

Activation: The Point of View of Clients and 'Front Line' Staff

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1. Policy background and methodology

Between September and December 1997 we carried out field research in four areas of high unemployment in England where we organised focus groups, attended by just under eighty long term unemployed people, and carried out detailed interviews with over fifty 'street level' key workers in agencies delivering programmes for the unemployed.¹ This research followed ten years in which successive British Governments had progressively intensified the 'activation' of the benefit system creating a new 'stricter benefit regime', implemented through the Employment Service (ES), aimed at increasing the job search activity of the unemployed and deterring fraud.

Since 1996 an unemployed person in the UK can only obtain Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) if they agree to a Jobseekers Agreement which specifies the detailed weekly steps they intend to take to look for work. These activities are monitored at fortnightly reviews and longer formal Restart interviews are held at least once every six months (see Table 1). In addition to sanctions for refusing suitable jobs, leaving work without good reason, or for not being available for or actively seeking work, officials also have a discretionary power enabling them to issue a Jobseekers Direction requiring an individual to look for jobs in a particular way, to take other steps to "improve their employability" or to participate in an employment or training programme (see Table 2). If the claimant fails to attend or behave in the required manner they might lose benefit entirely or be subject to a two or four week sanction.

The new regime was intended to shift the focus of the contact between the client and ES from benefit entitlement to job search and to try to get the individual into employment as soon as possible. Although it was acknowledged that most unemployed people were genuine about looking for work policy makers now suggested that too many of them were ineffective in their job search or were too selective about the jobs they wanted, especially amongst the long term unemployed. The new powers given to ES officials by JSA were also aimed at enabling and (through specified performance targets) requiring them to put pressure on another group amongst the unemployed who it was suggested observed the rules but had no intention of getting work or who were already working in the informal economy.

By 1996/97 the scale of the stricter benefit regime was significant and was clearly contributing to the marked falls in unemployment that the Labour Government was to inherit (Sweeney and McMahon, 1998). In that year the ES carried out over 3.3 million new claims interviews, nearly 3.3 million Restart interviews, and just under another 1.2 million advisory interviews. As a direct result of these interventions over 147,000 people were placed directly in jobs; nearly 150,000 people started on employment and training programmes that took them off the unemployment register; and over 440,000 people started on (predominantly) job search programmes where they

¹ The Full Report 'Welfare to Work and the Long Term Unemployed' can be obtained from the Unemployment Unit at Camelford House, 87-89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TP (email unemploy.unit@mcr1.poptel.org.uk)

remained on the register. Another 65,000 made a transition to another benefit and there were over 162,000 other “sign offs” directly attributable to the impact of the interviews (DfEE, 1998, Table 3.5).

A number of evaluations have used various statistical techniques to identify the net impact that the new regime and individual employment and training programmes have had in moving people off the unemployment register and in getting some of them into jobs (see, for example, Payne et al, 1996; White et al, 1997). However, as with most evaluations of labour market programmes, these studies have treated implementation processes as a taken for granted “black box” even though we know that the actual implementation stage of the policy cycle is crucial and that partial or non implementation at the ‘front line’ can undermine public policy objectives (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier, 1998; Schmid et al, 1998).

At the same time traditional programme evaluations have tended to neglect the voices and lived experiences of the clients and, as is characteristic in other social research, individuals and their needs have usually been understood passively within the categories defined by researchers’, providers’ or policy makers’ (Williams et al, 1999). We wanted to go beyond traditional individualised customer satisfaction surveys and use the technique of focus groups to explore how the long term unemployed actively negotiate, sometimes even resist, what appeared to be provided to assist them. In this context, focus groups are particularly useful for understanding the reaction and perception of an affected population to a policy change, especially where a power differential exists between participants and decision-makers. Focus groups provide an effective way of investigating complex behaviour and motivations “that is typically not available with other methods” (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 16). In particular, the interaction within the focus group, coupled with the security of being among peers, encourages participants to share views they might otherwise be reluctant to divulge and the technique can provide access to the group's level of meaning in a way that is friendly, respectful and non-condescending: an important consideration when working with groups whose views are all too often treated with low esteem.

Our research explored and reports on how the stricter benefit regime was being implemented at the front line, through the day to day contact between the unemployed and those working with them. Both these groups, whose views should figure more highly in the policy making process, have accumulated a wealth of knowledge and insights into the workings of the system which can enable us to better understand the **unintended** as well as the intended impact of ‘activation’. In particular, our primary objective was to explore the relationship between the new regime and what the unemployed and their key workers identified as the key barriers to work and establish why Government ‘schemes’ and the ES had become so unpopular, **despite** falling unemployment and the apparent success of the activation strategy.

