

Working Well Early Help: what did it achieve?



Research Summary

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September 2023

Working Well Early Help (WWEH) was a three-year long programme for residents in Greater Manchester. It helped individuals with physical or mental health issues who had gone on medical leave ('off sick') or who had recently become unemployed to return to work. The programme was set up to fill a gap in support for those with health issues who had recently left work. The logic was that providing support soon after leaving work could help people to return more quickly and stop them being out of work for long periods of time.

WWEH provided support such as a Return to Work Plan which listed the support participants could access and the steps they could take to get back into work. Some participants also had quick access to services including physiotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is a talking therapy that can help people manage their problems by changing the way they think and behave.

The programme was created by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) who represent all ten Greater Manchester councils and the Mayor. It was run by a private company called Maximus UK.

GMCA asked a team of researchers based at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Salford to evaluate how well WWEH worked. The evaluation began when the programme launched in 2019 and finished in July 2022. It set out to understand how useful participants found the support and whether it helped them to improve their health or to return to work.

The Sheffield Hallam team analysed data on all 3,433 people who took part in the programme. They also spoke personally to 131 participants to find out about how useful they had found the support and what difference it had made to their

health and ability to return to work. The team also interviewed staff who had been involved in running the programme to get their views on how effective it had been.

Findings

Participants were more likely to experience a mental rather than a physical health issue: 59 per cent of all participants had at least one mental health condition compared with 37 per cent who had at least one physical health condition. In many cases, health issues were the main reason why participants were not currently working. These health issues were often caused or made worse by bad experiences of work e.g. working very long hours, bullying or harassment, difficult or dangerous working conditions, and a lack of support from managers.

The programme did not recruit as many people as originally planned. One reason for this is the difficulties in running a programme during the pandemic which started about one year after the programme had launched. It was also harder than expected to get smaller businesses with less than 250 staff to refer employers with health problems into the programme.

The evaluation found that most participants were satisfied with the support they received. They felt that staff were friendly and understanding and provided support and advice that took their personal needs into account. Some did not want this support to end when the six month limit was reached.

Many participants experienced a range of positive changes, particularly in terms of improved health and wellbeing. This included, for example, reductions in low mood or anxiety, increases in life satisfaction, and improvements in coping and confidence. Participants who were in work

but on medical leave were more likely to report improvements in health and wellbeing than those who were unemployed. This may be because unemployed participants tended to have more severe health problems and needed more support to feel better than those on medical leave.

The programme was quite successful in helping those who were on medical leave to return to work. It was less successful in helping those who were unemployed to find a new job. One reason may be that the programme took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when there were fewer jobs available.

The programme helped many people back into a job that may otherwise not have found work without WWEH support. One participant described, for example, how the support helped her to find a job working for a charity that was much better than the unsatisfying short-term jobs she done before:

This is the longest job I've had since I was 19...I would never have gone into this role without their support...It just like put me on the path of how I could actually move forward, it was kind of like a life coach...I will be forever grateful, they were so great.

Nearly all staff and agencies involved in WWEH felt that the programme showed the value of rapid support for people with health issues soon after they go on medical leave or become unemployed. The findings may be used to develop further support for people with health conditions who are out of work in in Greater Manchester in the future.

Some participants suggested ways in which WWEH support could have been better. This evidence is very useful as it can be used to improve any programmes put in place in the future. Suggested improvements included being able to receive support for more than six months and to meet support workers in person (all support was telephone and email-based during the pandemic). Some support workers also noted that more support was need to deal with the after effects of the pandemic including the impacts of long COVID.

It was also clear that participants often had more severe health needs than expected and WWEH could not always provide the level of support needed. This means that any future programme should include more intensive support for those with the highest levels of need e.g. severe mental health issues.

The evaluation also concluded that more needed to done to promote 'good work' given that the work itself often caused health conditions or made them worse. It recommended that GMCA work with employers to improve conditions in workplaces and to encourage them to promote healthy lifestyles among staff.

More information on WWEH and the full evaluation reports can be found at: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/work-and-skills/working-well/>

The research team would like to thank everybody who gave up their time to take part in the research.

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DOI: 10.7190/cresr.2023.2847098777

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