

Employment and Support Allowance: Findings from a follow-up survey with customers

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About this report

This report presents the findings of a follow-up telephone survey with 1,842 people who took part in an earlier, baseline face-to-face survey of people claiming the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)¹ who had consented to be re-contacted. It was carried out by Ipsos MORI between July and September 2010.

This follow-up survey aimed to explore the progress over time of ESA claimants since the baseline survey – in particular at their ongoing experiences of claiming ESA, any changes in their personal and household circumstances, and the subsequent activities of those whose ESA claim ended.

The sample of people surveyed had made an initial claim for ESA in April-June 2009, and participated in the baseline survey between December 2009 and February 2010. This follow-up survey was conducted in July-September 2010. A full technical report on the survey will be available shortly on the DWP website².

ESA was introduced in October 2008 to replace Incapacity Benefit and Income Support received on the ground of incapacity. It provides financial support and personalised help for people who are unable to work, because of a health condition. From April 2011, existing incapacity benefits claimants nationally are being reassessed for ESA.

Changes in health and personal circumstances since the baseline survey

Customers generally reported few changes in their domestic and personal circumstances between the baseline and follow-up survey – almost three-quarters (74 per cent) had no changes. The most commonly-reported changes were moving home (seven per cent), attending training (ten per cent) and people moving into or out of the household (11 per cent). Ninety per cent of those still receiving ESA at the follow-up survey were on the same claim as the baseline survey. Most customers (87 per cent) had already attended a face-to-face Work Capability Assessment (WCA) at the baseline survey, so this follow-up survey does not report detailed WCA experiences.

Half of customers reported changes in their health from the baseline survey, and health was as likely to have deteriorated (25 per cent) as improved (25 per cent). For those in older age groups, health was more likely to have deteriorated, while for younger groups it was more likely to have improved.

The ESA claim process

Experiences and views of Work Focused Interviews

A substantial proportion of customers (half of those placed in the **Work Related Activity Group** (WRAG) and Support Group) said they had attended at least four Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) by the follow-up survey. They were well-received by customers, with 78 per cent of those in the WRAG finding personal advisers helpful, and 80 per cent

¹ Barnes, H., Sissons, P. and Stevens, H. (2010). *Employment and Support Allowance: Findings from a face-to-face survey of customers*. DWP Research Report No. 707. Department for Work and Pensions.

² <http://dwp.gov.uk/research-and-statistics/>

finding WFIs helpful in thinking about paid work in future. As at the baseline survey, the main issues people remembered discussing were health and its impact on work (47 per cent of those attending WFIs reported discussing this) and the type of work wanted (44 per cent reported discussing this).

Looking at attitudes to work (as measured by agreement with by a series of statements), it is clear that some statements commanded a stronger level of agreement than others, although there was no evidence of a link between the number of WFIs attended and attitudes to work. While there were high levels of agreement with the statements 'having a job is the best way for me to be an independent person' (85 per cent) and 'once you've got a job it's important to hang on to it' (77 per cent), there was less consensus about others, and fewer than half of respondents (47 per cent) agreed that 'work is good for my health'.

Of customers who had attended WFIs since the baseline survey, there were no large differences in attitudes to work between the WRAG and customers with other claim outcomes.

Sanctions

As at the baseline survey, awareness of sanctions was widespread, but knowledge of how they applied was not always accurate; as at the baseline survey, the belief that benefit would be stopped if customers missed a WFI, rather than reduced, was widespread. Eighty per cent of respondents felt that sanctions made them more likely to attend WFIs, and only a small minority of people (eight per cent) said they had actually been sanctioned for missing a WFI.

Appeals

At the baseline survey, 20 per cent of customers found fit for work reported appealing, and the majority were still waiting for the outcome of their appeal. Almost all of these appeals had been decided by the time of the follow-up survey. Of those who had received an appeal decision, 46 per cent had received a decision in their favour, and 54 per cent had been found in favour of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)³. The most popular reason given for appealing was simply disagreeing with the WCA decision made (56 per cent said this).

Just over half (54 per cent) of the respondents who consented to data-linking⁴ reported that they had received some form of help with their appeal. The most common form of support, accounting for 48 per cent of those who had help, was a Citizens Advice Bureau or other advice centre. Where respondents had received help they were more likely to have won their appeal – 71 per cent who received help won, compared to 40 per cent who did not receive help⁵.

Immediate post-claim activities of the fit for work and closed/withdrawn claim groups

People who reported that they had left ESA (whether because they were found fit for work, or their claim was closed by Jobcentre Plus, or withdrawn before a decision on it was made) were asked what they had done immediately after their claim ended.

