

Over 50s Outreach Pilot: qualitative research

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The Pensions Green Paper 'Simplicity, Security and Choice: Working and Saving for Retirement' published by the Department for Work and Pensions in December 2002 set out Government proposals for supporting people in their 50s and 60s in work and for creating opportunity and choice to enable them to work for longer. The proposals incorporated a package of measures designed to stimulate the economic and social inclusion of older people. The Green paper also undertook a commitment to pilot new approaches to the delivery of welfare to work services. This commitment came as a response to the difficulties experienced by Jobcentre Plus in engaging people from the over 50s age group, particularly those on inactive benefits such as Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Income Support (IS).

The primary objective of the Over 50s Outreach Pilot was for external organisations with previous experience and an innovative approach to engaging with economically inactive people, to raise awareness and encourage the use of Jobcentre Plus back to work services among the over 50s. The main target group was people in receipt of inactive benefits who have no contact with Jobcentre Plus. However the scope of the pilot also included any individuals who were interested in paid or voluntary employment and would benefit from Jobcentre Plus services, regardless of whether or not they were in receipt of benefits or above State Pension age (SPA).

Seven external intermediary organisations were selected to operate pilot projects delivering diverse approaches to awareness raising across seven Jobcentre Plus districts in England, Scotland and Wales. The pilot went live in April 2004 and ran for two years until March 2006.

This summary is based on qualitative research carried out by Insite Research and Consulting between December 2005 and February 2006 to examine the operation of the pilot. The research was not intended to evaluate the outcomes or impact of the pilot; its overall aim was to identify best practice and lessons learned in the delivery of the pilot.

Key findings

- Pilot projects with greater integration and involvement between the providers and Jobcentre Plus generally fared better than those where relationships were more distant.
- Providing a more individually tailored, face-to-face and friendly service was highlighted as being particularly important for engaging older customers. The more targeted the marketing and the more personalised and tailored the outreach service to the specific needs of individual customers, the more effective it was.
- Irrespective of the methods used, the number of individuals in the target group who responded and were referred to Jobcentre Plus was lower than anticipated. Those in receipt of inactive benefits were least likely to respond to the marketing and outreach approaches of providers. Among this group the concern that enquiring about work would result in a loss of benefits was highlighted as a key barrier. Intermediaries perceived as 'trusted organisations' and specialists in the over 50s field seemed to have fared better than others at attracting individuals on inactive benefits.

- People over SPA and those not in receipt of benefits responded in the greatest numbers. Many wanted pensions, benefits or volunteering advice but had no interest in work. Not surprisingly, referring such individuals to Jobcentre Plus services caused tensions and resulted in poor working relationships between Jobcentre Plus and the providers.
- Overall, outreach methods that offered information and advice on a one-to-one basis, together with direct access to jobs, training and volunteering opportunities produced the most effective customer engagement.

Background

The research was carried out in five of the seven Jobcentre Plus districts between December 2005 and February 2006. 32 in-depth, face to face interviews were undertaken with Jobcentre Plus advisers, District Programme Quality Monitoring Team (DPQMT) personnel, provider staff and customers who had been engaged and referred to Jobcentre Plus via the pilot.

The research was not intended to evaluate the outcomes or impact of the pilot but rather to describe how the pilot projects were implemented and delivered, to explore the methods used by external organisations to promote contact with Jobcentre Plus and to assess the effectiveness of the pilot in raising awareness and encouraging the use of back-to-work help among older people. The overall aim was to identify best practice and lessons learned in the delivery of the pilot.

The findings

Implementing and managing the pilot: Best practice

The degree to which Jobcentre Plus district teams engaged with the pilot varied significantly across the different districts, from active 'hands-on' involvement in the design and delivery of the pilot, through to a 'hands-off' contract management role. These differing degrees of involvement impacted on the conduct and success of the pilot. Pilot projects with greater integration and involvement between the providers and Jobcentre Plus generally fared better than those where relationships were more distant.

A key lesson learned in relation to setting up and managing future pilots was that successful outcomes resulted where clear, mutually supportive objectives and encouraging strong communication links were set up from the outset between Jobcentre Plus and contracted providers. In districts where this occurred, providers and Jobcentre Plus were clearly working towards a common goal, which led to good working relationships and quality customer service. Where this did not occur, there was a lack of clarity and co-ordination between pilot providers and Jobcentre Plus staff in relation to which individuals should be referred to Jobcentre Plus, resulting in tensions and poor working relationships between the parties.

A key constraint for the pilot was the timing of its implementation, coinciding with major structural and policy changes within Jobcentre Plus, some of which ran contrary to the main aims and objectives of the pilot. In the period between the announcement of the pilot and its conclusion, many Jobcentre Plus offices had centralised services, staff had re-organised and efforts were re-focused around priority groups of benefit customers. In most districts, advisers simply did not have the time to spend with people over SPA or not in receipt of benefit. Getting the timing of the pilot right and ensuring a good degree of 'fit' with wider policy developments and objectives, therefore appears to have been a key lesson learned.

Methods used to engage the over 50s: Best practice

Providers adopted very different approaches to the delivery of the pilot and the methods used to engage the over 50s. Some implemented general, 'broad brush' marketing and outreach strategies, while others focused on more targeted, one to one information and advice services. Generally, the more targeted the marketing and the more personalised and tailored the outreach service to the specific needs of individual customers, the more effective it was.