2. Views about the work opportunities and job search strategies available to the long-term unemployed

The long term unemployed expressed a strong desire to get full-time permanent jobs that would pay them a “living wage”. Part-time and/or temporary work was an unattractive proposition because it meant disrupting the benefit claim, and confusion about the consequences for benefit was widespread. They attributed unemployment to the lack of suitable job opportunities and discrimination by employers on the basis of race, area, age and long-term unemployment itself.

Most key workers attributed long term unemployment to a shortage of appropriate job opportunities and the tax/benefits poverty trap, although it was stressed that some of these expectations acted as self-imposed restrictions reflecting the perceptions, aspirations and attitudes of claimants. The key workers also pointed to significant personal characteristics which acted as barriers to employment: physical and learning difficulties, problems with literacy and numeracy, mental health problems, substance abuse, poor communication and presentation skills, and insufficient access to adequate transport and other basic facilities such as telephones. Some characteristics, such as insecurity and motivation, were often said to be symptomatic of long periods of unemployment, whilst personal qualities such as level of social skills and aptitude were often regarded as longer term individual characteristics.

When probed about their actual job search activities most of the long term unemployed cited local newspapers and informal contacts as the best sources of work. Very few of them had approached, or registered with, private employment agencies and most were sceptical about making speculative inquiries to employers which they tended to see as something they were increasingly expected to do by the ES. There was a general consensus that the ES had the least attractive jobs, was inefficient in updating the vacancy information it displayed, and there was frustration about how few new vacancies were displayed even though they were now expected to visit the Jobcentre several times a week.

The main complaint was about the low pay levels on offer with intense competition for those with even modest wages: “if a job comes up at over £4 per hour, you'll get over a hundred people going for it, for one job!”. Some Jobcentre workers thought they should have powers to refuse to advertise poorly paid jobs (this was before the minimum wage). Some also complained that vacancies were posted by unscrupulous employers (e.g. salary negotiable or on commission).

Opinions among those working with the LTU varied as to what were the most appropriate job search strategies. One former Jobclub leader argued that the more jobs a person applied for the higher the chances were that they would eventually find work. Support workers in voluntary employment access centres however suggested that it was demotivating for clients if they made repeated job applications only to get repeated rejections. This only served to reinforce pessimistic attitudes and, even if successful, was likely to result in the client being unemployed again quite quickly because they had taken a job that was not suitable. ES staff thought that requiring the LTU to actively seek work could act as a useful ‘prod’, but they were deeply concerned about the impact that random speculative approaches could have on employer perceptions and goodwill. Overall, a more focused and selective approach to job seeking was favoured by most key workers including some of those in official Jobclubs. Such a strategy was considered to be at variance with ES policy but in the client's long-term interests. One training provider said: “Some people need to do the 100 applications. However, I reckon if it's somebody reasonably able, reasonably skilled and reasonably literate I can get them a job with three applications. You target the right job and you make sure they've got the skills for it .. There is no point in making people apply for a quota simply for the sake of it. What they've got to be is assisted to apply for appropriate, relevant jobs”.

3. The nature of front-line work in the ES: the impact of performance targets

In general the long term unemployed had a very critical view of the ES in terms of its ability to help them find work, or guide them through the variety of initiatives aimed at helping them improve their employability. Although some had a good relationship with an ES adviser most felt that ES staff did not have enough time and/or experience to deal with them as individuals; that they attempted to remove them from the register rather than offer genuine help; and that their approach was too rule-bound.

Morale in the ES was said to be very low, caused by and causing high staff turnover, especially amongst more junior grades who had most day-to-day contact with the unemployed. According to all key workers, high staff turnover was a major problem because it undermined the continuity of working relationships, both between the ES and the unemployed, and between the ES and provider organisations. In particular, the loss of experienced staff was thought to be particularly detrimental, as was the increased use of inexperienced casual workers to fulfill front line duties. Lack of experience led to problems including poor quality advice and guidance, clients being directed to programmes or premises that no longer existed, misinformation about the right to combine benefit with part-time study, and problems in giving unemployed people accurate advice about in-work benefits.

