



EUROPE

Wellbeing Premium randomised controlled trial for small and medium-sized enterprises: recruitment evaluation report

Understanding factors influencing firms' recruitment

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Summary

Background

Good employee health and wellbeing is of key importance to employers and to the economy. Yet, many businesses find it hard to invest in the health and wellbeing of their employees or do not invest at all. These problems are especially true for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).¹ There has been considerable interest in the effect of financial incentives to stimulate change in the workplace environment, but evidence is limited.

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) is running a randomised controlled trial of a financial incentive programme to improve employee health and wellbeing in SMEs in the Wider West Midlands Region.

RAND Europe and the University of Warwick have been commissioned by the WMCA to conduct an evaluation of this programme, the Wellbeing Premium Programme. The primary aim of the study is to establish whether SMEs will improve their health and wellbeing offer² and achieve higher employee awareness and participation in wellbeing activities in response to a financial incentive offer. The evaluation also aims to assess whether such premiums help and motivate SMEs to overcome barriers

when aiming to improve the health and wellbeing of their employees.

This study, carried out by RAND Europe, focuses on better understanding the reasons behind companies' decisions to participate in the programme, including barriers, motivators and enablers that influence the success or otherwise of recruitment to the randomised trial. The evaluation questions are:

1. What (if any) aspects of the *programme* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
2. What (if any) aspects of the *trial design* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
3. What (if any) aspects of the *recruitment process* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
4. What *other reasons* (if any) influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?

The remaining elements of the trial – an impact evaluation and a process evaluation – will measure the efficacy of the programme and

1 An SME is usually defined as any business with fewer than 250 employees. In the trial, eligible SMEs were those employing between 10 and 250 staff.

2 The health and wellbeing offer of a company is here defined as taking positive action on health and wellbeing of staff.

explain how it was implemented and will try to achieve an understanding of why behavioural change did or did not take place as expected within participating SMEs. The results of these evaluations are expected in 2020.

Recruitment strategy and approach

The successful recruitment of 152 SMEs to the trial represents a considerable achievement by the team in difficult circumstances.

Recruitment was made considerably more difficult because it took place during the summer holiday period, with a compressed timeframe, tight resources, a protracted period of time required to reach consensus on the wider trial design, and multiple short-term extensions to the recruitment deadline.

The WMCA would have benefited from a more fully articulated recruitment strategy, one which considered the optimal timeframe and resources needed and included contingency plans. However, there was no time available between approval for the trial and the start of the recruitment drive, forcing the WMCA to develop and adapt its approach as the recruitment period proceeded. Had there been time, piloting the recruitment approach with a subset of SMEs in the region would have enabled the team to learn lessons about what was effective and to estimate the resources required more accurately.

The preparedness to be flexible and adapt as the WMCA went along was critical to the team's ultimate success. This included enlarging the recruitment team, extending the timeframe, and widening the geographical area for recruitment, as well as modifying the messages used and the ways SMEs were approached through trial and error.

Drivers of and barriers to recruitment

Among those interviewed, interviewees often did not have a comprehensive knowledge of all elements of the programme. The accreditation scheme was the most remembered aspect, but the availability of a grant or network meetings were largely unknown to the interviewed SMEs.

Among a number of requirements, the interviewees were mostly familiar with making a commitment to improve the health and wellbeing offer for staff, working towards accreditation and participating in research.

Overall, the aspects related to the recruitment process (uncertainty about the process and requirements), together with other reasons (lack of time and resources) were most frequently reported as barriers to SMEs partaking, although the programme and trial design played a role as well.

Factors that could make a difference in future include a more clear (or more effective) communication about expected benefits, costs, and requirements for taking part; tailored email or a phone call accompanied by follow-up and an assisted process of joining the programme. Providing a 'lighter' version of the programme or a menu with core and optional elements could also help SMEs take part.

Lessons learned

Future trial commissioners and implementers should aim to:

- Conduct market research with SMEs to explore how to approach them and if and how they would like to participate in a future initiative. This could help understand the intervention design and communication messages most likely to resonate with the target population.

- Complete the design of the intervention and evaluation before starting the recruitment in order to formulate a clear business proposition (e.g. time commitment of maximum two hours per week, access to resources, opportunity to network with other leaders and managers).
- Develop a fully-fledged strategy (including alternative scenarios in case recruitment does not go according to plan, as well as plans to manage/mitigate risks) and run a recruitment pilot to test communication channels and the messages/business proposition, the clarity of eligibility criteria, etc. This would also allow using testimonials or pilot participant feedback in recruiting organisations to the main trial.
- Plan for a longer timeframe for recruitment: for a similar trial, a more realistic recruitment period would be at a minimum three months avoiding holiday periods, or four months with holiday periods included.
- Secure the resources and expertise needed to support a recruitment team (combine experience in trial recruitment, communication, business/SMEs, and behavioural insights). In cases where there is a pressure to start implementation sooner, consider using minimisation designs so SMEs are randomised gradually during recruitment.
- Rely on pre-existing connections of your team and/or established business networks and personalise messages when speaking with SMEs, building on existing relations and trust. This could include an involvement of SMEs or organisations representing them, similar to public and patient involvement in health and social care research (National Institute for Health Research 2019).
- Provide a short and clear summary of the programme and research aspects, supply evidence on why the programme may be effective, give SMEs time to consider the offer, and follow up.

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3 The West Midlands Combined Authority is a combined authority for the West Midlands metropolitan county in England with responsibilities over transport, economic development and regeneration. It started operations in June 2016. West Midlands Combined Authority (homepage), n.d.-a.

4 The Work and Health Unit is a cross-government unit jointly sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health and Social Care. Work and Health Unit (homepage).

1 Introduction

1.1. Context and background

Good employee health and wellbeing is of key importance to employers and the economy. In 2008, 6.5m employees in England reported musculoskeletal problems, and this is predicted to rise to 7m employees by 2030 (Business in the Community 2017). In the West Midlands, the percentage of working hours lost due to sickness absences is 2.4% annually, compared to 1.9% across the UK as a whole (Office for National Statistics 2017).

As a setting for health promotion, workplaces enable access to large groups of people to promote health and wellbeing. Yet, many businesses find it hard to invest in the health and wellbeing of their employees or do not invest at – problems that are especially true for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

To improve the health and wellbeing offer, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) is running a randomised controlled trial of a financial incentive programme to improve employee health and wellbeing in SMEs in the West Midlands.

RAND Europe and the University of Warwick have been commissioned by the WMCA to conduct an evaluation of this Wellbeing Premium Programme. The primary aim of the study is to establish whether SMEs will improve their health and wellbeing offer and achieve higher employee awareness and participation

in response to a financial incentive. The evaluation also aims to assess whether financial incentives help and motivate SMEs to overcome barriers when aiming to improve the wellbeing of their employees.

This study consists of:

- A **recruitment evaluation** carried out by RAND Europe in order to better understand reasons behind companies' decisions to participate in the programme, as well as barriers, motivators and enablers that influence the success or otherwise of recruitment to the randomised trial.
- A **process evaluation** carried out by RAND Europe and the University of Warwick in order to explain how the programme was implemented and to understand why behavioural change did or did not take place as expected within participating SMEs.
- An **accreditation assessment** carried out by WMCA to assess programme implementation and to measure the difference in completion rates across trial arms.
- An **impact evaluation** to be carried out by the University of Warwick in order to measure the effects of the programme.

This report summarises the findings from the recruitment evaluation conducted by RAND Europe. However, before we start, it is important

to note that recruitment is difficult to evaluate because it is affected by a combination of factors. We discuss these below.

First, we note that recruitment and retention challenges are very common in randomised trials; a wealth of literature discusses these and offers some strategies to address them (e.g. Bower et al. 2014; Liu et al. 2018; Newington & Metcalfe 2014; Treweek et al. 2010, 2013, 2018). Trial recruitment always requires experienced teams, careful preparations and sufficient time.

While the bulk of evidence relates to clinical trials in the healthcare context, difficulties with recruitment are also relevant for trials involving SMEs (Phillips et al. 2013; Roper 2018; Stewart & Alexander 2006). The recruitment of SMEs is usually slower than expected, although in the published trials target numbers were achieved or even exceeded to accommodate for drop-outs (Roper 2018).

Second, we note that recruitment to the trial started before the operational details of the intervention and the impact and process evaluations had been fully fleshed out. The impact of not having this in place cannot be understated – it meant that the recruitment team was not clear what the comprehensive list of potential benefits and requirements for an individual organisation was.

Third, we recognise a wider landscape in which the trial has been set. With the population of 9,855 (Office for National Statistics 2018) small and medium-sized firms in the West Midlands metropolitan county, the recruitment target was set at 152 SMEs (that is, 2% of the population). The region currently hosts a

number of other local initiatives (Lamb et al. 2017), such as the Thrive into Work health-led trial (Thrive into Work, n.d.), in addition to national schemes, such as Disability Confident (UK Government 2014) and the Workplace Wellbeing Charter (The Workplace Wellbeing Charter, n.d.) – and navigating through these might be difficult for small organisations.

Fourth, we note that the WMCA was established in 2016 and that it was preparing this trial while already implementing other challenging initiatives (e.g. the health-led trial) and building the reputation, recognition and branding in the region. For a relatively new institution, with limited experience in trial recruitment and still-fresh relations with local businesses, leading recruitment of SMEs to the trial seemed like a big ask despite some organisational experience in recruiting businesses to different programmes.⁵

1.2. Description of the trial

1.2.1. Trial design

The study is a four-arm cluster randomised controlled trial with before and after cross-sectional design. The trial protocol (Thrive at Work Wellbeing Programme Collaboration 2019) provides a comprehensive overview of the design and is a result of a two-year period of preparation and consultation that went into planning the trial. However, the intervention itself was not developed by the research teams (see Annex C. Roles and responsibilities in the trial). In short, SMEs are randomised into one of the four study arms (Table 1.1), which are briefly described below.

⁵ In 2016, the WMCA absorbed Centro (now Transport for West Midlands and an executive body of the WMCA). Examples of programmes to which Transport for West Midlands recruited participants include: Top Cycling Locations (which offered monetary grants to businesses that committed to and achieved Bronze, Silver or Gold standards in cycling and walking), Business Engagement (which offered access to various funded activities, such as cycle training or discounted public transport tickets), Business Grants (which offered funding for businesses to improve sustainable travel rates among staff).

Table 1.1: The four trial arms

	Thrive at Work Commitment and toolkit	Grant amount	Network meetings	Impact evaluation (all)	Process evaluation (sample)
Arm 1 (Intervention 1)	Yes	100%	Yes	Baseline, Midline, Final	Baseline, Midline, Final*
Arm 2 (Intervention 2)	Yes	50%	Yes	Baseline, Midline, Final	Baseline, Midline, Final*
Arm 3 (Single Control)	Yes	-	Yes	Baseline, Midline, Final	Baseline, Midline, Final*
Arm 4 (Double Control)	Yes	-	Only the final meeting	Final	Final †

*Five SMEs per arm were selected for the process evaluation in arms 1–3.

† Three SMEs were selected for the process evaluation in arm 4.

The **Thrive at Work Commitment** (West Midlands Combined Authority, n.d.-b) provides criteria and guidelines on creating a workplace that promotes employee health and wellbeing, focusing on key organisational enablers (e.g. health and safety, manager training) and on health areas (including mental, musculoskeletal and physical health and promoting healthy lifestyles) (West Midlands Combined Authority, n.d.-c). The supporting toolkit outlines available resources, policies and services that can help SMEs implement the Thrive at Work Commitment (West Midlands Combined Authority, n.d.-d). These elements are part of the Thrive at Work programme, and they are

free to use by all companies from the Wider West Midlands Region, regardless of their size.

