

One parent families
GINGERBREAD
making change happen


WorkDirections[®]

Sustainable employment and skills - Questions arising from Opportunity, Employment and Progression: making skills work

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Introduction

Both One Parent Families | Gingerbread and WorkDirections are focused on the need to ensure that the interventions designed to support the transition from benefits to work are sustainable in the long term, and facilitate ongoing progression within the labour market.

We welcome the policy directions outlined in *Opportunity, Employment and Progression*. For too long the difficulties involved in integrating the skills and employment agendas on the ground have meant those most disadvantaged within the labour market have lost out. Key to the operational success of these interventions, however, will be how readily this approach can be implemented by those delivering employment and skills services to disadvantaged groups. This requires a clear commissioning strategy with the right incentives in place to drive provider (whether public, private or voluntary) performance.

We set out below the key questions that arise from *Opportunity, Employment and Progression* and the main areas that we think need to be addressed before proposals are taken to the next stage.

Delivery

Jobcentre Plus

There is clear evidence from the Employment Retention and Advancement project (ERA) and other retention and advancement programmes that both retention in employment (although not necessarily in the same job) and progression (this does not simply mean linear promotion, for many disadvantaged clients it is achieving a higher level of control over their working lives) within the labour market are more successful when in-work support is pre-empted by pre-employment support that focuses on long-term outcomes. This will require some changes to the job matching services currently provided by Jobcentre Plus, and, arguably, a different skillset for advisors.

- Will Jobcentre Plus advisors be targeted to deliver longer term job outcomes in line with the suggestions in the DWP Commissioning Strategy?
- What action is being taken to improve the initial service provided to customers to ensure employment sustainability?
- To what extent are the findings of ERA driving plans to upskill Jobcentre Plus staff?

Learning and Skills Council

This will mark a considerable change in direction for the LSC which should not be underestimated. To date they have been funded and assessed on learning rather than employment outcomes. This has had a number of unintended outcomes, including high levels of attrition from basic skills courses by those entering work, even if that work is temporary. There is a need for employment and skills targets and funding to be aligned alongside the broader policy objectives.

- What are the implications for extending these policies to the devolved countries?
- In what way will the LSC target structure be changed to support job, and progression outcomes as well as training outcomes?
- What formal targets will the new advancement and careers service be tasked with achieving?
- Will Jobcentre Plus job entry measures be able to discern between those clients who have followed up on advice from the Adult Careers Service and those who have not - how will success be measured? To what level will this information be analysed in order to achieve a better understanding of the quality and relevance of different interventions?
- We understand that Jobcentre Plus, and later provider, advisors will have the final say on whether individuals follow the advice given in the Adult Careers Service interview and skills health check. How will this be captured in order to measure the relevance of advice given? If the advice is not followed, will this be able to be matched to outcomes?
- How can we ensure that those who require long-term interventions in order to enter the labour market do not lose out?

Providers

The DWP Commissioning Strategy identifies the need for longer periods of sustainability (up to 18 months) to be measured, and this is very much welcomed. It is important that providers are given the flexibility to design and deliver long term outcomes. It is, however, crucial that links with public services, particularly the Adult Careers Service, operate as smoothly for customers with private and voluntary sector providers as those accessing Jobcentre Plus services. It is our understanding that the suggested funding system for both will be through learner accounts -customers who undertake considerable amounts of training in first 12 months of unemployment must not then be financially penalised from continuing to access learning support if they need to.

- How is this work being linked in with the DWP's interim Commissioning Strategy and the targets that those commissioned to deliver welfare to work programmes will be set?
- How will sustainability be measured? The current system is neither effective or efficient.
- Will there be an evaluation of the link between take up of skills training (and type of skills training) and success in hitting six, 12, and 18 month sustainability targets?
- Will those providers most effective at achieving sustainable outcomes have the reasons for this success captured? To what extent will there be formal opportunities to learn from best practice?
- Is there any desire to capture salary increases as a method of logging progression within the labour market?

Employers

Employers have an important role to play, not only in the provision of vacancies, but also in the quality of the opportunities available. We know that many lone parents and Incapacity Benefit claimants who want to and

could work do not due a lack of flexible opportunities, particularly with respect to hours. Addressing this key issue will make a difference both to employment rates and sustainability - Local Employer Partnerships provide a vehicle for engaging employers in the process of doing this.

- Will signing up to Train to Gain be a condition of joining a Local Employment Partnership?
- Can flexible hours be made more central to the conditions for signing up to the Local Employer Partnerships? This would also allow individuals to undertake other non-work specific training should they want to
- Employers often say soft skills are more important - can public sector employers undertake to review recruitment practices so that people are not unnecessarily screened out on hard skills?
- How can Local Employer Partnerships be better harnessed to meet the sustainability and advancement agendas?
- There exists significant opportunity to develop better support for those individuals who move into work and wish to undertake training in another area. Designed and funded in the right way, such a programme could have significant advantages to both participants and employers.

