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Sector-based Work Academy Programme: Qualitative Case Study Research

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Executive summary

This summary outlines key findings from in-house qualitative case study research on the Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP). The research took place in four Jobcentre Plus (JCP) district areas across England in June to November 2022 and involved a total of 93 in-depth interviews/focus groups with 118 participants. The research was conducted to generate insight into how the programme is delivered, and the value of the support it provides for employers and claimants. In each area, fieldwork was conducted with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff involved in delivering the programme locally, alongside claimants, employers and training providers who had participated in a SWAP in recent months.

Key findings

Overview of district-level programme delivery

Districts varied in the way that staffing was set-up to support the delivery of SWAPs, and this was mostly driven by their operational priorities. This ranged from a centralised model with a central, co-located team to launch and manage SWAPs for the whole district, to a clustered approach in another area, which saw staff working on SWAPs embedded within operational sites and account managing SWAPs for their sites. The staffing models had implications for SWAP delivery and quality, although the research didn't identify any trends in outcomes based on these models. A reliance on Adult Education Budget funding also influenced what types of SWAPs were delivered. DWP staff reported a bias within the funding towards generalist skills training which wasn't always thought to equip claimants with the career-enabling skills required for more specialist roles.

Local SWAPs

The SWAPs delivered across all areas were highly diverse in content and format, reflecting the flexibility of the SWAP model. While SWAPs were thought to align well with local labour market needs, DWP staff identified some gaps in provision in terms of specific sectors claimants were interested in (e.g., a lack of administration SWAPs outside of the Civil Service in Areas 2 and 3). Other gaps mentioned included a lack of SWAPs with shorter or more flexible hours for claimants with caring commitments, and district-specific gaps such as few SWAPs in areas outside the main urban centre in Area 1.

Partnership working

The most effective model of partnership working entailed all three parties (DWP, training providers and employers) being actively engaged in the set-up and management of SWAPs. This included all parties being aligned with expectations of the SWAP, employers specifying their training requirements, employers contributing to pre-SWAP information sessions, and regular cross-party communication throughout the duration of the programme. If a training provider initiated a SWAP,

however, this could minimise the level of engagement DWP had with end employers and reduce the flow of information to DWP concerning outcomes.

Referral

Referrals were a crucial stage influencing the effectiveness of the SWAPs delivered. Claimants tended to describe receiving minimal information about the programme which mainly concerned course logistics, although most still felt they had a choice in taking part. Overall, most employers reflected that the calibre of candidates was mixed. The poor suitability of some claimants, alongside lower than anticipated referral numbers, was seen as one of the main reasons why SWAPs didn't meet all these employers' vacancy needs. Both DWP-related factors such as Work Coach time and knowledge of SWAP, and external factors such as claimant interest and personal circumstances, were thought to determine the volume and quality of referrals received.

Claimant experiences of programme delivery

Overall claimants were positive about their participation in a SWAP, with components such as the pre-employment training considered more useful when it was specific to the end role on offer or wider sector. The work experience placement and guaranteed job interview (GJI) components of SWAP were not consistently offered to the claimants interviewed, and when the GJI wasn't delivered this could be particularly disappointing. Claimants mostly valued the support received from Work Coaches during the SWAP, although there were some gaps reported, notably in the period immediately following SWAP completion.

Employer experiences of programme delivery

Employers shared diverse experiences of SWAP. While some employers valued the bespoke nature of the training provided, and felt candidates were well prepared and confident at interview, for a minority, they weren't sure what training had been delivered and/or considered it less necessary for their sector. Some employers linked poor suitability among some of the claimants referred to negative claimant attitudes towards the role or work in general. A small number of employers felt that more robust screening of claimants was needed as part of the referral process to avoid these issues reoccurring.

Outcomes from SWAP

Claimants reported a range of outcomes from their participation in a SWAP, and most of these improved their overall employability (e.g., qualifications gained or improved confidence). There was less evidence from this research that SWAPs moved claimants directly into employment, despite this being a key intended outcome for the programme. For employers, SWAPs could help with job-matching and filling vacancies, however, there was doubt about the magnitude of the effectiveness of the SWAP for employers in terms of the number of vacancies filled. Overall, participants found it difficult to attribute positive outcomes to specific types of SWAPs. In general, effective SWAPs were linked to face-to-face training, the delivery of a qualification and the presence of a GJI as part of the offer.

Contents

- Executive summary 2
- 1. Introduction..... 8
- 2. Research methodology..... 10
- 3. Overview of case study areas 14
- 4. District-level programme delivery 18
- 5. Local SWAPs 24
- 6. Partnership working..... 27
- 7. Referral..... 32
- 8. Claimant experiences of programme delivery 38
- 9. Employer experiences of programme delivery 45
- 10. Outcomes from SWAP 51
- 11. Conclusions..... 59
- 12. Considerations for future programme delivery..... 62
- 13. References 64

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List of abbreviations

AEB	Adult Education Budget
CSL	Customer Service Lead
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
E&P	Employer and Partnership
EA	Employer Adviser
ESL	Employer Service Lead
ESOL	English Speakers of Other Languages
FSF	Flexible Support Fund
GJI	Guaranteed Job Interview
IHRU	In-House Research Unit
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
LMAD	Labour Market Analysis Division
PET	Pre-Employment Training
SBWA	Sector-Based Work Academy (previous acronym for the programme)
SWAP	Sector-based Work Academy Programme
ToC	Theory of Change
UC	Universal Credit
WCTL	Work Coach Team Leader
WEP	Work Experience Placement

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from qualitative research on the Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) which took place across four case study areas in England in June to November 2022. The research was conducted to generate insight into how the programme is delivered, and the value of the support it provides for employers and claimants. Fieldwork took place with DWP staff and training providers involved in delivering SWAPs, as well as claimant and employer participants.

This chapter provides an overview of the policy background and context to this research, before setting out the aim and guiding research questions.

1.1. Policy background

SWAP is a long-standing employment support programme first introduced in 2011 in England, and 2012 in Scotland¹; it was rebranded from 'SBWA' to 'SWAP' in 2020. Currently, it forms part of DWP's Plan for Jobs provision. This support is open to jobseekers aged 16 or over. Internal guidance suggests those referred should be close to the labour market and have most of the skills needed to be able to work.

As a demand-led programme SWAP is designed to prevent long-term unemployment by encouraging claimants to move sector and fill vacancies in local industries experiencing high demand for staff. This means the programme covers a broad range of sectors. It is managed and delivered by staff in Jobcentre Plus (JCP) who set up SWAPs to meet local vacancy demand in collaboration with local employers and training providers. There are three core elements to every SWAP:

- 1) A short module of vocational pre-employment training (PET);
- 2) A work experience placement (WEP) with an employer; and
- 3) A guaranteed job interview (GJI) linked to a genuine job vacancy.

Each SWAP can last up to six weeks, although the length and content of the three elements can be tailored to the skills and experience local businesses require to fill their vacancies. The GJI should be part of the SWAP offer unless there are restrictions related to the employer's recruitment policy meaning they are unable to offer one. In this case, claimants must receive support with the recruitment process.

The decision to participate in a SWAP is voluntary; however, for claimants on the Universal Credit (UC) intensive regime and those on Jobseeker's Allowance, once they have agreed to participate, they are required to complete the PET and GJI, and they may face a low level sanction² if they do not. The WEP is voluntary. While

¹ The programme does not run in Wales.

² For low level sanctions, claimants are sanctioned from the date they failed to meet a work-related activity until they comply with the activity again, or no longer need to comply, plus an extra fixed period of days.

claimants are taking part in a SWAP they remain on benefit and can receive support with travel, equipment, and childcare costs from JCPs through DWP's Flexible Support Fund (FSF). Employers do not pay any direct costs to participate.

In response to the pandemic labour market conditions, DWP's commitment to the programme and delivery expectations have increased. In 2021/22, the target number of SWAP starts³ doubled from the previous year to 80,000. The programme has been funded to achieve a further 200,000 starts between April 2022 and March 2025.

1.2. Research context

Previous research on SWAP has looked in isolation at employer (DWP 2013b) and claimant (DWP 2014, DWP 2016) experiences of the programme and outcomes quantitatively, and staff experiences qualitatively (DWP 2013a). Most of these studies evaluated multiple employment support interventions simultaneously, which restricted the depth of insight provided specifically on SWAP. In addition, while SWAP starts are collated locally on manual trackers and monitored centrally within DWP, there is limited information captured about the remainder of the SWAP journey. Therefore, while SWAP starts are currently exceeding the annual target, it is unclear how claimants and employers experience SWAPs, and how this links back to programme delivery, which is highly localised. This is particularly important to understand considering the recent increase in scale of delivery. This qualitative case study research therefore addresses this gap. It forms one element of a wider evaluation, complementing an impact assessment (in progress), which will provide an overview of the impact of SWAP on claimants' movement into employment and benefit receipt.

1.3. Aim and research questions

The overarching aim of this research was to improve understanding of the differing types of SWAPs offered, and how these impact on claimant and employer experiences of, and satisfaction with, the programme. The findings will be used to inform adjustments to the delivery of the programme to maximise employment outcomes. Specific research questions to guide the work were:

1. How do SWAPs vary and why? (Chapters 4 to 6)
2. How do claimants, employers and DWP staff experience SWAP? How does this vary by type of SWAP? (Chapters 6 to 9)
3. To what extent do the different SWAP types meet a) claimant and employer preferences and b) their needs? How can this vary? (Chapters 8 to 10)
4. What are the facilitators and barriers to meeting claimant and employer needs through SWAP? (Chapter 4 and Chapters 6 to 10)
5. What do we (JCP/DWP) and others (training providers, employers) need to do differently, to address any identified barriers? (Chapter 12)

³ A 'start' is defined as when a claimant begins their pre-employment training.

2. Research methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used and details key considerations of data collection, analysis and reporting.

2.1. Scoping

To ensure the research methodology and materials developed were appropriate, a detailed scoping phase took place. This consisted of a series of discussions with labour market analysts, alongside delivery and skills policy colleagues about the work, followed by workshops with these stakeholders to collaboratively build a Theory of Change⁴ (ToC) logic model for the programme (Annex 1). This output was used to understand the desired outcomes and impacts of SWAP, and the mechanisms through which the programme is intended to achieve these. This stage informed the development of the interview and focus group guides for fieldwork.

2.2. A case study approach

This research used a qualitative case study approach, with research based in four JCP district areas. Each case study drew from in-depth semi-structured interviews with DWP staff involved in SWAP delivery in and/or across the district, as well as claimants, employers, and training providers who had been involved in a SWAP in these areas in recent months. Focus group discussions were also held with Work Coaches in each area who had experience of referring claimants to the programme. Using a case study approach enabled the capture of in-depth and contextually based insight into the nature and effectiveness of all stages of programme delivery.

Case studies were conducted at the JCP district area level as this was the level at which most SWAP activity was coordinated, and how performance on SWAP is tracked. Given the relatively small scale of SWAP as a programme⁵, establishing cases at this level enabled access to a sufficient number of claimant participants.

2.3. Sampling and recruitment

Four case study areas were selected using a purposive sampling approach and the factors that influenced this selection and an overview of each area are detailed further in Chapter 3. Fieldwork for case study areas 1 and 2 took place in June to July 2022, and case study areas 3 and 4 in October to November 2022.

⁴ A Theory of Change outlines how and why the activities of an intervention (such as SWAP) lead to the intended or observed outcomes and impacts.

⁵ As a comparison, Jobs Entry: Targeted Support (JETs) aimed to support 286,000 people between October 2020 and October 2021 (NAO 2021).

In total, 86 interviews were conducted across the four case studies, as well as a total of 7 focus groups comprising 32 Work Coaches. The achieved number of interviews for each group of interest varied slightly by area, and the final achieved profile is summarised in Table 1. Fieldwork with claimants in Area 4 was stopped before the target number of interviews was reached. This was due to an underlying issue with the claimant sample for this area, in which many claimants were unreachable through the contact information provided, and those who were contacted had no recollection of participating in a SWAP. Unfortunately, there was limited resource and time to be able to pursue obtaining a further sample for this area given the high risk that this issue would reoccur.

Table 1: The total number of fieldwork participants by case study area

	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Total
Claimants	10	9	10	2	31
Employers	6	4	6	7	23
Training Providers	3	3	4	3	13
DWP Staff	4	5	5	5	19
Work Coaches	7	5	11	9	32
Total	30	26	36	26	118

In each area we were assigned a local JCP contact to help progress the research. Participating operational staff were selected through initial discussions with the local contacts who were able to provide an overview of the set-up of SWAP in their area, and thus which roles and therefore individuals would be well-placed to contribute to the research. The staff roles interviewed included:

- District SWAP leads (often members of Employer & Partnership Teams)
- Operations Managers
- Senior Employer and Partnership Managers
- Employer Service Leads (ESLs)
- Customer Service Leads (CSLs)
- SWAP Account Managers
- Employer Advisers (EAs)

Work Coaches were also identified collaboratively with local contacts; this was guided by requests from the study team to include a variation of participants in terms of the customer groups they supported, and sub-areas of the district they worked in.

There is no centrally held record of training providers and employers involved in SWAP. As a result, recruitment of these groups again relied on local JCP contacts providing this information. The reliance on local contacts for information may have

introduced some selection bias towards participants with positive experiences of working with DWP because of the nature of this recruitment approach. To minimise the risk of bias, a sample was obtained from each area and recruitment was then targeted to ensure a spread in size of employer, sector and length of SWAP⁶, as well as how the SWAP was initiated (e.g., by training providers).

The sampling approach for claimants aimed to cover a range of SWAPs and participant characteristics to understand whether there were differences in experiences depending on the SWAP attended. A sample was obtained for each area by linking local manual tracker data to centrally held customer contact information. Recruitment calls were then targeted within each area to capture breadth in terms of claimant gender, age and length of latest claim, as well as sector of SWAP they participated in. Once claimants had agreed to participate, interviews either took place on the spot or were scheduled for another time. Claimant participants were provided with a £20 voucher as a thank you for their time.

2.4. Fieldwork and analysis

Research took place remotely via telephone (for claimants, employers and training providers) and via MS Teams (for DWP staff). This was due to time constraints and practical considerations of covering the case study areas which were geographically dispersed. The difference in mode between groups is due to the data processing approvals in place for these groups at the time. Five discussion guides were developed for each strand of data collection. The guides covered the same topics but tailored to each stakeholder group and their experience of SWAP. The overarching topics included: background to the participant, the referral process, experience of SWAP/delivery, SWAP set-up and outcomes and reflections of their experience.

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data collected, with a coding framework (Annex 4) developed following the review of a selection of interview transcripts alongside the interview guides and research questions. Using a framework approach enabled the analysis to be conducted by multiple members of the project team in a consistent way. Most of the analysis was conducted in NVivo 12. Members of the project team were partnered up and each pair was allocated a specific strand of data to code (e.g., employers). A sample of coding from each strand was quality assured by another member of the project team, and feedback from this review was provided to the coders to inform their coding of subsequent transcripts. All coders met regularly to discuss coding queries, refine the framework and findings. A final workshop was held with all coders to discuss key themes relevant to each fieldwork strand and how these varied by case study area. Further details on the methodology used for this research is included in Annex 3.

⁶ A breakdown of participating employers, training providers and claimants by sector of SWAP is provided in Annex 2.

