

Research summary

In October 2003, the Government introduced new Incapacity Benefit (IB) Reforms in three pilot areas: Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, Argyle and Bute (RIAB); Bridgend, Rhondda, Cynon and Taff (RCT); and Derbyshire. *Key features of the reforms include:* a series of mandatory work focused interviews (WFIs); new specialist adviser teams of specially trained IB personal advisers (IBPAs); a Choices package of interventions to support return to work; new work-focused condition management programmes developed jointly with the local NHS; and a 52 week Return To Work Credit (RTWC) of £40 per week.

This summary is based on qualitative research conducted by a team from the National Centre for Social Research (*NatCen*). The study comprised six focus groups with purposively selected samples of IB Personal Advisers (IBPAs) and new IB customers in early 2004. It was designed to provide rapid feedback on the operation of the pilots in the first three areas of operation, and to identify key issues or problem areas early in the evaluation.

Key research findings

- Prior to participation in the training and WFIs, IBPAs were positive about the idea of being able to offer an attractive package of support to IB customers. However, there were concerns about resistance from IB customers to taking part in WFIs.
- After participation in training, IBPAs felt more confident about interviewing customers and introducing the reforms to customers in a positive way. However, there was some feeling that the training lacked sufficient information about the Choices package and sufficient consolidation time.
- Key issues relating to the delivery of the early WFIs included: problems with using the screening tool; a backlog of IB customers at 'go live', resulting in little IBPA time to pursue knowledge of the Choices package and follow up FTAs; a perceived shortage of staff to conduct WFIs in some areas; and lack of availability of some elements of the Choices package, notably the Condition Management Programme.
- IBPAs had typically expected what they saw as 'difficult cases' (often those with more serious health conditions and/or customers who they anticipated would have a negative stance towards work) to be screened out of the WFIs, and were surprised that they were not. This appeared to stem, for the most part, from a misunderstanding of the screening tool, the common belief having been that 'difficult' cases, rather than the more 'job-ready' were the ones who would be screened out. Some IBPAs expressed anxiety about the inclusion of these cases, feeling that there was little they could offer them. More positively, other IBPAs had been pleasantly surprised by the reaction of some of these customers to the WFIs and support on offer.
- IBPAs described the RTWC as receiving a particularly positive reaction from customers.
- Customers typically felt it was 'fair enough' that they had been asked to attend a WFI. This was usually because they felt the WFI would provide them with a chance to prove the legitimacy of their claim rather than because they anticipated being offered a helpful package of support. No customers seemed aware, prior to attendance, that they were taking part in a new policy, or what the key features of that policy were.
- Some customers were pleasantly surprised at the range of support that was offered to them when they attended their WFI, especially in relation to financial incentives. However, others felt that they heard little that was particularly attractive or new at their WFI (*the limited availability of, and IBPA knowledge about, certain elements of the Choices package at the time of the research could be a key explanatory factor here*).
- Customers awaiting further medical treatment and those who viewed their health condition as too severe to allow them to consider work tended to be more negative about their WFI; some felt that it was insensitive that they had been asked to go along at all. A related finding was that, at this point in the roll-out of the reforms, IBPAs did not appear to be making full or even limited use of waivers and deferrals.

Executive summary

- This report is based on qualitative research conducted by a team from the National Centre for Social Research (*NatCen*).
- The study comprised six focus groups with purposively selected samples of IB Personal Advisers (IBPAs) and IB customers in early 2004. Customers differed in their personal and health circumstances. All had recently made fresh IB claims, some had also made previous benefit claims. Staff varied in their IBPA role depending on whether or not they were devoting all or only some of their time to the IB role, in addition they had differing extents of experience in advisory work and in working with the IB customer group.
- The study was designed to provide rapid feedback on the operation of the pilots in the first three areas of operation, and to identify key issues or problem areas early in the evaluation. It does not therefore present a definitive account of the success or otherwise of the reforms, as it is anticipated that some of the early implementation problems identified at this stage may recede as the reform processes become more established. It is the role of later stage of the evaluation to assess comprehensively the reforms over time.

