

The Youth Contract: Findings from research with Jobcentre Plus staff in five case study districts

By Lizzie Jordan and Andrew Thomas

The Youth Contract was launched in April 2012 to provide additional support for unemployed young people between the ages of 18 and 24 including:

- more intensive support from Jobcentre Plus advisers;
- additional funding for up to 250,000 work experience and sector-based work academy (sbwa) placements; and
- a wage incentive of up to £2,275 for employers recruiting a young person who has been claiming for over six months or is attached to the Work Programme.

Key findings

- There was widespread support for additional adviser contact as this enabled advisers to build a working relationship with claimants, to get to know their needs and identify appropriate support provision.
- Staff in offices that had created a dedicated Youth Contract team recognised more benefits than those still handling a mixed caseload. Dedicated Youth Contract advisers were able to spend more time getting to know claimants and target support provision more effectively.
- There was thought to be a wide variety of support provision for young people, particularly in large towns and cities. In dedicated teams, advisers had more time to identify appropriate options, thereby taking full advantage of the support available.

- There was much support for work experience, as there was a feeling that many of the young people advisers saw needed work experience to help them move into a job. Work experience opportunities were considered easy to set up, increasing the choice of employers and opportunities for young people. Advisers were also able to give examples of work experience placements leading to a young person being offered a job.
- Staff were less positive about the wage incentive and tended to prioritise work experience and sbwas within their employer engagement work. This is likely to reflect the early stage of roll-out of the wage incentive and its limited availability through Jobcentre Plus at the time of the research.

Background

This summary presents the main findings from research with Jobcentre Plus staff in five case study districts and examines the implementation and delivery of the Youth Contract. Interviews were carried out with staff in November 2012. The research is part of a wider two-year, mixed methods evaluation of the Youth Contract involving staff, claimants, employers and Work Programme providers.

Implementing the Youth Contract

Jobcentre Plus staff largely acknowledged that the Youth Contract was inherently flexible. Although weekly contact was required, advisers could adopt

a light touch approach, in the first five months, for claimants who were able to search for work independently. By contacting these claimants by email or text message, advisers freed up time to meet face-to-face with claimants requiring more support.

Larger offices tended to create dedicated Youth Contract teams that were assigned smaller caseloads. These advisers developed a better knowledge of the provision for that age group and could share this experience with one another. However, it was not always practical in smaller offices (between five and ten advisers) as specialist teams would be too small to meet demand and/or cover sickness. Some staff also questioned whether it was fair to adopt separate youth and 25+ teams (for claimants 25 years and older), as the standard of service may not be as high for 25+ claimants and advisers may be less able to meet off-flow targets. This issue was not raised in offices which had adopted the two-team approach.

In each district, implementation of the Youth Contract was designed in consultation with staff at all levels. This ensured staff buy-in and that the design would be achievable. However, in some districts there was a delay in delivering practical information and consequently advisers felt ill-prepared.

Specialist adviser roles were created (including digital champions, sector-based work academy advisers and work experience advisers) to support adviser teams. Whilst larger offices created a range of roles within a dedicated Youth Contract team, in small offices with mixed caseloads, only one adviser was responsible for updating the team on all elements of the Youth Contract. Specialist advisers ensured that the rest of the team were well informed about the provision available for young people.

Feedback between employer engagement staff and advisers ensured that placements could be targeted to claimant needs. Larger offices had trialled embedding employer engagement staff in dedicated Youth Contract teams. However, it was too early, at the time of this research, for staff to comment on how successful this had been.

Additional adviser support

Under the Youth Contract, claimants in the five case study districts were assigned a named adviser. Jobcentre Plus staff discussed a range of associated benefits including: increased confidence amongst claimants; openness about personal issues, such as substance abuse; and more appropriate referrals to training and support. Advisers developed a working relationship with claimants and witnessed their progression and ultimate success which improved their own morale and commitment.

When the Youth Contract was first launched, advisers in some Youth Contract teams were not immediately able to manage their diaries effectively. Advisers in busier offices had limited experience of managing their own diaries, having been required to conduct a set number of interviews per day. To address this, managerial staff suggested that training in time management would help advisers to maximise the amount of contact time they had with claimants.

After a claimant has received Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for five months, it becomes mandatory for weekly contact to be conducted face-to-face. There was little support for this amongst Jobcentre Plus staff as they believed that advisers were best placed to decide on the appropriate level of contact with individual claimants. However, in most cases, advisers were already exceeding this requirement, seeing high need claimants face-to-face on a more regular basis and at an earlier stage in their claim. In offices struggling to deliver weekly contact, there was a preference for concentrating on claimants at an earlier stage in their claim because it was believed that identifying needs early could help claimants be referred to the full range of appropriate support options.

