

The operation of choice in Multiple Provider Employment Zones

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Employment Zones (EZ) was designed as a relatively intensive and long-term programme for people in particularly disadvantaged labour markets. In 2004, Multiple Provider Employment Zones (MPEZ) were established in six of the largest EZ areas. Initially, only volunteers (lone parents and those on Pension Credit) to the programme were given a choice of provider. In April 2007, this choice was extended to mandatory clients claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in MPEZ.

This study specifically focused on the operation of choice and was not an evaluation of any other aspect of Employment Zone delivery. The research explored the process of client choice within MPEZ from the perspective of clients (both mandatory and voluntary), Jobcentre Plus staff and provider staff. This research brief presents a summary of key findings.

Key findings

- There was strong support for choice among the EZ clients with 78 per cent of those who recalled making a choice feeling that this was a positive thing.
- Before making a choice, clients accessed information from a range of sources. Over a quarter of clients (27 per cent) said that they did not access any information at all.
- Experiences of making a choice was influenced by how well informed clients perceived themselves to be.
- Five elements underpinned an informed choice. These were: the nature of the information received; the opportunity to visit providers to find out about their services and client approaches; the time available to consider the information; the ability of the adviser to clarify and explain, and the client's own outlook and engagement with EZ.
- There were several factors which influenced clients' choice of provider. These were the location of provider offices; previous experience of a provider; recommendations from family and friends; information and advice about the services provided; influence of EZ providers and Jobcentre Plus staff, and the type of provider organisation.
- Although a range of factors existed, it was often a single factor that underpinned a client's choice. The most common were the location of the provider (29 per cent), the information and advice clients received about the provider (28 per cent) and clients' previous experience (27 per cent).
- Offering a choice had an impact on Jobcentre Plus advisers. Choice made it easier to engage clients in the process and had made advisers' roles easier. Choice also had an impact of the efficiency of the referral process – in some cases improving efficiency and in others making it more onerous. There was also some feeling that choice compromised adviser impartiality.
- The introduction of choice in MPEZ had implications for the way in which providers marketed services to clients and the range of services offered. Choice also had an impact on their business operations, which included: the location of the service, staffing of MPEZ provision, the operation of aspects of the choice process and providers' share of the market.

- For clients, choice was reported to have improved attendance, increased levels of engagement and lessened resentment about having to attend a provider. Choice was however also felt to have brought about confusion for some clients.

Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods and consisted of:

- A scoping study;
- In-depth interviews with EZ clients¹;
- In-depth interviews with EZ providers;
- In-depth interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff;
- Non-participant observation of client meetings; and
- A telephone survey with EZ clients using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

Background

EZ were introduced as a relatively intensive and long-term employment programme aiming to offer practical support to lone parents, as well as clients in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), and Pension Credit. Recipients of JSA are 'mandatory clients' in that they must take part in the programme when they become eligible. Lone parents and those on Pension Credit volunteer to take part.

The initial 15 zones began in April 2000, when EZ replaced the New Deal 25 Plus programme for older clients in receipt of JSA. Each EZ was initially contracted to a single provider. In 2004, MPEZ were established in six of the largest EZ areas and involve up to three contractors delivering EZ provision. Mandatory clients on EZ were allocated to one of the providers via

¹ There was a considerable delay between the time clients made a choice and when they were interviewed about this process. As a result, clients' accounts may have been affected by their ability to recall specific details of the process.

the Random Allocation Tool (RAT) on a pre-arranged contractual distribution of market share. Only volunteers to the programme were given a choice of provider. Since April 2007, this choice has been extended to mandatory clients claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in MPEZ.

Findings

Process of choice: Clients accessed information about the providers from a variety of sources, but most common were the use of leaflets (51 per cent), followed by contacts with provider office (28 per cent), and posters and notices (21 per cent). Client choice was also aided by other information channels which included friends, family and EZ providers.

Despite the range of sources of information that were available to clients, over a quarter of clients (27 per cent) said that they did not access any information.

It was expected that clients would receive written information two weeks prior to making a choice at a Restart meeting with a Jobcentre Plus adviser. This process did not operate in the intended way for all mandatory clients. There was inconsistency in the amount of information clients received as well as whether clients received information prior to or at the time of their Restart meetings.

Discussions with Jobcentre Plus advisers gave clients the opportunity to gain more information about client choice and the programme itself. Variation in the range and depth of the issues discussed were dependent on: the different nature of interview for lone parents and mandatory clients; the adviser's knowledge and; an adviser's understanding of their role.