Participating organisations will be eligible for an assessment, an **accreditation** and the Thrive at Work Wellbeing Award. The accreditation scheme has three levels: Bronze, Silver and Gold.⁶

A **financial grant** aims to help implement the Commitment. The amount of the grant varies depending on the number of employees in an SME (based on an amount per employee⁷) and their trial arm random allocation: SMEs in Arm 1 receive 100% of the grant amount, and SMEs in Arm 2 receive 50% of the grant

6 The Thrive at Work Wellbeing Commitment handbook (WMCA, n.d.-c) defines these as follows: "The Bronze level focuses on providing accurate and appropriate information to enable employees to make healthier choices on a variety of subjects. Criteria for this level outline specific actions for businesses. Activities have minimal direct costs but will require commitment to implementing effective policies and procedures, good line manager training, and board level engagement, for example. The Silver level focuses on understanding employee's health needs and taking direct action to prevent ill-health. Activities at this level of the commitment will require businesses to show they understand the health needs of their employees and can demonstrate they are taking action to meet those needs and prevent ill health. The Gold level focuses on businesses becoming experts in employee needs and developing strategies to actively improve employee health and wellbeing in a monitored and sustainable way. Businesses at this level will choose their own areas for action and develop innovative activities and have a clear idea of how to monitor their success and impact on employees and their business."

7 The amount per employee was provisionally set based on calculations assuming that an SME mix recruited to the trial will be similar to the makeup of the West Midlands population of SMEs. Given that the recruited sample overrepresented larger SMEs, the allocated grant amount would not have covered paying £250 per employee. For this reason, in September 2018, the amount per employee was reduced from £250 to £200 in agreement with the WHU.

amount. A proportion of this grant (30%) is received at the beginning of the trial, and the remainder (up to 70%) at the end, depending on their performance (i.e. achievement of Thrive at Work criteria). A minimum total payment amount (a base, where organisations with fewer than 20 employees receive the same grant as those with 20 employees) will be set for the smallest SMEs in the sample, and a maximum amount (a cap, where organisations with more than 50 employees receive the same grant as those with 50 employees) for the largest SMEs in the sample. The maximum possible grant was capped at £12,500 (in Arm 1); thus the majority of the grants are much lower (West Midlands Combined Authority, n.d.-b).⁸ The grant will only be payable towards Bronze-level criteria. The grant element is limited to the organisations participating in the Wellbeing Premium trial (and randomised to Arms 1 and 2).

Quarterly **network meetings** for participating SMEs aim to facilitate exchange of information, mutual learning and change. The network meetings are limited to the organisations participating in the trial (and randomised to Arms 1, 2 and 3), but they are expected to open up for the Thrive at Work programme in future.

For organisations invited to participate in the trial, all these elements (i.e. commitment and toolkit, accreditation, financial grant, and network meetings) formed an offering pack, which was available in four different combinations (i.e. trial arms). As such, each arm of the trial represents a somewhat different intervention (for simplicity, all are referred to as Thrive at Work).

1.2.2. Inclusion criteria, recruitment timeline, and randomisation

The inclusion criteria for the trial were: location in the West Midlands (initially the seven metropolitan districts, then opened up to the Wider West Midlands Region); the organisation's size (10–250 employees); being receptive to implementing health and wellbeing behaviour changes within workplaces (with or without a financial incentive); willing and able to provide organisational-level data; willing and able to allow employees time to complete questionnaires and for leads to be interviewed (able to provide consent).

The recruitment timeliness (July 2018–September 2018) are presented below against a wider context of preparation for and the launch of the trial (Figure 1.1).

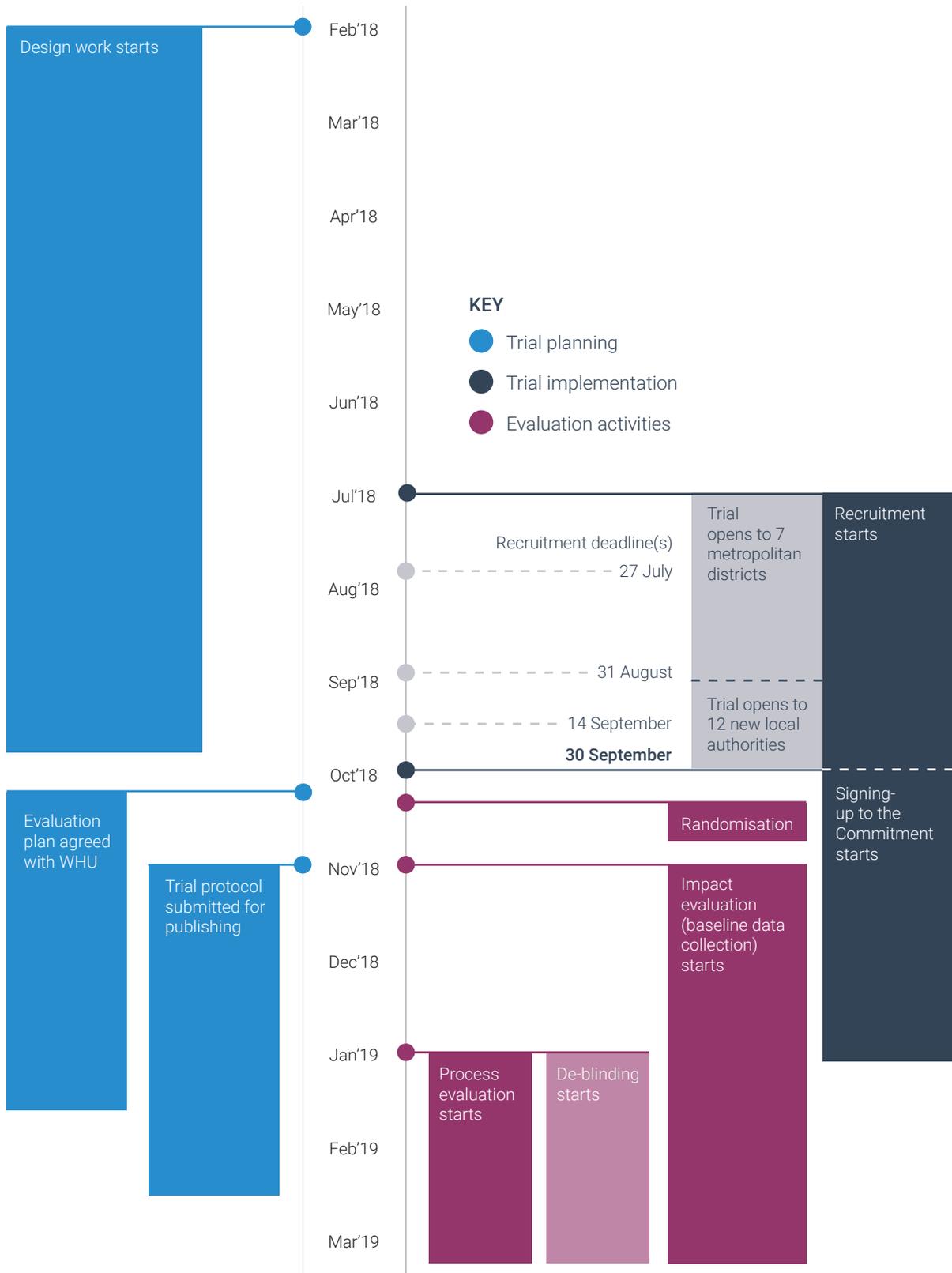
1.3. Recruitment evaluation

1.3.1. Purpose

The aim of the recruitment evaluation was to understand the reasons for participation in the trial. This aimed to provide insights into the barriers, motivators and enablers that influence the success or otherwise of recruitment to the programme, knowledge that would be relevant to future attempts to introduce similar initiatives. Non-participating SMEs and organisations that initially signed up and then dropped out were approached to provide information on participation in order to inform future studies and policies, and so that any factors that may potentially affect drop-out are considered in relation to the main study. The recruitment evaluation took place after recruitment closed.

⁸ For example, an SME with 20 employees in Arm 2 could receive at most £2,500 (if they achieved all the relevant Thrive at Work criteria). The change of amount per employee from £250 to £200 affected the figures in the communication material, with the maximum funding for an SME with 20 employees being £2,000.

Figure 1.1: Timelines of the recruitment to the trial



The recruitment evaluation questions were as follows:

1. What (if any) aspects of the *programme* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
2. What (if any) aspects of the *trial design* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
3. What (if any) aspects of the *recruitment process* influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?
4. What *other reasons* (if any) influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate?

1.3.2. Methodology

Approach and data collection

The first stage of data collection was a **documentation review**, which included the recruitment strategy and materials produced by the WMCA. The documentation we reviewed consisted of:

- Press releases created by the WMCA to advertise and invite participation in the trial
- Email communications from the WMCA:
 - Externally, to 'cascaders', asking them to contact SMEs in their networks and distribute recruitment material
 - Internally, to the WMCA staff who were also asked to act as cascaders
 - Directly to the target group of SMEs
- Recruitment literature in the form of brochures to advertise and to inform SMEs about the trial and online guidance
- Documents that formed part of the registration process, such as the initial Registration Form and the final Declaration of Commitment, which all participating SMEs were required to make.

The review was complemented by five **telephone interviews carried out by RAND Europe researchers with the recruitment team** (i.e. WMCA personnel and other parties closely involved in the recruitment exercise). Interviewees were those with direct involvement in recruitment in various capacities, including the design and oversight of the recruitment process, as well as those involved in day-to-day liaisons with SMEs. Discussions using a semi-structured interview covered the recruitment strategy and materials, the pattern of recruitment (over time and in terms of the nature of SMEs choosing to join or decline to join the trial), the overall success of the recruitment exercise, and implications for the interpretation of the main study results.

The second stage of the recruitment evaluation involved **telephone interviews with non-participating SMEs**, and the aim was to interview representatives from 10–20 organisations from among those that decided not to take part in the programme (Table 1.2). The approach to recruitment was sensitive to the fact that this group of SMEs was likely to be relatively disengaged, having declined to take part in the trial. In order to draw out reasons for non-participation, we chose interviews rather than a survey, thus allowing employers to tell us in their own words why they had chosen not to participate. To incentivise SMEs, organisations that agreed and took part in the recruitment evaluation were entitled to £100 payment to compensate them for their time and contribution to the research.

Contact details for non-participating SMEs were shared with RAND Europe by the WMCA. This allowed emails and phone calls to be directed to a named person within the organisation, maximising the chance of securing an interview. The list of non-participating SMEs shared with RAND Europe was not comprehensive, as

Table 1.2: Scope of the recruitment evaluation

SMEs that were not contacted for the Wellbeing Premium Programme/Thrive at Work trial and that did not sign up	
SMEs that were contacted but did not sign up and had no recollection of the programme	Consulted 13 SMEs as part of the recruitment evaluation
SMEs that were contacted and did not sign up but had some recollection of the programme	
SMEs that were contacted and did sign up but that withdrew before completion of the registration process	
SMEs that were contacted, did sign up, and were randomised but that withdrew before they were informed about their trial arm allocation	
SMEs that were contacted, did sign up, were randomised, and were informed about their trial arm allocation	

comprehensiveness was not possible given the snowball sampling approach to recruitment.

