

The new Help to Work scheme could use some work

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*Will the government's new Help to Work scheme, recently launched, actually help people back into work? The evidence suggest that the placement element is ineffective. On the other hand, those receiving intensive support, provided as part of this scheme, may experience changes in behaviour that lead to improved job outcomes in the months after the end of the scheme. **Jenny Gulliford** and **Beth Foley** provide 10 concerns and recommendations.*



Last week saw the launch of the new Help to Work scheme, designed to help people claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) for 2+ years return to work. The government has been looking into this policy for some time, first under the guise of the Community Action Plan and more lately under the slightly more cumbersome name 'Support for the Very Long Term Unemployed' (or SVLTU to the policy nerds). The [assessment](#) of the trailblazer pilot was actually published back in 2012, with the [equality impact assessment](#) published even earlier, in 2011. A more recent [publication](#), published very quietly in 2013, even gives us a longer term perspective, tracking a cohort of participants leaving the Flexible New Deal over two years on a pilot of the Help to Work programme.



We are therefore well equipped to take a serious look at whether it is likely this scheme will be effective in helping people back into work. Whilst Help to Work will offer claimants three options – a long term mandatory work placement, high-intensity Job Centre Plus (JCP) Support, or an education or training placement – SVLTU provided either a work placement, or intense JCP support. The SVLTU assessment tested these interventions by comparing them to the outcomes achieved through the standard JCP package.

Firstly, and most importantly, the SVLTU trailblazer assessment found that the intervention had little impact on job outcomes at the end of the six month placement, with the percentage of people entering work (18-19%) not differing significantly from the control group two years after starting the programme. Though jobseekers on the programme on average worked 9 or 11 days more over the two years than those who hadn't, this is a very small difference. It is probable that this is at least in part the result of a 'locking in' effect, which also occurred in Australia's 'Work for the Dole' programme, where the scheme actually had an adverse effect on youth unemployment in some cases (see our ['Missing Million'](#) report). Moreover, given the negligible impact of the Mandatory Work Activity scheme, which we have written on [previously](#), it is perhaps no surprise that the placement element is ineffective.

There were however some 'softer' benefits to both elements of the scheme, with individuals on the placement and those receiving intensive support experiencing a positive shift in terms of how close they felt that they were to the labour market, and the amount of work-related activity they were participating in. It is possible that these changes in behaviour might lead to improved job outcomes in the months after the end of the scheme. With this in mind we have ten concerns and recommendations:

1) As the assessment points out, the group that will be in this programme are the people who, for the most part, have the most complex and severe barriers to work. Given that a third of all participants in the trailblazer cited health issues or disability as barrier to work, and 20% listed family or caring commitments, this is a group that's going to need specialised support, not just harsher conditionality. As far as we are aware, none of the three proposed measures – work placements, training or intensive Jobcentre support – provide direct or specialist support to tackle these two major barriers to work. Indeed, participants should have already received these types of interventions during initial contact with JCP and the Work Programme, so the impact of offering the same again at this later stage is unclear.

2) The government should also be aware that a proportion of this group should simply not be claiming JSA. Over the course of the trailblazer 4-5% of the pilot group moved on to ESA or Income Support. An assessment before entering

'Help to Work' to ensure that the person is claiming the right benefit should be considered. Placing or keeping someone on a cheaper benefit is short-sighted and prevents them from getting the support they need. Benefit-type decisions must be realistic.

3) The intensive job support strand must be tailored to provide actual support for people with complex conditions – forcing people to attend daily meetings may not achieve positive work outcomes if the severe barriers that some people will be facing are not addressed.

4) With issues travelling to work also cited as a common barrier to work in the trailblazer, the government should consider allowing Jobcentres to carry out JCP meetings over the phone or via email to reduce the burden of travel costs and time.

5) The question of whether the Jobcentre is resourced to take on this additional claimant group is an important one. Under proposals for Universal Credit, JCP will also have to begin supporting those in work but with low earnings. With adviser caseloads already high in many areas, the DWP will need to ensure it fully considers the extra resources needed to ensure this form of support can be meaningful and effective.

6) Work experience placements, if they are to be useful enablers of employment, must be relevant to the individual, and must teach valuable and transferable skills. They must be of a quality that not only helps an individual prepare for work, but that can convince an employer that they are ready for it.

7) Work experience placements must not replace actual jobs, with all placements being additional to existing roles. This is very hard to ensure in practice, and must be a top priority if the government does not want to remove paying jobs from the labour market and increase the unemployment rate overall. Community work placements, as proposed under Help to Work, have many precedents and have rarely been shown to be effective. This type of scheme was already operating in the 1980s with the Community Programme, which proved very expensive and offered relatively few benefits to participants. Evaluations have tended to conclude these programmes frequently reduce participants' employment prospects due to the duration of the scheme and additional time away from job search, and generally offer poor value for money.

8) Sanctions should always be a last resort. Given the impact that a four week sanction can have on an individual – driving them into debt for example – this is not a decision that should be taken lightly.

9) It should be noted that this is a supply side intervention. The largest barrier expressed by jobseekers participating in the trailblazer pilot was the 'lack of vacancies or too much competition for jobs'. Although the economic situation has improved since the pilot and employment rates are rising, this factor should be borne in mind.

10) Finally, whilst we would recommend specialist support being available to this group, as we have [stressed previously](#), this is the type of more personalised intervention envisaged as part of the Work Programme. Attempts to address these support needs *after* participants have spent two years on the Work Programme suggests a poorly-designed system; early intervention, rather than long periods out of the labour market, is central to effectively re-integrating those with complex barriers into sustainable employment. This is why it is vital to ensure the current underspend on support services within the Work Programme is reversed and that this help is provided at a much earlier stage.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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