³ This is broadly in line with 60 per cent found in favour of DWP in the official statistics. http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/workingage/esa_wca/esa_wca_25012011.pdf

⁴ Survey respondents were asked for consent to link their responses to administrative data held by DWP on appeals, ESA claim details, and information on other benefit claims, for the purposes of this research only.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that this figure is likely to be affected by the missing data from those who had appealed but did not report this in the survey and whose data are therefore absent from routed questions. See chapter 3 for more details.

Overall, 80 per cent of this group had either claimed another income replacement benefit⁶ (43 per cent) or returned to work (37 per cent); the remaining 20 per cent gave a different response. These 'other' responses were fragmented and included retirement, being sick or unemployed without receiving benefit, and relying on savings or a partner's income, or moving into education; many said simply that they did not know. In many cases it was unclear what the claimant's income source was.

Activities of the fit for work and claim closed/withdrawn groups at the time of the follow-up survey

The follow-up survey asked those found fit for work, or whose claim was closed by Jobcentre Plus, or withdrawn before a decision on it was made, what they were doing at the time of the survey.

At the baseline survey, around a quarter (26 per cent) of this group were in work, a quarter (25 per cent) were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA); six per cent were claiming other income replacement benefits; and 42 per cent were neither in work or claiming an income replacement benefit.

By the follow-up survey the proportion in work had increased to more than one-third (35 per cent), the number claiming JSA had fallen slightly to 21 per cent; and 37 per cent were neither in work or claiming an income replacement benefit.

The claim closed/withdrawn group were much more likely than the fit for work group to be in employment at both the baseline and follow-up surveys, while the fit for work group were more likely to be neither working, or claiming an out-of-work benefit.

Overall, ten per cent of this group viewed themselves as permanently sick and unable to work at both the baseline and follow-up survey. An additional ten per cent of this group reported being unemployed and looking for work at the time of the follow-up survey, but were not claiming an out-of-work benefit.

Movements onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)

The youngest respondents (aged 16-24) who were found fit for work, or had a closed or withdrawn claim, were least likely to be in paid work – and most likely to be unemployed and claiming JSA – at the time of the follow-up survey. Around one-third of this group and a quarter of those aged 25-34 were unemployed, which corresponds with high national rates of youth unemployment⁷. Those aged under 25 may therefore be a priority for early receipt of services via the Work Programme.

Most (over 80 per cent) of those claiming JSA had been asked to attend meetings with an adviser⁸ and most of these (over 80 per cent) had attended two or more such meetings. The main issues discussed were how to look for work (82 per cent), and improving skills relating to jobseeking (16 per cent). Specific advice about health issues was mentioned only by a very small minority.

Around two-thirds of those reporting a health problem, who claimed JSA and met with an adviser, reported that the help that they received was adequate (54 per cent said this was 'about right' and 10 per cent reported that it was more than enough to meet their needs). However, there was clearly an appetite for more advice related to managing health and work; over 40 per cent of those with a health problem who were seeing an adviser expressed a wish for more support in this area – either on the types of work that would suit their health, or advice on health adaptations employers could make.

Future expectations

The vast majority of those in the WRAG or Support Group at the baseline survey continued to be in this group at the follow-up survey; only 15 per cent of the WRAG and ten per cent of those in the Support Groups left ESA between the baseline and follow-up survey. Under five per cent of each group moved into work.

⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=12>

⁸ The definition of meetings with an adviser excluded fortnightly signing-on.

⁶ Income replacement benefits means JSA, IS or IB.

When asked how long they expected to stay on ESA, both groups displayed a high degree of uncertainty; 42 per cent of the Support Group thought they would stay on ESA indefinitely and 32 per cent did not know how long they would stay on ESA. The respective figures for the WRAG were 19 per cent and 47 per cent. Those in the WRAG were more likely to expect to stay on ESA for a year or less (23 per cent, compared to 14 per cent for the Support Group).

Those still receiving ESA were also asked about their expected work status in six months; 24 per cent of the WRAG thought they would be in work at this time, compared to 16 per cent of the Support Group. Of those who did not expect to be working in six months, a third (34 per cent) of the Support Group said they did not expect to work again, compared to 16 per cent of the WRAG. Almost a fifth of the WRAG (19 per cent) thought they would be looking for work, or in education or training, in six months. This suggests that a proportion envisage moving towards work, but not entering employment, in the short-term.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 979 6. Research Report 745. May 2011).

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

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