Key workers in other external organisations were also critical. There was a strong overall sense that ES staff had a difficult job to do especially in urban areas of high unemployment but that it was made even more difficult through a lack of resources, compounded in some cases by poor management. ES workers themselves were critical of high caseload and the target culture within which they worked, feeling that the pressures made it difficult for them to give individual support and in some cases led to “burnout”. One said “at the moment it's all (job) placements .. and then suddenly .. the actual programmes have started to fall, so now it's a panic: “oh you've got to start submitting people to Jobclub or Training for Work”. But you've still got to get your placings. So when you're on the front-line there's so many things that are going through your head .. And if you've got a client sitting in front of you and you're thinking about trying to sell them (in work benefits) or something, you can just picture the questions they're going to ask and you think, it's just not worth it. And all this in seven minutes”. Another reported that “The idea of a service for people that come in, because of numerical targets, has gone by the board to a large extent”. It appeared that the prevailing target culture of the ES had undermined its effectiveness in two ways. Firstly, rigid targets for the number of people being referred to programmes distorted ES priorities, prevented them from delivering a fully client-centred service, and meant that too many people ended up in programmes unsuitable for their needs. Secondly, inflexible job entry payment targets encouraged bad practice and led to “creaming”, where participants were being selected largely on the basis of how likely they are to get a job. While job entry rates are not irrelevant to programme effectiveness they mean very little on their own, and many programmes would add far more value if they helped those with the most severe labour market disadvantages. Although the development of more accurate measures of performance is a complex and demanding management task, it is crucial if providers and ES staff are to improve the service they deliver. In ‘Reinventing Government’ Osborne and Gaebler expressed the point bluntly: “saddling people with inappropriate measures in whose development they have had no input is a sure way to create resistance, destroy morale and encourage cheating” (1993, p.358).

4. The Jobseekers Agreement , job search verification and sanctions

One central aim of the reforms introduced in the UK has been to shift the emphasis of the contact between the ES and the client away from its previous focus on benefit eligibility and payment towards a stronger emphasis on jobsearch activity and assistance (see Table 1). In addition to entering a mandatory Jobseekers Agreement (JSAg) the unemployed are now expected to keep a record of what they do to look for work and to report on their job search efforts every two weeks during a short “active signing” interview.

The Jobseekers Agreement is like an individual action plan agreed at the beginning of the claim. None of the focus group participants felt that the JSAg was either useful or worthwhile and most were disparaging of it. One client described it as “a waste of paper. You sit there with a person who knows nothing about you and they’re obviously in a rush so you get about ten minutes of their time and then you sign it and then go”. The main criticisms were (a) people agreed to things they did not want to do or intend to do so as to ensure that they were paid their benefit, which for many was “the real issue”, and (b) in a number of cases clients found that the ES Adviser had written into the JSAg commitments which they had not actually made.

Most of the focus group participants agreed with the principle of job search verification along the following lines: “if you're unemployed, the least you can do it look for work during the week and turn up for your interview with the written proof .. rather than turn up at the Job Centre with an empty sheet. It's fair”. However, many had objections to the equity of the procedure in practice: for example, that it is often difficult to prove a job application took place. Some thought that the requirements could be unfair for older workers near retirement. Another cause of criticism was a perception that the rules were applied unevenly and it was suspected that ES staff were leaving some clients alone who were not genuinely seeking work because they were too troublesome. A few of the unemployed reported that the system created a perverse incentive to misrepresent job search activity, even to lie, in order to safeguard benefits. One of the ES front line staff confirmed that some “social-work” cases might be allowed to just come in and ‘sign on’ and that procedures were difficult to implement for those with either literacy or numeracy and/or behavioural problems.

Many ES key workers considered that they did not have enough staff or time to conduct all the necessary procedures, especially at the fortnightly interviews where they were allowed only seven minutes per interview with someone out of work for over six months (see Table 1). Partly related to this, there were wide arbitrary variations in the intensity with which ES staff scrutinised job search activity, with some ES offices or individual officers ignoring the procedure and others insisting on it, leaving claimants often unsure as to precisely what was expected of them.

It also seemed that the application of sanctions for inadequate job search appeared to be rare in the case study areas. Most ES staff interviewed said they were reluctant to impose sanctions. However, some claimed to know of others who were over-zealous. Some staff said that the then recent arrival of the new [Labour] government had been followed by an unofficial consensus that the “stricter benefit regime” was to be applied less vigorously.

