

Provider-led Pathways: experiences and views of implementation in phase two districts

By Rosalind Tennant, Mehul Kotecha and Nilufer Rahim

Background

The report presents the findings of a qualitative study which explored customer and staff experiences and views of the implementation of Provider-led (PL) Pathways in phase 2 districts. The research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) in collaboration with the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in 2009. The study comprised in-depth interviews and group discussions with 30 staff from Jobcentre Plus and 50 staff from provider organisations and in-depth interviews with 36 customers participating in the programme across six phase 2 PL Pathways districts.

The research aimed to build upon the evidence from the early implementation study conducted in phase 1 PL Pathways districts in 2008¹. The purpose of the study was to explore:

- Customers' experiences of the initial Work Focussed Interview (WFI) with the Jobcentre Plus advisor, referral to the provider and support received from PL Pathways provision.
- Provider staff experiences and views on contractual arrangements, working with Jobcentre Plus, and delivering PL Pathways services.
- Jobcentre Plus staff experiences of working with providers and customers.

Key findings

The exchange of information and administrative processes

Although the black box contract design was seen to afford providers flexibility to offer a diverse range of services, it was also felt to underpin a lack of detailed knowledge of the exact nature of the services delivered by provider organisations among Jobcentre Plus advisers.

Jobcentre Plus advisers felt limited in what information they could provide to provider organisations during the referral process due to the lack of health assessment information available to them at this point as a result of the delay in the processing of Work Capability Assessments (WCA). The non-receipt of a customer's WCA and the Work Focussed Health Related Assessment (WFHRA), or poor quality information contained in the WHFRA, also impacted on Jobcentre Plus advisers' ability to make decisions about deferrals and to prepare properly for the Jobcentre Plus WFI.

Provider staff also reported receiving inappropriate referrals due to delays in the receipt of WCA results, customers not being sufficiently well-informed about the provider services by the Jobcentre Plus and lack of detail in the PLP referrals forms received from Jobcentre Plus.

¹ *Provider-Led Pathways: Experiences and views of early implementation*, Nice et al, SPRU, DWP RR 595, published 27th October, <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2009-2010/rrep595.pdf>

Provision of customer choice

A number of barriers to customer choice were identified including a lack of time to digest information received about providers prior to making a choice and a lack of guidance from Jobcentre Plus advisers.

Customers' choice of provider organisation reflected a range of concerns not necessarily related to an appraisal of the services offered by the providers, including the geographical location of the provider organisation and available transport links.

Provider staff knowledge and skills

Jobcentre Plus staff questioned the suitability of commercial organisations to deliver the Pathways programme, querying their expertise and ability to meet the needs of customers with complex needs and who were further away from the labour market. They attributed the failure of some providers to meet job outcome targets to being unprepared for the volume of customers referred to them and the complexity of their needs, as well as the fact that fewer vacancies existed because of the economic climate at the time. Both customers and Jobcentre Plus staff raised questions about providers' knowledge of specific health conditions and their understanding of appropriate work-focused activities, job roles and sources of external support for customers with these conditions.

Despite both the basic and specialist training being offered by providers, provider advisers felt that they sometimes lacked formal training on how to work with customers and/or that they felt ill-equipped to deliver advice to customers on such issues as benefits.

Tensions between job outcomes and providing appropriate support

Some provider advisers felt that job outcome targets helped to encourage them to motivate customers to enter paid employment. However, some felt that the targets were unrealistic, given

the current economic climate and the complex barriers to paid employment customers were facing. Advisers also felt that the targets were not set up to recognise the work they did in building customers' confidence or changing their orientation to work.

Customer experiences of PL Pathways support

The interventions offered by providers ranged from support to help customers acquire paid employment to follow-up support delivered to customers once they were in the labour market. Providers preferred using in-house provision wherever possible for a number of reasons, including a desire to retain customers to impact positively on targets and to minimise the bureaucracy associated with referring customers to sub-contractors. Sub-contractors were used in the provision of CMP and, in some cases, to undertake WFIs with customers with specific needs. Providers reported having good working relationships with both sub-contractors and other provider organisations, including in Customer Choice areas.