Experience of choice was influenced by how well informed clients perceived to themselves to be. Here, it was possible to identify four groups of clients' decision making:

- **choice based on complete information.** This experience was characterised by clients feeling they had made a conscious choice of provider based on good information. Only one in eight clients (12 per cent) recalled this experience.
- **choice based on limited information.** Clients in this group either had insufficient information on providers or were not aware of the full range of providers available (42 per cent).
- **failure to make a choice despite having information;** here clients felt they had been given information, but they did not want or feel able to make a choice (3 per cent).
- **no awareness of choice** (with limited or no information), clients who did not recall any choice of provider (42 per cent).

Where clients did feel able to choose a provider, informed choices were underpinned by five key factors. These were: the nature of the information received; the opportunity to visit providers to find out about their services and approach to working with clients; the time available to consider the information; the ability of the adviser to clarify and explain, and the client's outlook and engagement with the programme.

Factors underpinning choice: A wide range of factors were identified as influencing clients' decisions and these can be broadly categorised into six main factors: the location of provider offices; previous experience of a provider; recommendations from family and friends; information and advice about the services provided; influence of professionals, including both Jobcentre Plus advisers and providers, and the type of provider organisation.

The reasons for choosing a provider varied for different types of client. The majority (80 per cent) identified one factor as a primary influence, while 20 per cent mentioned two or more reasons for choosing a provider.

The most common driving factors were the location of the provider (29 per cent of clients), the information and advice received (28 per cent) and clients' previous experience (27 per cent). Mandatory clients were more likely to identify

the provider location and previous experience as key factors whereas voluntary clients were more likely to say that recommendations, information and advice about the services provided, and the influence of professionals underpinned their decision.

Location was important in four ways. These were: the distance of the provider from the client's home; the distance between the job centre and the provider office; the accessibility of the provider; and the environment or area in which the provider was based.

Where information and advice was discussed as a factor, clients highlighted the availability or accessibility of information, the appearance of the information leaflets, and the way information portrayed the services on offer.

Past experience influenced choice through both positive and negative assessments of their time with EZ providers, such as how well they got on with provider advisers, and prior success in finding work through that provider.

The extent to which providers influenced client choice was largely determined by how much access they had to clients prior to choosing a provider. Where Jobcentre Plus advisers influenced client choice, it was related to the adviser's interpretation of how to provide impartial information as well as the way they presented and discussed information.

The implications of choice: The introduction of client choice had operational effects on both Jobcentre Plus advisers and providers as well as the relationship between the two. Where choice was felt to have brought about change for advisers, it was seen as having made it easier to engage clients in the process and having made advisers' roles less strenuous. Choice had also impacted on the efficiency of the referral process both positive and negative changes were described. There was also some feeling that choice had compromised adviser impartiality.

The introduction of client choice had two sets of implications for the way providers operated. The first related to the service offered to clients and the way they were marketed, and the second

concerned their business operations. There were several aspects to this, which included: the location of the service, the staffing of the MPEZ provision, providers' ability to operate aspects of the choice process and fluctuations in their share of the market.

Among clients, 78 per cent of those who recalled making a choice felt that being able to do so was a good thing.

Clients' feelings about the value of having a choice were based on their experiences of that choice; the perceived degree of control they had over the process and the extent to which they felt there was a choice to make. Clients' subsequent experience with the chosen provider, their achieved outcomes and their individual motivation to return to work were also key.

There were mixed views among clients about whether choice had in fact made any difference. There were though, cases where choice had made a positive difference to clients' feelings about themselves.

Choice was reported to have improved attendance, increased levels of engagement among clients, and lessened resentment and hostility about having to attend a provider. However, the introduction of choice was also felt to have brought about confusion for some clients who found the decision-making process difficult.

Implications for the future delivery of choice:

The findings suggest the following implications and recommendations for the future operation of choice in programmes:

- Future delivery of choice needs to take account of the operational constraints on the front line and ensure that protocols governing the choice process can be delivered by staff and work effectively for all clients.
- There is a need to review the type of information given to clients to inform their choice.

- More needs to be done to underscore to clients the usefulness of contacting providers or visiting providers' offices, given it can lead to a more informed choice but at present is underused by clients.
- Guidance issued to advisers about choice in future circumstances should be clearer about how best to engage clients prior to them making a choice, as well as the parameters of the adviser role in assisting clients' choice.
- The prominence of location as a factor influencing choice should not be underestimated, and clients' reasons for why location matters are something for providers to consider.
- The factors underpinning choice demonstrate that clients pass judgment on providers' delivery and customer service. This can lead to fluctuations in market share, which in turn can affect business operations for providers.
- Offering clients a greater level of control through choice can lead to improved attendance, increased engagement and less resistance to the process. However, the value is dependent on it being delivered in an effective way.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 757 0. Research Report 650. May 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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