Advertising methods that more successfully raised awareness and stimulated interest among the target group appeared to be newspaper and radio advertising. The least effective methods were deemed to be general leaflet drops and poster campaigns.

Themed outreach events and 'one stop' jobs fairs specifically aimed at older people looking for work, training or volunteering opportunities were identified as being particularly effective methods. Using older people as outreach workers also worked well in helping to build trust and break down customer barriers; outreach workers who were more mature adults themselves were generally better able to identify and empathise with older adult customers. Other effective approaches included small discussion groups and group workshops. Meeting customers on their own territory and in neutral and accessible community settings where they felt comfortable, was another important factor in engaging this group. Practical assistance, including 'meet and greet' services, mentoring and 'hand-holding' services were also much appreciated by customers over the age of 50.

Overall, outreach methods which encouraged a more personalised service based on face-to-face contact and delivered one-to-one, together with approaches which provided direct access to jobs, training and volunteering opportunities, produced the most effective customer engagement. Individuals were perceived to respond better when services and events were specifically targeted at the over 50s and where there was a strong presence of employers. In particular, outreach methods that encouraged links with Age Positive employers were deemed to have worked well at engaging the more job ready.

Pilot respondents: Best practice

Overall, irrespective of the methods used, the experience of all pilot providers, was that the number of individuals in the target group who responded and were referred to Jobcentre Plus was lower than anticipated. Of all the different categories of the over 50s, those in receipt of inactive benefits, particularly longer term, appeared least likely to respond to the marketing and outreach approaches of providers. Concerns that enquiring about work would result in the loss of benefits was highlighted as a key barrier preventing these individuals from engaging with Jobcentre Plus. Pilot providers that were perceived as 'trusted organisations' and specialists in the over 50s field seemed to have fared better than others at attracting those on inactive benefits.

People over SPA and those not in receipt of benefits responded in the greatest numbers. Many wanted pensions, benefits or volunteering advice but had no interest in work. Providers over-selling what Jobcentre Plus could realistically offer to such individuals appeared to be a key reason, together with a possible flawed understanding on the part of some providers as to what was the main purpose of the pilot. Some providers were referring any and all 50 plus individuals, irrespective of whether or not they might be interested in work. Not unsurprisingly, this caused tensions and poor working relationships between Jobcentre Plus and some contracted providers.

Among the large and important group of pilot respondents who were interested in employment, a significant proportion were above SPA and in receipt of an occupational or state pension. People above SPA were rarely looking for full-time work, with most wanting a part-time job to 'top-up' their pensions and to keep themselves mentally and physically active.

Providers offering direct links to volunteering opportunities reported having some success. Though individuals at or above SPA were mostly interested in voluntary work for social or altruistic reasons, those below SPA often perceived voluntary work as a means of gaining valuable experiences in terms of possible future employment.

Stigma, personal pride, a fear of the unknown, coupled with out dated images and perceptions of the types of places Jobcentres were deemed to be were key barriers preventing older individuals from accessing the service. Where a more personalised, face-to-face and friendly service had been provided, these barriers were more likely to be overcome. In some cases, respondents who had been referred acknowledged the positive changes and improvements that had occurred within Jobcentre Plus and indicated that they would be more willing to use their services again in the future.

What the pilot did clearly evidence was a demand for employment, training and voluntary opportunities among the over 50s not on benefits. Many such customers had taken early retirement or been forced to leave a job due to ill-health but were keen to find alternative work. With little or no previous contact with Jobcentre Plus, many

were highly receptive to the approaches of pilot providers. On the face of it, those with recent work experience, a solid employment history and transferable skills may appear better placed to help themselves, requiring little input or involvement from Jobcentre Plus. However, many needed quality information and advice on training and jobs as part of a change of career. Jobs fairs were particularly useful in assisting the job ready but for individuals needing to re-train for a new job or career, there appeared to be little help available.

Lessons learned and policy implications

Given the very low response among the main target group, there was little evidence to support the view that contracting out the marketing and awareness raising functions of Jobcentre Plus to independent intermediary organisations was any more successful in securing the engagement of 50 plus customers in receipt of inactive benefits, than Jobcentre Plus. This suggests that while using an intermediary organisation can help to break down the barriers to Jobcentre usage among people with a limited history of claiming benefits, it appears to make little difference to inactive benefit claimants.

Persuading older adults in receipt of inactive benefits to use Jobcentre Plus services may therefore first require convincing them that a return to work is financially viable. No amount of awareness raising or outreach may be effective in encouraging such customers to take up the offer of Jobcentre Plus back to work help without the prior knowledge and reassurance that they will not be worse off in work. In this respect, what may have been more useful to pilot would have been a targeted marketing or advertising campaign which sought to get this key message across.

Another approach may have been for providers to have offered better off calculations (BOC) and information and advice on permitted work, benefit protection and other financial incentives designed to help in the transition from benefits to work. It is only through having access to this type of information that people will understand that they might be better off in work, or that they can try

work without risking the loss of their benefits if the job is not sustained.

On the other hand, in so far as Jobcentre Plus is unable to distance itself from its benefit policing role, the only effective means of encouraging target benefit customers to access Jobcentre Plus back to work services, may be through a mandatory Work Focused Interview (WFI) which includes a BOC. What is interesting from the perspective of the over 50s outreach pilot, is that with the introduction of mandatory Work Focused Interviews and roll out of the IB Pathway to work Pilots, this lesson appears to have already been learned.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84712 116 0. Research Report 401. November 2006). It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

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