

## Key recommendations

The research feedback suggests that, without some form of intervention, the number of MFA referrals and interviews will not increase in the future. It is therefore recommended that the ES considers a relaunch for MFA.

It is recommended that the relaunch include an information campaign for Jobcentre staff. In order to give MFA a clear role and increase its perceived relevance, it may help to present it within the context of the ES's "toolbox" of processes that can reduce fraudulent claiming.

It would also be helpful if proactive MFA co-ordinators were involved in the campaign as they have useful experience that can be passed on to Jobcentre staff. They are also more likely to get the attention of, and be able to motivate, Jobcentre staff than those without hands-on experience.

It is recommended that the ES tries to get a more accurate picture of the BFIS / BIS referral response problem reported by some research respondents by comparing ES and BFIS / BIS statistics (if possible). If the delayed return of MFA1s by BFIS / BIS staff is a widespread or significant problem, it is suggested that the BFIS / BIS role in the MFA process be reviewed with the aim of increasing BFIS / BIS staff awareness and commitment to the process.

If this is not possible, it is suggested that BFIS / BIS's involvement is reduced in order to ensure the least possible delay in setting up MFA interviews.

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## More Frequent Attendance Post Implementation Review: Qualitative Research Report

Following the introduction of the More Frequent Attendance (MFA) policy in January 2001, the Employment Service (ES) commissioned BMRB Qualitative to carry out research to aid the MFA Post Implementation Review. The overall aim was to find out how the MFA policy is working in practice.

A qualitative methodology was used, involving ES Jobcentre, regional and district office staff and Benefit Fraud Investigation Service (BFIS)/Benefits Investigation Service (BIS) staff. A mix of interviews and group discussions was carried out with respondents from England, Scotland and Wales. The fieldwork was conducted in late July and early August 2001.

### Main findings of the research

- The research found little evidence that MFA referrals and interviews are being carried out on a regular, on-going basis. Awareness of, and involvement in, the process is generally low within both Jobcentres and BFIS / BIS offices. There has been very little activity in some areas.
- While the introductory process did make staff aware of what MFA is, it would appear that it did little to motivate them to start using it. Given that it has a low priority status, MFA has been all but forgotten by some Jobcentre staff. Others are aware of the process but are more focused on carrying out tasks for which performance targets have been set.
- It should be noted that staff had no problem understanding the rationale behind the new process and usually thought it was a good idea in theory. However, many were unsure how worthwhile it would be in practice.
- In some areas, it appears that BFIS / BIS are not responding to MFA referrals within the specified ten day period; in some instances there have been delays of several weeks. This has directly impacted on the number of MFA interviews carried out in these Jobcentres, as interviews cannot be arranged until BFIS/BIS has given a positive response.
- Given these factors, MFA activity to date has often been very dependent on the presence of a proactive MFA co-ordinator in the Jobcentre.
- Feedback from some BFIS / BIS and Jobcentre staff suggested that they had a less than positive working relationship. This was usually due to conflicting expectations and priorities of the different agencies' staff. The research feedback suggested that the new MFA process has done little to help this situation.
- BFIS / BIS staff could see little benefit to them in the new policy. As a result, it had yet to establish itself among these staff.
- The research findings suggest that the number of MFA referrals and interviews is unlikely to increase in the future without some form of intervention to increase understanding of the benefits of the MFA process, motivate Jobcentre staff to participate, and speed up the BFIS / BIS response to ES referrals.



## Executive Summary

The More Frequent Attendance (MFA) policy was introduced in January 2001. It entails asking Jobseekers who are suspected of working while claiming Jobseeker's Allowance to attend extra advisory interviews in addition to their normal Fortnightly Jobsearch Review.

The interviews are arranged at unpredictable times and at short notice with the intention of disrupting any routine undeclared working activity. The interviews are entirely work-focused; Jobcentre staff do not confront clients with their suspicions of fraudulent activity. Candidates for MFA are checked with the Benefit Fraud Investigation Service (BFIS) / Benefits Investigation Service (BIS) before interviews are set up.

Qualitative research was commissioned to aid the MFA Post Implementation Review. The overall aim was to find out how the MFA process is working in practice.

### Research design

A qualitative methodology was used, tailored to the availability of Employment Service (ES), BFIS and BIS respondents. A mix of depth interviews and paired depth interviews and trio, mini and standard group discussions were carried out. The respondents included ES Business Managers, advisers and frontline staff, Management Information (MI) co-ordinators, and BFIS / BIS administrative staff and investigators.

