

Work Focused Interviews for Partners and Enhanced New Deal for Partners: Qualitative evaluation, Phase One

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The qualitative evaluation of WFIPs and NDP forms one strand of research into initiatives for the partners of working age claimants of benefits. Other related research includes a quantitative client survey, an analysis of administrative data relating to partners, and a cost-benefit analysis of the initiatives as a whole. It is intended to add to evidence relating to workless couples by exploring the characteristics and circumstances of partners, their responses to mandatory Work Focused Interviews for Partners and their experiences of participating in NDP.

The Department for Work and Pensions commissioned Insite Research and Consulting to conduct the evaluation through face to face interviews with partners, claimants, advisers and other Jobcentre Plus delivery staff, approximately six months after the start of the initiatives in April 2004. A second phase of interviews will add a longitudinal dimension to the research and allow exploration of how the initiatives develop, as well as providing a longer term view of impacts and outcomes for the client group.

Key findings

Most partners accepted the need to attend a WFIP as part of benefit processing and were not troubled by it, although negative reactions were found, particularly among carers and those already working part time.

Partners had complex needs and difficult barriers to overcome which were usually closely linked to household and relationship issues. It was frequently impossible for advisers to address

individual partners' needs in isolation, although many were reluctant to do otherwise. Partners were viewed as a low priority client group, due to the small numbers involved and to advisers' perceptions that it required a lot of effort to move them through to a job entry.

Partners accessing NDP were often job ready and some had already secured a job. Many were seeking only part time work and short flexible hours training courses due to constraints on their time from caring responsibilities and looking after young children. The self employment option on NDP was particularly well suited to the complex circumstances of many partners, and was well appreciated by those pursuing it.

The reduction in time allocated to WFIPs meant that IWBCs (widely recognised as crucial elements of advice and persuasion) could only be carried out at subsequent (NDP) meetings. IWBCs were critical to decision making but said to be difficult to carry out and subject to being undermined by the inherent instability of partners' situations. For many partners it was difficult to demonstrate significant benefits from working.

NDP was successfully getting small numbers of job ready partners into employment, and helping some other individuals to move closer to the labour market, but was not generally managing to address the structural and domestic barriers that define the client group.

Summary

Work Focused Interviews for Partners (WFIPs) and the enhanced New Deal for Partners (NDP) were introduced in April 2004, requiring partners of working age benefit claimants to attend a mandatory meeting (a WFIP) with an adviser to discuss their work options. NDP is a voluntary programme involving assistance with jobsearch, access to training and information about in-work benefits and Tax Credits. WFIPs and NDP form part of the policy to extend Jobcentre Plus services to all customers, bringing support and provision for partners into line with other groups, such as lone parents.

In April 2004, the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned Insite Research and Consulting to conduct a qualitative evaluation of WFIPs and NDP. The aim of the research was to examine how the policies have been implemented, explore the characteristics of the partner customer group, establish for whom the policies are most and least effective and why, and explore the outcomes and impacts of the initiatives on Jobcentre Plus staff and customers. This report presents findings from the first of phase of qualitative research.

Work Focused Interviews for Partners

WFIPs are triggered at the 26 week point in a new claim, in 'flow' cases. For those who had been claiming for longer than this by April 2004 (the 'stock' cases), Jobcentre Plus were given up to three years to arrange the process.

Technical problems were experienced early into the initiative and some offices received large volumes of calls from customers worried about being forced into work or having their benefits stopped.

Most partners were untroubled by the WFIP appointment letter and the requirement to attend. Flow partners in particular mostly accepted that it was part of benefit processing, although some negative reaction was generated among carers of benefit claimants and partners already working part-time.

Although the appointment letter mentioned the opportunity to attend as a couple (benefit claimant and partner), this seemed to have been overlooked or misunderstood. Couples who had attended jointly found it to have been useful.

Reactions to the WFIP were mixed. Most partners found advisers to be friendly and helpful, providing useful information. Dissatisfied customers included those who believed their caring responsibilities precluded them going out to work.

Advisers reported that partners attending WFIPs were an extremely diverse and heterogeneous group. They were perceived as having complex needs and barriers to overcome, usually involving both in the couple. Household factors tying partners to claimants were seen as multiplying problems and constraints. Partners' decisions about work were tied up with the effects on benefits and were affected by the potential impact on the couple and household. Many advisers were unfamiliar with these aspects of work with partners and found them a difficult group to help. Some advisers also felt more confident about dealing with partners of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants compared to partners of Income Support or Incapacity Benefits as they felt most similar to the customers they were used to dealing with.