Early involvement with the IB Reforms

Initial reactions of IBPA staff to the reforms, prior to training and conduct of the first WFIs.

- IBPAs had found out about the IB Reforms through different routes. Whilst some had actively applied for the IBPA role, others had been 'volunteered' by managers.
 - The general view was that the IB Reforms were designed to provide IB customers with the help and support that they needed to move into work.
 - Staff perceived several positive aspects of the reforms including: they were 'filling a gap' by providing consistent support and advice to IB customers; the development of a package of support including the addition of new service provision in the form of the Condition Management Programme (CMP), alongside existing provision; *and* the introduction of new financial incentives (RTWC).
- Key staff concerns in advance included: the potential for negative customer reactions to being called to a mandatory interview whilst 'signed off sick'; worries about encouraging moves into work which could be detrimental to the customers' health condition; feeling out of their depth when faced with the range of health conditions customers could present with; IBPA safety when carrying out home visits; *and*, worries about resistance from 'hardened claimants' or those with complex needs and circumstances.

Initial reactions of IB customers to the reforms, prior to attending the first WFI

- IB customers had either initiated their IB claim themselves, through an employer or doctor. Contact with the Jobcentre had started via a letter or telephone call.
- Customers made a clear link between the Jobcentre and the concept of work, and the expectation was that the purpose of the WFI was to discuss work.
- Customers knew - from the letters they had received - that their benefits could be affected if they did not attend these meetings, which had been distressing to some.
- However, customers did think it was 'fair enough' to attend *a* meeting (although not necessarily a series), to demonstrate the genuine nature of their IB claim.
- Awareness of the IB Reforms as a new policy was limited, with little knowledge of key features of the reforms, such as the CMP.
- Particular groups of customers who thought it unlikely in advance that they would benefit from involvement were: those with an existing contract of work who were expecting to resume their employment; customers awaiting further medical treatment or investigations; those who viewed their health conditions as being too severe to allow them to work; those who anticipated difficulties getting to the Jobcentre for the interview; *and*, those who had experienced problems with their IB claim.
- External influences on customer attitude to work included the nature of the local labour market and what work was available, and customer perceptions of the attitudes of employers to disabled people or those with health conditions.

Implementation of the IB Reforms

- IBPAs undertook training modules to enable them to deliver the IB Reforms. Key positive aspects included: improved interviewing skills; greater confidence to work with IB customers; introducing the reforms and the concept of work in a positive way; *and*, the development of a close, supportive IBPA network.
- Key concerns about training were: gaps relating to process; insufficient information about the Choices package; scarce time for effective consolidation; *and*, too little written information, particularly in relation to processes and the Choices package.
- A system of mentors was set up to support the IBPAs as they settled in to the new role. This had worked with varying degrees of success.
- IBPAs felt that there had not been enough training for other Jobcentre Plus staff involved in the reforms. This was compounded by the initial problems with capacity that were encountered including: backlogs of IB customers requiring WFIs at ‘go live’; too few IBPAs in some areas; *and*, insufficient allocation of ASO time to the reforms. Early evidence suggested this was improving.

IBPA delivery of work focused interviews

- Initial WFIs usually took place more than eight weeks after IB claims were initiated because of early capacity issues. Another early problem for some IBPAs was the lack of private offices for WFIs to take place in.
- Concerns about the screening tool were expressed throughout the IBPA sample, in particular that: it was slow and cumbersome to use, it was difficult to know how to categorise customers, and that what they saw as serious or ‘*entrenched*’ cases were not, as they had expected, being screened out. This concern appeared to stem, for the most part, from a misunderstanding of the screening tool, the common belief having been that ‘difficult’ cases, rather than the more ‘job-ready’ were the ones who would be screened out.
- Some IBPAs chose, as a result of concerns about the failure to screen out those they had thought would be screened out, to rely on their personal discretion rather than the screening tool when deciding whether and how to follow up customers. IBPAs did not seem aware that they

could *legitimately* defer or waive WFIs with customers with real barriers to participation.