2.5. Ethical considerations

As with any in-house research, participants from all groups may have felt obligated to take part in the research either because they felt it may affect their benefit claim, their relationship with DWP, and/or a review of their workplace performance. To minimise the risk of this and any potential harm to participants, a process of informed consent was used. Information about the research was given at the start of recruitment calls and interviews to explain the objectives of the research, what participation would involve, and that taking part was voluntary. Where multiple interactions took place in advance of an interview, this key information was reiterated. In addition, the independence of the research team from the programme was emphasised throughout communication with all participant groups.

Throughout the reporting process, care has been taken to ensure that the case study areas, and the participating staff, remained anonymous. Finally, while we sought to minimise the burden of participation for JCP district areas, all areas were offered a summary of the overall key findings as a thank you for taking part in this study.

2.6. Presentation of findings

The findings in this report are presented to show the wide range of experiences and views related to SWAP from participating individuals. Quotes used throughout have only been included where we consider there to be no risk of identifying these individuals and are attributed to the relevant strand of data collection and case study area. Due to the reliance on a relatively small group of individuals in each JCP district area for the bulk of SWAP delivery, we present the views from staff in these roles under the general term 'DWP staff' to remove the heightened risk of identifying these individuals. Quotes attributable to Work Coaches are separately labelled.

Finally, all data collection involved an interviewer and note-taker. Staff interviews and focus groups were also transcribed using MS Teams, and the transcript from these were used to supplement the note-taker's notes. This is due to the available equipment and data processing approvals in place at the time. As a result, direct quotes in this report for claimants, training providers and employers should be understood as being taken from note-takers' notes rather than verbatim transcripts.

2.7. Report structure

The remainder of the report starts with an overview of the case study areas, followed by a summary of the different district-level set-ups that facilitated the delivery of this programme. The report then discusses what SWAPs were delivered locally, before exploring in detail two key aspects of delivery that are important to the effectiveness of SWAPs: partnership working and the referral process. The report moves on to summarise the experiences of claimants and employers who participated in the research before discussing the outcomes from SWAP that were reported. The final chapters offer conclusions from the research and key learning for future delivery.

3. Overview of case study areas

This chapter explains how the four case study areas were chosen and provides an overview of the local labour market in each, particularly in terms of the employer sectors present, and local barriers to employment for claimants.

3.1. How case study areas were selected

Four JCP district areas were selected in agreement with DWP policy, delivery and analyst colleagues, and following approval from local Service Leaders. Selection was based on programme data as well as operational insight on the local models of SWAP delivery it was thought useful to explore. The following criteria were reviewed during selection:

- The feasibility of achieving a sufficient sample of claimants⁷
- Performance against the district's profiled target number of SWAP starts
- District performance in terms of the proportion of claimants who had recorded earnings following participation in a SWAP (also called 'post-SWAP earnings')⁸
- Local employment rates
- The geography of each area (in terms of region and mix of urban, suburban and rural subareas)
- Operational insight into how SWAP is organised and delivered locally; and
- The typical sectors of SWAPs offered in each district.

Using these criteria, the list of 34 JCP districts was narrowed down to the final four case study areas, which captured variation in performance, employment rates, geography and delivery of the programme. Key features of the areas and the rationale for the selection of each area are summarised on the following page.

⁷ The claimant sample required a minimum of 150 claimants to have started a SWAP in the previous 3 months and who could be successfully matched to contact details.

⁸ Post-SWAP earnings related to participants who attended a SWAP between 8th February 2021 and 31st December 2021, and who recorded any subsequent earnings up to January 2022. Figures across all JCP districts ranged from 47 to 77%.

Table 2: Key features of the case study areas in relation to SWAP

Case Study Area	Performance on SWAP starts ⁹	SWAP delivery model	Rationale for selection
Area 1	Achiever/Over-achiever and ahead of starts profile	Centralised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the top quartile of areas for post-SWAP earnings⁸. • Consistent performance on SWAP starts over time for 21/22¹⁰. • Opportunity to review centralised delivery approach. • Mix of urban and suburban localities. Mix of local authorities with employment rates above and below the average for Great Britain (GB) (ranging from 73 to 80%).
Area 2	Achiever/Over-achiever and ahead of starts profile	Localised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the lowest quartile for recorded post-SWAP earnings. • Consistently high performance on SWAP starts over time for 21/22. • Large variation in sectors of SWAPs delivered. • Urban area with a diverse population. Most (7 of 11) local authorities had a lower employment rate than the GB average (ranging from 60 to 80%).
Area 3	Achiever/Over-achiever and behind starts profile	Clustered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the lower end of the middle range for post-SWAP earnings. • Behind on the total achieved number of starts compared to district profile. • Mix of urban, suburban and rural localities. Local Authority employment rates ranged from 62% to 83%, with most areas above the GB average (17 of 20 local authorities).
Area 4	Under-achiever and ahead of starts profile	Clustered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the top end of the middle range for post-SWAP earnings. • Slower start against SWAP targets but had achieved profile before the end of 21/22. • Mix of urban, suburban and rural localities. Only 2 of 9 local authorities had an employment rate above the GB average (ranging from 66% to 76%).

⁹ 'Achiever/Over-achievers' had an average number of starts on or above the previous 4-week period of their forecasted weekly profile (data relates to w/e 13th March 2022). 'Under-achievers' were below their forecasted profile of starts over this period. Districts could, however, still be ahead of their overall forecasted number of starts to have achieved by this point in the operational year.

¹⁰ Consistency was reviewed by examining recorded starts against expected profile for each quarter of the 21/22 operational year.

3.2. The local labour markets

As detailed in earlier sections, each of the case study areas were JCP districts, and this means each area encompassed several, sometimes very varied localities. This subsection provides a broad overview of the local labour markets, which draws together information provided by participants in this study. They provide context for the findings on SWAP delivery and its perceived value and success.

Area 1

A range of sectors were present in this district, with the public sector (mainly the civil service), care, engineering (street works and/or fibreoptics), customer service, construction and hospitality the most prominent. The impact of Covid-19 on the local labour market was mostly mentioned in relation to a new cohort of Work Coaches who required upskilling.

Common barriers to employment mentioned across participant groups included the impact of health conditions, which limited claimant readiness to work, and the types of work claimants can undertake, as well as difficulties finding work that fitted around caring responsibilities (in terms of hours and location), particularly for lone parents. Access to transport could also be problematic and this could be a barrier particularly for claimants living in certain areas outside the main urban centre. Due to the presence of prisons in the district there was a large ex-offender population who were also thought to be restricted in terms of the job opportunities available to them.

Area 2

The highly urbanised nature of Area 2 was reflected in the volume and range of sectors present across this district. These included hospitality, public sector (again mostly the civil service), construction, security, retail and digital/IT. Staff described high levels of unemployment, with a large number of claimants who were long-term unemployed and an overall higher caseload as a result of Covid-19. Most sectors (excluding digital/IT) were thought to have been affected by Covid-19, but they were also described as showing signs of recovery. Staff highlighted a shift towards more digital ways of working, which had accelerated during Covid-19 and changed the skillsets that some employers were looking for.

Barriers to employment across this area were similar to Area 1 in terms of difficulties finding work that aligned with claimant health conditions and caring responsibilities. A lack of licences, qualifications and experience were also mentioned as barriers to specific sectors. Reflecting the highly diverse population in this district, limited English language proficiency was also thought to limit customers from finding work and gaining the qualifications and licences needed to access job opportunities. A lack of digital literacy and the movement towards online job application processes and digital skillsets were also thought to be challenging for some claimants.

Area 3

Area 3 covered both urban and rural localities across which staff described pockets of high unemployment and deprivation alongside very affluent areas. A key sector for this district was hospitality; however other sectors present included transport and logistics, care, manufacturing, retail, finance, construction and agriculture. In some sub-areas, these local labour markets could be seasonal (such as hospitality in coastal neighbourhoods), and in others they were influenced by a nearby large city (in another JCP district) in commuting distance. Fieldwork for this area was conducted later than case studies 1 and 2, and JCP staff in this district thought that vacancies in the local labour markets had returned to pre-Covid levels.

Access to transport was commonly mentioned as a barrier to employment, reflecting the very rural nature of some localities in this district. As with other areas, finding work that could fit alongside caring responsibilities could also be challenging. Limited English language proficiency could also be a barrier, with one member of staff noting that this is something that needed to be addressed before these claimants could be referred to a SWAP. The impact of health conditions, particularly mental health, was also linked to worklessness, and in one particular sub-area, barriers in relation to addiction and homelessness were identified.

Area 4

Area 4 covered a mix of urban and rural localities and perceptions of local unemployment rates varied between staff. Local sectors identified included transport and logistics, care, hospitality, retail, manufacturing, the public sector and engineering. Recent perceived changes to the labour market included a decline in hospitality vacancies and front-facing retail roles, and a rise in warehouse opportunities and remote working. One member of staff also noted that recruitment was slowing down because of inflation and resultant costs for businesses, which likely reflects the timing of fieldwork in this area which took place in October to November 2022.

Barriers to employment across this area included access to transport to be able to reach job opportunities as well as the cost and availability of childcare, and availability of work that fitted around caring commitments. One member of staff reflected that some jobs were increasingly requiring applicants to have a driving licence, which limited many claimants from applying. Other staff mentioned a general low skill level in their customer base, which inhibited claimants from accessing more skilled roles. Finally, like Area 1, a number of large prisons were present in this district and staff noted that ex-offenders could find it challenging to access employment.

4. District-level programme delivery

This chapter starts the exploration of how SWAPs are delivered locally and what underpins this delivery in each area. It examines DWP staff perceptions of the programme and summarises the local staffing and funding models. In doing so, this chapter explores the implications of these different aspects of delivery for the SWAPs created in the case study areas.

4.1. Staff understanding of the programme

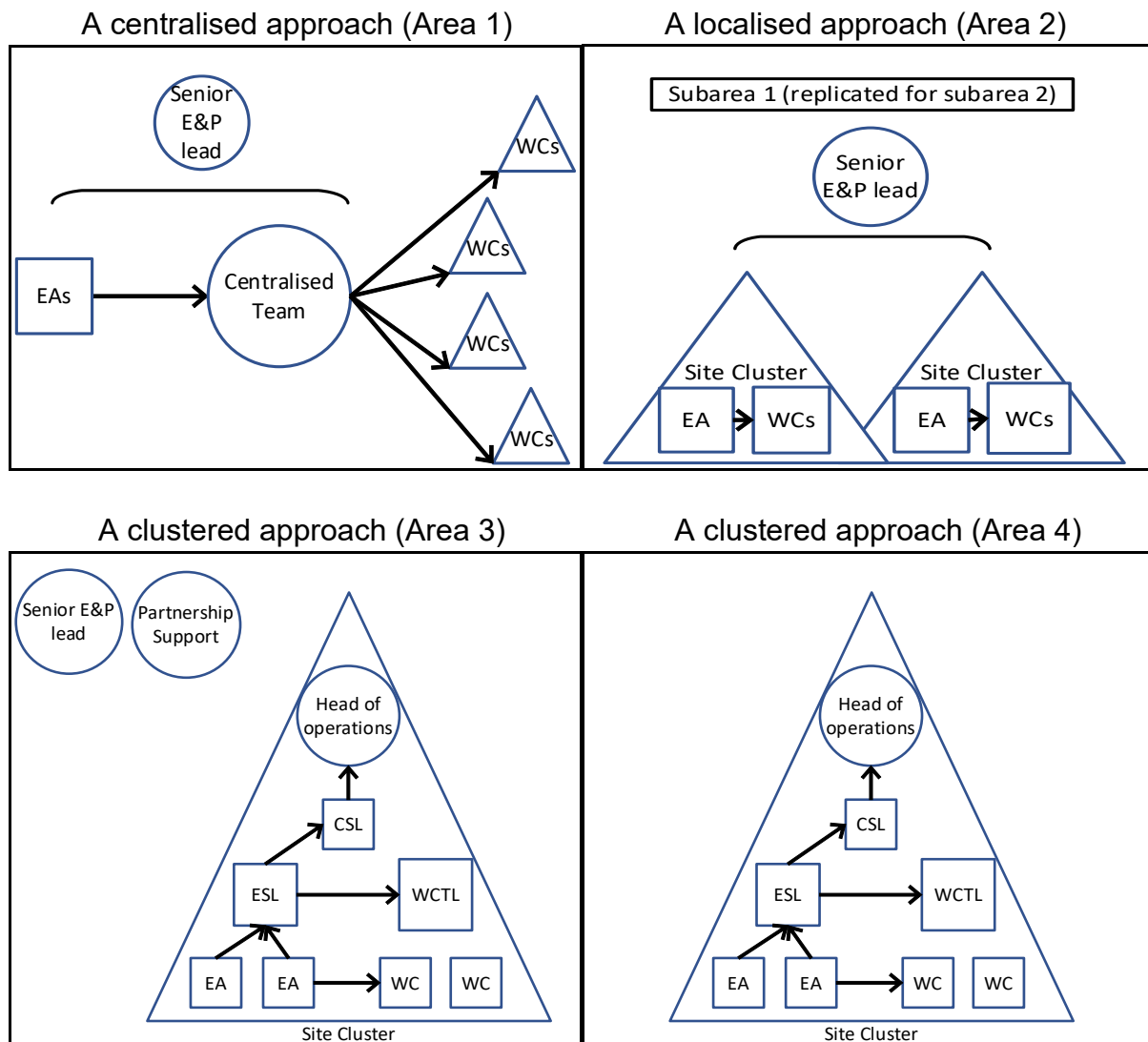
DWP staff perceptions of the programme intention, and who it is targeted towards are important for understanding why SWAPs are delivered in particular ways at the local level. In line with the programme Theory of Change, most staff across all areas understood the main purpose of SWAP as being to move claimants into employment. Staff thought this was facilitated by SWAPs allowing claimants to bypass usual recruitment processes and increase their exposure to employers when they wouldn't otherwise have this chance. Staff also thought SWAPs provided claimants with the opportunity to increase their skillset, making them more attractive to employers.

“For the customer to get a job. It isn't always easy to get a job interview and doing a SWAP makes it easier cause it bypasses the traditional layout. Because we are giving them the training. We already have the partnership with the employer...it supports in bypassing that [harder thing]. Some of the customers might traditionally not make it through.” (Staff, Area 2)

There was more variation in who the programme was perceived as being targeted towards, although this question was not consistently asked of all participants. Of those asked, only a small number of DWP staff thought SWAPs were targeted towards claimants experiencing minor barriers to finding employment, such as a specific skill shortage or lack of experience in the relevant role or sector. Most respondents instead saw SWAPs as being widely applicable to anyone looking to find work, and a further small subset thought that SWAPs were for claimants who hadn't been employed for some time and/or were furthest from the labour market. These latter perceptions contrast with the assumption underpinning the programme Theory of Change, that claimants attending a SWAP are 'job ready' and/or 'close' to the labour market. This suggests that some claimants referred to SWAP may have needed further support than the programme is able to provide, which could have implications for the outcomes the programme is able to achieve.

“Interviewer: Who is it [the programme] aimed towards? Participant: People not in employment for some time who want to gain confidence and brush up their skills or like if they want to upskill themselves with something new, they wanna [sic] learn.” (Work Coach, Area 3)

4.2. SWAP staffing models



Across all staff participating in the research, responsibilities related to SWAP formed only one aspect of their day-to-day roles. While there were mostly the same job roles present in all areas, the responsibilities in relation to SWAP, and how the roles interacted with each other, varied by district. The exception to this were Work Coaches, who across all areas were only involved in referring claimants to SWAP.

