



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

Research and analysis

# **Plan for Jobs Cross-cutting Evaluation Wave 1 and 2 synthesis report: summary**

Published 23 May 2024

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## Overview

This multi-strand evaluation aimed to assess how well DWP's parts of the Plan for Jobs (PfJ) were able to respond to the increase in unemployment in 2020 as a result of restrictions on business operation and social mixing passed into law in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and whether the response met the needs of unemployed claimants. The evaluation also aimed to explore how well employment services were joined up and how decisions on referral and targeting were made.

The evaluation included ten qualitative case studies in different parts of Great Britain, a two-wave survey of Universal Credit claimants who had taken part in one of the strand provisions ('participants') and those who had not ('non-participants'), cluster analysis of wave one survey data to better understand barriers to employment and two rounds of follow-up qualitative interviews with respondents drawn from the survey sample.

The research objectives for the case studies were to understand how the PfJ provision supported claimants to find work and explore the interactions of PfJ with local contexts. It used a systems approach to highlight key interactions and interdependencies, identify gaps in implementation, and explore reasons for varying engagement in PfJ strands between areas. The case study strand also offered a deep dive into how PfJ affected, and was affected by, structural changes in sectors and sub-regions.

The research objectives for the survey and follow-up qualitative strands were to explore the barriers, enablers and motivators to participating in the PfJ strands and to gaining employment. The survey also gathered customer feedback on PfJ and aimed to identify the differences between participants and non-participants and understand experiences and outcomes for participants without a sustained work outcome. This research is not an impact or cost-benefit analysis of Plan for Jobs provision, and therefore cannot definitively ascribe employment-related outcomes to participation in strands.

# Research Context

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in March 2020, which led to restrictions on business and social activities, had a major economic impact. Claimant unemployment rose by 69% between March and April 2020 to 2.1 million, leading to a surge in Universal Credit claims ([IES](https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-may-2020-analysis-claimant-count-data) (<https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-may-2020-analysis-claimant-count-data>), 2020). Predictions from the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility indicated a potential 10% unemployment rate, which would decline more slowly than GDP recovered ([OBR](https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/Coronavirus_reference_scenario_commentary.pdf) ([https://obr.uk/docs/dlm\\_uploads/Coronavirus\\_reference\\_scenario\\_commentary.pdf](https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/Coronavirus_reference_scenario_commentary.pdf)), 2020).

The Government's Plan for Jobs, announced on 8 July 2020, allocated over £7 billion in measures to support the UK labour market. Aspects overseen by DWP aimed to boost job search intensity, enhance job matching and brokerage for employers and jobseekers, and develop necessary skills for vacancies. These were:

- Rollout of a new Job Finding Support (JFS) service.
- Kickstart, a programme providing six-month jobs for 16-24 year olds.
- Commissioning of Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) for claimants who had been out of work for between 13 weeks and one year.
- The Restart programme, which initially offered 12-month personalised programme for those out of work for between 12 and 18 months.
- A more than doubling of places on Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs).
- The launch of the Youth Offer to replace the Youth Obligation Support Programme, which brought together three strands of support: the Youth Employment Programme, Youth Employability Coaches and Youth Hubs.

Delivery of these measures was complemented by recruitment of 13,500 Work Coaches and expansion of Jobcentre offices. There followed a period of changing national guidance with regards to social distancing, business closures and requirements for working from home for those who could. Contrary to predictions, the long-term labour market crisis did not emerge. Unemployment decreased in 2021 and 2022, and by July 2022, with a 3.8% unemployment rate and 1.3 million vacancies, job openings surpassed the number of people out of work for the first time in 50 years.

# Key Findings

## Implementation challenges

In response to the increasing numbers of claimants, the number of Jobcentre sites and personnel was also increased. Staff members were required to adjust rapidly to the new schemes, leading to difficulties in correctly referring claimants and misunderstandings about the suitability of the programmes.

Training was offered to address these difficulties. When social distancing protocols permitted, contracted providers found it beneficial to operate from Jobcentre offices. This arrangement facilitated communication with Work Coaches and enhanced the quality of referrals. The quality of the initial PfJ service also affected referrals. When negative feedback was provided about a particular scheme, some staff members became less willing to refer to it. Despite this, staff members recognized that client feedback about the service could evolve over time. They believed it would improve as the service became more firmly established.

Geographical areas with existing strong partnership working practices were best able to embed new provision with existing provision. This helped to maximize the benefits for customers. It was particularly helpful where PfJ provision offered additional support or services that were not locally available (e.g. the Kickstart scheme).

Contrary to projections, unemployment did not increase as much as expected during the pandemic. As a result, the claimants joining the PfJ strands were more distant from the labour market than initially anticipated. Among Jobcentre and provider staff, there was a feeling that employment outcomes were slower to achieve than previously expected.

## Customer health profile

Many PfJ participants had physical or mental health conditions, which acted as barriers to work. Around half of all participants had a health condition or disability, lowest amongst JETS participants (48%) and highest in the Youth

Offer (63%). Non-participants were most likely to have a health condition or disability (66%). Staff reported more claimants with health conditions, particularly mental health conditions, than anticipated and felt PfJ wasn't always adequately supportive for these customers.