The support customers had received from the provider was valued, including support that was specifically employment-related, as well as less formal emotional support and support for customers' soft skills, such as motivation and confidence. Customers who had moved into work since completing the mandatory elements of the PL Pathways programme attributed this, in part at least, to the help provided by the programme. A need for continuing support was identified, not only for those still looking for work or requiring help to move towards employment, but also for customers in work to help them deal with employment-related issues.

Positive experiences of both the Jobcentre Plus WFI and first provider WFI were underpinned by the clarity of information from advisers about the PL Pathways programme and about the provider, as well as a friendly and individually tailored approach by advisers.

For subsequent provider WFIs, customers valued continuity: this was achieved by having the same adviser for every WFI and feeling that each WFI built upon the action plan developed at the previous WFI.

Customers favoured providers' premises over Jobcentre Plus offices highlighting that they were accessible, welcoming and offered privacy. Any criticisms of the location of providers were centred on being referred to a provider that was some distance from their home (especially where another office was closer), and security procedures in operation where providers shared offices with other organisations.

Failure to attend and sanctions

Customers in this study had seldom missed more than one provider WFI and so had little exposure to sanctions. Their attitudes towards sanctions ranged from accepting them without question as a necessary incentive to attend the programme, to viewing them as unnecessary and even inappropriate for customers with health conditions. The threat of sanctions was identified as having the potential to undermine messages about the benefit of the programme.

Provider staff indicated that whilst the reported use of sanctions was low, providers were beginning to reassess their use of sanctions for failures to attend (FTA). There was some evidence that providers felt more frequent use of sanctions, and increased severity of sanctions, would consolidate their efforts to reduce FTAs.

Division of roles and responsibilities

Third Party Provision Managers' (TPPM) relationships with Contract Managers (CM) were characterised by a lack of clarity among TPPMs in the differentiation between their respective roles, and there were suggestions from TPPMs that they should perform some aspects of the contract management role. Whilst the communication problems between TPPMs and provider managers identified in the

evaluation of the phase 1 districts appeared to have persisted, they were improving, in part due to the efforts of provider managers and TPPMs to organise Provider Engagement Meetings (PEM) and other, regular face-to-face meetings.

Conclusions and policy implications

- The need for early communications about the programme to mandatory customers to emphasise both their obligation to participate and the potential benefits of the programme was identified by customers.
- It may be helpful to reflect on the kind of choice facilitated by the current model and the extent to which the original aims of providing customer choice are being achieved. Steps to address the identified barriers to customer choice could include:
 - revisiting the guidance given to Jobcentre Plus advisers about their role in facilitating choice between providers;
 - training for Jobcentre Plus advisers in the services offered by providers;
 - ensuring customers receive information about providers prior to their Jobcentre Plus WFI.
- There is a need for Jobcentre Plus advisers to receive timely and detailed information about customers' health conditions. Both Jobcentre Plus staff and advisers suggested revisiting channels for the transfer of customer data, arguing that the facility to complete and send paperwork electronically would reduce the burden of paperwork and facilitate timely transfer.
- Revisiting the training that Jobcentre Plus advisers receive about the provider organisation could support them to feel better informed and better able to provide information to customers.

- There is potential for Jobcentre Plus advisers to play a more prominent role in providing training or ongoing advice to provider organisations about disability and financial support to help customers move from benefits into work.
- To ensure that support is provided to all customers, provider managers felt that the role of targets for providers should be revisited to reflect not only tangible job outcomes but also work aimed at helping customers move closer to the labour market.
- There may be a need for some more explicit communication to TPPMs from the Department about the respective roles of TPPMs and CMs.
- Although steps such as PEMs are already providing opportunities for communication between Jobcentre Plus and Providers, creating more opportunities might help to address challenges in the exchange of information about individual customers.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 732 7. Research Report 643. July 2010).

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<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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