Organisations were contacted for the recruitment evaluation over a period of two and a half months, from the beginning of October until mid-December 2018. In total, 62 organisations were approached. Among the approached organisations, 12 had no recollection of the Thrive at Work programme and were not interviewed, 13 were interviewed, and others were not available for an interview.

The key questions we tried to ask of all SMEs were: *Can you tell me what, if anything, you know about the Thrive at Work programme running in the West Midlands? Can you talk me through your organisation's reasons for not taking part?* A total of 13 telephone interviews were conducted with non-participating SMEs, each lasting between 5 and 50⁹ minutes. Flexibility was built into the interview guide, allowing employers to participate in a relatively short discussion if they were unwilling or

unable to speak for longer. Discussions with SMEs covered views about the programme and perceived suitability for their organisation, considerations about the research element of the trial, when they decided not to participate in the trial and their reasons for doing so.

Analysis and synthesis

The interviews were audio recorded with interviewees' permission, and interview notes were prepared based on the recordings. The notes were analysed using a thematic approach, structured according to the evaluation questions, but allowing the flexibility to create new themes emerging from the data. Feedback from employers was fully anonymised and presented at an aggregate level. Where appropriate, the analysis was supported by verbatim (and anonymous) quotes from interviewees.

Findings presented in this report were formulated in a two-step process. First,

⁹ Interview length was guided by how long respondents were able and willing to speak to us. Most interviews lasted 25–30 minutes; the shortest was 5 minutes, and the longest was 50 minutes.

the data were coded by two researchers independently using a coding framework derived from the topic guide and analysed using a thematic approach which aimed to identify recurring themes, relationships between or within these, granularity of views on certain topics and any conflicting opinions. Then, the evaluation team held an internal workshop at RAND Europe at which the initial analysis and findings were discussed, refined and moderated, and conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

Limitations and strengths of the research

First, for the documentation review, we focused on a few key documents relevant for recruitment to the programme, and we did not cover all possible literature on the provision or take up of health and wellbeing offer at the workplace or SMEs participation in research. We reviewed material that was made available to us. The purpose of the review was to provide a brief and factual description of the programme and the recruitment strategy adopted (and adapted) by the WMCA.

We reached out to a wide range of SMEs to invite them to this evaluation. However, many SMEs either did not respond to our requests or had no recollection of the programme and declining their participation. The number of conducted interviews is therefore limited, but we feel we reached data saturation as no additional themes emerged from the last few consulted SMEs.

The organisations consulted do not necessarily reflect the diversity of SMEs approached to join the trial. For example, not-for-profit entities (such as citizen's advice bureaus) were somewhat more willing to be interviewed than typical commercial SMEs, and this latter group seems particularly underrepresented. However, most of the interviewed organisations had knowledge of different elements of the programme and recruitment to the trial

and were able to help us obtain a good understanding of this process.

We also note that one SME was interviewed about the reasons for non-participation in the trial, despite in fact having signed up to it. The person interviewed seemed unaware of the company's commitment to Thrive at Work and was indeed convinced this was not being taken forward. Given that the organisation was allocated to the double control group (Arm 4), it had to be excluded from the trial, but it could still take part in the Thrive at Work Commitment and make use of the toolkit. For the sake of clarity, the results of the interview are not included in the analysis of reasons for non-participation in the trial.

All the interviews were semi-structured, meaning that not all interviewees were asked identical questions. This specifically applies to the topic guide with SMEs, where certain questions were prioritised to accommodate for those interviewees who had very little time to speak with us. The £100 payment may have led to a self-selection bias, with some type of entities more inclined to take part in the research than others. All the findings from interviews are based on the knowledge and perceptions of the participants (self-reported), and it is not possible to verify every piece of information provided.

The interviews were carried out by multiple and experienced interviewers, whose styles and approaches would differ slightly. We tried to mitigate against this by developing a protocol for the semi-structured interviews. All interviews were written up as comprehensive notes rather than a verbatim transcript, meaning that some information may have been lost. Finally, another limitation from the point of view of causal inference is that these were self-reported reasons for not participating and for what could increase participation, and therefore not definitive in terms of actually influencing real-world enrolment.

Yet, the self-reporting and in particular the extensive use of citations in this report allows us to hear the voice of SMEs' representatives speaking for themselves and telling us about their motivations and the struggles they face. The qualitative data collected in this evaluation provides useful and rich insights into supporting small and medium-sized companies to improve the health and wellbeing offer to staff. This work was successfully conducted in a compressed time frame. The recruitment of 13 SMEs (a group difficult to engage in research) which also declined participation in the programme should also be considered among the strengths of this report.

1.3.3. Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2 – The recruitment strategy and approach.** We start by setting the scene and outlining the ambitions of the WMCA for the recruitment of SMEs and the routes, vehicles and messages used. We briefly discuss the dynamic of the recruitment process and the outcomes, as well as achievements, challenges and lessons learned by the WMCA.
- **Chapter 3 – Drivers of and barriers to recruitment.** This chapter summarises findings from the interviews with SMEs that decided not to participate or that withdrew from the trial before they were told of their trial allocation. We look into different aspects that affected their decisions, whether these were related to the elements of the Wellbeing Premium Programme, the trial design, the recruitment process, or other reasons.
- **Chapter 4 – Conclusions and lessons learned.** This chapter provides a synthetic overview of the study's conclusions and the responses to the four evaluation questions, which are systematically presented in Section 4.2. We conclude with implications and learning generated by the evaluation team in light of the supporting evidence.

In addition, this report contains the following annexes: Annex A, which provides an overview of SMEs consulted in the recruitment evaluation; Annex B, which presents the topic guides used; and Annex C, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the organisations involved in the preparation, implementation, recruitment and evaluation of the trial.

2 Recruitment strategy and approach

This part of the report sets out the approach to recruitment used by the WMCA based on our review of the recruitment materials and interviews with five WMCA staff, and it identifies the main challenges and successes in relation to the recruitment process. We found that:

- The successful recruitment of 152 SMEs to the trial represented a considerable achievement by the team, which was working under difficult circumstances.
- Recruitment was made considerably more difficult because it took place during the summer holiday period, within a compressed timeframe and with multiple short-term extensions to the recruitment deadline.
- The WMCA would have benefited from a more fully articulated recruitment strategy, one that considered the optimal timeframe and resources needed and included contingency plans. Had there been time, piloting the recruitment approach with a subset of SMEs in the region would have enabled the team to learn lessons about what was effective and to estimate the resources required more accurately.
- The preparedness to be flexible and adapt as the WMCA went along was critical to the team's ultimate success. This included enlarging the recruitment team, extending the timeframe, and widening the geographical area for recruitment, as well as modifying the messages used and the ways SMEs were approached, through trial and error.

In the remainder of this chapter, we refrain from using citations, so that different narrative styles of our interviewees do not disclose their identity. We reference the interviews with the recruitment team using a code: W01, W02, etc.

2.1. Recruitment objectives

The aim of the recruitment exercise was to recruit a minimum of 132 SMEs who were eligible to take part in the trial, so that these could be randomly allocated into the four trial arms. The WMCA agreed with the WHU to set a target of higher recruitment target of 148

SMEs to take into account the likelihood that a proportion of SMEs would either not complete the sign-up process (including the submission of data about their workforce) or would drop out before the end of the trial. Initially, the objective was to complete recruitment by

the end of 31 August 2018, but this was later revised, ultimately until 30 September 2018, to acknowledge the difficulty of recruiting during the summer holiday period (see Figure 1.1).

No specific recruitment targets were set in relation to such factors as size and industry sector, although the aim was to recruit a mix of organisations similar to the makeup of the West Midlands population of SMEs. One interviewee reflected on how the aim was to reach a range of organisations in terms of their level of engagement with employee health and wellbeing (W02). The expectation was that organisations that were already engaged and active in this area would be more eager to sign up to the trial, particularly if they could build on existing organisational policies. It was therefore an aim of the trial to reach organisations that had little knowledge or experience in the area of employee health and wellbeing (W02), though it was not a pre-specified inclusion criteria.

2.2. Recruitment approach

WMCA's approach to recruitment was built around utilising local networks and disseminating information via intermediaries (so-called cascaders). This was in part intended to supplement the resources of WMCA's recruitment team, which started as a team of four (not all of whom worked full time on recruitment) and was later increased to a team of six. Cascaders were local organisations with their own networks, such as chambers of commerce, local enterprise partnerships and the federation of small businesses. Ultimately, the WMCA also sought the cooperation of larger employers in the West Midlands to promote the trial among their networks, and it enlisted the support of WMCA employees beyond the recruitment team to use their personal networks to sign up more SMEs. The rationale behind using

cascaders was to reach a large and diverse group of SMEs, building on pre-existing networks and personal contacts.

One feature of recruitment was that it was not based on a fully articulated statement of the strategic approach: the trial protocol, for example, contained only a brief summary of how recruitment of the required number of SMEs would be achieved (W02, W05). The lack of a detailed plan for recruitment was related to the protracted period of time required to reach consensus on the wider trial design, and to the energy and resources associated with refining that design. Once the trial was approved, recruitment had to be undertaken rapidly to align with the overall deadline agreed for completion of the trial, but this placed additional pressure on the recruitment. Rather than proceed according to a clear plan that considered alternative scenarios and contingency arrangements, the WMCA recruitment team therefore had to develop and adapt its approach in response to lessons learned as the recruitment period proceeded (W01, W02, W05).

2.3. Recruitment methods used in the trial

Given the emphasis on deploying cascaders to recruit SMEs to the trial, one of the first tasks of the recruitment exercise was to develop a list of potential cascaders and to approach these organisations to collaborate. By and large, members of the recruitment team we interviewed commented that cascaders were understanding and supportive of the trial (W01, W02, W05). Cascaders were keen to help, in part because they believed that the programme had the potential to benefit employees and to increase the productivity of businesses in the region (W05).

Cascaders were involved in recruitment in a variety of ways, for instance in disseminating information about Thrive at Work in

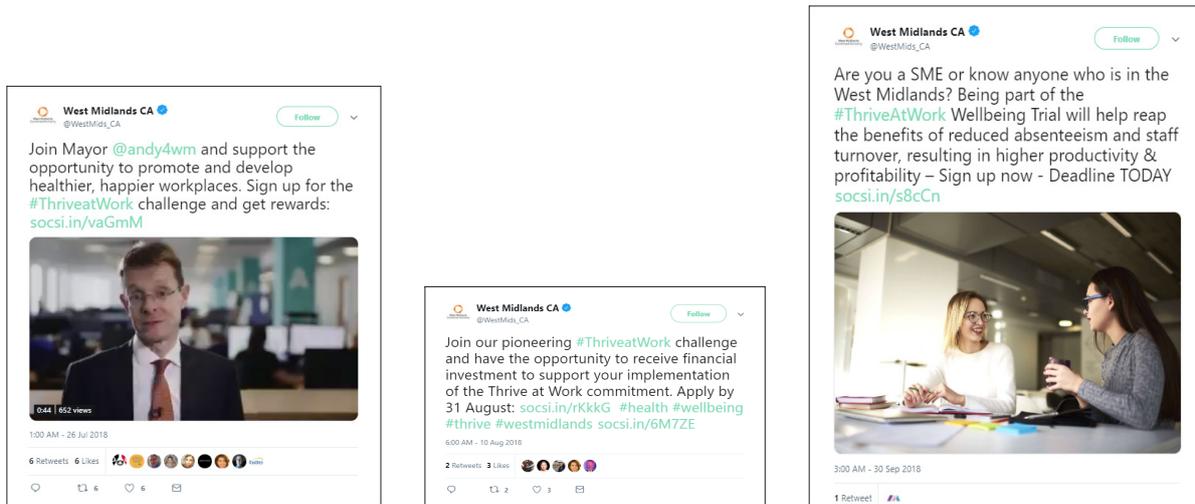
newsletters, at local events, at meetings, and on their websites and social media. One interviewee noted that the general data protection regulation came into force in May 2018 (two months before recruitment started). In the initial stages of recruitment it raised some concerns about sharing lists with contact details to SMEs between the WMCA and cascaders that supported the recruitment (W01). Feedback from recruitment personnel was that working with cascaders was a helpful means of securing an introduction to a wider and more diverse set of organisations. However, a key factor in the success or otherwise of this approach was having a relationship with the target SME or cascader before contacting them about the trial (W03). Approaches to employers based on prior personal contact were felt by recruitment team members to be much more effective than, for example, 'round-robin' emails or cold calls made by WMCA employees (W01, W02, W05).