Group information sessions are an optional element of the Youth Contract. Advisers can refer claimants to a group information session in lieu of weekly contact. They were used across the case study districts to deliver generic information, thereby freeing up more space in advisers' diaries.

Experience of using the National Careers Service was mixed. Advice was considered generic or better suited to claimants seeking professional employment or further education. However, advisers did refer claimants if there were tangible benefits, such as links to training opportunities.

Sector-based work academies

There are three stages of an sbwa placement for claimants. Placements last up to six weeks and include pre-employment training, a sector-based work experience placement with an employer and a guaranteed interview for a job (including an apprenticeship) or other support to help participants through the employer's application process.

Setting up an sbwa was said to be time-consuming and, therefore, was only considered worthwhile if there was a ratio of one vacancy to every two claimants taking part (usually between 15 and 20 claimants). As a result, only large employers were approached which restricted both the areas where sbwas were appropriate and the types of sectors involved, usually retail, customer service and hospitality.

There was strong support for sbwas, in towns and cities where employer engagement advisers were able to engage with large employers with multiple vacancies. However, Jobcentre Plus staff, in offices servicing small towns, said there were few large employers and very few vacancies in the local area. Therefore it was difficult to find enough vacancies for an sbwa to be considered worthwhile.

There was, nonetheless, considerable demand for sbwas, because they provided both training and work experience and there was usually a job opportunity at the end. However, advisers said that claimants were disappointed by the lack of choice and demand often outstripped supply.

Sbwas were presented to employers as an alternative recruitment process. Employers therefore expected claimants to be ready for the workplace. As a result sbwas were not appropriate for all claimants. Advisers would only refer claimants who

were confident and motivated to avoid jeopardising relationships with employers, and demoralising claimants who may not perform well in the workplace and interview environment.

The three stage approach was not viable for all employers, particularly those recruiting within a shorter time-frame. Employer engagement staff therefore used sbwas flexibly, reducing the period of work experience or training, or removing one of these elements altogether to suit employers' needs. However, not all offices understood this was possible and consequently, these offices experienced difficulties finding employers willing to participate.

The social care industry was a large employer in all the Jobcentre Plus case study districts and were said to struggle to find appropriate staff. However, there was limited provision for sbwas in the care industry. There were two main barriers:

- it was difficult to engage employers as they tended to use specialist recruitment agencies; and
- claimants required a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Employers were not willing to pay for these and advisers were unsure whether they could use the Flexible Support Fund to pay for them.

Work experience

Work experience was considered suitable for claimants who were not workplace ready and enabled claimants to try out a sector and get into a working routine. Claimants gained experience and a reference to enhance their CV, and there was usually an application process which provided an insight into the real-world experience of recruitment. There were also several examples, cited by advisers, of claimants being offered employment following a work experience placement.

However, there was concern amongst Jobcentre Plus staff that placements could occasionally be created 'for the wrong reasons', for example, to fill temporary resource needs. To address this, employer engagement staff presented work experience as an opportunity to 'give something back' through training and mentoring.

In some cases, claimants were not willing to engage in work experience; advisers thought there needed to be additional levers to encourage these claimants to participate in the labour market.

Wage incentive

At the time of the fieldwork, the wage incentive was being administered primarily by Work Programme providers for young claimants participating in the Work Programme. Only Jobcentre Plus offices within nine districts that contained the 20 'youth unemployment hotspots' (geographical areas with particular problems with high youth unemployment) had access; the wage incentive was available to young people living in those areas from six months of the claim. Therefore, Jobcentres dealing with the wage incentive had only been doing so for three months. Since this research was carried out, the wage incentive has been rolled out to all Jobcentre Plus districts (from 17 December 2012).

Employer engagement staff said it was difficult to explain why some claimants were eligible and others were not without highlighting that eligible claimants had been unemployed for a long time. The policy aim is to incentivise the employment of those young

people who might be overlooked because of a lack of experience or skills. However, staff were concerned that explaining these conditions may have an adverse effect, by discouraging employers from recruiting longer-term unemployed people. Employer engagement staff also believed that employers were more concerned with finding the right candidate and that the wage incentive had little impact on this.

Recommendations

Dedicated 18 to 24-year-teams should be encouraged where possible and, where this is not, offices should share best practice for managing mixed caseloads.

Jobcentre Plus staff should be reassured that flexibility is possible when setting up an sbwa in order to engage with employers who are put off by the three stage approach.

There needs to be greater clarity about when and how the Flexible Support Fund can be used within districts. This would address a lack of consistency that was found across offices in how the Flexible Support Fund was used to address barriers to employment.

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