## **Experiences of Plan for Jobs strands**

At wave 1, two thirds or more of participants on each strand knew what to expect and found the provision useful. Nearly seven in ten participants reported being satisfied with the support received through each strand. Youth Offer and JETS participants were most satisfied, whilst JFS participants were least satisfied.

## **Outcomes**

At wave 1 around 80% of participants across each strand achieved an employment-related outcome as a result of taking part in their strand. These outcomes were more widely defined than securing a job and included feeling more confident looking for work, attending interviews or gaining relevant experience.

Although employment outcomes cannot be solely attributed to participation, at wave two of the quantitative survey, more than four in ten (41%) of those who had participated in a PfJ strand stated that they were currently employed compared to around three in ten (31%) of non-participants (who had a higher average level of barriers to work than participants). Considering the sustainability of employment outcomes, employed participants were most often on permanent or open-ended job contracts. Three quarters of employed participants (75%) were satisfied with their job and two thirds (66%) of employed participants agreed that progressing in their current job in the next 12 months was important.

At wave 2, the main barrier to working identified by unemployed participants was their physical or mental health condition (47%), regardless of the strand participated in.

Both waves of the qualitative follow-up interviews identified the importance of a strong relationship with their Work Coach or provider staff.

# Recommendations

At a systems level, DWP provision is part of complex and varied local employment support landscapes. In commissioning new provisions, there is therefore a need to ensure that new programmes add value to this existing support offer, and do not undermine or duplicate existing successful programmes through the introduction of competing targets, for example.

To mitigate against the potential of undermining existing programmes and services, (new) Work Coaches should be regularly briefed on changes to the provision landscape and provided with support to help identify which provision would best meet customer needs.

The case study research highlighted that where there was a high degree of join-up and coordination between local employment services, the efficacy of the system in matching customers to appropriate provision (and therefore supporting their entry into employment) was seen to be enhanced. DWP should consider whether, in commissioning services, it is also possible to invest in ways to strengthen these local partnerships and ways of working (for example, through co-location and/or data sharing arrangements).

DWP should work in partnership with policy owners (such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) to consider how the transition from the European Social Fund to the Shared Prosperity Fund will affect these local partnership structures (and particularly whether it poses any risks to their sustainment), and the potential implications this has for the delivery of future employment support services.

Although the work of Partnership Managers was often praised by DWP staff and wider partners, DWP should continue to consider what long-term role Jobcentre staff can play in these partnership structures and how this fits with the Department's aims and objectives. In some areas, non-DWP partners felt that their focus on inclusion and finding sustainable employment outcomes for the local population (both the inactive as well as the unemployed) was at odds with the Department's perceived focus of moving customers into any employment as quickly as possible.

Where possible, customers should be signposted to support available to help with particular work barriers such as a lack of skills or financial difficulties. Similarly, support needs to be tailored to those with physical and mental health conditions as well as those with caring responsibilities.

Most customers reported continuous barriers to sustained employment or progression after completing the programme including high travel costs or lack of relevant skills to progress. Options for ongoing support should be considered where appropriate to ensure any employment outcomes can be sustained long term.

In delivering future services, DWP should look at how existing contracts with providers can be used to respond quickly to changing labour market dynamics. By the time it became operational, some PfJ strands were not seen to respond effectively to the needs of DWP's customer base. DWP should consider whether services can be adapted to best respond to the changing needs of the local population and address local labour market needs.

Across the case study research, common barriers to work entry that were not easily resolved included language barriers and health (particularly mental health conditions). Further training and guidance may be required to ensure that Work Coaches feel equipped to support customers with these needs.

In terms of employer engagement, consideration should be given to how Jobcentre districts can best capitalise on the new employer relationships that were developed over the course of the pandemic.

## Methodology

A mixed methodology approach was taken to the evaluation, comprising:

- Ten Local Authority case studies completed between October 2021 and August 2022
- Two-wave longitudinal survey of respondents who had taken part in one of the strand provisions ('participants') and those who had not ('non-participants'), achieving 8,325 interviews at wave one and 6,950 interviews at wave two, including 1,338 longitudinal interviews. Wave one fieldwork was conducted between 17 March and 10 April 2022 and wave 2 fieldwork between 1 November and 21 December 2022
- Cluster survey analysis from unemployed subsample of participants and non-participants to better understand the different types of barriers to employment
- Sixty follow-up qualitative interviews with both participants and non-participants drawn from the wave 1 survey sample conducted between September and October 2022



- Sixty follow-up qualitative interviews with both participants and non-participants drawn from the wave 2 survey sample conducted in March and April 2023

This research presents a snapshot of Plan for Jobs participants. The sample for the survey and follow-up qualitative interviews was drawn from customers who had started their provision between December 2020 and November 2021. Restart was not included in the survey samples for this research (to enable its main evaluation to take place) and is therefore covered in less detail in this report. Intensive Work Search participants include some claimants awaiting a Work Capability Assessment (WCA), or the outcome of a WCA. The outcome of this may change their work search requirements.