- The key emphasis in the early WFIs seemed to be on customer motivation and routes towards returning to work. This was for several reasons including concerns about ‘overloading’ customers with too much information, a lack of knowledge about the package of services available and confidence to describe them, and a perception that getting people into work was the focus of the reforms and therefore, should be the centrepiece of any WFI with customers.¹
- Given that knowledge about the ‘Choices’ package was in its early phases, IBPAs tended to feel that they were limited in what they could offer customers who were not interested in moving into work. They hoped that as their knowledge developed they would be able to offer customers a more varied package of services.
- IBPAs could be pleasantly surprised by the positive reactions of customers they had originally written off as being difficult to work with, such as people who had been on benefits or unemployed for a significant period. They also mentioned a positive reaction amongst some of their existing customers to the new package of support on offer, in particular the RTWC.

Customer attitudes towards work focused interviews

- Customers experienced some problems in attending WFIs. Key difficulties included problems with attendance due to fluctuating health, a lack of knowledge about the possibility of deferring interviews, a lack of privacy when WFIs took place in public areas, difficulties accessing the Jobcentre (for example, problems with public transport or parking) and in one case, physical access issues at the Jobcentre itself. These difficulties, in some cases, strengthened or created negative views about the process.
- Customers varied in their reactions to the content of early WFIs. One key group of customers expressed clear interest in ‘moving

¹ Confidence about raising the issue of work in the WFIs can be seen as a step forward from previous practice as highlighted in the Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 162: Pathways to Work from Incapacity Benefits: A pre-pilot exploration of staff and customers’ attitudes, page 14, paragraph 3.11

on' from their current situation and tended to be positive in principle about the idea of attending WFIs once they had understood their purpose. A second group were adamant at this stage that they did not need or want help to move towards work or training. These customers tended to be negative about the WFI experience, feeling that there had been too much emphasis on returning to work, and that the inappropriateness of their attendance at the WFIs (as they saw it) had not been acknowledged.

- Attitudes towards IBPAs varied. Some customers were very positive about their IBPAs, feeling that they had been friendly, approachable and helpful. However, others felt that their IBPA had not appeared to be listening to them, or treating them as an individual.
- Awareness of the requirement to attend six mandatory WFIs was mixed. Amongst those who were aware, feelings differed. Those who felt that they were moving on or receiving useful advice at later WFIs were typically happy with the idea of attending on several occasions. However, those who felt that the coverage in the early WFIs had been inappropriate to their situation wondered what they could have to gain by attending several more WFIs.

Issues for future consideration

- In terms of substantive findings about experiences of and views on the IB Reforms, it is too early to draw conclusions. Among a small number of customers and staff involved in the focus groups, there was considerable diversity both in their individual circumstances and their range of experience of the IB Reform package.
- The study was conducted at a time when the initial areas were still, to a certain degree, laying the foundations for their future provision of IB Reform services and none of the customers had yet reached even the mid-point of their planned WFIs journey, so it would be impossible to paint a picture of outcomes at this stage or to make statements about the potential effectiveness of the package.
- Nevertheless, IBPAs were broadly supportive of the idea of the reforms, and did talk in positive terms about the range of help and support available through the Choices package, particularly the CMP and the financial incentives on offer. They also noted the positive reactions from some customers.
- Even at this early stage, there are issues emerging which may be useful for policy makers

in the development of the reforms. These included: addressing process issues in staff training (as well as interviewing skills, which was highly valued by many) and allowing adequate time to consolidate the training; the importance of early capacity; questions relating to the legitimacy of the screening tool; and, perceived tensions between the supportive and enabling focus of the reforms with the mandatory elements.

- The evidence also suggests that the role that deep-seated beliefs and attitudes play in facilitating or inhibiting progress through the reforms will be a key area for later studies, as will the impact of changing experiences and circumstances on those attitudes.