Email communication was perceived to be efficient for reaching a large number of organisations, but not effective at achieving sign-up without more concerted follow-up (W01, W03, W04). Personnel involved in recruitment emailed SMEs directly and emailed cascaders. The benefit of email was also its key drawback, namely, that the ease of sending email results in a high volume of emails being received and therefore a lower likelihood of them being read and responded to. One respondent commented that businesses today experience 'email overload', such that if they don't recognise the sender, their most likely response is to delete the email without reading it (W03). Utilising personal networks, including working with cascaders, was helpful in this regard, since individuals may be more likely to read and respond to an email from a known contact. Also, the recruitment team felt that some very long email messages it had sent, and those which contained several

attachments and links to lengthy documents, acted as a barrier to engagement (W01, W02). This was later adapted so that shorter email messages were sent out, aiming to balance the need, on the one hand, of providing SMEs with sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision to participate in the trial and, on the other, of ensuring the brevity of the message. One issue that hindered the initial stage of recruitment was that the team found problems with the email list of potential cascaders. One interviewee observed that many of the email addresses on the list were 'ceremonial', meaning that they would be received by the target organisation but that no-one there would ever go to or open the emails received (W02).

Cold calling was not found to be a particularly effective strategy because of resistance to answering or engaging with phone calls from strangers (W04, W05). Interviewees suggested that phone calls from strangers are assumed to be sales related or otherwise not of interest (W04, W05), and that the WMCA brand was not yet sufficiently established to raise the level of interest (W04). A particular problem was that many people did not recognise the name of the Combined Authority or know what it did, in which case they were unlikely to engage with the caller, assuming that the purpose of the call was to sell something (W04). It is also hard to ensure that one was speaking to the most appropriate person within the organisation when making cold calls. One respondent commented that sending an email and then following up with a phone call was more effective than starting out with a phone call (W03). Having a more senior person make the call (or mentioning in the conversation support offered to the initiative by the mayor of the community) could also be an effective means of getting past 'gatekeepers' or engaging with companies. While cold calling brought with it various challenges, phoning rather than (or in

Figure 2.1: Examples of recruitment tweets posted by the WMCA



addition to) emailing existing contacts was felt to be beneficial. One respondent commented that calling provided a greater sense of credibility to the project than could be achieved by email alone (W05).

In addition to phone and email contact, personnel involved in recruitment engaged in a number of face-to-face activities. **The recruitment team attended a number of local events in a bid to encourage organisations to sign up to the trial.** Attending events was felt to be effective because it enabled networking and the development of personal contacts. The active involvement of the mayor and the director of implementation of the Mental Health Commission was also identified by some of the recruitment team as effective in raising interest (W01, W03). One respondent commented that breakfast meetings and after-dinner speeches were particularly useful because people are more open to considering new opportunities outside of normal working hours (W03). As well as networking at events, the recruitment team handed out business cards and followed up afterwards with emails and/or phone calls. In one instance, a member of the recruitment team knocked on doors in an industrial estate

in which a number of SMEs were represented. As with cold calling, however, this impromptu approach was not found to be effective and therefore, was not pursued further (W02, W05).

Throughout the recruitment period, **there was an on-going media campaign** to raise awareness about Thrive at Work. The recruitment team sent out press releases to local newspapers, which were sometimes followed up by further articles and posted about Thrive at Work on social media. Social media (including Twitter – see Figure 2.1) was felt to be a useful tool for raising awareness, but not sufficient alone to achieve sign-ups. It could be effective in increasing awareness and recognition of the programme, but more personal follow-up was usually necessary to encourage SMEs to take part (W03).

Increasingly as the recruitment exercise progressed, **the strategy centred on utilising personal networks and relationships.** Personnel involved in recruitment commented that having conversations with people on a personal level was the most effective way of encouraging organisations to sign up to the trial. Cascaders could be a means of finding a personal connection, but this was not always

the case, since some cascaders worked with quite large networks. Members of the recruitment team, as well as other personnel within the WMCA, were encouraged to spread the word around their personal networks (W01, W05). The feedback was that this personal approach was effective in encouraging sign-ups to the trial (W02).

In summary, personnel involved in recruitment were able to comment on the relative effectiveness of the different routes and vehicles used for recruitment. However, there were challenges in assessing this systematically and drawing conclusions about 'what worked'. The number of communications sent out, and the fact that these were often via intermediaries, meant that it was difficult to collect data on how organisations heard of Thrive at Work and what prompted them to sign up.¹⁰ This process generally involved a number of different people and was comprised of several steps, making it difficult to track individual pathways. What was clear was that drawing on personal connections and relationships was effective at securing a 'foot in the door', enabling more detailed discussions to be had about the benefits of taking part in the trial. Interviewees commented that it was inherently difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the different approaches used when, ultimately, recruitment was achieved by a combination of methods interacting with one another – for example, initial awareness of the trial through social media triggering recognition on receipt of an email, backed up by a call from a member of the recruitment team or a cascade (W01, W05).

2.4. Recruitment messages

Recruitment messages sought to appeal to SMEs in a number of different ways, which evolved during the course of the recruitment process. Messages from WMCA's recruitment team consistently referred to the **financial and organisational benefits of investing in employee health and wellbeing**, claiming that it would be good for SMEs' productivity and bottom line, while also being good for their staff (W03, W05). Communications via email, social media and broadcasts also stressed the cost of ill-health to organisations and the regional economy more broadly, including the cost of both absenteeism and presenteeism and the link between employee health and productivity. Investing in health and wellbeing was positioned as a means of building engagement and loyalty from employees and reducing staff turnover. These arguments were felt by the recruitment team to be particularly compelling to small and medium-sized enterprises, for whom staff turnover and retention were often seen as critical issues (W03).

As the recruitment process went on, the recruitment team became increasingly aware of value of stressing **the intrinsic as well as the instrumental value of investing in employee health and wellbeing**. Their interactions with SMEs revealed that many organisations were interested in this area because they cared about their staff and saw it as 'the right thing to do' (W05). Mental health was identified as an area where there is a lot of attention and interest, with organisations increasingly aware of how much mental health issues affect their employees (W04).

10 The consent form included a question about where the organisation had heard about the trial, but many answers were missing.

One of the messages used to encourage organisations to sign up to the trial was **the possibility of receiving a financial grant**. The recruitment literature varied in the extent to which it sought to use the grant element as a selling point: the first page of the WMCA press release of 25 July 2018, for example, said that *'Grants, training materials and support will be available for businesses with 10 to 250 employees who sign up to take part'* (which risked implying that all participating SMEs would receive a grant), whereas the short leaflet the WMCA produced to promote the trial to SMEs placed more emphasis on the wider benefits, with the only mention of the grant making clear that it would be provided only to the half of participating SMEs that had been selected to receive the intervention. In general, the grant was not the most prominent aspect of the recruitment campaign, as the team recognised the need to communicate that the financial grant would not be offered to all participants and could not be guaranteed. The recruiters also did not want to risk a high drop-out rate in the control arms later in the trial (W01). Their discussions with SMEs were generally limited to the possibility of receiving a grant; the size of grant that could be received, which would vary depending on the size of the SME and performance, was rarely discussed (W02, W04, W05).

Recruitment messages therefore emphasised other components of Thrive at Work equally or more strongly, in particular that all SMEs who signed up would receive **certain benefits free of charge**. The offer of a free toolkit, free accreditation and awards were felt to be attractive to SMEs (W01, W05). One respondent commented that they had refined the message around accreditation as the trial progressed: since free things were often perceived as low value, the messaging had shifted from free accreditation to accreditation

that would normally cost money that SMEs would not have to pay for (W05).

Recruitment messages often touched on **the requirements of participating**, because it was felt that SMEs would naturally be concerned about this. The team emphasised that organisations may already be doing some of the activities required to work towards Thrive at Work accreditation and reassured organisations that they could work at their own pace and that for the purposes of the trial Bronze-level accreditation would be sufficient. The different requirements for Bronze, Silver and Gold accreditation were used to illustrate the degree of flexibility in the level of engagement and investment from employers. As the recruitment process evolved, the team found that translating the work required for accreditation into an estimated number of hours could be effective, as it allowed organisations to develop a more concrete understanding of what would be involved – e.g. about 50 hours, or 1 hour a week, of the Thrive at Work lead's time for an SME to achieve Bronze-level accreditation (W03, W04).

Recruitment messages did not tend to emphasise or expand on **the trial element of Thrive at Work**, with the recruitment team observing that SMEs typically did not have a high level of interest in research nor of understanding of the nature of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) or their value for policy (W01, W03, W04). Naturally, some elements of the trial had to be communicated, such as the randomisation to different trial arms or the requirement to participate in interviews, but this was approached from the perspective of reassuring people about the requirements not being too onerous or time consuming. One respondent noted that some employers were motivated by the opportunity to participate in a trial that will be used to help shape national policy but acknowledged that others had little interest in this (W03).

Network meetings were rarely mentioned as a component of the messages used for recruitment but were mentioned in the more detailed written material and on some social media posts. However, one respondent mentioned that for some organisations, such as recruitment agencies, the network meetings were a real draw because of the opportunities they presented for them to network with potential clients (W05).

2.5. Recruitment trends and outcomes

Recruitment was slower than expected, and it became apparent that achieving the target recruitment was not going to be feasible in the reduced timeframe. Therefore, the WMCA, supported by Warwick University and RAND Europe, agreed with the WHU to extend the recruitment period, initially until mid-September 2018 and later until the end of September 2018. Repeatedly pushing the deadline back was felt by one interviewee to have resulted in some SMEs losing interest in the trial (W02). The geographical scope of the trial was also widened significantly during the last few weeks in order to reach the recruitment target. The trial area was originally restricted to the seven metropolitan boroughs in the West Midlands, but this was later expanded to include all 19 local authority areas in the West Midlands (West Midlands Combined Authority 2018).

There was a surge in sign-ups to the trial in the final week of recruitment (W02, W04, W05). A number of possible explanations were put forward for this. Interviewees mentioned taking a slightly different approach in the final week of recruitment, for instance, increasing telephoning rather than emailing cascaders. It was also communicated to employers as the final deadline approached that this was their last chance to sign up to the trial, and this was

felt to have had an impact, in spurring some into action (W04, W05).