Another factor limiting the use of sanctions was, according to ES staff, the unwieldy and lengthy adjudication processes involved which could often result in the reinstatement of benefit to the sanctioned client. This reticence was also evident in the limited use made of the power to issue a

Jobseekers' Direction. Advisers reported that they more often directed jobseekers to do things verbally during an interview “rather than go through all the rigmarole of doing a Direction on the [computer] system”. It was far simpler to use verbal and administrative techniques which would put pressure on the client and disrupt their “settled” way of life, especially if they were working in the informal economy.

5. Labour market programmes

Cynicism about “government schemes” was widespread and deeply felt among the LTU. This was hardly surprising as the individuals in the focus groups had by definition been out of work for long periods. So even if evaluation evidence shows that overall programme participation increases the job prospects of some individuals there was a common view that these “schemes” were designed to remove them from the unemployment register rather than provide them with genuine help.

Relationships between the various organisation involved in the “unemployment industry” were complex. There were many examples of positive links between agencies and especially between key staff working for providers and in the ES. However, there were problems that worked against the interests of claimants. For example, competition between various providers means that information is not always shared or communicated to clients. Competition for vacancies is also strong with many organisations seeking to develop exclusive relationships with prospective employers.

The diversity of initiatives from the ES and other providers, and constant change, generates confusion among the long-term claimants regarding the names, nature and purpose of different programmes. This does little to promote informed choice. There is much “turbulence” and instability amongst the provider network. Small organisations suffered greatly from fluctuations in demand and found it hard to compete for and deliver ES programmes. Larger organisations still suffered considerable instability, owing to policy changes and budget reductions. This volatility in the market encourages the employment of many front-line staff on short-term contracts, there is little incentive to invest in skills, and job changes are common.

Providers all felt that courses as currently structured were too short and too generalised and that the ES was not sufficiently selective about who they referred. Providers claimed that the diverse mix of people with widely differing needs and circumstances in any given course intake made it difficult for tutors to establish any meaningful rapport with the individuals in the group. Some providers felt they should be allowed to further screen the clients to direct them towards appropriate courses. They also commented that mandatory courses could be marketed more positively as they felt that much of their work was undermined, not so much by the element of compulsion, but by the way in which the ES used the threat of compulsion.

6. Evaluation of specific measures (see Table 2)

Job search courses were popular but clients indicated a preference for non-official provision where attendance was more flexible and eligibility rules less bureaucratic. ES staff themselves expressed concern about the unbalanced and increasing emphasis on job search programmes where “even popular and proven effective programmes like Jobclub seem ‘tired’ in the context of so much which focuses on improving jobseeking skills”. They were also concerned about the confusion

caused by having so many job search programmes with different names and eligibility requirements all offering much the same thing.

Subsidies for hiring the long-term unemployed involved considerable administrative effort on the part of the ES (and it was felt that the new Government's plans for expanding them were likely to be difficult to fulfill).

Work trials are arrangements where employers can try out potential recruits for up to three weeks before appointing them. Many clients were suspicious and thought Work Trials could be exploitative, providing work for nothing, and one support worker did say they needed to be monitored carefully because she had a client go on a Work Trial with an employer who, she was convinced, did not have a vacancy. Other clients were reluctant to use Work Trials (or subsidies) to present themselves to an employer in a manner which they perceived devalued them as a prospective employee. However most key workers thought that Work Trials were valuable, particularly so for the long-term unemployed, and greater effort was needed to convince claimants of the scheme's potential.

Training measures. The majority of those we talked to had either completed training courses, were currently involved in training or were contemplating taking up training in the near future. There were also a number of people who expressed a desire to take up training courses but for various reasons were unable to do so, usually because of the level of course or its duration. In addition to official short duration Training for Work courses many had made use of the 16 hour rule, which allows a person to retain benefit and study on a part time basis so long as they remain available for and actively seeking work. Clients and providers all emphasised that the complexity of these rules and the variation in their interpretation created a significant barrier to participation, even in vocational courses supported by the European Social Fund. Although most clients saw the value of training others were less positive about the nature of much of the training that appeared to be accessible to them and those that had completed training courses in the past were sceptical about the value of training. Much of the scepticism about training came from the fact that despite having successfully completed courses and gaining qualifications, focus group participants were still unable to find work.

