

# The experience of Additional Work Coach Support: Findings from qualitative interviews with customers

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## Overview

This report outlines the qualitative findings from a mixed-method study evaluating Additional Work Coach Support (AWCS). These findings explore the experiences of those in receipt of AWCS, the support they have received and the outcomes they have experienced.

Evidence shows that with regular support, UC health journey and ESA customers can move towards and into work.<sup>1</sup> Through AWCS, customers receive additional appointment time with a work coach. This additional support aims to give work coaches more time to understand customers' barriers to work and provide or signpost to appropriate support, ultimately to move customers towards work.

There are three health journey customer groups:

- Pre-work capability assessment (pre-WCA) – Universal Credit (UC) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) customers
- Limited capability for work (LCW) and work-related activity group (WRAG) – UC and ESA, respectively.
- Limited capability for work and work-related activity (LCWRA) and support group (SG) – UC and ESA, respectively.

## Research context

The phased rollout of AWCS across Great Britain created an opportunity to evaluate the policy to help identify 'what works' for supporting disabled adults and those with long-term health conditions towards work. This evaluation paired qualitative in-depth discussions with a longitudinal survey to measure customers' experience of AWCS.

The wider evaluation aimed to:

- Understand the implementation and delivery of AWCS.
- Explore the employment barriers faced by each group, and the extent to which AWCS helped them overcome these barriers.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1001785/evaluation-of-the-personalised-support-package.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1001785/evaluation-of-the-personalised-support-package.pdf)

- Measure the impact and outcomes of AWCS on customers' wellbeing, progress towards employment, and work preparation behaviours.

The full results of the longitudinal study will be reported in 2026. The present report does not address all of these objectives, with measurement of the impact and outcomes of AWCS to be addressed in the final report. This research is separate to the impact analysis carried out by DWP internally.<sup>2</sup>

This qualitative component of the evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

- How was AWCS communicated to customers, and what were their expectations or goals for the support?
- What were customers' experiences of receiving AWCS in practice? Particularly in terms of frequency, length and location of appointments.
- To what extent did customers feel comfortable discussing their health condition, and other barriers to work, with their work coach?
- What types of support were offered by work coaches under AWCS, and how was this viewed by customers?

## Methodology

As part of the wider mixed-method evaluation, 90 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with UC health journey and ESA customers. The first phase of interviews took place in May 2024 (32 interviews before the General Election) and continued in August/ September 2024 (58 interviews). Interviews were conducted through a mix of telephone and online video calls, to suit individual preferences.

Interviews were split between the three customer groups eligible for AWCS.

- 20 pre-work capability assessment (pre-WCA) customers
- 30 limited capability for work (LCW) and work-related activity group (WRAG) customers
- 40 limited capability for work and work-related activity (LCWRA) and support group (SG) customers

## Main findings

- Customers had complex barriers to work. For many, their circumstances had recently changed for the worse, and they were struggling to cope with the practical, financial and social problems that come about from deteriorating health and losing a job, often in quick succession. Customers often had very limited support networks outside of Jobcentre Plus to draw on, particularly where changes in circumstances were more recent for customers.
- Jobcentre Plus was not always the obvious place customers looked for help to overcome the barriers they faced to working. Many customers were initially

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-additional-jobcentre-plus-support-on-the-employment-outcomes-of-disabled-people>

worried that their work coach could force them into inappropriate employment or that contact would result in their benefit entitlements being reduced. However, work coaches successfully managed to overcome negative perceptions in most cases. Most AWCS customers had come to view their work coach as a supportive presence, feeling that these relationships were empathetic and tailored to their needs.

- Work coaches provided well-received referrals and signposting to other organisations to support with issues that were not directly work-related. Customers often valued work coaches' advice and signposting to support to help address a wide range of problems: mental health issues, social isolation, addiction, financial advice, debt advice, housing support, and food banks.
- Specific work-related support received a mixed reception from customers. In some cases they felt this was because work coaches were not able to provide support that was sufficiently tailored.
- Many customers felt that simply speaking to a work coach on a regular basis helped to improve their wellbeing. This was often simply due to attending appointments with someone who appeared empathetic and understanding of their situation, or through work coaches signposting customers to other mental health support.
- Movement into work for the customer group is generally low. Employment outcomes were experienced by a small minority of research participants, but a number of customers appeared to have taken steps that could move them closer to work. For some, the journey is likely to be a long one, but customers appreciated support, even with small steps towards getting back to work.
- Where customers felt the support was not helpful, these comments centred around a lack of consistency in the delivery of support or a perceived lack of tailoring to their specific circumstances and barriers to work. Not having contact with the same work coach consistently was viewed negatively, as building rapport with one individual was very important to customers. There was also suggestion by some customers that support could be improved by greater work coach knowledge of the implications of some health conditions or having specialists to ensure appropriate tailoring of support.

## Barriers to work and support needs

The majority of customers in receipt of Additional Work Coach Support (AWCS) had some experience of working but most had left their last job in the past few years due to a deterioration in their health, which had prevented them returning to work. Generally, health conditions were the biggest barriers for customers in returning to work, with many reporting that their health ruled out work now and in the future.

Customers had a variety of health conditions, and many customers expressed concern about how they would manage their health condition whilst working.

Customers also worried about whether employers would be understanding of their health conditions, and how their needs would be accommodated in the workplace.