Not all personnel involved in recruitment felt there were clear patterns in the type of employers who were more or less engaged and open to taking part in Thrive at Work. Employers signed up to the trial were felt to represent a broad spectrum, covering all sizes (within the criteria of 10–250 employees), industries and sectors represented in the West Midlands. Some of those involved in recruitment had noticed patterns in the type of employers who were more or less difficult to recruit to the trial. In some cases, it was easier to recruit smaller organisations to the trial, since larger organisations often required board-level approval to participate. Time to take in information about the trial, digest this, present it for approval at board level and then actually sign up was limited. At the end, despite initial intentions to reach out to organisations with limited knowledge or experience in the area of employee health and wellbeing, and given the time and budgetary constraints of the recruitment process, the recruitment team has been accepting SMEs as long as they fulfilled the inclusion criteria (Thrive at Work Wellbeing Programme Collaboration 2019). A number of businesses wanted to take part in the trial but did not fulfil the inclusion criteria and so signed up to the Thrive at Work commitment only instead. Some organisations had submitted incorrect employee numbers, especially large employers, and so had to be excluded from the trial because they did not meet the eligibility criteria.

2.6. Successes and challenges

One of the key challenges encountered related to **the scheduling of and timeframe for recruitment**. The timeframe for recruitment was very short (one month initially, then

eventually extended to three months) given that the team had no previous experience of recruiting to similar initiatives. With a small team working on recruitment, this proved to be challenging. This issue was compounded by the scheduling of recruitment over the summer, a time when many SMEs are understaffed (W01, W02, W03, W04, W05). One interviewee estimated that the recruitment team effectively lost a month because of the holiday season. In addition, there was no continuity in conversations and leads due to different personnel in the target organisations going off on leave at different times (W03). Organisations in which board-level approval was required often struggled to secure this over the summer, when boards tend not to meet.

Another challenge related to **the lack of prior evidence on which to build a recruitment strategy**. One interviewee commented that there had not been time to run a recruitment pilot exercise (W05). This would have enabled the effectiveness of different recruitment strategies and messages to be assessed prior to undertaking the recruitment exercise. A pilot would also have enabled the team to develop a clearer estimate of how long recruitment was likely to take (W05). Another respondent commented on the lack of evidence more broadly on effective strategies to recruit SMEs to trials (W03).

One of the key factors identified as underpinning the success of the recruitment exercise was **close and effective working across the team** and the dedication, persistence and sheer hard work of those involved (W03, W05).

The approach to recruitment was designed to be flexible, and the team commented on certain changes that were made as the recruitment period progressed. This was about experimentation, trying out new strategies

and approaches to explore what might be effective, as well as **learning from experience**. This degree of flexibility could be positioned as both a success and a weakness. On the one hand, the recruitment strategy was not clearly defined at the outset and covered a range of activities, including some degree of trial and error experimentation. On the other hand, the preparedness to be flexible about the approach allowed the recruitment team to develop and refine the approach in order to reach their goal.

Personnel involved in recruitment were asked what they would do differently if they were to undertake the recruitment exercise again. The most common responses related to the scheduling and duration of the recruitment period, namely **having a longer timeframe for recruitment** and not scheduling this over the holiday period. These challenges could also have been mitigated by **having a larger team working on recruitment**, with interviewees commenting that the team had been too small, particularly at the outset (W02, W03). Had scheduling allowed for it, **running a recruitment pilot** would have provided more reliable estimates and informed the development of the strategic approach (W05).

A key lesson learned from the recruitment process was the value of **having a pre-existing personal connection**, and personnel commented that they might have placed greater emphasis on this earlier on in the recruitment process. Email was generally felt to have been ineffective as an initial recruitment tool unless it came from a trusted source and/or was followed up by personal contact. Interviewees also commented that some of the emails sent out were too long or contained too much information, so the interviewees recognised the value of keeping communications with SMEs short and easily digestible (W01, W02).

3 Drivers of and barriers to recruitment

This chapter reports key findings from the interviews with SMEs. The chapter first clarifies how SMEs understood the programme and the requirements to participate. Then it identifies the main factors (barriers and facilitators) reported to be affecting companies' decisions to join the trial. We found that:

- The interviewees did not have a comprehensive knowledge of all elements of the programme. The accreditation scheme was the most remembered aspect, but the availability of a grant or network meetings were largely unknown to the interviewed SMEs.
- Among the requirements, the interviewees were mostly familiar with making a commitment to improve the health and wellbeing offer for staff, working towards accreditation, and participating in research.
- Overall, the aspects related to the recruitment process (uncertainty about the process and requirements), together with other reasons (lack of time and resources) were most frequently reported as barriers for SMEs to partaking, although the programme and trial design played a role as well.
- Factors that could make a difference include clearer (or more effective) communication about expected benefits, costs involved and requirements for taking part, a tailored email or a phone call accompanied by follow-up, and an assisted process of joining the programme. A 'lighter' version of the programme or providing a menu with core and optional elements could also encourage SMEs take part.

In the remainder of this chapter, we use citations so that the employers tell in their own words what attracted them to the programme and why they ultimately chose not to participate. We reference the interviews with SMEs using a code: 01, 02, etc.

3.1. Awareness and understanding of the Thrive at Work Programme

3.1.1. Awareness of Thrive at Work

To tease out the familiarity of interviewees with the Thrive at Work trial, we asked what they

knew about the trial and its various elements (the Commitment and toolkit, accreditation, grant, network meetings, research elements). The level of awareness varied across the interviewed SMEs. Most organisations were familiar with at least two elements (04, 05, 09, 10, 13). Three organisations had knowledge of

only one element (02, 03, 06), whereas only two organisations recalled all four aspects (08, 12). One interviewee had no recollection of the trial upon commencing the interview (01).¹¹

The most well-known element of the Thrive at Work trial, which a majority of interviewees recalled, was the accreditation scheme (02, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 10, 12, 13). A commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of employees and the toolkit came in second (04, 08, 10, 12, 13). Only a limited number of SMEs stated having knowledge of the availability of a grant (08, 10, 12) or network meetings (08, 12, 13). One interviewee in particular commented on being unaware about the financial incentive:

“ Normally, a grant would be magic to my ears. When I hear *grant* my ears perk up and I would remember. (03)

3.1.2. Understanding of requirements

Similar to the awareness of elements of Thrive at Work, the level of understanding of what was required of organisations for taking part in the trial differed among organisations. To provide insight into this, organisations were asked about their knowledge of specific requirements (commitment to improve health and wellbeing, working towards accreditation, uploading evidence online, participating in research, providing sensitive employee information, usage of grant money or own budget to improve wellbeing, recording associated costs). Three interviewed organisations were familiar with all or most of these (09, 10, 13) and a further five could name three or four of these requirements (04, 05, 06, 12, 08). Two companies were familiar with a couple of requirements (03, 02), and only

two organisations had no knowledge of any requirements involved (01, 07).

More specifically, most SMEs knew about making a commitment to improve the health and wellbeing offer for the staff (02, 04, 05, 06, 08, 09, 10, 12, 13). The second most well-known requirement was working towards accreditation (02, 04, 05, 06, 08, 10, 12, 13). The third most frequently remembered requirement was having staffs participate in research (04, 05, 08, 09, 10, 12, 13). Fewer organisations recalled the obligation to implement the commitment by uploading evidence to an online dashboard (04, 05, 09, 10, 13). Four SMEs were aware of needing to provide sensitive employee information, such as payroll numbers and names, to participate (06, 09, 10, 13). The least frequently recalled requirements were the possibility of using grant money or a budget within the organisation to improve the health and wellbeing offer (09, 10, 12) and recording associated costs as well as keeping invoices, which only one interviewee had knowledge on (10).

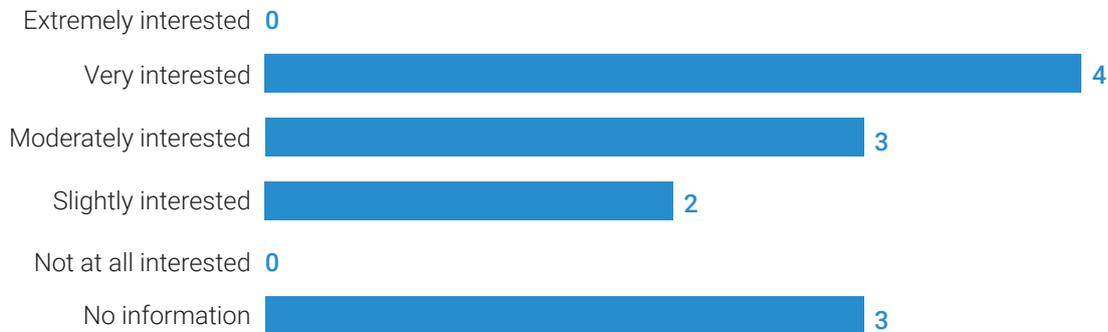
3.1.3. Finding out about the programme and organisations' initial level of interest

The diverse ways used to establish contact with organisations have been outlined in Chapter 2. Reflecting this diversity, low numbers of organisations shared the same pathway of initial contact. Of the interviewed SMEs, all except one interviewee (08) recalled how they first heard of the Thrive at Work trial, with one organisation having no knowledge of the trial (01).

The most frequently mentioned method was an **email** (02, 07, 12, 13). Two organisations became aware of the trial through their **network of local businesses** (04, 06). However, all other

11 In addition, 12 SMEs initially contacted could not remember anything about the programme or trial and therefore they were not interviewed.

Figure 3.1: Initial level of interest in the programme among the interviewed SMEs, reported at the interview (n=12)



Source: RAND Europe

interviewees mentioned different ways of hearing about Thrive at Work. In one case, the organisation came into contact with information on the trial through a **forum of industry organisations**, followed by meetings (03). One interviewee recalled receiving a **newsletter** but could not remember where it was sent from (10). A third organisation was engaged in discussions with their respective **city council** during which the trial was discussed (05). Lastly, **Twitter** was emphasised as a means of establishing contact. This occurred through a 'like' followed by an email (10).

To gain insight into the initial level of interest of SMEs in the Thrive at Work trial, interviewees were asked to recall and rate their initial level of interest on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (where 1 indicated 'not at all interested' and 5, 'extremely interested'). This resulted in the majority of organisations providing a rating from very interested (04, 05, 09, 12) through moderately interested (08, 10, 13) to slightly interested (02, 06) (Figure 3.1).

A common denominator for a majority of organisations that influenced the level of interest positively was the general importance of looking after the wellbeing of staff to either the organisation or the contact person (02, 04, 05, 06, 08, 09, 10, 12, 13). For some SMEs

the, interest in wellbeing of employees and the trial was also due to the particular field of work they are engaged in as an organisation (02, 04, 06). Within the wellbeing aspect, three organisations mentioned particularly the emphasis on mental health as being of importance (04, 05, 06):

“ We know that mental health is an issue in the population and therefore, there is an interest in supporting our staff as best as we can. (04)

A further reason for showing an initial interest in the trial was that partaking would have accentuated a positive public image. Taking part would indicate that the firm is concerned about the wellbeing of workers and would result in the firm being seen as a good provider (03, 04). One interviewee noted that participating in research and, through this, influencing the development of the region, was one of the main reasons for showing initial interest:

“ [It is in a] sense of contributing to research which is valuable and which can make impact to other businesses positively. We are always looking for ways to collaborate with the West

Midlands Combined Authority.
As an employer in the region, it is important for us to have a voice into the wider political scene. (12)

In another case, the political aspect of interacting with the WMCA and the possibility of building a relationship was seen as advantageous (04). Economic reasons were also mentioned by one firm. The potential of identifying health issues before these become a concern and lead to sickness absence and thus, being able to avoid costs, was seen as favourable (03).