Temporary work programmes. Although there were few temporary work opportunities available in the case study areas broader evidence about their impact shows that unemployed people and front line staff regard voluntary temporary work programmes delivering projects of community benefit with mixed feelings. Participants are fairly positive about the work they do and are pleased to have a chance to get back to work, even if only for a while. However, programmes paying a wage have typically offered part-time work which only young people with low housing costs and no family commitments could afford to take; yet benefit-plus payments are widely criticised for being inadequate or exploitative. Other criticisms have been about the quality of the work offered (manual work, or work in areas with poor job prospects) and lack of training; the short length of the placements; and the lack of connection with employers and with the regular labour market. Compulsory work programmes, such as Project Work are seen far less positively, particularly by those given little choice over their work placement who "saw the work as completely irrelevant to their own spheres of employment interest". Recent evidence suggests that so called Intermediate Labour Market programmes which combine work experience paid at the rate for the job with formal training are significantly more popular and effective, especially with the very long term unemployed, than other temporary work programmes (McGregor et al, 1998).

7. Compulsion

Unemployed people and front line staff have mixed attitudes about compulsion. Many agree with the principle and accept it as a safeguard against abuse, yet suggest in practice it is applied inappropriately and sometimes unfairly. What unemployed people most resent is compulsion without a genuine range of choice. For example, it is not the compulsory nature of Restart interviews which is resented so much as the fact that unemployed people (and ES staff) feel that clients' own needs and long term goals are ignored in favour of targets aimed at achieving short-term outcomes. However, although key workers were generally critical of the impact of the "stricter benefit regime", their sympathy with the negative attitude of claimants was tempered by the feeling that an individual "might learn something useful" and they had few reservations about referring clients to mandatory courses.

Providers of compulsory courses said that they were often perceived as a threat or punishment and sessions were sometimes disrupted and often undermined by those who resented being made to go, which in turn prevented others genuinely seeking help from benefiting. One Restart tutor was convinced that the ES referred people to compulsory courses when they suspected them of working in the informal economy.

Amongst clients compulsory job search courses were resented and seen as a waste of time especially by those who were repeat attendees. One major criticism was that the course content was often too broad and of little direct relevance to individual circumstances. The rules for compulsory participation could sometimes become ridiculous, for example, when a person had voluntarily done a similar course only a few weeks earlier. Compulsion without a genuine range of choice was particularly resented, for example when people entering the Project Work programme were given little or no choice over their work experience placement.

Against a background of fear of benefit sanctions for inactivity, some LTU attend anything that is proposed to them. Most LTU participants in the focus groups claimed that they attended compulsory courses in order to prevent loss of benefit not because they would gain anything of value. A few seemed willing to risk the loss of a week's benefits by not attending. One provider in a larger company quoted a regular non-attendance figure of 60% in one area and ES advisers emphasised the high "drop out" rates that occurred between referral and attendance on courses. Much of this was attributed to acceptable factors, such as getting a job or being unwell, but some was thought to reflect significant participation in the informal economy or a regrettable culture of "benefit surfing" that had developed in some communities.

8. Frustration

If one word epitomised the feelings of most of the long term unemployed people and key workers we talked to it was that of frustration. The feeling was expressed by claimants who were not able to find suitable work despite numerous job applications, and the acquisition of work experience and/or training. It was expressed by ES advisers who, because of high caseloads and performance targets, seemed unable to spend enough time with individual claimants to be able to offer the help they felt was needed. They were also frustrated because they often did not have the time they needed to find out about or monitor local projects in order to be able recommend them to claimants. In addition, even when they were aware of an initiative that looked as though it might be beneficial it might not be

viable because of the restrictions imposed by unwieldy benefit regulations. Frustration was also expressed by those delivering contracted ES programmes who had to adhere to rigid specifications and what they thought to be outdated and often inappropriate programme manuals.

