Research on the Work Programme finds wide variations in support to participants

Independent research led by the Institute of Employment Studies, along with NIESR and other research institutions, on the first year of the Work Programme is published today by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). These preliminary findings from the on-going evaluation find wide variation in the amount of contact and support given to participants by providers in the private and voluntary sectors contracted to deliver the service. Some participants are offered the help they need to get back to work. However, others see a personal adviser infrequently and feel their barriers to work are being left unaddressed.

The report presents the findings from the first phase of the evaluation which involved interviews with staff from 56 Work Programme provider organisations, staff in 12 jobcentres, 94 Work Programme participants and 60 observations of meetings between advisers and participants.

Jobcentre Plus refers those who have been unemployed for a year to the Work Programme (less in some circumstances). Work Programme providers take over all support for claimants on their books. Some providers offer this support themselves, while others sub-contract. Providers are also able to refer individuals for specialist assistance, for example to deal with barriers to work such as drug or alcohol dependence, or for training. However, the research found little evidence of use of such specialist support and that providers mostly access services which are free of charge or at low cost. On meeting their Work Programme personal adviser, participants are usually assessed for their degree of job-readiness, which is used to determine the amount and type of help they will be offered. Advisers are able to decide how frequently to arrange meetings with participants. Despite being offered higher payments for hard-to-help groups, many providers appear to be prioritising more job-ready clients ahead of those seen as less likely to find work. This is due to higher than expected caseloads and growing pressure to achieve job outcome targets.

Work Programme advisers also report considerable limits on the additional support that could be offered to participants, arising largely from lack of funding to pay for provision such as training. Therefore, most support to participants interviewed for the research was reported to be delivered by Work Programme advisers and consists of help such as CV writing and advice about how to look for jobs.

The Work Programme is also intended to improve job retention by providing on-going support to participants who find jobs. Evidence on the extent and nature of this support is limited. Where it does take place, it is usually through phone calls to identify problems and offer reassurance. Participants generally find this helpful, although some do not. Providers find some clients reluctant to stay in touch, which presents a problem, given that funding for providers is to some extent dependent on getting clients into sustainable jobs. However, both providers and participants feel that getting into the right job in the first place is more important than on-going support when it comes to achieving sustainable outcomes.

Participants who fail to comply with activities arranged by their adviser may be sanctioned and have their benefits withdrawn for up to 26 weeks. Most sanctions to date have been for failure to attend the first meeting with the provider, rather than subsequent non-compliance with activities. This appears to have often resulted from mistakes in participants’ contact details rather than deliberate non-compliance. Interviews with participants found widespread willingness to comply with the requirements of the programme, although different views were expressed on the value and effectiveness of the programme in getting them back to work.

Attitudes towards the programme were found to depend on experiences of the first meeting with a personal adviser and the quality of that relationship. Regular, positive engagement with advisers appears to provide encouragement and motivation to some participants so that they report feeling more prepared for work. Others complain they are not being given the help they need. These include more…
people seeking short skills-based training. Some people with health conditions report being seen as 'job-ready' and encouraged to enter work without any further specialist support. There is also evidence that some participants are being 'parked', offered little help because their chances of finding work are low.
The report is from research in progress and was carried out at a relatively early stage of the Work Programme. Therefore, some caution should be exercised in generalising from the findings until more evidence from surveys, participants’ records and further interviews becomes available.

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Notes for editor:
The Work Programme was launched in June 2011, replacing a range of earlier programmes including the Flexible New Deal. A key feature is its delivery through private and voluntary sector contractors. Participation is mandatory for those who have been unemployed for a year (9 months for those aged 18-24). Claimants in some circumstances can volunteer to take part.

The research was led by the Institute of Employment Studies and a consortium of other research organisations: the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, the Social Policy Research Unit at York University and the Centre for Social Inclusion. It was commissioned and funded by the Department for Work and Pensions.

The report is available at: http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp

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