3.2. Decision making and factors influencing organisations' choices to participate in the programme

3.2.1. Decision making

While not all SMEs provided details on who took the decision not to participate in the programme, and at what point, the interviewees who commented on these aspects showed a great diversity in terms of how this happened. In at least five SMEs, a decision was down to one individual with executive powers or responsibility for the health and safety portfolio in the organisation (02, 03, 04, 08, 12). In one case, the person in question decided not to investigate any further as the involvement in the programmes was deemed too complicated at first glance (02). In other organisations, further interest was shown. For example, one person consulted the chair of the board and, having a cautious but positive opinion, looked into documentation and requirements more closely. Only then did the person decide not to participate (08).

“ It was really when I had to start signing up and I looked at what I would have to produce (when I decided against it). Actually it was realising to get my head around

the project in its entirety, through reading documents that was the point where I thought 'No. I don't really have time to do this without severely stressing myself.' It just seemed to require more than I was able to commit in that way.... I have a board of trustees but they are very remote. I don't have HR support, it is just me. Ultimately, it would be just me doing it with, no support, so it just was not practical. (08)

Another interviewee delegated the health and safety lead in the organisation to take this forward (03). Unfortunately, that person did not follow through, and eventually the opportunity was missed. This example shows that the effectiveness of an enrolment strategy does not solely depend on the recruiter: even when messages about the programme do 'get through' and one secures support from company management, the actual take-up requires staff commitment and supervision.

“ I told somebody to actually do it, but then he didn't follow through very well, I frankly lost that on my agenda due to lots of other things coming up. Then a few months ago he left and nobody was re-tasked to do that so that's my bad, I guess. I delegated it to a head of department who was also our health and safety lead, so he was the obvious person to be handling that.... I didn't follow-up with him. I had a couple of follow-up meetings with him ... but I didn't actually make sure it was done. Let's say lack of motivation and interest on behalf of senior management. I authorised him to go ahead with the scheme – he didn't need any further approval. I wanted to go ahead, but I wasn't so entranced by it that I made it one of my priorities. (03)

A unique example of a miscommunication within a single company about their participation in the programme is briefly related below. For the clarity of the analysis, findings from this interview are not included elsewhere in this report.

One SME was willing to take part in the recruitment evaluation and was indeed interviewed, despite having signed up to the trial. It turned out that one person within the company was leading the Thrive at Work initiative, while another person was convinced this was not being taken forward. During the interview, the person who thought the organisation did not join the programme said:

“ I’m wishing we hadn’t made that decision [not to take part] to some extent now. I read a bit about it and looked around it and thought it would be really good but that we didn’t have time. I didn’t have time to discuss it with [name]. In retrospect, if I had taken a few minutes to think about it and talk to my colleagues, we might have been more open [towards] it. It was ultimately my decision.... It was purely that I knew we had an exceptionally busy time coming up. Then I saw an email from [a similar organisation] saying they weren’t eligible so I thought we might go through all the processes and then not be eligible. And then I purely got distracted. (11)

Only one interviewee reported consulting a wider team and taking a collective decision not to join the programme (09). Finally, one person

thought that the programme was not meant for their organisation upon hearing about the application and selection process (04). The specific reasons for taking these decisions are outlined below.

3.2.2. Factors reported as affecting choices made

Reasons for not participating and barriers to participating

We asked the SMEs why they did not take part in the programme and what factors in particular influenced their decisions. The most frequently cited response related to the **time and capacity constraints**, either in this particular period or in general. It was reported by eight companies (02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 09, 10).

“ We felt that it is not something that we could accommodate this year. We have had a number of challenging situations to deal within the organisation. We started the year not knowing if we will get any funding this year or not.... It is a programme of activity that would have been a commitment for us given that we don’t have anybody whose role would have been to put that on top of the service manager’s functions.... We were dealing with a couple of challenging HR issues ... that were taking a lot of management time.... and trying to put a new programme on top of that, I think that will be too much for the service managers and it felt inappropriate given the stress level that our managers have dealing with challenging situations. (06)

More specifically, **competing business priorities** that restrict companies’ abilities to focus on issues beyond the core business were cited by two firms (03, 05). For these, the fact of undergoing a major growth period or simply prioritising a delivery of particularly

important assignments prevented them from joining the programme.

“ Our company has had a couple of years of very, very rapid growth, with a very small management team. It is hard to do a large number of things. If it’s doing this or following up a contract with the [name of a client], well, you know which one is going to get by time.... For us, the perceived costs were the time; the time for briefing people, for having to come and do this, taking the focus away from the business and making people more focused on themselves in work time. (03)

“ I think it is a very worthwhile trial, and it does take a lot to get past the kind of screen of people who are very busy running companies.... As with any companies, the danger is to do what is urgent first and to continuously ignore what is important. Obviously employees’ health is very important, but because it is not urgent it is hard for it to become a priority. (03)

“ We have currently 2 enormous projects that they are interdependent and critically linked to funding agreement and funding support.... These 2 major projects are absolutely paramount to everything and the amount of change that we have had to go through would get people very involved but taking that on board with everything else that it is going with an amount of uncertainty, it would probably jeopardise the benefits of the programme in the longer term because we have got to get through the next immediate stage of our business that we are going to a completely new critical territory here in the next 18 months. Effectively we cannot

afford everything that we need to do because we are small. (05)

A further reason for not joining the programme was a **(mis)perception of the purpose of the selection process**, although this was also related to time constraints and additional workload expected from participating SMEs (04).

“ I thought if there is a selection we are probably not who they are looking for. If they are selecting, they ... clearly want some kind of a range or cross-section and there will be a lot of [organisations] who will go up for this ..., therefore our chances of success are low. If they are looking for a selection, they are obviously going to expect you to do a lot.... There will be additional demands on you and it will be a more difficult Programme as a result. I was imaging some kind of competitive process – some kind of online application, there might be a need to go to meetings, submit information or submit reports etc. I was quite put off by the entire notion. I thought it would be a big resource drain for the organisation. It could actually add stress onto managers, it might actually cause a deterioration of the mental health of [staff] because we would be asking them to do a lot more. (04)

Two SMEs cited their **participation in another scheme** (or existing measures considered as satisfactory) as factors that played a role in their decision not to take part the programme (07, 09). They also had some concerns about extra requirements involved in the Thrive at Work Programme.

“ [We had a] previous commitment with a different wellbeing programme. We already put in a lot of work for the other programme

[which] is simpler. There is nothing against Thrive at Work at all, but where we are, it did not make sense. If we hadn't picked up on anything with who we are working with at the moment, this would have been ideal. So it was not the ideal timing because of our commitments. We are also already quite far down the line with current programme. We have a quite good working relationship with people already and it would mean starting again really, there would be no point. (07)

“ We have wellbeing things here and the staff is quite happy of how we support the wellbeing here as it is.... It was also that the staff felt a bit that they didn't particularly want to share the details that they [would be asked] for. It was specific about the contact details and all of this stuff and they didn't particularly want to, and I think that they felt that they will be too involved. (09)

Others simply wanted some other SMEs to try out the programme first and see what kind of benefits and costs could be expected, so that their decision about participating could be informed by lessons learned by others (04, 06).

“ We knew that one of our colleagues in the ... area signed up to Thrive at Work and we were hoping to learn from their experiences. If we knew how easy or difficult it was ... we might do it in future. (06)

“ I knew that one of my colleagues ... was going forward with this and I thought 'I'd wait to see *what her experience of it is.*' As the initial cohort, sometimes that's a benefit because you can shape things, and sometimes you'd prefer to let someone else go and be the brave

soldier and find out how well it works. (04)

The interviewees were also probed about some specific barriers to understand if and to what extent these affected their decision. We report on these below. Nine SMEs pointed to the **uncertainty about how the process would work or what exactly was required** as a factor that played a role in their decision to decline (01, 02, 04, 05, 06, 08, 09, 10, 12). In terms of the **administrative burden of participating in the programme** (associated with paperwork, health needs assessment, additional health and wellbeing activities, network meetings, accreditation process), five SMEs reported this was or would be a concern (02, 04, 06, 09, 12).

“ We would need to be uploading some information so it would be some admin associated with this. Again we don't have spare resources so it is tricky to think how we would have done it. (06)

“ [Administrative burden] could have been a factor that would have put me off because we are such a tiny team so doing some kind of extra specific reports is a consideration in comparison to the benefits you are getting. (02)

However, in terms of **participating in the research component** (associated with taking part in interviews, communicating with the WMCA and researchers), four SMEs explicitly disagreed that this affected their decision (02, 04, 09, 12), but it was identified as 'quite a burden' by one organisation (10).

“ Participation in the trial/research – I don't think that would be an issue. Usually, when people do research it is this kind of thing [a short interview]. It shouldn't be too onerous. (04)

“ We are part of a partnership that is linked to a research group that does a couple of research projects a year. All that involves is participating in a couple of interviews a year. That is kind of manageable.... Anything else would be dependent on the time required. (02)

The views on the **time required from staff to take up health and wellbeing activities** were more diverse. Some organisations were cautious about their employees’ involvement in the programme (04, 09, 12), but others did not consider this to be a major challenge, providing that absence from work was not excessive (02, 05, 10).

“ I thought it would mean that my line managers in particular would need additional training. I thought it would raise an expectation that they would have to spend more time in terms of line management. (04)

“ I don't that this is an issue at all.... However, we do work on a low threshold of human resources or in other words if someone is being away of their job for a period of time that costs and manifests strongly. For example,... we cannot have someone being trained without having the day job being backfilled. (05)

Likewise, opinions were divided on **randomisation and the resulting lack of certainty about the actual offer to be received**, the level of the grant payment (50% or 100%) or the value of the final payment (dependent on the performance – see Section 1.2.1). The analysis of the interview data is complicated by the fact that only one interviewed SME was aware of the possibility of receiving a grant. On the one hand, three SMEs claimed that the grant was or would be an important factor influencing their decision whether to take part or not (02, 03, 05).

“ In terms of what we [get] financially, that would be a consideration quite strongly.... I would have taken the opportunity personally. I have probably the smallest resources that I ever have worked with but I would make it happen and that it is because many people work here because they have a passion ... but it is always nice to get some financial support and get something to happen faster.... It would have been nice to see the offset because I would have to sell it to my board and to my executive team. If you know where you are from day one, they will be glad to hear it. Sometimes it is good to have all the information from day one, [to get] people on board. (05)

“ Probably I was factoring in that there might have been some small grant. That may well have pushed me into doing it. My memory is that it was part-subsidised, but not fully subsidised.... I think a lot of employers would like to know that they are introducing this at no cost to them, because then it becomes a bit of a no-brainer. I presume the grant was to bring the facilities to the site for the assessment. To be able to give a free benefit to your employers is an obvious benefit. (03)

On the other hand, two SMEs did not consider this aspect as relevant for their decision (08, 12).

“ I was not doing it for the financial incentive. It was really because it might help the staff and help the [organisation]. (08)

None of the interviewees had major concerns about **access to data, confidentiality or the consent process**, and some of them were confident about the process and/or familiar with the legal requirements. Most SMEs did not

consider it as a factor in their decision (02, 04, 05, 06, 10); the exception was one organisation, where this was an issue raised by the staff (09).