Changes in customers' health conditions often meant they could no longer carry out the tasks required in their previous role, and many were considering retraining in a role that would be better suited to their health needs. However, there was a low awareness of the options that were available to them and how to navigate the process of retraining. Customers often had a low level of basic skills, for example digital skills, which added to the complexity of finding opportunities for retraining for a new, more suitable role.

Confidence was also a large barrier to returning to work, particularly for those who had been out of work the longest.

Most customers were not receiving any formal employment support outside of Jobcentre Plus (JCP), however many relied on informal support from friends and family.

Customers who had not received prior support from JCP before starting contact with their work coach did not have strong views or expectations on the support that they might be offered. However, customers often had general negative perceptions of the Jobcentre, irrespective of whether they had prior experience of JCP. Concerns that the Jobcentre would force them into any work regardless of their condition and capabilities were common, though this was not generally experienced in reality.

### Overall experience of Additional Work Coach Support

When customers were first contacted about Additional Work Coach Support (AWCS), it was not always clear to them what specific support was being offered. However, customers said work coaches tried to ease concerns they had about the support, and provide further information at the earlier appointments. Generally, customers were happy with the length and frequency of their appointments, and most found the format flexible to their needs. The ability to attend appointments via telephone or video was seen as a significant improvement compared to their expectation that they would need to attend in-person.

Given the varied circumstances amongst the customer groups, there were differing expectations and concerns. Concerns mainly centred around being forced into work and the impact the support would have on their benefit payments. Despite these concerns, many said the support was offered at the right time. This was often because they were either ready to return to work or were keen to do further training in preparation for returning to work. Those who were not looking for support commonly said they approached the support with an "open mind" about what would be offered. They were keen to engage as they hoped to find support with their health problems and benefit entitlements.

It should be noted that whilst AWCS was designed to be structured differently for the different customer groups, in reality, work coaches took a more flexible approach to delivering the support. Generally, customers felt the support through AWCS recognised, and was tailored to, their current circumstances and health needs. Customers further away from work often felt their appointments were a simple, short

“check-in” to discuss their health condition and wellbeing, rather than strictly about work. This was not seen as a problem among those who did not feel ready to discuss moving back into work. There were, though, a few customers closer to work who experienced short, irregular meetings which they felt held them back from progressing.

The added flexibility and personalisation of appointments appeared to contribute to a good working relationship with work coaches. The majority of customers said they had developed a positive relationship with their work coach. This was often down to the additional time allowed during sessions for listening to customers’ social, emotional and mental health support needs, or otherwise as a result of tailored signposting to wider support and opportunities. Customers who had more than one work coach, and those who felt their work coach lacked specific knowledge or skills, had a more negative relationship with their work coach.

### Support provided through Additional Work Coach Support

Customers tended to feel comfortable sharing their physical and mental health concerns with their work coach. Work coaches supported customers with their physical and mental health barriers by signposting and referring them to other support, including DWP programmes (such as Access to Work). These referrals were usually tailored based on a customers’ health, rather than their customer group and the associated expectations around finding work.

Customers often viewed traditional support from the Jobcentre to be focused on just finding work, and some felt they were not ready for this. Work coaches did also support customers with the other barriers to work they faced, including helping them to address their financial situation, lack of access to technology, and confidence around work. The wider support from work coaches was welcomed by customers.

Most customers felt that work coaches were able to get to know their needs and provide appropriate support. However, some who felt they were ready to find work immediately would have welcomed more proactive support. They wanted targeted help in upskilling, finding appropriate jobs, and preparing and applying for jobs that they could manage alongside their condition. This group tended to find work search support too general to be helpful.

Most customers were still having contact with their work coach and receiving support at the time of interview. However, there were examples of customers who had stopped having contact with their work coach in both the pre-work capability assessment and limited capacity for work groups (where attendance at appointments is mandatory) and in the limited capacity for work and work-related activity group (where attendance is voluntary). Reasons for this included: further deterioration of health making support into work no longer relevant; achievement of positive outcomes meaning support was no longer necessary; or a change of circumstances meaning customers were no longer in a group where attending regular work coach appointments was mandatory.

## Outcomes of Additional Work Coach Support

Many customers saw improvements to mental health and wellbeing because of the consistent, empathetic support they received from their work coach. This was often simply due to attending appointments, or through work coaches signposting customers to other mental health support. However, for those who saw their physical health as a barrier to work, there was little change in their ability to manage their physical health condition.

Some customers also reported improved financial wellbeing. This stemmed from work coaches giving general advice about their benefit claim, guidance with applications, and signposting to debt advice services.

Another outcome seen across customer groups was improvements in motivation to find work, and overall confidence. This was associated with work coaches delivering personalised support and giving customers a greater understanding of the types of support that might be available to them in the future when they felt closer to work.

Whilst feeling meaningfully closer to work was an outcome for a minority of customers, some customers gained work-related skills from Additional Work Coach Support (AWCS) if their work coach made referrals that felt tailored. Customers tended to report improved skills where they were signposted to courses or volunteering opportunities that felt relevant to career interests they had expressed. However, this was not always the case. There were customers who received advice and referrals about developing new skills or re-training that they felt was generic, and therefore unhelpful.

Successfully starting work was an outcome for a small number of customers. Advice about flexible and part-time jobs, whilst maintaining benefits, was an important factor in taking this next step. For those who were able to successfully start work, completing courses recommended by their work coach, taking on advice about suitable jobs and returning to work part-time without losing benefits were positive drivers. However, many customers still felt work was not an option for them at this time without a change in their health.