A centralised approach (Area 1)

In Area 1, there was one central, co-located team who created, launched and managed SWAPs for the district. The team was comprised of account managers for individual SWAPs who managed each SWAP from beginning to end, completed the SWAP manual trackers and liaised with the end employer and training provider. SWAP account managers were supported by two administrative colleagues who supported the collation of referrals for the trackers, answered queries from Work Coaches about specific SWAPs, and checked claimant eligibility.

While the account managers oversaw SWAP delivery, the marketing of SWAP to employers mostly took place by Employer Advisers (EAs), who referred interested employers to this centralised team. The team was managed by an Employer and Partnership (E&P) professional who was also the day-to-day SWAP lead for the district, with overall strategic oversight from a senior E&P lead.

A localised approach (Area 2)

EAs delivered SWAPs, from initial employer engagement through to completion of the manual trackers. EAs were managed by colleagues in their local JCP sites, and they primarily set up and managed SWAPs for these sites and neighbouring areas. While EAs were managed locally within their operational sites, they also had oversight from one of two senior E&P managers, who each liaised with EAs within their geographic half of the district. One of these E&P managers was the SWAP lead for the district. The SWAP lead monitored data returns and outcomes for the district, disseminated messaging around SWAP to the EAs, and set expectations with training providers on their role in returning information on claimant outcomes.

A clustered approach (Areas 3 and 4)

Both areas followed a clustered approach to SWAP delivery, this aligned with wider operational delivery within these districts whereby subareas made up of JCP site clusters operated separately to each other with their own management chains. As with Area 2, EAs in these areas undertook the bulk of SWAP marketing, set-up and management and were assigned to a particular operational site. EAs account managed SWAPs for their site and neighbouring sites.

The exact nature of the clustering varied between the two areas. In Area 3, EAs were managed by the Employer Service Lead (ESL) for their site, who led delivery of SWAP alongside other aspects of DWP's employer agenda. ESLs were therefore responsible for ensuring SWAPs met local employer needs. ESLs, in turn, were managed by the Customer Service Leads (CSLs) for those same sites, who were responsible for overall operational performance within their offices. CSLs managed the Work Coach Team Leaders (WCTLs) alongside the ESLs, and so acted as the bridge between the employer and claimant operational teams.

Area 4 was moving to the same approach as Area 3 during the fieldwork period for this study, and so some staff were still operating under the previous model for this district. Under the previous approach, EAs working on SWAPs were managed through a central E&P team for their geographic cluster, rather than managed through their operational sites. The move to the new model was intended to improve operational performance on provision separate to SWAP.

Finally, Area 3 had a senior E&P member of staff who shared messaging on SWAP for the district and kept senior operational staff informed on progress on SWAP starts. This work was supported by a partnership support colleague who reviewed the quality of tracker recording and upskilled EAs to improve the robustness of monitoring information collected. In Area 4, there was no single SWAP lead, the senior operational leads for each geographic cluster had responsibility for SWAP in their subareas.

4.3. Implications for SWAPs

The different models of delivering SWAP within districts had implications for the way staff experienced this programme, and the resultant offer available to claimants and employers. These are explored further below.

Effectiveness of information sharing: A centralised approach to programme delivery was seen as beneficial by DWP staff working in Area 1, and a senior member of staff in Area 4, because it was thought to enable more effective information sharing between colleagues working on SWAP set-up and management. Examples of this mentioned by staff included being able to learn from other colleagues' expertise, the easier identification and prioritisation of communications to increase referrals, a reduced risk of duplication of SWAPs, as well as the early identification and sharing of knowledge regarding training providers who weren't delivering in line with expected outcomes.

“So they [some training providers] were trying to think of any way basically to get people in the doors and get them on the course. And I know nationally other people do work with them, but I think because, I think with having the central team, that was picked up straight away and then we just refused to work with them training providers. [...] other areas, if the local EAs aren't speaking to each other, then that was getting missed.” (Staff, Area 1)

Consistency of delivery: In Area 3, one member of staff noted that moving to a cluster-based approach had enabled a more equitable level of service to local JCP sites, as EAs were able to cover SWAP-related tasks for neighbouring offices within their cluster if another EA was unable to work on the programme. Having a more dispersed delivery approach across the district, however, could also mean some inconsistencies in the interpretation of what counts as a SWAP, and therefore the SWAPs on offer to claimants. One EA in Area 3, for example, noted that there had been occasions where they did not feel that a SWAP running in a different part of the district was a 'quality SWAP' that would be of benefit to claimants. This was linked back to a lack of quality assurance of SWAPs across the district, which another member of staff mentioned was the result of the district no longer having a named lead for the programme, and delivery being more embedded in operational sites.

“There are slight differences in what people see as a SWAP. For example, we were told that a Civil service SWAP was running with [organisation] for 1 hour, but to us in [town] that's not a SWAP. That may not be flagged at a central level. As a district team [the former operational set-up] we identified SWAPs that needed improvement to make them a quality SWAP, but there is the potential for some SWAPs now to go under the radar and not deliver the quality service that they should.” (Staff, Area 3)

Monitoring of programme outcomes: In Areas 2 to 4, EAs completed the SWAP manual trackers alongside other responsibilities, which could involve delivering additional elements of DWP's employer agenda. As a result, the completion of the trackers was sometimes seen in these areas as time-consuming and burdensome. This, in addition to delays in receiving outcome information from providers and

employers, meant that staff didn't always complete the trackers in detail, which hindered understanding of the effectiveness of the different SWAPs being delivered. In comparison in Area 1, while there was no feedback specifically on the trackers, it was noted by one member of staff that having a dedicated team of SWAP account managers had freed up EA time to work on other DWP provision.

“If it's an external provider – they are poor at telling us the results of them [claimants] starting if they are completing the other elements of the SWAPs. As a Work Coach, EA or ESL, – they are not fond of back tracking what happened with the SWAP that they did three months ago and updating a number to say that this person did actually get a job. So I think you missed a lot of data that way because it's the will to go back and make sure you're completing all the records.” (Staff, Area 3)

Relationships with Work Coaches: In Areas 2 to 4, it was thought that having EAs based on operational sites helped to drive the employer agenda within those sites and enabled a more joined-up approach between SWAP delivery and Work Coach activity. This was seen as particularly beneficial for ensuring that SWAPs were in line with claimant interests. A centralised approach, however, didn't necessarily mean a lack of engagement with Work Coaches. In the centralised team, each member of the team was a buddy to a cluster of local sites. This involved attending job fairs at those sites, sitting alongside Work Coaches and supporting them where needed, to ensure SWAPs were being discussed with claimants as intended.

4.4. Funding sources

In addition to staff perceptions and staffing set-up, funding was also an important component of delivery that influenced the delivery of SWAPs. All case study areas relied predominantly on Adult Education Budgets (AEB) to fund SWAPs. In at least three areas, AEBs were devolved, and this meant the relevant combined authority determined which training providers could access this funding.

When asked, DWP staff felt that AEB funding didn't always align with the programme intention, and this was due to a perceived bias within the funding towards sectors seeking candidates with more generalist skills for entry-level roles. Staff reflected that for more specialised roles/sectors, it wasn't always possible to bridge the skills gap through the AEB-funded courses, despite these skills being seen as career-enabling.

“New broadband, fibreoptics, that's big in [District area] [...] that there's a huge sector and there's so many jobs that can be filled and that's something they're still not funding at the moment. So we [DWP through FSF] fund it now. This isn't just any [training], this training is about £3,000 worth of training per person [...] it's not just a job for the individual, it's an actual career, they start on pay [of] something like 30k and that's just as a trainee.” (Staff, Area 1)

Staff noted that where training providers paid for licences or other, sector-specific qualifications offered through a SWAP, this came out of their profit margins, and therefore providers needed to add in more general employability training to be able to

receive AEB funding. This was thought by some staff to contribute to providers adding in course content that didn't meet vacancy requirements.

“If we've got an employer or a training provider who says ‘okay, we're gonna [sic] do a CSCS course, but before you do a CSCS course we need you to do a basic skills course’, it adds an extra couple of weeks on and sometimes it means that our customers are doing things that they don't necessarily need to do in order to tick the boxes for the training provider to get the free funding to do the CSCS course that the customer actually wants to do.” (Staff, Area 3)

In addition, training providers only receive AEB funding for learners aged 19 years and above, whereas SWAPs are open to claimants aged 16 years and over. DWP staff noted that while certain providers will accommodate claimants aged 16 to 18 if they have enough claimants aged over 19 years-old to balance this out, others reject referrals for this younger age group, indicating a funding gap for younger claimants.

It was rarer that staff mentioned using other funding sources for SWAPs and it was not clear if this was because staff weren't aware of these alternative funding streams. Area 1 mentioned procuring training for more bespoke qualifications and skillsets through their FSF allocation. Staff in this area, however, reflected that FSF is finite and used for wider provision alongside SWAP, which can mean it's challenging to fund these SWAPs against competing priorities. Other strategies included using grant funding for running SWAPs in specific areas or with specific groups, and employers funding the training or delivering the training themselves (and in one example the cost was recouped from successful claimants following employment).

“We've never yet had to pay to run a SWAP. When like, for example, [travel company], they've explained that they'll pay for the training for the bus licence, but it will be deducted over a 2-year period of £11 per week, so then that person will pay back that money from the training themselves.” (Staff, Area 4)

The dependency on AEB emphasises the importance of the conditions around funding in determining the types of skills training that can be delivered through SWAPs. It suggests that funding conditions need to be broad enough to support sector-specific needs, such as more technical training, and that guidance should be available to staff on how to access alternative funding sources.

4.5. Summary

Districts varied in the way that staffing was set-up to support the delivery of SWAPs, and this was mostly driven by their operational priorities. The different models of staffing had implications for SWAP delivery and their quality, such as the ease of sharing information concerning providers who were not delivering as expected. Available funding and staff understanding of SWAP were also influencing factors. All districts were reliant on AEB funding, which some staff felt was biased towards more generalist skills training, and limited SWAPs for more specialised skills and roles. It was also evident that there was some variation in who the programme was thought to be targeted towards. This could indicate the programme is delivered to claimants beyond those it was originally designed to support.

5. Local SWAPs

Following on from exploring the case study areas and key factors underpinning local delivery of the programme, this chapter provides an overview of the local SWAPs encountered throughout this study. It also summarises DWP staff reflections on how well these SWAPs align with local labour market needs.

5.1. SWAPs delivered locally

All areas were running or had run SWAPs in sectors including construction, warehousing, the civil service, administration, hospitality, and health and social care. Security, railway track training and education (for teaching assistants) SWAPs were also present in Areas 2 and 3. Areas 3 and 4 had SWAPs running in manufacturing, and Area 4 also had SWAPs for the transport (bus driving) and the wider public sectors (the police).

In the main, across the interviews, the SWAPs were mostly linked to entry level roles, and while they contained some level of tailoring to individual employers, they tended to deliver training specific to the overall sector rather than an end job. Only a few participants described receiving highly bespoke training set-up very specifically for a particular role or group of claimants.

The typical length of the SWAP varied considerably, from half a day up to 6-7 weeks, although most claimants reported their SWAP lasting two weeks or less. Length was seen by staff as mostly dependent on the employer's requirements in terms of the skills gap to be bridged, the urgency of filling vacancies, and the time and resource employers had to support components of the SWAP, such as the WEP. Overall, the length of the SWAPs offered reflected the programme intention, that SWAPs are short, sharp interventions to help meet employer vacancy demands at pace.

*“So I’ve seen SWAPs where the skills component, it’s five weeks, so that you have a few days of work experience. I’ve seen SWAPs where the skills parts you have two or three days’ worth of skills provision, and then it’s two or three weeks’ worth of work experience. So there are ways of flexing it overall.”
(Staff, Area 2)*

SWAPs that were longer in length tended to be where licences or other specific training and/or testing was required. The railway track SWAPs, for example, lasted the full six weeks due to the volume of manual practices to learn. In contrast, civil service SWAPs were among the shortest, sometimes comprising of only half day workshops focussed on the civil service application process.

“Yeah I would say not usually more than three weeks I think [...] that said, I think I’ve seen some that are like seven weeks if it’s really specific. I think some of the fibreoptic ones ‘cause there’s so much training involved. But typically yeah, between one week and three weeks.” (Work Coach, Area 1)

SWAPs took place either face-to-face, online or through a blended approach with some elements delivered virtually and others in-person. While staff across all case study areas were trying to run more SWAPs in-person, they acknowledged that some would likely remain online, particularly where this mode was considered more suitable (e.g., for home-working roles).

5.2. Alignment of SWAPs to local needs

Overall, staff across all case study areas thought that local SWAP provision covered a range of sectors and was well-matched to local labour market needs. Staff described how colleagues involved in setting up SWAPs would actively seek out information from Work Coaches on customer skillsets and sector interests, using this to create or find SWAPs to meet this demand. Once established, staff noted that SWAPs would often be repeated, particularly when they were seen as popular among claimants.

“We always go out with the employer advisors to see what skills customers have and what they’re looking for, and we will try and bring them employers in as well for something different.” (Staff, Area 1)

“I think we have quite a good range to be honest, and so you know, we do cover a fair amount of sectors. The more popular ones, we tend to run those slightly more frequently, so we may run them twice a month, and the others maybe once a month or bi-monthly, depending on what people are wanting at that time.” (Staff, Area 4)

However, some Work Coaches felt that there wasn’t enough variation in the types of SWAPs on offer from a claimant perspective, and they therefore did not always align well with claimant aspirations where claimants were looking for work in a sector not covered by the usual offer. For example, Work Coaches in Areas 1 and 4 highlighted a lack of SWAPs for health and beauty roles despite this sector being popular among their claimants, and Work Coaches in Areas 2 and 3 described a scarcity of SWAPs for administration roles outside of the Civil Service.

“I’d love to see some kind of SWAP for health and beauty, because I’ve got a lot of people who they’ve got health and beauty qualifications and are desperate to get into that industry.” (Work Coach, Area 4)

Another gap mentioned by Work Coaches across all areas included SWAPs with shorter or more flexible hours, so that claimants with childcare and other caring commitments could attend more easily. While JCPs can help fund childcare costs through local Flexible Support Fund (FSF) budgets, there was little evidence of this happening among claimants, and one DWP staff member commented that it would be difficult to arrange on a short-term basis. Finding SWAPs for claimants attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses could also be difficult. For other areas, Work Coaches found it challenging to find SWAPs for claimants in locations outside the main urban centre (in Area 1) and for younger claimants (aged under 19 years old) (in Area 4).

“[...] the only thing that I would input on, because we do have, for single parents, because we need to work around the school hours, we would need, it would be helpful for us to have something during that period, that sort of starts at 9:30 until about 2pm, so we can forward our single parent customers to that [...]” (Work Coach, Area 2)

“I’m on the youth team as well, and a lot of them [SWAPs] are 19 plus and they’ve got to be 19 by a certain point. That can knock a lot of my customers out.” (Work Coach, Area 4)

In addition, DWP staff identified sectors where they thought SWAPs were unable, or unsuitable, to address local vacancy demands. Sectors considered more ‘fluid’ with multiple, changing skills needs, or where the skills gap to be bridged fell beyond the scope of available funding or SWAP timescales, were considered less appropriate. This was mentioned in relation to roles in the digital/technology sector, despite this being a key growth sector for Areas 1 and 2.