Facilitators and factors that could make a difference to the organisation's decision

Notwithstanding the barriers to participation, the interviewees pointed out a number of aspects that could have helped win them over to sign up to the programme.

The largest group of such factors related to **communication – its content, forms and character**. We should note that some of the opinions may reflect the fact that interviewees were not aware of existing communication material. All findings are reported below to emphasise the type of information that is likely to trigger the most attention.

Six interviewed SMEs wished that the information about the programme received upfront were clearer about **expected benefits, costs involved** (including time and resources involved) and **requirements for companies to take part** (02, 04, 05, 06, 10, 12).

“ It was very engaging visually. That element was very good but it is actually then the actual information was not straightforward to find out.... I felt that the content repeated itself a lot. As I was digging further to see what is this, what is required of it, I ended up find the same phrases repeated. I wasn't very clear of what is exactly involved. (12)

Two interviewees acknowledged that it is difficult to identify and filter out relevant information among many emails they generally receive and stated that either a tailored email or a phone call could have made a difference (01, 02). The desirability of having **a one-page summary** – explaining the programme, its elements, the benefits it involves, and how much time it might take – was mentioned by

three SMEs (02, 06, 08). A short (four-page) A5 flyer covering these aspects was indeed available, but the interviewed organisations either were not aware of this material or, as some of the interviewees admitted, did not explore the communication material received. One interviewee suggested a follow-up and more detailed regional conferences or webinars to provide further details to those initially interested (08). In this context, one interviewee thought that having a **possibility to sign up to some elements** but not others would be desirable (06); another specifically suggested that the **minimum level of engagement should be presented as a spectrum** and accompanied with corresponding support on offer (04); and yet another proposed introducing a 'lighter' version of the programme, with less paperwork and time commitment (10).

One SME reported that more **certainty about the timelines** would be critical for them to ensure there was no interference with two major projects – this uncertainty, together with other factors, contributed to their decision not to take part (05).

Another factor that could help SMEs join the programme was **clarity on how organisations were selected to take part** (04). The argument was that the selection process misguided the interviewee, who thought that their organisation was unlikely to get through because this was a competitive process. The interviewee wished that it had been more clearly stated that the selection was needed for the recruitment to the trial to test the programme (rather than create a competition and choose the best or most promising SMEs) (04).

Finally, one SME reported that the multitude of initiatives that they perceived as similar to Thrive at Work (they cited Time to Change, Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, Disability Confident) made it more difficult for employers to make up their mind and pick one, as they cannot do all of them (04). What would have

helped them in a decision making process was **information on how these various initiatives differ** or complement each other (04).

While SMEs had many suggestions on what should be communicated and how, some interviewees considered that communication about the Thrive at Work was helpful, good, clear or visually attractive (03, 09, 12). What they did emphasise was that even commendable communication material might not be sufficient to secure enrolment to a programme. Five interviewees felt that there was a need for more follow-up and check-in through the process, if not some limited hand holding or assistance to see SMEs join the programme (01, 03, 07, 09, 12).

“ The information was reasonably clear as long as you read the booklets and stuff. (09)

“ You did a good [job] on communicating the benefits. It is just following-up and maybe giving people a bit more support. (03)

“ Whoever it was who presented at ... did a good job – I don't think there is any fault there. There was a good feeling at the meeting. I expect some other organisations signed up. It was a good presentation – it is the follow-up afterwards that was at fault. (03)

“ What you could have probably done is follow up better with us and said 'What's going on?' and 'Are you doing it?' I just lost my focus on it. I think the learning for you is that you probably [the] need to manage the company to some degree, at least up until the point where it is up and running and established. (03)

“ The company that introduced us to [another scheme] were proactive in coming to us and saying “Oh, we would like to help you promote health and wellbeing at the workplace” and then told us about a lot of practical things they could do for us. And I suppose when you are contacting companies they think it is a lot of hard work but then if you say there are some things that help them run and that stuff that is always good. (07)

In addition, but unsurprising, the interviewed SMEs would welcome any **modifications to reduce the administrative burden, time and resources required** from them to participate in the programme. Any such measures would make it more likely for them to sign up (06). This was particularly clear when speaking with relatively small organisations that pleaded for extra help (08, 10).

“ I did say we were a bit small for this but the person I was talking to thought [we] wouldn't be. A big company, they got HR, they have people who can do it. If you want small companies to participate then perhaps a little bit more resources helping them to achieve that might be a good idea. (08)

Finally, there were some elements that would help organisations join the programme in future, if it is rolled out after the testing period (05, 06). One SME in particular emphasised that they were keen to wait and learn from the experiences of those who signed up first. They wished to hear accounts on the cost–benefit assessment from the participating SMEs, understand if the programme reduces sickness absence, improve staff's wellbeing, or affects staff turnover and engagement, as well as what other employers saw as critical success factors (06).

4 Conclusions and lessons learned

This chapter first discusses the findings on recruitment to the Thrive at Work trial in the context of a range of factors that played a role in the process. We then draw overall conclusions, provide answers to the evaluation questions, and formulate lessons learned that can help in preparation and implementation of future similar initiatives. As such, in Section 4.3 we refer to lessons for *trial commissioners*, and *trial implementers* at large, rather than point to specific institutions in this trial.

Given the general challenges with trial recruitment and in engaging SMEs (see Chapter 1), our overall conclusions from the recruitment to the programme need to be considered against a wider context. As noted earlier, the recruitment to the trial started before the intervention and evaluations were fully fleshed out. The complexity of the intervention and the trial design further affected the recruitment process which was carried out by a relatively new institution (WMCA) with limited experience in trial recruitment and under pressure from the WHU to complete the recruitment over a short period of time. As such, we acknowledge that the task to recruit SMEs to the trial was not easy.

4.1. Conclusions on trial recruitment

The successful recruitment of 152 SMEs (compared with 148 SMEs planned) to the trial represented a considerable achievement

by the team, which was involved in difficult circumstances. Recruitment was made considerably more difficult because it took place during the summer holiday period (starting in July 2018) and within a compressed timeframe. The initial deadline of 31 August 2018 was later revised to 30 September 2018.

The approach to recruitment centred around **three main elements**: (i) WMCA's recruitment team of three, then five people, ultimately enlisting the support of WMCA employees beyond the recruitment team; (ii) local organisations with their own networks, such as chambers of commerce, local enterprise partnerships, and the federation of small businesses ('cascaders'); (iii) larger and other employers in the West Midlands to promote the trial among their networks.

The WMCA would have benefited from **a more fully articulated recruitment strategy**, one that considered the optimal timeframe and resources needed and included contingency plans. Had there been time, piloting the recruitment approach with a subset of SMEs in the region would have enabled the team to learn lessons about what was effective and to estimate the resources required more accurately.

The readiness to be flexible and adapt was critical to the team's ultimate success. This included enlarging the recruitment team,

extending the timeframe, and widening the geographical area for recruitment, as well as modifying the messages used and the ways SMEs were approached through trial and error.

The recruitment methods included:

- (i) Deploying so-called **cascaders** to disseminate information about Thrive at Work in newsletters and at local events. The cascaders were helpful because they believed that the programme had the potential to benefit employees and businesses in the region.
- (ii) Attempting to reach a large number of organisations via **email communication**. This was seen as ineffective without more concerted follow-up.
- (iii) **Cold calling**. This was not deemed effective; phoning rather than or in addition to emailing was considered to be more useful.
- (iv) Engaging in **face-to-face activities** (e.g. attending local events, breakfast meetings or after-dinner speeches). This enabled networking and the development of personal contacts.
- (v) Deploying a **media campaign** to raise awareness about Thrive at Work. More personal follow-up was usually necessary to encourage SMEs to take part.

The approach to recruitment centred on **using personal networks and relationships**. Overall, tactics based on prior personal contact with employers were felt to be much more effective than generic emails or cold calls. However, ultimately, recruitment was often achieved by a combination of methods interacting with one another.

Recruitment messages evolved during the course of the recruitment process. They consistently referred to the **financial and organisational benefits of investing in employee health and wellbeing**. Emphasising the cost of ill-health, including the cost of both

absenteeism and presenteeism, and investing in health and wellbeing as a means of building engagement and reducing staff turnover were thought to be particularly compelling arguments.

Stressing **the intrinsic value of investing in employee health and wellbeing** became important because many organisations were interested in this area because they cared about their staff. One of the messages used to encourage SMEs to sign up to the trial was **the possibility of receiving a financial grant**, but this message was not prominent because the recruitment team recognised the need to communicate that the grant would not be offered to all participants and that it varied in value. As a result, other components of Thrive at Work (such as a free toolkit and free accreditation) were communicated more extensively. Network meetings were rarely mentioned as a component of the messages used for recruitment, to avoid bringing in another layer of complexity to the information presented.

Recruitment messages touched on **the requirements of participating**. Translating the work required for accreditation into an estimated number of hours could be effective as it would allow organisations to develop a more concrete understanding of what would be involved.

4.2. Responses to the evaluation questions

The first three evaluation questions (Section 1.3.1) explicitly differentiate between aspects that could affect organisations' decision to participate or not participate in Thrive at Work – that is, the programme itself (Section 4.2.1), the trial design (Section 4.2.2), and the recruitment process (Section 4.2.3). The final evaluation question asks whether any other reasons influenced the SME's decision to take part or not (Section 4.2.4). Overall, the aspects related to the recruitment process, together

with other reasons (lack of time and resources) were most frequently reported as barriers for SMEs to partaking, although the programme and trial design played a role as well. We respond to each evaluation question below.

4.2.1. Aspects of the *programme* that influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate

Participating in the programme is naturally bound to have some consequences in terms of reporting to the WMCA, conducting a health needs assessment, or staff time related to administering the programme, as well as participating in health and wellbeing activities.

While such an additional **administrative burden** associated with participating in the programme was not cited as a major obstacle, a number of SMEs reported that this either was or would be a concern. In terms of **time required from staff to take up health and wellbeing activities**, the views were equally split between organisations that were cautious about their employees' involvement in the programme and those that did not consider this to be problematic.

4.2.2. Aspects of the *trial design* that influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate

The fact that the programme was implemented as a randomised trial had consequences for the business proposition (i.e. what each SME would receive and what it would be required to do – see Table 1.1). The uncertainty related to **random allocation to trial arms** seemed to have played a role for some organisations in making their decision to participate, but others thought this did not make a difference. In terms of **participating in research**, only one firm considered this to be a major burden; others did not seem to mind this element at all. Similarly, most SMEs were unconcerned about **access to data, confidentiality or consent process**; only one organisation reported this was an issue.

Even though the aspects related to the trial design did not significantly affect organisations' decision to participate, the interviewed SMEs reported that any **modifications to reduce administrative burden and requirements** to participate in the programme (especially for really small companies) would be appreciated and would make it more likely for them to sign up. This suggests that, if the programme was to be implemented in normal settings (as opposed to in an RCT setting), recruitment could have been somewhat easier.

4.2.3. Aspects of the *recruitment process* that influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate

The **uncertainty** about what exactly was required and how the programme would work was one of the major factors that played a role in organisations' decision to not participate. They either did not receive relevant information, did not engage with it, or failed to understand it. In particular, SMEs wished that information about the programme was clearer about **expected benefits, costs involved and requirements for taking part**. A **one-page summary** of this information would be helpful for many. For others, a tailored email or a phone call could make a difference. Interviewees felt that there was a need for more follow-up and check-in through the process, if not some limited hand holding or assistance to see SMEs join the programme.