The fieldwork was set up by the Jobseeker Mainstream Services Division (JMS8) and carried out by BMRB Qualitative in late July and early August 2001 involving Jobcentres in England, Wales and Scotland.

### MFA awareness and involvement

Jobcentre staff awareness of, and involvement in, the MFA policy varied considerably across the research sample. On the whole, there had been minimal activity and the process appeared to have made little impact on many Jobcentres.

Few staff had been actively involved in carrying out the process on an on-going basis. In many Jobcentres, MFA had been forgotten by staff who were busy with other tasks, and were not being regularly reminded or encouraged to make MFA referrals.


In some cases MFA activity also appeared to be limited by BFIS / BIS delays; the local BFIS / BIS took much longer than the agreed ten days to return MFA1 forms. (The MFA1 form is the form used by ES to refer working and signing cases to BFIS / BIS.) In some cases these delays ran into weeks, and ES staff had to ring and remind BFIS / BIS to return the forms on a number of occasions.

As a result, many Jobcentres had made relatively few MFA referrals and had carried out only a handful of MFA interviews. Furthermore, MFA activity would appear to have slowed down since launch.

In the absence of a target for MFA, ES staff had little idea of how many referrals they should be making or how many interviews they should be carrying out. It was not until quarterly data was circulated by Head Office that District Office staff and Business Managers became aware of how low the numbers were in some areas.

A few Jobcentres had not attempted to implement MFA as they were achieving the same result using an alternative process.

For example, they were getting jobseekers into the Jobcentre on a weekly basis as part of the New Deal Gateway, enhanced Restart, or the weekly signing for long term unemployed people. Respondents from such Jobcentres reported that these processes had the desired effect of encouraging jobseekers to terminate their claim to JSA.



MFA was less than top-of-mind among BFIS / BIS staff. It was seen as an ES policy that made very little difference to the way BFIS / BIS worked, and they did not recognise that MFA had any benefit for them. For example, they did not appreciate that it could help reduce their workload.

In addition, some BFIS / BIS staff were unaware (or had forgotten) that non-ES referrals could be passed to Jobcentres for MFA interviews, using the MFA2 form. (The MFA2 form is the form used by BFIS / BIS for non-ES referrals to instigate MFA action.)

### **MFA introduction and implementation**

There was positive feedback from those who attended the regional handover events prior to national implementation in January 2001.

However the Jobcentre communication meetings that followed appear to have had rather limited effect in some cases. For example, when details were passed on by a member of staff who had received them second hand, that is, from someone who had not attended the regional event in person, Jobcentre staff had often been left quite vague.

Many reported that they would find out more about MFA if they ever needed to. However, in the meanwhile, they were either unable to make referrals, or were not motivated to do so.

In some Jobcentres, the appointed MFA co-ordinator had taken a much more proactive approach. These individuals had often been personally involved in generating referrals and / or undertaking MFA interviews.

Despite the varying levels of interest among Jobcentre staff, most had understood the aim of the new process and thought that it was a good idea when they first heard about it. However many also anticipated problems.

Some thought that it would require quite a lot of work for relatively little result, and / or that it would only be effective for a small number of jobseekers. Others anticipated that some frontline staff would have a problem referring clients they knew well, or that BFIS / BIS's involvement might lead to timing problems.

This latter concern reflected the fact that, in some areas, the relationship between ES and BFIS / BIS was not good. In these instances, Jobcentre staff were often quite critical about their local BFIS / BIS colleagues; the latter staff were not necessarily aware of these feelings.

This negativity appeared to be due to mismatched expectations in terms of what could be achieved by BFIS / BIS, and BFIS / BIS's role relative to ES. There was also a feeling among more experienced, longer serving Jobcentre staff that ES fraud investigation had been much better when ES had had its own fraud investigators based at Jobcentres.

In two of the three Fraud Sectors, all referrals sent to BFIS / BIS are now evaluated by the Portal computer programme. This has reduced the investigator's role considerably. It means that they do not return the MFA1 form to Jobcentres, and have no opportunity to use the MFA2 form.

The ES Management Information co-ordinators reported on the problems that they had experienced with the original regional and district collation sheets. These problems had been reduced considerably when the forms and guidance had been revised and re-issued by JMS8.