“I think that there are some sectors SWAP lends itself a bit better to, and others maybe where the skills ask would start to get above what current funding would allow, or where the sectors themselves [would allow]. Let’s take some of the creative and digital sectors, I’ve seen SWAPs into some of those roles, but where it’s a very fluid sector, with multiple skills needed, I don’t think we see so many SWAPs delivering into those sectors, but that links back to the funding.” (Staff, Area 2)

5.3. Summary

This chapter has highlighted that the SWAPs delivered across all areas were highly diverse in content and format, reflecting the flexibility of the SWAP model. In general, the PET delivered through SWAPs tended to be tailored towards working in overall sectors rather than the end employers or roles. While SWAPs were thought to align well with local labour market needs, DWP staff identified some gaps in provision, notably in terms of the sectors covered and flexibility of hours, as well as district-specific challenges such as the concentration of opportunities geographically. The following chapters explore key aspects of delivering SWAPs (partnership working and referrals) before unpacking how SWAPs are experienced by claimants and employers, as well as the outcomes of this programme according to study participants.

6. Partnership working

This chapter provides an overview of the key themes identified within the data concerning how DWP, employers and training providers worked together in the set-up and management of SWAPs. In doing so, this section explores the factors that were thought to drive successful partnership working in delivering this programme.

6.1. Initiating SWAPs

SWAPs were mostly either initiated by DWP (where JCP staff approached employers and offered SWAP as a recruitment tool) or by training providers (whereby training providers approached DWP and/or employers and proposed a SWAP). Less commonly mentioned were employer-initiated SWAPs, which occurred when employers returned for a repeat of a previous SWAP, or proactively requested further information about how the programme could support their recruitment needs.

“Bit of both, we contact employers who are recruiting we tell them about SWAP and what DWP are offering. We do get employers coming to us who we’ve worked with before, who know we deliver SWAPs so it’s a bit of both. We also have training providers coming to us telling us we’ve got this SWAP running, can you set up information session for us, and we’ll feed in our customers. So, it comes from three directions really.” (Staff, Area 4)

6.2. Drawing on established relationships

Staff described drawing on a varied and established network of employers and providers to create SWAPs, and often chose to run these with trusted providers.

“We’ve already got numerous training providers we’ve worked with for a long time, and that we know, the course content is good, and they’ve got great admin behind them, and they know what we expect and what we need. So, we’ve already got those training providers on board if you like. Now from an employer perspective, there are certain employers we work with all the time and you get used to it. You know, you sort of, we all have certain employers that come us because we’ve done SWAPs with them before and some of them are ongoing.” (Staff, Area 1)

When setting up new SWAPs, in Areas 1 and 2, DWP staff reported approaching a range of providers within their networks to secure the best offer for the PET in terms of content, length and cost.

“[...] it’s going out to maybe a few training providers and saying we need this, this and this, can you provide it? And what are the costs? Or can any of it be done for free? It is asking a few different training providers that question and seeing what they come back with.” (Staff, Area 1)

Participants reflected how SWAPs could enhance local networks, enabling collaboration between employers, DWP and training providers, and also aiding future collaboration.

“Interviewer: What has your organisation gained from SWAP (so far)?

“Employer: Erm as I say about 8 people, 8 staff and obviously the good working relationship with the jobcentre, so people know [company] are open to working with the jobcentre and giving people opportunities.” (Employer, Warehouse SWAP, Area 3)

For DWP, in particular, SWAPs could create a reputational boost, which could result in further collaboration between JCPs and employers, either on SWAP or through other formats. When a SWAP was set-up and seen as working well, DWP staff mostly described using the same training providers to re-run these courses as they were familiar with the content, and they were confident it would be suitable for bridging the skills gap required. DWP staff preferred using training providers that they had already worked with and sometimes declined new training providers who approached them, as they had the same end employer as pre-existing providers.

“Since I've worked in this team it's quite established, so we do tend to work with those who are relevant. There are new training providers who have come on aboard which we don't use as we figured they feed from a main training provider and we do tend to have quite a few that offer the same thing. You know, they've got the same end employer, so we stick to the main one. If were working directly with that employer we'll say no, we're working with that employer already. Recently a lot of training providers coming to us with the same end employer and we have to say, you know, it doesn't work really, there's no point.” (Staff, Area 4)

6.3. Training-provider led SWAPs

Across the case studies, the party who initiated the SWAP tended to lead on SWAP set-up and management. For example, where DWP initiated a SWAP with an employer, they led on sourcing and introducing a suitable training provider for that employer, and they set up meetings between all three parties. Where training providers initiated the SWAP, using their own pre-existing end employer, DWP had less involvement in the set up and management of these SWAPs. In these cases, training providers were the main communication link between the employer and DWP; providers promoted and explained SWAPs to the employer, arranged the employer introductory meetings with the jobcentre, and arranged the GJIs.

“.....if the employer comes to us we'll discuss what their vacancy needs are, what kind of roles they're recruiting for, what kind of people they're looking for, all the information around the vacancies and vacancy numbers and where we'll approach the provider, or there's a few different providers, we'll speak to providers and see if they have suitable training that kind of matches up to those roles. [...] If it's the provider that approaches us, then it's sort of the

same again, but rather than us leading on it, that provider would set up those meetings.” (Staff, Area 4)

For these training provider-led SWAPs, DWP staff sometimes found it difficult to obtain updates on claimant progress and outcomes. This was particularly prominent when the training provider held the relationship with the end employer, as DWP was reliant on the training provider for this information. As a result, monitoring job starts and therefore the overall effectiveness of these SWAPs, was more challenging for DWP staff to action.

“If they, employers, come to us initially to set it up, then we’ll get the feedback from them regarding the job interviews and job offers and job starts. If the employer’s approached the provider, it can be a little bit more tricky and they like to go through the provider rather than come to us direct. But from what I understand of the process, that’s if they approach the provider, that’s how it should be anywhere.” (Staff, Area 4)

DWP staff also raised concerns about the intentions of some training providers and suggested that these providers were more interested in how they could get their courses funded rather than ensuring the course delivered as intended for employers and claimants, due to the way funding for SWAPs is set-up (outlined in section 4.4., ‘funding sources’).

“Providers will get funded for things like employability [...] It is all these soft skills that they will get funded for. They will not get funded for all these licence requirements. That is coming out of their profit margins and that is why it sometimes becomes pressure that they have minimum numbers to break even. That is why sometimes we have had those challenges.” (Staff, Area 2)

6.4. Facilitators of effective partnerships

Across all areas, four factors stood out as facilitating effective coordination between the parties involved: 1) setting clear expectations early across all parties; 2) regular cross-party communication on progress; 3) active employer engagement and 4) consistency of DWP contact.

Setting expectations early: Where SWAPs were seen as successful by DWP staff, they typically involved an initial meeting with all three parties (DWP, the training provider and the employer) to agree expectations of the SWAP and to set out the responsibilities of each party in meeting these. These meetings allowed DWP staff to understand the employer’s vacancy needs and manage their expectations of what’s possible to deliver through a SWAP. They also allowed DWP staff the opportunity to introduce and explain the role of the training provider, and ensure they were suitable for the SWAP. For one employer, who didn’t experience this type of kick-off meeting, they felt this “scene-setting” would have been helpful to ensure expectations of all participating parties were aligned, accountability was clear, and each parties’ needs were understood.

“So, I think it’s important right from the start to set your stall out, so this is my SWAP, I’m going to manage it, and the employer’s going to lead it. The training provider needs to be flexible and understand that [...] but they’re providing that service for that employer, so I think it’s important right from the start to set that out. So, no misunderstandings [occur].” (Staff, Area 1)

Regular cross-party communication: Related to the above, partnerships were thought to work best when there was regular cross-party communication throughout the duration of a SWAP. This included DWP informing employers and training providers of referral numbers in advance of a SWAP starting, DWP keeping in touch with training providers to track claimant attendance and aiding with any issues (e.g., with documents and/or travel costs) during the SWAP, and liaising with employers and providers at the end of a SWAP to record claimant outcomes. This was thought to help ensure all three parties were engaged and invested in the SWAP process.

“The [SWAP] EA will be joining in with the SWAP sometimes, checking who’s started and how’s it going, what’s happening with the WEP. Talking to the employers all the way through, giving updates as near to real time as possible. [...] Updating both the employer and training provider with what the referral rate is at, then when it’s started how successful is it, touching base as often as possible.” (Staff, Area 3)

Active employer engagement: Employer engagement beyond solely delivering the GJI also helped to keep employers invested and was thought to lead to a more successful SWAP. Active engagement included employers being involved in specifying their training requirements, contributing towards pre-SWAP information sessions and giving feedback to claimants and DWP following participation in a SWAP. Training providers suggested that this engagement led to a more successful SWAP as it allowed claimants to interact and become familiar with the employer before the end interview, and one provider noted that it showed to claimants that the employer cared. Similarly, DWP staff suggested that employer engagement meant that employers were more invested and were able to see that the process was for their benefit, as well as being able to identify and flag suggested improvements.

“[The] [organisation] [SWAP] works well because there is shadowing, you get to meet [the] employer and see what is involved each day. Some employers send a video, it’s not what we want, as claimants want involvement, to be seen as something real and worth the effort and to know the programme is valued.” (Training Provider, Area 3)

“They [employers] feel more invested in the process and see that it’s for their benefit. Lots of our providers are good at encouraging the employers to come in on day 1 or 2 of the SWAP to give a presentation about the company. Like a pre-WEP session with them. The employers get to see what’s going on on the course and can then say whether there is something that they don’t like or want to change.” (Staff, Area 3)

Consistent DWP contact: Although the three-way communication worked well, some employers reported difficulties in engaging DWP staff during a SWAP.

Consequently, feedback suggested that partnerships worked best where there was a single, consistent, and engaged contact within DWP for training providers and employers to work with. One employer, for example, reported that their DWP contact didn't attend the partnership meetings with the training provider, which led them to believe that DWP was less invested in the process and only interested in the SWAP outcomes. DWP staff frequently moving roles or contact details changing also raised difficulties for some employers and training providers, who found that these changes in personnel made communication more time-consuming. In contrast, two training providers in Area 1 noted that the centralised team meant it was easier for them to find the right contact within DWP to set up SWAPs in this district area, compared to other areas where it can take much longer to find the relevant JCP contact.

"I don't think they (JCP) are as invested as we are. They don't know their customers. I try to get across to them, please, please don't refer people if they're not right. There's some great staff but the structure – how they support SWAPs, could be better. I cannot sustain the level of commitment we are putting into SWAPs with my team. [DWP] haven't attended our meetings sometimes - the EAs, they don't even know the customers. I think the structure has changed slightly, I think their involvement, they're keen to know the outcomes, but I don't feel they are as invested as myself and the training provider". (Employer, Area 3)

"We share all our data back to [the] JCP about who is referred, who has gone to work, who attended, the SWAP setup works really well, I am a big fan, our biggest issue is the changing of [DWP staff] managers which hinders progress." (Training Provider, Area 2)

6.5. Summary

This chapter has highlighted how DWP staff often draw on an established network of training providers and employers to deliver SWAPs locally. It was evident from the data that any party could initiate a SWAP, but if a training provider initiated a SWAP, this could minimise the level of engagement DWP have with end employers and reduce the flow of information to DWP concerning outcomes, which has implications for DWP's understanding of the effectiveness of different SWAPs. In addition, this chapter has highlighted key factors facilitating effective partnership working on SWAPs. These included setting expectations early in terms of what SWAPs will deliver and the responsibilities of each party in relation to this, maintaining regular cross-party communication throughout the duration of a SWAP, employers actively inputting throughout the SWAP process, and providing consistency in the JCP contacts assigned to each SWAP.

7. Referral

Referrals were a crucial stage linked to the perceived effectiveness of SWAPs in meeting claimant and employer expectations and needs. As a result, this chapter provides an overview of the referral process experienced by claimants and Work Coaches, and the perceived effectiveness of this from the viewpoint of providers and employers. It highlights the key aspects influencing volume and quality of referrals.

7.1. The referral process

Across all case study areas, claimants mostly heard about SWAP through interactions with their Work Coach. A minority of claimants mentioned the SWAP was advertised or recommended to them through other channels (such as social media platforms like Facebook, or through word of mouth via family and friends), before asking their Work Coach if they could be referred. While some claimants said they had spoken to the Work Coach before taking part, many stated they applied simply after receiving a notification through their UC journal or from seeing the SWAP on their local JCP notice board.

“I actually found that out on Facebook, ever so coincidentally, I was just scrolling through Facebook and it came up on an ad.” (Claimant, Construction SWAP, Area 2)

“When you’re on universal credit they always send you these sorts of courses. I always get them on my account so that’s why I chose it.” (Claimant, IT and Communications SWAP, Area 1)

Claimants who spoke to their Work Coach before being referred described these conversations as brief and the information provided during these interactions was high level and focussed on the logistical elements of the SWAP, such as venue, time, or length of the opportunity. Few claimants reported receiving information about the end role on offer.

“Interviewer: *What information were you given about the programme?*

Participant: *Nothing, they just told me there was a training course and I could apply for it if I wanted to know more.” (Claimant, Civil Service SWAP, Area 3)*

Despite the lack of information received beyond the logistics of the SWAP, most claimants felt they had been provided with a sufficient level of information before starting. There were, however, some claimants who felt the level of information was insufficient. For example, one claimant said they hadn’t been told that they’d have to complete a Maths and English assessment prior to the SWAP and believed this was because their Work Coach didn’t want to deter them from doing the course.

“I think had I known what we would go through on the course, if I had known I wouldn’t have gone on it.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

In contrast to the experiences reported by claimants, most Work Coaches stated that they would only refer claimants once they had had an initial conversation with the claimants. Work Coaches described how they addressed claimants' suitability for the programme by taking into consideration any potential barriers to participation, such as access to travel or childcare needs. The communication was also described by Work Coaches during the initial referral process as taking place via face-to-face conversation rather than through online journals or email, as most claimants interviewed suggested.

"You know, I always try and be open with them. I tell them these are what we got, and you know, what do you think? And then I might have a conversation that says, this one and this one, I think, are more in your skill set, then we'll talk through those. And of course, there's knockout factors like any job, you know, if a job says you got to be there at 5:00 in the morning and they don't drive, that might be a knockout factor. All the same with SWAPs, so it's about them identifying those knockout factors as well, and I think they're more in control of it then, if it's suitable for them." (Work Coach, Area 1)

7.2. Claimant choice

Most claimants felt they had a choice in taking part in the SWAP and had no concerns about participating. This perspective was reiterated by Work Coaches who acknowledged that claimants didn't have to agree to participate in a SWAP if they didn't want to and they wouldn't force this.

"I mean, if they really don't wanna [sic] go on it, we can't, it's not mandatory to go on, so we can't, you know, I wouldn't, I'd - I'd obviously try and sell it to them and look at what the good points are. But if they were really dead against it, I wouldn't. You know, you can't make somebody go on one. So, they've gotta [sic] be keen on the idea." (Work Coach, Area 1)

"[Named Work Coach] didn't contact me directly and say you've got to go on this. It was the generic message saying if you're interested contact your Work Coach. I never felt like my arm was twisted at my back or I was forced into it." (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

Only two claimants reported that they didn't feel they had a choice in taking part, and one of these believed that if they didn't participate then their benefits would be impacted. This claimant acknowledged that this was their own opinion of the situation, rather than something they had been told by their Work Coach. Confusion on this aspect, however, could lead to claimants undertaking SWAPs for the wrong reasons, and reduce claimant suitability.

A small number of DWP staff believed that once claimants agree to take part in a SWAP, they should be made aware of the implications to their benefits if they then drop out, to improve claimant attendance on the programme. Most Work Coaches, however, reflected that claimants rarely dropped out once they started a SWAP and this was mostly due to changes in circumstances, such as childcare, or that claimants had found work elsewhere, suggesting such measures may not be necessary.