Other aspects of the recruitment process that played a role were: uncertainty about the timelines and selection criteria to participate and confusion with other, seemingly similar initiatives.

There were a few suggestions on what could have helped SMEs make a different decision. These proposals included allowing **signing up to only some elements** of the programme; **presenting the level of engagement on a scale**; or **introducing a 'lighter' version of the**

programme, with less paperwork and time commitment. Again, this could help reach out to the smallest companies, who usually have the most limited resources.

4.2.4. Other reasons that influenced organisations' decision to participate or not participate

The reason for not participating cited by nearly all interviewed organisations was **time and capacity constraints**. Many SMEs had different competing priorities and could not focus on issues beyond the core business. Others were undergoing a major growth period or struggled for survival. This was by far the **major reported barrier to join the programme**. This seems a particularly important conclusion, given that the aim of the programme is to support organisations with limited resources in investing in health and wellbeing activities for staff. If the lack of time and resources is still cited as the main barrier, this may call for re-considering the intervention's design in light of the suggestions above.

Finally, **participation in another scheme** (or satisfaction with the existing health and wellbeing offer) was cited by some SMEs as a reason for not taking part.

4.3. Lessons learned

Drawing on the reflections and conclusions above, we formulate the following lessons for future trial commissioners and implementers:

- Conduct market research with SMEs to explore how to approach them and if and how they would like to participate in a future initiative. This could help understand the intervention design and communication messages most likely to resonate with the target population.
- Complete the design of the intervention and evaluation before starting the recruitment in order to formulate a clear business proposition (e.g. time commitment of maximum two hours per week, access to resources, opportunity to network with other leaders and managers).
- Develop a fully-fledged strategy (including alternative scenarios in case recruitment does not go according to plan, as well as plans to manage/mitigate risks) and run a recruitment pilot to test communication channels and the messages/business proposition, the clarity of eligibility criteria, etc. This would also allow using testimonials or pilot participant feedback in recruiting organisations to the main trial.
- Plan for a longer timeframe for recruitment: for a similar trial, a more realistic recruitment period would be at a minimum three months avoiding holiday periods, or four months with holiday periods included.
- Secure the resources and expertise needed to support a recruitment team (combine experience in trial recruitment, communication, business/SMEs, and behavioural insights). In cases where there is a pressure to start implementation sooner, consider using minimisation designs so SMEs are randomised gradually during recruitment.
- Rely on pre-existing connections of your team and/or established business networks and personalise messages when speaking with SMEs, building on existing relations and trust. This could include an involvement of SMEs or organisations representing them, similar to public and patient involvement in health and social care research (National Institute for Health Research 2019).
- Provide a short and clear summary of the programme and research aspects, supply evidence on why the programme may be effective, give SMEs time to consider the offer, and follow up.

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Annex A. Overview of SMEs consulted in the recruitment evaluation

Industry sector, if known (alphabetical order)	Type/status, if known	Size, if known	Status
Advice sector	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Unaware of the trial
Advice sector	Unknown	Small	Decided against joining the trial
Advice sector	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Decided against joining the trial
Advice sector	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Decided against joining the trial
Advice sector	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Withdrawn from the trial
Advice sector	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Recruited to the trial, then removed
Arts and cultural	Not-for-profit service provision	Unknown	Decided against joining the trial
Arts and cultural	Not-for-profit service provision	Medium	Withdrawn from the trial
Childcare	For profit	Small	Withdrawn from the trial
Engineering	For profit	Unknown	Decided against joining the trial
Hospitality and tourism	For profit	Small	Withdrawn from the trial
Manufacturing	For profit	Unknown	Decided against joining the trial
Retail	For profit	Small	Withdrawn from the trial

Annex B. Topic guides

Topic guide with non-participating SMEs

- *Interviews with SMEs will last up to 30 minutes but may be as short as 5 minutes depending on the willingness and availability of the respondent. To help prioritise questions, the most important questions are underlined below.*
- *Confirm the interview is voluntary and can be stopped at any time.*
- *Reassure respondents about confidentiality and anonymity and secure permission to record the conversation and use quotes.*
- *Check respondents are happy to proceed with the interview.*

1. The Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)

- 1) Can you tell me what, if anything, you know about the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial) running in the West Midlands?

NOTE: MIRROR LANGUAGE OF RESPONDENT WHEN TALKING ABOUT TRIAL

- What elements are you aware of?
 - IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):
Commitment, toolkit, network meetings,

grant (fiscal incentive), accreditation and award.

IF UNAWARE, CHECK THIS IS THE RIGHT PERSON IN THE ORGANISATION TO SPEAK TO AND END INTERVIEW

- 2) As far as you are aware, what is required of organisations to take part in the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)?

IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Making a commitment to improve health and wellbeing offer for staff.
- Implementing the commitment by uploading evidence to online dashboard/area
- Using any grant money received or own budget to improve health and wellbeing offer.
- Recording any associated costs and keeping receipts/invoices.
- Participating in research/allowing staff to participate in research.
- Working towards accreditation/having an accreditation assessment
- Providing employee information such as names and payroll numbers.

3) How did you first hear about the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)?

IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Website (PROMPT FOR NAME)
- Online forum or social media page (PROMPT FOR NAME)
- At a meeting or event (PROMPT FOR NAME)
- Through a specific organisation (PROMPT FOR NAME)
- Correspondence (PROMPT FOR MEDIUM AND SENDER)
- Other (PROMPT FOR DETAILS)

2. Level of interest in participating

4) On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is not interested at all and 5 is extremely interested), how interested initially was your organisation in participating in the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)?

PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Not at all interested (1)
- Slightly interested (2)
- Moderately interested (3)
- Very interested (4)
- Extremely interested (5)

PROMPT FOR MORE DETAIL:

- Why was this?
- What (if any) factors in particular triggered your initial interest?

5) How (if at all) did the requirements discussed earlier affect your level of interest in taking part in the Wellbeing

Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)?

IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Making a commitment to improve health and wellbeing offer for staff.
- Using any grant money received to improve health and wellbeing offer.
- Recording any associated costs and keeping receipts/invoices.
- Participating in research/allowing staff to participate in research.
- Sharing data/providing employee information.

3. Decision making around participation

6) At what point did your organisation decide NOT to participate?

IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST): after reading materials/communication, after internal discussion, when filling in the application, dropped out before the launch of the programme

7) Can you talk me through your organisation's reasons for not taking part?

PROMPT FOR MORE DETAIL:

- How was a decision reached?
- 8) What factors in particular influenced your decision not to take part?

ALLOW RESPONDENT TO ANSWER SPONTANEOUSLY AND THEN FOLLOW UP

- Which, if any, of the following were barriers to you taking part?

IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Uncertainty about how the process would work/what was required
 - Concern about the administrative burden related to:
 - Participation in the programme
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: paperwork/online submissions, health needs assessment, additional health and wellbeing activities, network meetings, accreditation process.
 - Participation in the trial/research
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: paperwork, taking part in interviews, communicating with the WMCA and researchers
 - Concern about the employees' time in relation to:
 - Participation in the programme
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: paperwork/online submissions, health needs assessment, additional health and wellbeing activities, network meetings, accreditation process
 - Participation in the trial
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: paperwork, taking part in interviews, communicating with the WMCA and researchers
 - Concern about access to data, confidentiality, consent process, etc.
 - Randomisation - uncertainty whether we would get the grant payment
 - Uncertainty on the grant payment (50% or 100%) or the value of the final payment
 - 9) What might have encouraged you to take a different decision?
- ALLOW RESPONDENT TO ANSWER SPONTANEOUSLY AND THEN FOLLOW UP
- Which, if any, of the following might have encouraged your organisation to take part?
- IF NOT MENTIONED SPONTANEOUSLY, PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):
- Less administrative burden
 - Less time/fewer resources required
 - Knowing for certain whether we would get the grant payment/how much the grant payment would be
- #### 4. Conclusion
- 10) Do you have any further feedback or suggestions about how the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial) might be improved?
 - 11) Do you have any suggestions about how the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial) should be communicated to companies like yours?
 - 12) Do you have any final comments?
- Thank you very much for speaking with us.**

Topic guide for the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

1. Recruitment strategy

- 1) Can you run us through a brief overview of the recruitment strategy for the evaluation of the Wellbeing Premium Programme (Thrive at Work trial)?

PROMPTS:

- Sampling
- Communications
- Routes and vehicles (website, direct contacts, cascaders, etc.)
- Recruitment targets
 - Numbers to recruit and project timing
- Changes to the strategy over time
- Time and resources dedicated to recruitment (costs of materials, staff time, other)

2. Recruitment process and outcomes

- 2) How did the recruitment process match up to your expectations?

PROMPTS:

- Expected challenges vs unexpected challenges
 - How did you manage these?
- Recruitment targets
 - Numbers to recruit and project timings
- 3) What trends, if any, have you observed in relation to routes and vehicles used for recruitment?

PROMPT:

- Which seemed to be bringing most/least recruits and why?
- Which required most/least time & effort and why?
- 4) What trends, if any, have you observed in the type of employers who are more or less engaged? (Probe for size, industry sector, any other common characteristics)

PROMPTS:

- Why do you think this is?
- 5) To the extent you can comment on, what were the main:
 - Motivations, drivers and expectations from SMEs willing to take part?
 - Reservations, objections or concerns from SMEs reluctant to take part?

ALLOW RESPONDENT TO ANSWER SPONTANEOUSLY AND THEN FOLLOW UP

- What impact, if at all, do you think the following factors had?

PROMPT (READ OUT LIST):

- Uncertainty about how the process would work/what was required
- Concern about the administrative burden related to:
 - Participation in the programme
 - Participation in the trial/research
- Concern about the employees' time in relation to:
 - Participation in the programme
 - Participation in the trial
- Concern about access to data, confidentiality, consent process, etc.
- Randomisation - uncertainty whether we would get the grant payment

- Uncertainty on the grant payment (50% or 100%) or the value of the final payment
- 6) How did you try and engage employers who were more reluctant to take part?

PROMPTS:

- How successful was this strategy?
- What else might have been done?
- 7) Overall, what would you say are the main barriers and enablers affecting recruitment to the evaluation of the Wellbeing Fiscal Incentive Programme?

PROMPTS:

- Why do you think this is?
- 8) What, if anything, would you do differently during if you were to undertake this recruitment exercise again?
- 9) If you could give one tip to the Work and Health Unit about how to recruit SMEs to future trials, what would it be?

3. Next steps

- 10) Is there anything else that RAND should be aware of or that should factor into the discussions with employers?

Thank you very much for speaking with us.

Annex C. Roles and responsibilities in the Thrive at Work trial

WMCA:

- Overall lead, design and coordinator of the trial
- Design and implementation of the intervention
- Recruitment of SMEs, website design, business communications
- Lead liaison with the Work & Health Unit

Warwick Medical School:

- Design and implementation of the impact evaluation
- Data collection on behalf of RAND Europe for the process evaluation

Warwick Business School:

- Input and advice on design of the intervention (behavioural insights expertise)

RAND Europe:

- Early input to WMCA on the conceptual design of the trial
- Facilitation of workshop to formulate the Theory of Change model
- Design and implementation of the process evaluation
- Design and implementation of the recruitment evaluation
- Advice to Warwick Medical School on the design of the impact evaluation