

6 Overall impacts and conclusions

There was strong support for Joint Claims for JSA among respondents. However, outcomes remain potential and the following resolutions are suggested:

- staff need to deal with a critical mass of joint claims in order to build up experience and confidence in dealing with joint claimants.
- the role of reception staff is crucial to the effective processing of claims and perception of the service. A greater significance should be given to this role and staff workloads should be re-assessed in light of this

especially access to New Deal, would facilitate better access to the labour market

- communication between ES and BA should be improved, particularly in relation to registering and processing claims
- the quality of information flow between the ES, training providers and employers hampers service delivery and client satisfaction and should be more efficient.

- greater flexibility within JSA legislation,

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Joint Claims for JSA: Case Studies of Delivery

This report presents findings from the second of three stages of qualitative research reporting on Joint Claims for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). This stage covers case studies of delivery. It addresses the introduction and implementation of Joint Claims, and deals with specific issues such as the organisation and delivery of staff training, the barriers to work identified by staff, and reported outcomes and impacts. In addition, policy recommendations are made and good practice identified.

Summary of key findings

- There was significant support for the principle of Joint Claims for JSA among staff. Staff recognised the potential it has to help workless households off benefit and into work. However, because of processing difficulties and the lower than anticipated numbers of joint claimants, this potential remained largely unfulfilled at the time of the research
- Staff supported the proposed extension of Joint Claims for JSA to cover older couples
- At this stage, it is too early to tell whether Joint Claims for JSA can make a lasting impact on the numbers of workless households
- Some initial difficulties with the Employment Service (ES) and Benefits Agency (BA) processing systems caused problems with processing claims. Up to 90 per cent of stock claims were reported to be processed clerically, although this situation has improved since the research was carried out
- The actual number of joint claims registered on the system was lower than anticipated. An average of 40 per cent of the original schedule no longer met the criteria for joint claims by the time of implementation. Staff have therefore yet to see a critical mass of clients for them to be confident about delivering a good service
- The nominated payee in a claim (who tended to be the former claimant in stock cases) was usually treated as the de facto claimant. Consequently, the focus of a New Jobseeker Interview (NJI) was often on the nominated payee and not the other claimant, who was more likely to have a larger 'distance to travel' to the labour market. Thus, Joint Claims for JSA does not always focus equally on both joint claimants
- Barriers to work identified by staff include the benefit disincentive and clients' lack of confidence. A negative attitude to work was also apparent in some cases
- The perceived inflexibility regarding New Deal eligibility and access hampered Personal Advisers (PAs) in finding work for joint claimants.



1 Introduction

Joint Claims for JSA is a mandatory enhancement of JSA and applies to workless couples without dependent children, where at least one partner is aged over 18 and born after 19 March 1976 (i.e. under 25 when the enhancement was implemented on 19 March 2001). This research is the second of three stages of qualitative research and focuses on case studies of delivery. A separate programme of quantitative research is being carried out to estimate the net impact of Joint Claims.

2 Methodology

Face-to-face in-depth interviews with 87 respondents were carried out. A variety of staff were interviewed in the Employment Service (ES), Benefits Agency (BA) and among training providers. Interviews explored the introduction, implementation, delivery and impact of Joint Claims for JSA, together with training and barriers to work faced by claimants.

3 Aspects of Joint Claims for JSA

3.1 Strategy, planning and staff training

With a few exceptions, staff supported Joint Claims for JSA. Awareness raising and the use of supporting information were generally praised, as was the knowledge of implementation staff. However, the time lag between awareness raising and 'go live day' gave cause for concern, which was magnified by the poor usability and navigability of information contained in ESCOM (ES Communication System).

Opinions about training were polarised. On the

one hand, respondents felt training was comprehensive, when it included the theory and the practice, was backed up by useful supporting information, and was well planned and timed. The sharing of good practice and joined-up thinking provided effective learning contexts. On the other hand, training was sometimes poorly planned, delivered and timed. ES and BA training rarely overlapped and did not encourage joined-up thinking.

3.2 Implementation

The majority of joint claims came from the stock of claimants. There were fewer than anticipated, as an average of 40 per cent of stock claimants reported that they no longer met the criteria for joint claims. Fresh claims were also fewer than anticipated. Consequently, staff had yet to deal with a critical mass of joint claims and had not yet attained sufficient experience with the client group and the procedures to feel confident in delivering an effective service. The identification process worked well, but a few joint claims were missed. This was often where there was a significant age gap between the partners.

Clients were often given the choice of a single or joint New Jobseeker Interview (NJI). However, this choice was rarely made explicit because a joint NJI was usually presented to them as a 'fait accompli'. Interviews were often longer than the guidance suggested. Attendance at NJIs was good for fresh claims and poor for stock claims, especially among previous dependent partners. A high proportion of previous dependent partners from stock claims failed to attend the NJI. Non-attendance was also high amongst ethnic

minority couples. Registration of the claim was always based on the principle of benefits first then work. Former claimants from stock cases usually became the nominated payee. For fresh claims, this was usually the male. There was a degree of 'cultural resistance' by both minority ethnic couples and traditional working class couples.

For the work-focused part of the NJI, the 'together but separate' interview was usually conducted, where the claimants were present together but were dealt with sequentially. Less frequently, couples experienced separate interviews, or 'truly joint interviews'.

Staff found it hard to distinguish between being exempt from the labour market conditions of JSA and being ineligible for the enhancement. The need for experienced, trained and confident reception staff was essential. Joint Claims has also directly increased the number of clients requiring language support. Staff were concerned about the impact of Joint Claims for JSA on the role of reception staff and about the resource implications for language support in those districts with higher than average numbers of couples from minority ethnic backgrounds.

When Joint Claims was first implemented, deficiencies with JSAPS (the JSA Payment System) hampered the processing of claims, although this situation has improved since the research was carried out. Staff reported that up to 90 per cent of all stock claims faulted and were processed clerically. This increased workloads and curtailed inter-agency solutions. The situation had improved slightly for more recent fresh claims.

Clients faced delays to payment, which affected their perception of the ES and their willingness to look for work. ES reception staff and BA staff have faced increased workloads, but staffing levels did not always reflect this.

4 Barriers to work

Staff identified the benefits disincentive as a significant barrier for joint claimants. Clients' lack of confidence in themselves or in 'the system', and in a number of cases their negative attitude to work, were also identified and were exacerbated by the client's 'distance to travel' to the labour market. An addictive illness or a criminal record were also significant barriers. Labour market barriers included the general condition of the labour market, the attitudes of employers, and poor public transport. Potential solutions identified included greater knowledge of available provision, and greater flexibility in the eligibility for New Deal and other forms of training.

5 Inter-agency issues

When BA and ES are located in the same Jobcentre, inter-agency working is far more pronounced. Often, 'occupational territoriality' between ES and BA hampered this activity, as did poor communication, especially regarding clerical processing. The relationship between the ES and employers, employers' attitudes to workless people, and the information flow and delivery between ES, employers and training providers were highlighted as areas for improvement.