7.3. Effectiveness of the referral process

Employers and training providers were prompted to reflect on the overall effectiveness of the SWAP referral process. Most reflections centred around their experiences of the quality and quantity of referrals made to SWAPs.

Quality of referrals

Overall, training providers tended to be more satisfied than employers on the suitability of the claimants referred, noting that while claimants were sometimes put through who weren't appropriate for SWAPs (e.g., due to a lack of interest or particular health conditions), overall, the 'right' people were put forward. Employer views, however, were more varied. Some employers were happy with the suitability of the claimants referred to their SWAP, as they felt the claimants were job-ready and fitted in well with their organisation. For most employers, however, they noted that the calibre of candidates was, at best, mixed. Examples of poor claimant suitability mentioned by employers included claimants being referred who couldn't feasibly travel to the employer's location or undertake the work/hours of work required, claimants who were perceived to be uninterested or uncommitted to the role (or work in general). In addition, one employer encountered a claimant who had previously been dismissed from their workplace, and another employer noted some claimants needed extra support in terms of their mental health and confidence. The unsuitability of some claimants, alongside lower than expected referral numbers was seen as one of the main reasons why the SWAP didn't meet some or all of these employers' vacancy needs.

“Interviewer: To what extent were candidates job ready?”

Participant: ...very, very mixed. We've had to work extremely hard. [...] I don't know how long they've been out of work. Some of them have got distressing histories. [They've been] Out of work for very, very valid reasons. They might have the skills deep down but their mental state, we need to build them up.”
(Employer, Area 3)

“If we could have got 10 candidates to go through the training programme and work experience, and potentially hire 5 people it would have been worth it. But we came out with one, and he only works two 4-hour shifts a week” (Employer, Area 1)

Quantity of referrals

While training providers did not raise many concerns about claimant suitability, across all areas they described a recent decline in the quantity of referrals they'd received, although this was less prominent in Area 1. A small number of training providers linked this decline to the impact of Covid-19, which had slowed down referrals and made it more difficult to plan future SWAPs (other impacts thought to affect referrals are explored further in the next section). Across both training provider and employer interviews, it was evident that many participants had been disappointed in the volume of claimants referred, and this was often the case where employer expectations had been raised due to a high number of claimants attending

the initial SWAP information session, which then didn't correspond to the number who started the course.

“Initially, when I started my role in 2021, SWAPs were incredibly successful and had a really high volume of referrals [...] over the last six months the number of referrals have deteriorated. This increases the difficulty to confirm SWAPs and I don't have the capacity to work further ahead and work in advance which can be challenging.” (Training provider, Area 4)

“We had 16 candidates, 3 turned up for the first open day. We didn't employ anyone from that one. We did offer someone a role and they didn't want to be vaccinated. That didn't help. For the second open day, only 3 out of 26 turned up.” (Employer, Area 1)

7.4. Key factors affecting referrals

A variety of factors were thought by DWP staff and providers to influence the volume and quality of referrals made to SWAP. These factors included both aspects within DWP's control such as Work Coach time, as well as external contextual factors.

DWP-related factors

Work Coach time to make referrals: Work Coaches, and other DWP staff, recognised that there is limited time during meetings with claimants to deliver information about SWAP in detail, and ensure claimants make an informed choice that considers potential barriers to participation. Along with short appointment slots, the referral process can be burdensome for Work Coaches due to the lengthy process, which for certain SWAPs, can have multiple different stages. While most case study areas described actions they'd taken to make the referral process as easy as possible for Work Coaches, this remained an issue for staff to navigate.

“I think the time that Work Coaches have to spend with their customers ... It can sometimes be time consuming, ...they're not necessarily quality referrals because they don't have time to go through everything.” (Staff, Area 4)

“[The] referral process is important, being as streamlined and straightforward as possible is important. If it took half an hour the Work Coaches wouldn't have time, so [it's] crucial to make it straightforward. As EAs we pick up a lot of it, if a Work Coach is really snowed under, they may have only updated the CC [claimant commitment], so we can then pick up after that. It helps having the communication between the EAs and the Work Coaches, they can give us a shout if they can't fit it in otherwise, we wouldn't get the referrals through.” (Staff, Area 1)

Work Coach knowledge of SWAP: Related to Work Coach time is their knowledge of local SWAP opportunities, so they can refer the right claimants to the right SWAP. Staff across all case study areas described regular activities they undertook to ensure Work Coaches were aware of the SWAPs on offer. This included sharing upcoming SWAPs on SharePoint, promoting SWAPs at jobs fairs, and inviting training providers and/or employers to give virtual presentations to Work Coaches

about specific opportunities. Additionally, some staff noted that Work Coaches would not refer participants to particular SWAPs if they haven't previously received good outcomes for their claimants, indicating that Work Coach buy-in was also important.

"Knowledge and time. Work Coaches struggle to identify all of the opportunities out there. We've modified how we communicate, we have a SharePoint area, a 'what's on' page that they look at every morning listing what's on offer which has improved things" (Staff, Area 3)

We've got to make sure they are delivering what they say they are delivering. If someone has a customer with a bad experience, then they will stop referring if they think the provider is unreliable..." (Staff, Area 2)

Other DWP provision: Claimant ineligibility for SWAP because of their participation in other JCP provision, was a common frustration mentioned by DWP staff in differing roles when discussing referrals, as well as some training providers. Work Coaches mentioned that this was particularly an issue when claimants weren't getting what they needed from the other provision, but they were still prevented from referring these individuals to a SWAP due to rules around claimants receiving double funding. In general, there appeared to be uncertainty among Work Coaches about which provisions did or didn't rule out attendance on a SWAP, and so further clarity on this may be needed. The Way to Work scheme was also seen by some DWP staff as diverting possible participants away from SWAP by providing interviews without the need for training.

"There was some confusion if someone could go on a SWAP if they had been referred to Restart, can they still do a SWAP. The guidance was unclear and even managers didn't know." (Staff, Area 2)

External factors

Claimant personal circumstances: How well SWAP attendance aligned with claimant personal circumstances, such as childcare responsibilities and access to transport could also be a barrier to referring claimants to SWAP. Limited English language proficiency to be able to complete course documentation was also a consideration, and this was highlighted in particular in Area 2, which had a diverse customer base. Some districts were trying to overcome this challenge by working with training providers and employers from the same communities as the claimants.

"I think personally some of my ESOL customers, I find they miss out on SWAPs, and a lot of them are interested in things like warehouse work and like the SIA. They don't really get a chance to do it because they're only available a couple of weeks during the year when they're not at college." (Work Coach, Area 4)

Claimant interest: Claimant interest in the SWAP and/or end role was seen as an important factor by staff of all roles. Interviews with DWP staff revealed that having an end employer who was well known to claimants tended to increase the number of referrals made to a SWAP. Popularity of SWAPs could also differ between different

claimant groups. Homeworking SWAPs, for example, were thought to strongly appeal to parents as they could more easily attend around their caring responsibilities.

“Umm I think popular sectors. Sectors people normally relate to more, warehousing, security. Care, I keep going back to care, it’s a harder one. Security is a good one because the SIA badge on offer, they get the SIA badge at the end of it as well as a guaranteed interview. As long as the customers are aware of the employer, if it’s a well-known employer that’s a biggie [sic]. They already know about that employer, could have friends or family working there, so well-known employers are good.” (Staff, Area 4)

7.5. Summary

This chapter has highlighted some discrepancy in how claimants and Work Coaches experience the SWAP referral process. Claimants tended to describe a lighter-touch referral process than Work Coaches, which focussed on providing logistical information. While most claimants felt they had received sufficient information about the programme before starting, and that they had the choice to take part, it was evident that some claimants felt that the level of information provided was insufficient and a small number thought participation was mandatory. Training providers and employers had differing reflections regarding the overall effectiveness of the referrals process. Employers tended to focus on claimant suitability as well as the number of referrals received, with mixed views reported in relation to this. Training providers instead focused on the recent decline in overall referrals received for SWAPs, which could make their work in planning future SWAPs more challenging. A range of factors were thought to influence the number and quality of referrals made, and these factors link back to the importance of the interaction between claimants and their Work Coaches in determining whether a SWAP is the most suitable employment provision for individual claimants.

8. Claimant experiences of programme delivery

This chapter explores the experiences and perceptions of the claimant participants. It explores what motivations they had for taking part in the SWAP, their experiences of the PET, WEP and GJI, as well as how well the SWAP aligned with their personal circumstances and the support they received during and after taking part. It is important to note that this chapter primarily draws from data collected in Areas 1 to 3, due to the issues with the claimant sample for Area 4 (outlined in Chapter 2.3. 'Sampling and recruitment').

8.1. Motivations for taking part

Across the case study areas, claimants reported a variety of motivations for taking part in a SWAP, of which the following were most prevalent. The most common reason claimants across all case study areas suggested they took part in a SWAP was to improve their chances at moving into or closer to employment. This motivation, to an extent, aligned with the SWAP outcomes identified from the data (see Chapter 10, 'Outcomes'). In these situations, claimants thought a SWAP was the best way to facilitate this move towards employment as it provided access to a guaranteed job interview (GJI), or because there were multiple jobs available locally within specific sectors like security or construction. For example:

“Yeah, it was interest in the sector and the guaranteed interview at the end. I sat through it for 5 days, the training course, just to get the interview at the end of it... I only went on the course to get the interview anyway.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

In addition, claimants thought the opportunity to attain employability skills such as improved confidence or improved CV skills (in terms of both writing their CV and adding new skills to their CV), or outcomes like receiving a licence or certificates in sectors like security or construction, would help them find employment faster than traditional application methods.

Other claimants reported that they had an interest in the skills and sector of the SWAP, and felt the SWAP offered the opportunity to see if the end job or sector was suitable for their interests, or if it fitted with their personal circumstances:

“[I] wanted to do the FLT [forklift truck] course to see if I could just do it [with the restrictions in neck].” (Claimant, Logistics and Freight Transport SWAP, Area 1)

“Basically what I really wanted was just to know what it was all about, so if I found a job I liked I would know how to go about it.” (Claimant, Construction SWAP, Area 2)

Another prevalent motivation for taking part in a SWAP was that claimants were already familiar with the content of the course through previous first hand or second-hand knowledge or experience. This suggests that some claimants wanted to use the SWAP to continue working in the same sector or a similar role.

“I have a qualification in care. The agency was nursing caring, and all sorts of nursing stuff. That’s why I was interested.” (Claimant, Recruitment Agencies SWAP, Area 4)

Finally, where claimants felt an application process was challenging, either because of a specific employer like the Civil Service, or because they found it to be a challenge in general, some claimants went on the related SWAP to gain support in that application process.

“Genuinely I just wanted to have any insights into the process and um the structure of applying to the Civil Service and how that differs from the private sector” (Claimant, Civil Service SWAP, Area 3)

Following on from claimant motivations, the following subsections explore claimants’ perceptions of each of the SWAP components in turn.

8.2. Experiences of the PET

Claimants’ perceptions of the usefulness of the SWAP PET tied in with whether the expectations and reasons for starting a SWAP were met. Claimants found the PET to be most useful or impactful when it included sector-specific information or an interview/application support.

Where sector-specific information was provided, (i.e., information about what they could expect from the different elements of the end job, or practical or transferrable knowledge across multiple types of job), claimants often believed this to be the most impactful or useful takeaway from the training. This also extended to information provided to them by course leaders on the tools or knowledge needed to start their own businesses. This was particularly prevalent in Area 3. Finally, claimant interview or application support such as interview techniques or support with the application process was considered useful. Overall, claimants tended to value the practical elements or knowledge that they believed improved their employability or allowed them to venture into their own business interests.

“Yep I have learnt so many things by doing this course. In level 1 I learned I can start my own salon and get a license for my salon - I can do insurance when I do insurance. In level 2 I can start my business without any hesitation.” (Claimant, Beauty Therapy and Personal Services SWAP, Area 2)

“Actually, the course was quite good. Because they prepared us for what to say in the interview, what questions you can ask. What to wear and how to look smart.” (Claimant, Hospitality SWAP, Area 3)

As such, though most claimants felt the PET was useful to some extent, claimants who did not find the PET useful tended to perceive it this way because their expectations were not met, the course duplicated their existing knowledge, or they

didn't feel that the PET provided information or knowledge to increase their employability either generally or for the end job role.

“For me it wasn't useful because I've done all that and beyond.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

Claimants also commented on the length and pace of the training; some claimants wanted the pace to be less intense, and the length of the PET to be longer. This corresponds with previous research, whereby claimants were less positive in their attitudes towards the PET when a SWAP was shorter (4 weeks or less) than those on longer SWAPs (DWP 2014). However, it is worth noting that this perspective was not universal among claimants interviewed, suggesting that the pace and intensity of a course was subjective to the existing level of understanding a claimant had on the topic, and how easily they felt they could follow the content.

“I felt for - when I was doing the course – [I felt] for other people, because it had to be done in such a short period of time, we got a week, if you couldn't keep up, you were left behind. I felt sorry for the people who didn't understand and were winging it. Because it was so short.... If there was more time, it would be better.” (Claimant, Construction SWAP, Area 3)

8.3. Experiences of the WEP

Few claimants said they were offered a WEP, and almost all claimants would have liked one as they felt it would have provided them with a practical understanding of the end job role, as well as given them the opportunity to put their PET into practice and gain 'hands-on' experience. Some claimants perceived the 'hands-on' experience to be incredibly valuable as they felt it would increase their confidence in interviews, and – for claimants who were hesitant about applying for a job within the sector of the SWAP – it would provide an opportunity to see if they enjoyed the work, reducing their overall anxiety about this. In these cases, claimants felt they could use the WEP as a 'try before you buy' experience.

“To get more confident. It gives you a boost. For the interview you would be more confident to speak about your experience. It would give you more chances to get a good job.” (Claimant, Hospitality SWAP, Area 3)

The lack of WEP corresponds with reflections from a small number of DWP staff who recognised this was an element which could be improved to bring their current SWAP offer more in line with the programme's intention. Staff mentioned that following Covid-19, a lot of WEP elements were delivered in a less traditional way, such as through videos about the employer organisation, or existing staff speaking to SWAP participants about their day-to-day work, rather than claimants gaining experience in the workplace. The WEP offered was therefore dependent on what time and resource employers were willing to input, as well as practicalities, such as feasibility of obtaining the clearances required for claimants to be able to enter the workplace. In some cases, claimants reported that these less traditional approaches to a WEP were provided. Claimants found these provisions insightful and, when prompted, they agreed it gave a practical understanding of the end job or employer. Notably,

however, claimants did not tend to consider this to be work experience themselves, and many would have still preferred the opportunity of a more traditional WEP with the end employer.

“Yes, two employers came in and told us about the workplace, what kind of work it was, a care home. She was explaining the different areas we could go into.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

Claimants often mentioned that the lack of WEP or practical elements was an aspect that needed to be addressed to make the SWAP more worthwhile, as it was thought that this element would allow them to enhance their skillsets and therefore CVs. This aspect is therefore a key area of SWAP delivery that could be improved to enhance claimants' experiences of the programme.