Few partners attending a WFIP were job ready. The challenge this presented has placed emphasis on the crucial importance of individual advisers' levels of commitment, which in turn appears to have emphasised differences in experience among advisers. Many had found it difficult to engage with partners and hard to build up expertise when the numbers being seen were so low. Differences in advisers' approach and experience had been made more evident by a lack of specific training in areas identified as including: benefits eligibility and conditions; the complexities of the personal circumstances that partners present with; and joint interviewing.

Over the course of the initiative, interview time was reduced from one hour to thirty minutes. This led to an inability to conduct in work benefit calculations (IWBCs) at initial WFIPs and they were only generally happening if a partner would return for an NDP meeting.

Examples of good practice include: contact with claimants to preparing for WFIPs prior to issuing letters; courtesy calling partners prior to WFIPs, and; using joint follow up interviews to maximise the value of conducting IWBCs.

WFIPs attended by both partner and main claimant were common. Some couples found them very useful but advisers did not believe that they provided better sessions than single interviews. However, fully addressing the situations of the couple was seen as crucial for many customers in determining the success of WFIPs.

Joint WFIPs appeared to successfully stimulate discussion about work options and there was some movement closer to the labour market among both partners and claimants. The main criticism was of inappropriateness due to circumstances in the home perceived as making work impossible. There was a high demand for flexible, short training courses as a 'first step' towards work among partners considering changing their situations.

There was some limited job entries following WFIPs although how far the WFIP had contributed to these outcomes was unclear. In some cases, the impact had been on the claimant rather than the partner – with several moves into work being attributed to the information received directly or indirectly from the WFIP.

Enhanced New Deal for Partners

Enhancing the labour market capital of individuals rather than addressing or overcoming structural and domestic barriers, is what NDP appears to have been doing best, along with facilitating and accelerating moves into employment by those who were already decided and job ready.

However, enhanced NDP was seen as offering more to partners than the previous New Deal but was still not enough to overcome the issues to be addressed or to attract them into the programme.

NDP was a low priority due to the small numbers of partners participating and the perception that

time spent with these customers is 'unproductive' compared to other groups. Some staff suggested that eight job entry points towards individual performance targets for a partner was not sufficient reflection of the time and effort to secure it.

Very few partners had self referred onto NDP with minimal contact, often to have an IWBC and discuss options, before leaving. Advisers believed that self-referrals tend to be more job ready and are more convinced of the rationale to work than those who entering NDP via WFIPs. Those entering NDP via WFIPs tend to stay longer on the adviser caseload than those who self-referred (with the exception of those on the self-employed route) but even then many appeared to have minimal contact before leaving.

Reasons for joining NDP were predominantly to have an IWBC, to get help with jobsearch and to seek training. Constraints on partners' time meant that many were seeking part-time work and short, flexible hours training courses.

Many partners accessing NDP appeared to be job ready and some had already secured a job. Many advisers were operating an 'inactive' caseload system to keep in touch with partners who were interested in working but not yet.

Most partners expressed positive views of NDP, particularly those seeking help with self-confidence, skills and qualifications and those essentially job ready with no major barriers to working. Negative views of NDP were expressed by those with caring responsibilities and by partners with no dependent children or very young children, and by those seeking part-time work.

Key factors contributing to successful job outcomes included: active support from the claimant; a favourable IWBC; effective planning; and good discussion of work options within couples. The self employment support package was well received and appeared to be particularly suited to the needs of partners, addressing both individual aspirations and helping overcome many complexities partners faced.

Partners who had left NDP gave the following range of reasons: employment; an unfavourable IWBC; insurmountable barriers; an inability to cope with the demands of training or work placements; deteriorating health (of the partner or claimant); disruptions in support caused by changes in eligibility; and, inability to secure a job after training.

Financial issues dominated partners' priorities in considering employment options. IWBCs were critical to decision making and played a major role in moves into employment. However, they were complex and difficult to carry out, allowing room for possible errors and for results to be undermined by factors beyond advisers' control, such as changes in claimants' health conditions. Advisers reported that for partners without dependent children, it was difficult to demonstrate the benefits of work, due to eligibility rules of Tax and Childcare Credits, results of IWBC were often unfavourable.

An inherent instability characterised the circumstances in which most partners lived and worked, enhancing fears of leaving benefits and adding to the risks of moving into employment.

NDP appeared to work well at enhancing the labour market capital of some individuals, and furthering the transition to work for the job ready although there was little evidence that it was successfully addressing major structural and domestic barriers, which in many ways define the customer group.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 883 X. Research Report 283. September 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

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