Conditionality

It is clear from *Opportunity, Employment and Progression* that the additional support available will be matched by increasing conditionality. There is a need for evidence base-led decisions on how this works in practice. There is a significant difference between mandating engagement and mandating activity. How can a better understanding of how to engage existing and potential customers be gained and promoted?

- Will there be separate consultation on whether skills health checks should become mandatory for voluntary client groups (will the level of basic skills held impact on this)?
- What level of conditionality will be attached to training that customers are referred to?
- For JSA clients referred to mandatory skills training (most likely basic skills) will they have assurances of the quality of training they are told to take up? How will this quality be assessed? On employment rates of leavers? On attendance and attrition ratios (which are generally poor for this type of provision)?
- If training is conditional, what choice will be given about the type and level of training that must be undertaken?
- When the basis for the decision rests on what is considered 'reasonable' - how will nationwide equity be ensured?

Resources

We understand that resources are limited, and there is a balance to be struck between ensuring that those most in need of basic skills are able to access help, and enabling others to move on to higher level skills. Resources in the Department for Work and Pensions are particularly tight at the moment; we are concerned that if they are simply asked to deliver more without additional support, and clear indications as to where funding to support training is to come from, messages about the need to integrate employment and skills provision will once again remain rhetoric rather than reality. At present, it is unclear from '*Opportunity, Employment and Progression*':

- Who will deliver the skills screening and skills health checks? If Jobcentre Plus are to be asked to do this, what additional resources will be made available? If existing Personal Advisers are to deliver these, what additional training will they receive?
- What support will be available for those who take up their entitlement to training - in particular what support with paying for and sourcing appropriate childcare?
- What support will be available to those who already have a qualification beyond level 2, but are unable to find work linked to this qualification? Will any resources be made available for higher level or additional qualifications that lead to a clear job outcome?
- How can it be made easier for those who undertake training while out of work to continue with their training following a transition into work? At present much of the financial support for training is linked to employment status. Many claimants may have an eventual employment goal which is unrelated to their current employment, and therefore will be unable to receive financial support for training via their employer.

Type and level of training

As stated above, it is clear that resources have to be prioritised. But it is important that people receive training that is appropriate for their needs, and helps them to fulfil their own ambitions, rather than being seen as a tick box exercise. Much of the debate about human capital versus work first strategies based on American evidence has been distorted by the fact that 'human capital development' strategies often relied on poor quality, inappropriate training, without a work focus¹ Advisers need to be able to access a wide variety of training, beyond the 'usual suspects' and this training needs to be appropriate for the client group, as well as moving them towards, or helping them progress in employment.

- For those who have been out of the labour market for some time, the most important requirement may be for confidence building activities, which can form a first step towards further employment

¹ Bos J, Hamilton G, Scrivener S, Snipes J, Schwartz C and Walter J (2002) *Improving basic skills: the effects of adult education in welfare to work programmes* MDRC

related training. This may particularly be the case for lone parents who are undertaking the 'skills health check' two years before transferring from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance. Will there be scope, particularly for these parents, to access support that is not directly employment focused, and that may have a longer time span?

- While there is a clear focus on level two entitlements, for many public sector careers such as midwifery, social work or teaching assistants a level three qualification - often in the form of an access course, forms the first step. There is a particular gap in funding for parents undertaking these type of courses; what support will be made available for higher level courses such as this where there is a clear job outcome?
- It is clear that one of the aims of better integrating skills and employment policy must be to promote progression in employment. One of the most effective ways of measuring this is in terms of increased wages. Will this measurement take place, and will training courses and providers be assessed on their effectiveness at promoting increased wages, as well as increased job outcomes?
- It is suggested that JSA claimants will be allowed to undertake full time training for a period of eight weeks. Will this be sufficient to undertake a course that leads to a recognised qualification or significantly increases job readiness? Will there be flexibility if it is clear that a longer course would be more effective?
- Professional qualifications such as a Category C&E HGV licence can be expensive, but make a measurable difference to both job outcomes and wages. What flexibility will there be around contracting for and providing this type of training?
- What action will be taken to ensure that training providers tailor their courses to different client groups, for example ensuring that training is within school hours for lone parents? Will providers be monitored on the numbers of learners from disadvantaged groups accessing their provision? At present, few colleges for example monitor the number of lone parents accessing their courses²
- Will funding for learning providers be specifically targeted according to the employment and progression outcomes of those individuals who have accessed and paid for their courses through the Advanced Careers Service and skills health checks?
- How will funding arrangements ensure that all courses have a clear progression routes with explicit handover arrangements for participants to further services?

Conclusion

The long awaited integration of employment and skills policy and services represents a fantastic opportunity to improve the prospects of the most disadvantaged. However, if this is to make a real difference outside the corridors of Whitehall, arrangements for delivery, resources, the operation of conditionality and the aims of training to be commissioned must be

² Haux T and Kimina M (2005) *Accessing Training and Education in East London: The case of lone parents* National Council for One Parent Families.

explicit. We hope that this is a useful contribution to ensuring that that is the case.

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