8.4. Experiences of the GJI

Guaranteed job interviews (GJIs) were often perceived to be important by the claimants who were interviewed. While some claimants reported receiving a GJI, those who did not said they would have wanted to have one. This echoes reflections from Work Coaches in Areas 2 and 3, who noted that there wasn't always a GJI at the end of a SWAP. Like the WEP, claimants who didn't receive a GJI felt that having one would have allowed them the opportunity to practice being interviewed. In addition, for claimants who had personal circumstances that could impact their opportunities for work, they believed a GJI would give them a chance to explain their circumstances to the employer directly, to see if these could be accommodated and to learn more about the specifics of the end job:

“I would like to go to the interview, to know what they are asking to maybe have a chance, to explain your current situation, when you are talking face to face people can understand your hours, you can't explain on your job application. With part time it might be evening work, weekend work but they don't mention this. And you spend your time doing make up, going to the interview, and only then they tell you.” (Claimant, Public Sector SWAP, Area 3)

As claimants often stated that they were taking part in a SWAP to find employment, where they were advertised a SWAP with the promise of a GJI which was then not delivered, this was disappointing for them.

8.5. Fit with claimant circumstances

Claimants tended to perceive SWAPs to be a good overall experience for them, and that the SWAP fitted with their circumstances (for example, the locations and programme timings were accessible). This was case across all case study areas (except Area 4 where too few claimants were interviewed to draw conclusions on this). However, in circumstances where claimants were the main carer – predominately for parents with children – they felt that their ability to attend the training or end job was limited because of these caring responsibilities. In this way, caring responsibilities was a prominent barrier to these claimants being able to fully

participate in the SWAP or apply for the end job on offer. Notably, most claimants who discussed this were women.

“Yeah, that was nice...I didn’t get the chance to do the thing they gave it to me, like the homework. ...They were ready but I wasn’t ready because I was already giving my whole day 9-5 and I needed to do self-study. My husband had to go [abroad] and my daughter was unwell...This was the only reason to honestly. The course was fine. If I had child support, I would have managed to finish my course. (Claimant, IT and Communications SWAP, Area 1)

When carers felt their needs and personal circumstances were met, it tended to be when the SWAP took place during school hours, and therefore these participants could drop off or collect their children around the timings of the programme, or they were given the option to do the course from home when their child was not in school. However, it is important to note that this option was viewed differently by claimants, as for some claimant participants who completed a SWAP while simultaneously caring for a child at home, this could still be a challenge.

“When my son was at home, I found it hard to concentrate. So, I just done it when he was in nursery.” (Claimant, Education and Teaching SWAP, Area 2)

8.6. Support received during a SWAP

Where claimants were prompted about the support they received while on a SWAP, discussion tended to focus on the support provided by their Work Coach and/or the PET course lead. Claimants acknowledged the logistical support the JCP provided, which included financial support for arranging travel to the SWAP location and purchasing suitable clothes and equipment. Most claimants were happy with the level of support provided in these areas.

“The jobcentre supplied me with a bus ticket, I got the bus into town every day [...] at that time I smashed my phone, so I got a new phone as well out of them.” (Claimant, Construction SWAP, Area 4)

Some claimants also discussed receiving encouragement and emotional support from their Work Coach while on the programme and immediately afterwards. This was mostly mentioned by claimants in Area 1 and Area 3.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like I said, my Work Coach at the time, she was so supportive, unbelievable, absolutely wonderful.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

The PET course lead was another factor claimants suggested allowed them to feel supported on the SWAP. However, when claimants did not feel supported, or in one SWAP, where the trainer was reported to have displayed inappropriate and problematic behaviour, claimants held negative views about the course lead. These claimants were able to distinguish between the usefulness of the SWAP and their dislike of the course lead, however, as most of these claimants still suggested they gained something useful from the programme. Despite this, given the importance of

the trainer for claimants' experiences of a SWAP, this is an area that could require more continual oversight and quality assurance from JCPs.

“No that’s it, I think training in itself to help people get an interview is a really good idea but the way they and he [training provider] in particular delivered it, it just wasn’t helpful at all [...] A lot of sexist comments, borderline racial comments. Homophobic comments. Absolutely loads of them. I was in disbelief that he had been allowed to teach. He was just not professional at all.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

In addition, where claimants expressed a desire for more support while they were on the SWAP, this was often expressed in terms of more information about the financial support available to enable them to attend (which suggests this information is not consistently communicated to claimants), or support regarding their learning needs on the SWAP itself. The former point was echoed by a couple of employers, who noted that not all claimants attending their SWAPs were aware of the financial assistance available from JCPs for equipment and travel costs.

“My Work Coach told me they could provide financial aid to go there and come back. [Participant asked about getting this but...] she didn’t get back to me though, but I carried on and didn’t let that distract me, I spoke to some of the participants who did have the financial support, I wrote it in the journal about it but they [the Work Coach] never got back to me”. (Claimant, Logistics SWAP, Area 2)

8.7. Post-SWAP

Some claimants discussed their experience post-SWAP, and where this was the case, they tended to feel they had not received enough or any support during this period. This was occasionally perceived as a lack of emotional support, wherein claimants felt that once the SWAP was completed, Work Coaches stopped being as responsive as they were during the referral and training periods.

“When my course finished and I saw a different Work Coach, they only asked if I completed the course and got a certificate, I feel like I don’t spend more than 2 minutes, because I am waiting, and [they] only ask how [I] am doing, we have this and that.” (Claimant, Administration SWAP, Area 2)

Though not explicitly mentioned by participants, the data indicated that there could be a lack of clear responsibility taken by the end employer, training provider or JCP in the period between claimants finishing a SWAP and either beginning employment or looking for other work. This tended to be the case when pre-employment processes were delayed and/or disorganised, or the end job was not in line with what had been advertised. In these cases, claimants were often frustrated and suggested there was a lack of accountability and support available to resolve these issues.

“When I get to the venue for the interview, I was interviewed for the kitchen staff not the support worker. I said I’m here for the support worker job and they said, ‘oh there’s no jobs for that, they’ve all gone’, so I was interviewed by the

restaurant staff and cleaner. [...] I did let the company know, the one we went on the course with, I let them know the situation and she noted it all down, but I didn't hear anything, so I don't know if she did anything with it." (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

8.8. Overall reflections

Overall, most claimants across all areas perceived SWAP to be a positive experience. In line with previous research findings (DWP 2013a; DWP 2014) the claimants interviewed primarily felt they had gained new skills that would support them in attaining employment. In addition, some claimants shared that if it were not for their involvement in SWAP, they would not have considered work in that particular sector, suggesting that the programme can provide claimants with a greater view of jobs than traditional job searching.

***“Interviewer:** Would you have considered a job in this area without attending the programme?*

***Claimant:** It didn't even come to my mind, and I thought I couldn't do it due to my sciatica, it is hard work, I only did it as the Work Coach said good things about the course". (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)*

Some claimants, however, felt that while the SWAP was a good experience overall, they didn't find it useful, or it didn't translate into employment as they had expected; however, this tended to be when a claimant wanted a job in a specialised area, such as IT and Communications.

8.9. Summary

Claimants reported a variety of motivations for taking part in SWAP and while the overall experience of claimants tended to be positive, the SWAP wasn't always considered useful for moving into employment. SWAP outcomes for claimants are discussed further in Chapter 10. In terms of the specific components of SWAP, claimants tended to report the PET was most useful when it was specific to the end role or sector, and less useful where it duplicated existing knowledge or was considered less relevant. It was evident that few claimants took part in a WEP, although the idea of work experience was considered valuable in terms of gaining hands-on experience with which to test out the role and increase their confidence. Similarly, the GJI was perceived as an important part of the experience which, when not provided, was disappointing for claimants. In general, claimants reported few issues in being able to attend the SWAPs, although some claimants with caring responsibilities could find this challenging. Finally, claimants viewed positively any financial or other logistical support they received during the SWAP, although there were some gaps reported, particularly in terms of the period between finishing a SWAP and either starting work or continuing with job searching.

9. Employer experiences of programme delivery

Following on from the claimant experiences of SWAP, this chapter covers the key themes related to employers' experiences of this programme. The chapter starts with an overview of employer motivations for taking part in SWAP. Attention then turns to employers' understanding and reflections on the specific components of the programme (i.e., the PET, WEP and GJI). It also covers employer reflections on claimants' attitudes, and challenges in working with DWP on SWAP.

9.1. Motivations for taking part

Overall, employers saw SWAP as one approach in their repertoire of recruitment strategies, alongside social media, online portals, outreach to educational institutions, as well as other DWP programmes like Restart. Some employers noted that recruitment had become harder since the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, employers noted that they struggled to fill roles that involved shift work with anti-social hours.

Aside from recruitment value, some employers viewed SWAP as facilitating their commitment to corporate social responsibility. The opportunity to serve the local community through providing employment was a major motivating factor for their engagement in a SWAP.

"We've supported the local community, youngsters who want to change their lives and get something consistent that gives them a career progression."
(Employer, Area 2)

When expressing their satisfaction at seeing good outcomes for claimants, diversity was a common theme, a sentiment which was also expressed by some training providers. Employers held diversity in high esteem across the breadth of intersectionality (e.g., age, ethnicity, class, disability). They were satisfied that SWAP had broadened the pool of candidates applying for their roles. For one employer, this aspect of SWAP was thought the most beneficial of their experience:

"the diversity of the group. It was fantastic for us, we definitely have a core audience and the people who came [claimants] broadened the ethnic and socioeconomic background, even age we had guys aged 19 to 62. It was such a diverse group so from our perspective, being able to learn from that and reach different audiences has been really beneficial." (Employer, Area 4)

9.2. Understanding and experiences of SWAP components

Overall, employers were enthusiastic about the premise of SWAP. They liked the flexible, holistic format of the programme and its potential to deliver positive outcomes for themselves and claimants. At the same time, employers' understandings of the programme varied, and a small number of employers held misconceptions about it. These misconceptions related to their responsibilities regarding SWAP delivery, minimum length, and the necessary components of the programme. For example, one employer thought that a SWAP had to be 6 weeks long rather than up to 6 weeks. This meant that this employer was contributing more time and effort than was proportionate to their vacancy requirement. Other employers described SWAPs that appeared to last beyond the intended 6-week timeframe.

"[laughs at question] "That was another thing, my understanding was that I thought it [SWAP] had to be 6 weeks. Nobody told me that it could be a few days, I wouldn't have planned 6 weeks if I didn't have to do 6 weeks [laughs]"
(Employer, Area 4)

A small number of employers also varied in their understanding of the training element. For example, one thought that they themselves were responsible for providing training, whilst another thought training was no longer a required element for a SWAP. When reflecting on their experience, most employers felt that the PET delivered was bespoke and appropriate to their needs, and that claimants who completed the training were well-prepared for their interviews, knowledgeable and confident.

"We've had lots of positive feedback, it gives the candidate a really good understanding and foundation, employers feel that candidates come more prepared, so on interview day, they have lots more knowledge and understanding than someone who would come to them through a direct application." (Coordinating Employer, Area 4)

In contrast, where employers were less certain that the training had met their needs, this tended to be where they weren't sure what training had been delivered, or they considered the training to be less necessary for their sector. This was mentioned by two logistics employers (warehousing) and one hospitality employer, with one of these employers stating that for them claimant attitudes were much more important.

"I understand the training is somewhat important, but for me it's the attitudes of the candidate [...] they come and do this course as a refresher [...] any bad habits may be ironed out and then it's about attitude, what I'm looking for is someone attempting the course with the idea of kickstarting their career and getting started again rather than 'oh fantastic you've got a piece of paper'."
(Employer, Area 1)

A small number of employers believed that work experience was not a mandatory element of SWAP, with one employer associating work experience only with very young people, stating:

“[It’s] just not the environment for a work experience thing, and we can’t hire anybody below 18 years old because of dealing with age restricted products, it’s just not something that we offer.” (Employer, Area 3)

As a result, some employers admitted they didn’t offer any form of WEP on their SWAP, and this was particularly the case in Area 3. Other employers stated that they did provide some work experience, such as shadowing existing employees or presentations about their company, however many acknowledged that a more practical, hands-on WEP would be challenging to provide due to their wider operating environment, and the duty of care these employers had for the participants, and those around them (for example, vulnerable patients receiving care, or other workers present on their construction sites).

“Yeah from my point of view we’d have to issue a whole other process to give these guys [claimants] work experience. Health and safety, as you probably know, is a big issue in construction and we don’t want to put people in harm’s way. Like, when people don’t do a job properly this can cause something bad to happen on site.” (Employer, Area 4)

In terms of the GJI, most employers stated that SWAP attendees went through the same interview process as other candidates. One employer believed that the GJI was the most attractive component of the SWAP for claimants, and the main reason claimants participated in the programme.

“As an employer, the [GJI] is how you’re going to get people... People won’t turn up if there isn’t anything to work towards or a reason to stay.” (Employer, Area 1)

Three employers described a more informal interview process for SWAP candidates which involved the employer telling the candidates about the work, and the expectations involved, to ensure the claimants understood and were happy to proceed with this. For one of these employers, this interview took place at the start of rather than at the end of the SWAP, and for them this approach worked well in screening out unsuitable candidates for the SWAP and the role.

“I think the suitability works for us, I would say again... the vetting process the college have in place, I work very closely with them, the initial leg work they have done and that I have done with them to make sure we are attracting the right people... it works well actually” (Employer, Area 2)

For a further two employers, referred claimants were interviewed twice, once at the start of the SWAP, and again at the end. Both interviews were conducted by different parties, and the initial interview was focussed on checking claimant suitability for the SWAP (including aspects such as Maths and English ability, claimant understanding and interest in the role). An interview for the end role then took place following the PET and WEP. It’s worth noting that all three of these employers were satisfied with the suitability of candidates who then progressed onto the SWAP, and this initial

screening interview may have been beneficial for this. Further reflections on claimant suitability, in terms of claimant attitudes are detailed in the next section.

9.3. Employer perceptions of claimant attitudes

As outlined previously (Section 7.3. Effectiveness of the referral process), while a small number of employers were very satisfied with the suitability of claimants referred to the SWAP, most reported some experience of claimants being referred that they didn't feel wanted to work, either in the roles they were offering or more generally. This was usually speculated to be the case where employers thought claimants were reluctant to participate, employers experienced claimants dropping off the SWAP part-way through, or claimants failed to disclose important information relevant for the end role (e.g., failing drug and alcohol screening and DBS checks). While some employers felt that internal processes could be more thorough to address this issue (explored further in the next section), a small number thought this issue was reflective of the wider claimant pool DWP is currently working with due to recent labour market changes.

"This is where fundamentals of sector-based work academy fall down, people that are unemployed coming to jobcentre, a good chunk of them it's got nothing to do with skills and capability. [...] it doesn't come down to ability, it comes down to attitudes, wants and desire, to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning in the middle of November when it's raining. [...] these are the things that are missing" (Employer, Area 1)

9.4 Working with the JCP

Beyond the more general points around partnership working described in Chapter 6, employers reflected on the positives and challenges involved in working with DWP. Most employers reflected positively on their experience of working with JCP Staff to deliver their SWAP. Where this was the case, employers valued the regular communication they received from JCP Staff and felt that these staff members did everything they could to make the SWAP a success and obtain a sufficient number of referrals (even where this ultimately wasn't achieved).

Interviewer: "What does the [DWP] do to make it work so well?"

Participant: *They advertise for the job, organise presentation days, got in touch with training providers to get it up and running, organise work experience, interviews, we agreed times with them. It took a lot of time away from recruitment for us". (Employer, Area 1)*

A significant minority did, however, reflect on challenges they'd experienced working with DWP staff. This mostly linked back to the dual issues of quantity and quality of referrals to SWAP covered earlier in the report. In cases where fewer referrals were received than expected, some employers were unsure whether the SWAP had been

sufficiently promoted to Work Coaches. Where employers experienced issues with claimant suitability, a small number of employers thought that more robust screening of candidates within JCPs was required to ensure candidates were a good fit before being referred. This echoed the findings of a previous study (2013b) whereby employers suggested improving the programme by having JCPs conduct more checks on the suitability of the claimants referred, and better preparation of these claimants to reduce drop-out rates. It's worth noting, however, the barrier to this in terms of the amount of time Work Coaches have in which to make considered referrals to the programme (see Section 7.4. Factors affecting referrals). A further employer believed individual staff within DWP should be held responsible for the quality of referrals, and contextualised Work Coach behaviour as directed by DWP culture, which they perceived as overly target-driven.

“There should be true accountability on advisers in jobcentres [...] for want of a better phrase, you're wasting employers time [...] if it went really, really badly, well it did go badly for me, I'm lucky, I know SWAPs can work, if it went really badly [and didn't know how well they can work], I might say I'm not working with jobcentres again [...] so for me, some proper accountability, but also again, accountability on all parties to make things work.” (Employer, Area 1)

To address issues with the volume and quality of referrals, a small number of employers indicated they would like to be more involved in the referrals process at the very start of SWAP set-up. These employers stated that they'd be happy to have greater involvement in the claimant screening or vetting process or said they would be open to meeting directly with claimants and Work Coaches to discuss the SWAP opportunity and explain the candidate criteria more directly. These employers were keen to be involved in these processes and believed these measures would help them curate their intake of candidates. It's worth noting, however, that while this is a good solution for employers who are happy to provide more input into the SWAP process, other employers valued SWAP because it saved them time with their recruitment processes.

“I think probably more detail and work in regard to the referrals side for me, more time with Work Coaches to be able to understand it a little bit more and what they're talking about to candidates when talking about the role, and that just saves time, time's quite precious. We're happy to attend jobcentres to increase knowledge and build relationships.” (Employer, Area 4)

9.5. Overall reflections

Although most employers reflected positively on their involvement in SWAP, particularly in Area 1, across other areas these experiences varied from disappointed to very satisfied. Despite this, employers' engagement with the programme did not seem to be determined by the outcomes they gained from it. Even employers who had been disappointed with their experience indicated they would continue to engage with SWAP in the future, hopeful that the programme could improve.

“Yeah, I mean I think, although we’ve not had the numbers come through we’d hoped, we’re not in the position where we’d say it’s a lost cause. With any new endeavour there are bumps in the road, what you have to do is look at each constituent part [...] are there opportunities in each part to tweak it, refine it and change it? We’re only 2 [SWAPs] in, it’s still relatively early days, I don’t think we’re in a position where we’ll throw our hands in the air and give up, we’re a long way from that, I think there are plenty of opportunities we can look at that in more detail.” (Employer, Area 3)

9.6. Summary

Overall, employers shared diverse experiences of SWAP. Among the key motivations expressed by employers for taking part in the programme were its potential contribution to their recruitment process, as well as their corporate social responsibility, suggesting that for some employers their engagement was not simply outcome driven. A small number of employers held misconceptions about the core subcomponents of the programme, and this may have affected their subsequent SWAP offer to claimants. It was also evident that employers held a range of views of the usefulness of PET, which may be influenced by how relevant it was. When offered GJIs, SWAP candidates usually went through the same process as mainstream candidates, however a small number of employers described a different approach that could either be more informal, or involve extra processes, depending on the employer. Finally, most employers reported encountering poor claimant attitudes during the SWAP, and this was linked by some employers to a lack of oversight and accountability within JCPs for the referrals made.

10. Outcomes from SWAP

Participants discussed a range of outcomes related to the SWAP offer and how these outcomes may vary across claimant circumstances and different types of SWAPs. It is worth noting that participant reflections about outcomes were relatively similar across case study areas, but there were nuances in terms of the type of participant and their role (e.g., claimant vs. DWP staff). Participants were prompted to reflect on specific outcomes such as employment and confidence for claimants, and outcomes relating to vacancies filled for employers.

10.1. Labour market and employability outcomes for claimants

Two types of outcomes for claimants were evident in the data collected. These were 1) labour market outcomes and 2) employability outcomes, with employability outcomes more prominent in the data.

Labour market outcomes

Only a small number of claimants were in work at the time of the interview and some of the reasons provided by claimants for this were related to health conditions, caring responsibilities, or waiting for pre-employment checks to go through. However, the lack of employment could also reflect an issue with the fit between SWAPs and claimant circumstances (see also Section 7.3 on quality of referrals). This is evidenced below whereby the claimant didn't take up the GJI offered during the SWAP because they would not have been able to do the end role. This participant later stated that their Work Coach was happy for them to be referred to the SWAP just so they could gain the course certificate.

“Interviewer: Did you take up the offer?”

Claimant: No because I have health problems. [I] wasn't fit to work on [a] construction site.” (Claimant, Construction SWAP, Area 3)

It is worth noting that when claimants were in-work they were in a job which was not always the same as the job role linked to the SWAP, or it was not always clear whether the claimant's current job was linked to the SWAP or not. For example, a claimant from Area 2 who went on a logistics SWAP had to wait a while for the GJI appointment to come through for the SWAP, and in the meantime, applied for a role at a different company they were now working at. A different claimant did start work but the job they found was not suitable for their health condition and it appeared (from the interview more broadly rather than the quote below) that the job in question was not the job role linked to the SWAP but one they found through their Work Coach afterwards:

“Well I got the interview for the ward hostess ‘cos I thought I’d give that a go, and I got the position, but like I said I couldn’t manage. My Work Coach [name] said, try it, see how you get on, you never know. [I was] run ragged, you know, 6-hour shift and only a 15 minute break, you never stop, trolleying meals, trolleying back, cleaning the dishes, cleaning the floor [...] I got told off for talking to a patient, the lady [patient] worked at the [name] bank, she was disgusted. My leg was killing me when I was coming home, it was throbbing, I couldn’t walk, the next day was horrific.” (Claimant, Healthcare SWAP, Area 1)

Evidence that SWAP leads to employment was more prominent in the data from DWP staff and training providers. Some staff and training providers cited success rates that were widely-ranging. These numbers have not been cited in this report because it was not always clear on what evidence the cited numbers were based.

“...they complete and mostly most people get offered a job I would say, from the ones I’ve run, there’s very few, more like the odd person who doesn’t get offered a job at the end of it”. (Staff, Area 1).

At times the link between SWAP and claimants starting a new job could be more indirect. For example, SWAPs could indirectly help in hiring a claimant by providing an opportunity for the claimant to meet a prospective employer and show their potential.

“[Claimant] was supposed to be starting on a SWAP on the Monday but they [the employer] had a word with him on the Friday, and they employed him directly as a team leader and so we were actually down one star on our SWAP ‘cos actually they just literally gone straight into employment, direct employment with him which was absolutely great for the customer”. (Staff, Area 3)

Despite the indirect impact of participating in a SWAP, there were situations where the job claimants moved into was accessible through other means. For instance, a claimant from Area 1 felt that they could have signed up to the recruitment agency they worked for without having to go through the SWAP in administration. In another case, a claimant got a job through their personal networks.

“Interviewer: *Have you applied for any jobs in this sector?*

Participant: *No, I already have a job lined up at my friend’s business. I don’t have to apply for it.” (Claimant, Security SWAP, Area 3)*

Employability outcomes

In addition to leading to employment, there were also instances where SWAPs enabled claimants to move closer to the labour market by increasing their employability, and SWAPs facilitated this in several ways. For example, participants highlighted the role of gaining a qualification for accessing employment opportunities within the relevant sector. Where they did not lead to gaining job/sector-specific skills, SWAPs could boost claimants’ general employability skills by improving their understanding of the recruitment process

“Now I have my [SIA] badge I have an advantage [when applying for the security jobs]. For some companies they will train you and help you with your badge, but we are already trained.” (Claimant, Security SWAP Area 2)

A second important type of employability outcome was related to confidence, which could mean the confidence to learn new skills as well as confidence to navigate the recruitment process.

“I got confidence!... I knew what to expect but still nervous because it had been 12 years and I’ve been a carer and all my skills have gone. It’s always nervous because you know at end of the week you need to take a test... Now I’ve passed I know I can still do it [...] I can still learn new skills and contribute.” (Claimant, Logistics & Freight Transport SWAP, Area 1)

A third type of employability outcome related to exploration, i.e., trying out a new type of job or a new type of sector. For example:

“Interviewer: Did you get anything beneficial from your day?

Participant: Yes, I realise I can work in a warehouse job because I found out what it is.” (Claimant, Manufacturing SWAP, Area 3)

10.2. Facilitating the recruitment process for employers

Beyond outcomes for claimants, SWAPs could help with job-matching and filling vacancies in the local labour market. From the employers’ perspective, SWAP could facilitate the recruitment process by linking them with relatively suitable candidates.

“We got 15 people recruited in the end via a SWAP model, they all came through the SWAP. We did have others on the SWAP for other roles too. The people into work was higher than 15.” (Employer, Area 1)

“The SWAP model is a bit of a safety net for HR, because people are going on the SWAP it’s almost like a long interview... we can see if they turn up every day, what’s their attitude like? The colleges give us a bit of a report for each person which gives reassurance and makes them more willing to offer them the jobs.” (Employer, Area 1)

However, there was a sense of doubt about the magnitude of the effectiveness of the SWAP for employers in terms of the number of vacancies filled.

“If the intention is to bring people into work that are good candidates, appropriate candidates, we’d want to see more of those outcomes coming to fruition. Two heads out of a circa of about 18-19 people, probably isn’t a good conversion rate. We’ll see how SWAP 3 goes, I’m hoping for a better conversion rate. So that’s probably, the outcomes aren’t delivering the intention and that’s the only bit of the SWAP at the moment I’m thoughtful about. If it doesn’t deliver, we’ll have to look at the constituent parts in detail and whether they’re aligned to achieve those outcomes.” (Employer, Area 3)

Some employers also mentioned issues with staff retention. While claimants recruited through SWAPs did not always stay, they may still continue their labour market activity through other employment or education. Nevertheless, these claimants would arguably still move forward on the journey to a better job and/or a career.

“A couple have come through SWAP a few have left us and gone elsewhere. Our success has been our downfall. One lady left us to work in schools with special needs, but never would have thought about that career (without the care experience), and she also wanted to be closer to home. Another has gone into study nursing. He’s a student now. After working for us. He came from the SWAP programme.” (Employer, Area 1).

Despite the magnitude and retention of candidates, which were limited at times, SWAPs could have broader benefits for employers such as aiding diversity (see also Section 9.1. about employers’ reflections on diversity) and saving time and money from outsourcing their recruitment process.

“They [the employer] were paying £400 to a recruitment agency to fulfil the contract. DWP has the great thing of being free and it’s been very successful in employing the people that they need.” (Staff, Area 3)

10.3. Variation of outcomes of SWAPs

Participants were asked to reflect on how the outcomes of SWAPs vary in terms of claimant circumstances and employer/SWAP type. Each of these variations is now discussed in turn. It is worth noting that participants found questions about variation of outcomes difficult to answer. In fact, influences such as sector demand, the skills gap and ability for a SWAP to close this gap, and whether these roles are basic entry level role or more career-type opportunities, were also thought to be important. Therefore, rather than a robust classification, there was evidence in the data of complex linkages between outcomes and claimant and employer circumstances, and the interaction of these circumstances may lead to the effectiveness of certain SWAPs. For example, this is likely the reason why very specialised SWAPs such as rail track engineering or fibreoptics were used as examples of a successful SWAP – due to employer demand, the ability of these SWAPs to deliver a package of training that would be difficult for claimants to access otherwise, and the earning and career potential of the end roles available.

Variation of outcomes by claimant circumstances

While some participants felt that SWAPs are suitable for everyone, others identified a wide range of claimant circumstances where SWAPs may be beneficial. SWAP was seen as beneficial for exploring new sectors and as such it was suggested it could be suitable for those returning to the labour market after a long period of being out of work but also those who are new to it (i.e., young people). Such exploration could also be prompted by external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

“With customers, it’s anybody that their knowledge of a sector or knowledge of recruitment is lacking. Particularly younger people that are new to the labour market knowledge from schools is lacking so the pre-employment training is massive. Those that have been unemployed for a long time, there were a lot of people that lost jobs in Covid so they learn about sectors that they hadn’t worked in. Parents that have been caring for children for a long time. Anyone away from the labour market for a while or wants to move sector will gain.”
(Staff, Area 3)

Claimant attitude was also seen by DWP staff as an important factor linked to the effectiveness of SWAP. For example:

“I think it’s got to be about that individual wanting it as well, that’s a massive factor. And I guess it’s about helping that person understand maybe what skills they’ve got. It might be really obvious, but for others it might be talking about transferable skills so that they can go, oh yeah okay, and then build on it from there. But it’s very much about the individual and their matching on it, and people being realistic about what jobs are in the local area.” (Work Coach, Area 3)

Participants (especially DWP staff) felt that SWAP could be beneficial for particular groups like older people, those with health conditions and those who experience language barriers, but special considerations are needed in order to achieve a successful SWAP outcome, and these claimants would need to be eligible and appropriate for the roles offered at the end of the SWAP.

Work coach: *I think some adaptability is needed, although we did run a special swap for our Ukrainian customers and that worked quite well. So maybe some of them have to be tailored a bit which makes it a bit more difficult, but yeah that one was quite successful, the Ukrainian SWAP”.*

Moderator: *What made it successful?*

Work coach: *“We had a translator in it [...] company that wanted sort of specific staff and they were willing to make work adjustments and they’d had that discussion beforehand, so it just takes a bit more planning I think.”* (Work Coach, Area 3)

Variation of outcomes by employer characteristics

Participants were prompted to reflect on employer characteristics and how these linked to the effectiveness of SWAPs. Emerging factors linked to effective outcomes included 1) the employer being large (i.e., having a lot of vacancies to fill); 2) the SWAPs being employer-led (as detailed in Section 6.4); 3) the employer expanding in the area; 4) where there is a misunderstanding around the type of work involved (e.g. care work) the SWAP allows the employer to provide this information to candidates; 5) where there are good transport links to the employer location and 6) where there is high turnover.

“A SWAP will work best for bigger organisations or middle size organisations with enough vacancies to do a SWAP. The one-man band with one vacancy we know it’s not really - not relevant for them”. (Staff, Area 4)

Variation of outcomes by SWAP characteristics

Finally, participants were prompted to reflect on the SWAP characteristics that led to the effectiveness of the programme. These characteristics could be grouped in terms of 1) delivery mode; 2) content of the SWAP; and 3) sector/role, each of which is now discussed in turn.

First, in terms of delivery mode, participants linked SWAPs success to face-to-face delivery, which could be linked to better engagement from claimants.

“I prefer face to face. And it surprised me to say that because during the pandemic, when we did go virtual, I thought this is a really good idea. This, ‘cause you do your course at home and get your job interview via teams and you can, you can be starting work but it's difficult. It's easy to go missing, not to log on one day. Whereas I think if you're doing a face to face what you gotta [sic] get up, you gotta [sic] get dressed. You gotta [sic] get out the house [...] it all looks into that mindset that you need in order to start work, so I prefer face to face for that reason.” (Staff, Area 1)

In terms of duration, SWAPs of different lengths may be linked to different outcomes. For example, longer SWAPs were seen to be linked to a greater sense of responsibility and ownership from the participating claimants, and allowed a greater depth of training to be delivered. Shorter SWAPs on the other hand were thought to be better in terms of maintaining claimant engagement through the different elements of the programme to the end. This suggests that SWAP length needs to be personalised and bespoke to the employment opportunities on offer.

“I think the longer ones do grow a sense of ownership for the customer, so they do grow into it a bit more as opposed to the short half day things we’ve offered in the past. They don’t give any sense of responsibility, and they’re not necessarily gonna keep to that job, like it might be a hospitality job or something like that. The rail tracks that were running rail futures, it’s a very high result coming out of it after 6 weeks of training.” (Work Coach, Area 3)

“I think, for the majority of them, sort of a week or two weeks, that kinda [sic] keeps the interest and gives them the opportunity to get the training qualifications and that bit of work experience. And if you can keep the job interview either within those days or like the following days, once they’ve completed the training and the work experience, then that’s the best time to kind of have it really.” (Staff, Area 4)

Second, in terms of content, participants linked the effectiveness of the programme to the SWAP having a qualification attached to it and the SWAP including a guaranteed interview. In terms of the SWAPs having a qualification attached one participant explained:

“We have a substantial amount of vacancies in them areas but also they get the sector training. So, for example, they’ll get the CSCS card, so the health and safety card which gets them onto construction sites ...security, again, they would deliver the SIA licence so there’s also that, so at the end of it they also have the CSCS or the SIA badge...if they don’t get through that interview for the guaranteed job interview, ‘cause you know, not everyone will get the job at the end of it, they still have them skills and that qualification at the end to then look for other vacancies within that sector.” (Staff, Area 4).

In fact, DWP staff often gave examples with qualifications in construction (e.g., CSCS cards) and security (SIA badges) but driving qualifications like those for HGVs were also present in the data. As noted in Section 5.1. which outlines the SWAPs delivered locally, these qualifications were often linked to longer SWAPs. Arguably having such qualifications gave holders a competitive advantage in a particular sector. In terms of guaranteed interview as a SWAP characteristic potentially linked to SWAP effectiveness, one participant noted:

“...if there’s no jobs at the end of it, then where do the customers go from there, they can put that on their CV but there’s nowhere for the customer to go from that, I think it’s always better for there to be a guaranteed interview at the end of a SWAP.” (Work Coach, Area 2)

Third, in terms of variation by sector, a wide range of sectors were reported by participants as being linked to effective SWAPS, including (not in order of prominence in the data): construction, customer service, security, health and social care, administration, hospitality, rail, warehousing, manufacturing and logistics. There may have been slight variations in what SWAPs were perceived as being effective in different areas and a tentative suggestion could be made that these variations could be due to local labour market conditions such as local sector demand. At the same time participants shared some challenges related to specific sectors. For example, participants explained that the issues in the care sector included low pay, high turnover and difficulties in the recruitment and engagement with care SWAPs.

“I know when we’ve done health and social care in the past, it’s a difficult one to recruit into, but we do get good outcomes, but the customers don’t tend to stay. But it’s more about the sector rather than the quality of the swap, that sector, people don’t stay in that particular role.” (Staff, Area 1)

Similarly, the Civil Service SWAPs were seen as effective by some DWP staff, but due to regulations governing recruitment they do not offer a GJI and therefore they are not linked to a specific vacancy, which limits the direct labour market outcomes this type of SWAP can achieve. For example, some Work Coaches in Area 2 reflected that while they were often advertised as ‘admin’ SWAPs, the content wasn’t directly relevant to admin, and therefore claimants interested in this sector would be better off with a course that focussed more on computer or Excel skills.

Monitoring of outcomes

Finally, at least one member of staff in each of Areas 2 to 4 highlighted that there needed to be more monitoring and review of outcomes locally in order to understand which SWAPs were more or less effective at delivering for claimants and employers. In each district there appeared to be a strong focus on SWAP starts, with little evidence of DWP staff using SWAP tracker data at the district level to inform programme decision-making (although this wasn't directly asked about). Where a need for greater monitoring was mentioned, these participants thought that a better understanding of these outcomes could be used to inform and improve future SWAP opportunities in their districts.

“I think at the minute we're doing okay. At this rate, you know this pace, we're gonna be exceeding our profile by the end of the year. What we're not doing enough of at the moment is capturing that result of what the actual outcome of the SWAP was. So, you know, yes we've had, I don't know, 2,000 people start a SWAP, but what we're still not clear about is how many of those people who have started a SWAP actually found employment and got into work? And who was successful? Who wasn't successful? How do we then capture some of that feedback and improve our future opportunities?” (Staff, Area 3)

10.4. Summary

Overall SWAPs led to different sets of outcomes for the claimants (e.g., labour market outcomes and employability), and the employers involved (e.g., job-matching and facilitating the recruitment process). Outcomes for these groups could vary in several ways. Individual circumstances (e.g., health conditions) required different considerations to ensure the effectiveness of SWAPs, and employer characteristics such as size, expansion in the local area and location were also considered important. The effectiveness of the programme also varied according to a range of SWAP characteristics such as mode of delivery (e.g., face-to-face), content (links to a GJI and to specific qualifications) and the sector of the opportunity. Finally, there was little evidence of systematic monitoring of SWAP outcomes and usage of this information locally.

11. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to increase understanding of the differing types of SWAPs offered and how these impacted on claimant and employer experiences of and satisfaction with this programme. To achieve this aim and provide in-depth, insight, the research used a case study methodology to cover four JCP district areas. In each of these areas interviews and focus groups were conducted with DWP staff, training providers, claimants and employers involved in the programme. The findings provided important insights on the variations of SWAPs delivered, the experiences of those involved, and the extent to which the SWAPs encountered met claimant and employer preferences, as well as the barriers and facilitators to meeting these.

Variation in SWAPs

There was significant variation in the SWAPs delivered across all case study areas, with variations observed in terms of length, core components delivered, mode of delivery and the specific skills and/or qualifications gained. This diversity showcases the flexibility of the SWAP model, in that it can be applied to a range of job roles and sectors. However, given the scale of variation encountered it is difficult to propose an all-encompassing typology that reflects this diversity. Instead, this study has identified the strengths and weaknesses of different models of SWAP as well as wider elements of programme delivery encountered through the research.

SWAPs that were initiated by training providers with their own end employers, for example, tended to be considered more challenging in terms of DWP staff obtaining updates on claimant progress and outcomes, due the increased distance of staff from the end employers. This meant it was more difficult to identify when these SWAPs were not delivering as intended. Similarly, SWAPs that involved active employer input and engagement were thought to increase the interactions between claimants and employers, and facilitate a better fit between employers' needs and the content delivered.

Length of SWAPs was an aspect that received mixed reflections. Longer SWAPs were viewed by DWP staff as beneficial for providing claimants with more responsibility and ownership of the training opportunity, and some claimants reported that they'd have liked their SWAP to have been longer to reduce the pace and intensity of the learning they received. More commonly, DWP staff and employers stated that shorter SWAPs were better in maintaining claimant engagement and reducing drop-off rates.

SWAPs with PET that was considered relevant and linked to the specific role or sector in which the role was offered were valued among claimants and most employers. In addition, not all SWAPs delivered a WEP and a GJI, despite claimants valuing the idea of these components for enhancing their skillsets and CVs. Ensuring all SWAPs contain the required components could improve claimants' overall experiences of the programme. Some employers, however, reflected that providing a

WEP could be difficult to arrange due to practical issues such as the need to complete background checks, obtain licences or undertake further training to be able to enter their work environments.

The variation in SWAPs encountered likely corresponds to the way that SWAPs are created from a complex interplay of internal and external factors. This research suggests that internal influencing factors relate to the very localised set-up of SWAPs, and therefore include the operational staffing structures used within JCP districts (whether centralised, localised or clustered) which can affect aspects such as ease of information sharing regarding SWAPs and ease of outcome tracking and monitoring. Other internal factors include staff knowledge and understanding of the programme, and the strength of relationships and ways of working between DWP staff, training providers and employers. External influencing factors evident within the data included local labour market conditions, as well as funding sources used to fund the PET, and their associated restrictions.

Experiences of the programme

Given the variation in SWAPs it is therefore understandable that experiences of the programme were also varied. Experiences varied not only across case study areas, and the different SWAPs delivered, but also across types of participants (such as between claimants and employers).

Among DWP staff, most felt SWAPs were successful at moving claimant into employment and that local delivery of the programme aligned well with labour market needs in their areas. Overall claimants tended to report a positive experience, although SWAPs weren't always thought to be useful for moving directly into work. Similarly, employers were generally positive about the programme, with poor experiences mostly linked to a perceived lack of claimant suitability and negative claimant attitudes. This highlights the importance of the referral process in terms of linking the right claimant with the right job opportunity (and therefore employer), and the need for detailed discussions between claimants and Work Coaches about the expectations involved (something few claimant participants reported having taken place).

Although support mechanisms were identified in the data that facilitated the SWAP journey for claimants and employers, there were also some notable gaps which could negatively impact outcomes of this programme. Claimants overall felt supported in their SWAP journey however there was appeared to be a gap in terms of follow-up support after the SWAP was completed, and financial support regarding travel costs and/or equipment didn't appear to be consistently offered. There may also be a need for expanding provision to provide more opportunities for claimants with particular circumstances, such as claimants with health conditions, caring responsibilities (such as childcare) and claimants who may experience language barriers. These claimants would, however, still need to be eligible and suitable for the jobs on offer at the end of the SWAP.

Delivering for employers and claimants

Finally, this study provides valuable insight into the extent to which, as an overarching programme, SWAP achieved outcomes for employers and claimants. Overall, the wide range of perceived purposes of the programme identified by DWP staff aligned with the outcomes noted by research participants, although the envisaged outcomes were not always achieved. Participation in SWAP only led to employment for a small number of claimant participants; however, most claimants interviewed felt it had moved them closer to work by providing them with more general employability outcomes, such as sector-specific skills, improved understanding of recruitment processes and improved confidence.

For employers, SWAPs could help facilitate their recruitment processes by linking them with suitable candidates, as well as reduce the cost of their recruitment and contribute towards widening the diversity of their candidate pools. Not all employers felt that their vacancy needs were met by SWAPs and where employers were disappointed in the outcomes achieved, this was either in terms of the number of claimants recruited through the SWAP and/or the suitability of the candidates referred. These employers suggested more robust matching of claimants to SWAP opportunities or screening of referrals was needed by DWP staff.

Reflecting the variation of SWAPs encountered, it is difficult to attribute positive outcomes for claimants and employers to specific types of SWAPs delivered, and DWP staff across all case study areas found it difficult to do so. When asked to share effective SWAPs, for example, a wide range of sectors were listed by participants. Looking across the data, in general, DWP staff linked effective SWAPs to face-to-face training (which maximised claimant engagement), the delivery of a qualification (increased claimant competitiveness in specific sectors), and the presence of a GJI as part of the SWAP offer (thought to lead more directly to employment opportunities). Again, difficulties identifying effective SWAPs likely reflects the complex interplay of factors that influence these outcomes, with local sector demand, the ability of a SWAP to close the skills gap concerned and the type of end role on offer (in terms of whether it opens a career pathway) also considered relevant by DWP staff. Finally, there was an emphasis locally on the number of SWAP starts achieved against allocated profiles, and a small number of staff highlighted the need for greater monitoring and review of outcomes in their districts. Therefore, these findings collectively suggest the need for more active and efficient monitoring of SWAP outcomes to facilitate the easier identification of SWAPs to be prioritised at a national and local level.

Summary

Overall SWAP is a widely diverse programme that has been shaped by local practices, networks and labour market conditions. The diversity of SWAPs reflects the flexibility of this programme and the mostly positive experiences of claimants and employers detailed in this report demonstrate its potential to meet the needs of a range of claimants, employers and the DWP. On the following pages, specific learning from this research and implications for future programme delivery are drawn out further.

12. Considerations for future programme delivery

The findings presented in this report indicate the following areas should be considered for improving future SWAP delivery:

Providing further guidance/communication to DWP staff on the intended claimant target group(s) for the programme. To improve consistency in the referrals made and ensure that claimants referred correspond to the groups the programme is designed to support (claimants “close to the labour market”).

Ensuring the conditions of SWAP funding are broad enough to support technical training to meet more specific roles and/or sector needs, as well as claimants of all ages. To address any bias towards more generalist training in AEB-funded courses, and the current gap in funding for claimants aged 16 to 18 years.

Providing guidance to DWP staff responsible for SWAP delivery on alternative funding sources for the Pre-employment Training (PET) component. To improve staff capability to pursue alternative funding where the skills training gap can't be bridged by AEB-funded courses.

Providing a single, consistent DWP contact for employers and training providers to use in each district when setting up and/or managing SWAPs in that area. To improve the experience of employers and training providers of working with DWP to deliver this programme.

Ensuring DWP staff responsible for SWAP delivery understand the expectations of employer involvement in SWAP set-up and management. To ensure employers are involved and communicate their requirements in relation to the skills to be delivered through the SWAP, and to maximise the flow of information between all parties.

Adding SWAP opportunities to the Universal Credit (UC) build. This would allow Work Coaches and claimants on UC to more easily identify what SWAP opportunities are available, as well as relevant eligibility factors. If claimants reviewed these opportunities in advance of meetings, this could allow more time for discussions on suitability within Work Coach-claimant meetings. Other ways of alerting claimants to SWAP opportunities will still be required for claimants on alternative benefits.

Ensuring more effective pre-referral checks are conducted before claimants are referred to a SWAP. To ensure the right claimant is referred to the right SWAP.

More effective checks could be undertaken by increasing Work Coach appointment times with claimants for more detailed discussions on eligibility, by having a designated individual within each Jobcentre/site to review eligibility of claimants, or with input from employers and training providers.

Relaxing wider DWP rules on double funding, to allow claimants on other provision to be eligible for SWAP where this would be beneficial. To widen the available pool for claimants for SWAPs, potentially improving the suitability of claimants referred.

Ensuring SWAPs deliver the Work Experience Placement (WEP) and Guaranteed Job Interview (GJI) in line with the programme intention as far as possible. This would help increase the value of the SWAPs for participating claimants by enhancing their skillsets and CVs, and linking more directly to employment opportunities. Where these components are not possible, clear alternatives should be offered and the value of these communicated to claimants.

Expanding SWAP provision to offer more flexibility for claimants considered close to the labour market, but who have extra considerations that can make attending a SWAP more challenging. This would include, for example, SWAPs with part-time learning for claimants with caring responsibilities, or SWAPs which factor in limited English language proficiency by putting in place measures to aid communication with attending claimants (e.g., having an interpreter present). Expanding provision would help address the gaps in provision for these claimant subgroups, for whom a SWAP could be beneficial in finding employment. The jobs on offer through the SWAP would still need to be suitable for these claimants.

Reviewing what quality assurance of SWAPs takes place. To more easily identify and address issues including irrelevant content, missing components and inappropriate or other problematic behaviour from training leads.

Implementing more active and efficient monitoring of SWAP outcomes at a local and national level to facilitate the easier identification of effective SWAPs. This could then be used to inform future SWAP delivery.

Ensuring financial support available to claimants for travel, clothing and equipment costs is consistently offered to SWAP participants. To minimise these costs as a barrier to participation in a SWAP.

Supporting claimants in following up with employers and/or training providers where there are issues post-SWAP (e.g., where pre-employment processes are delayed or disorganised, or the end role on offer doesn't align with the SWAP). To minimise the potential impact on employment outcomes where these issues occur.

13. References

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