9. Evidence from official JSA evaluations

The Chief Executive of the Employment Service has suggested that the findings from official JSA evaluations show that jobseekers have a “generally positive” opinion of Jobcentres (ESC, 1999, para 15). However, a closer reading of the results gives a more mixed picture and reinforces many of the findings from our focus groups. On the positive side, questionnaire responses from nearly 1,500 front line advisers in 1998 found that they now saw themselves as having “a much more proactive and positive labour market role, focused on assisting the jobseeker’s jobsearch” (ESR27, 1999, p.6). However, the performance targets they worked to “get in the way of the new emphasis” and “interfere with listening to jobseekers”, and a broad range of factors restricted the quality and amount of time that could be spent with clients - staffing levels; paperwork load; office performance targets; and the presence of queues (p.3 & 8). The less experienced advisers also had problems with the complexity of the system and those with less than two years on the front line were “much more likely to indicate that their understanding of the benefit incentives is poor and that they do not know how effective the incentives are” (p. 10). The advisers thought that under the JSA regime clients now better understood their responsibilities and obligations and most agreed that they had a good working relationship with unemployed jobseekers and that the vast majority were cooperative. Nevertheless, the fragility of the jobseekers finances and cultural expectations (for example, about what a “proper” job is) limited the degree of change in jobseeker flexibility that could be secured and this problem was exacerbated by “having a high volume of low quality jobs available that jobseekers resist applying for” (p.4). Over half the advisers said they sometimes “turn a blind eye” to entitlement doubts and only a third “believe sanctions and penalties are effective at enforcing compliance with benefit rules and conditions” (p.7).

A qualitative evaluation involving in-depth interviews with 82 clients in Winter 1997 confirmed that the JSA regime had emphasised the conditionality of benefit and clarified claimants’ job search responsibilities (CRD, 1998, p.iv). However, while some “welcomed these changes for bringing transparency and motivation, some resented them as pointlessly coercive, and many were sceptical and ambivalent” (p.i). In practice, regular monitoring of jobsearch seemed to vary widely with fortnightly reviews still largely being “a brief, impersonal transaction focusing on signing the declaration” (p.ii). Some of those who had experienced a formal advisory interview “welcomed the chance to discuss their progress .. and help on offer”. Others “resented what they saw as a hostile and policing tone, and what they felt was an absence of real help” (p. iii). Overall, the clients felt that there had been improvements in the overall approach of the ES but it was still perceived as being reactive rather than proactive and “issues to do with benefit and monitoring of job search were thought to take priority over real practical help” (p.iv).

A survey of over 1,800 JSA clients found that less than 30% reported that their fortnightly jobsearch review lasted longer than six minutes, and 30% had reviews which lasted for two minutes or less (ES, 1998, p.44) Overall 43% reported that there was actually no discussion about jobsearch, rising to over 90% in some offices (p.40). The majority of clients still thought that the aim of the process was to police their activities.

Finally, the results from a much larger survey of client responses to JSA, which interviewed nearly 5,000 claimants in Autumn 1997, reported that the proportion getting jobs between sample selection and interview had risen from 20 to 29% pre and post JSA: although how much was attributable to JSA, an improved labour market or other factors is as yet unclear (Mckay et al, 1999, p.603). Nevertheless the report points to significant short term improvements, more “in some Jobcentres than others”, where clients better understand what is expected of them and the amount of time spent on job search and the number of job applications made has increased. However, there was still clear evidence of the gap between policy and implementation with little change in the way people looked for jobs or their concerns about taking them, and with more than half reporting the their JSAg was not helpful or “had no practical value”, and nearly half of those who had been required to attend a review interview saying they had taken no action as a result of it.

Although there is now broad agreement about the principle that active jobsearch should be the primary focus of the relationship between the ES and the client, there is still too much evidence that JSAg's are being drawn up mechanically and preciptively and, in the words of the Director of the independent Unemployment Unit, “people are often forced into meaningless jobsearch activities that do nothing to enhance their employability and may actually interfere with more constructive activities” (ESC, 1999, para 55). There is little recourse for unemployed people to challenge the content of a JSAg, and front line advisers do not have enough flexibility in negotiating activity agreements that could encourage the development of longer term employability.

11. The New Deals: Learning the lessons?

The success of labour market programmes is largely dependent on the overall state of the labour market but the available evaluation evidence shows that programme interventions, especially involving front line guidance and counselling, can assist the long term unemployed return to work (Martin, 2000; Meager, 1998). The research reported here also shows that the way in which these programmes and benefit regimes are implemented at the front line can be crucial in minimising waste and understanding and maximising their impact.

In developing its new approach towards the long term unemployed the UK Government has grappled with the “implementation gap” and has placed considerable emphasis on changing the way that the ES works. To reduce incoherence and fragmentation the ES is now required to work in partnership with other local agencies and organisations. Its performance targets have been amended to both encourage it to focus on obtaining higher quality job outcomes and to improve its penetration of and share access to the job vacancy market. Most significantly, the Government expects the ES to implement a new balance between the rights and responsibilities of the unemployed and this task of “combining assistance with compulsion, whilst retaining the confidence of its clients” is, according to a House of Commons Select Committee, “one of the biggest challenges facing the ES today” (ESC, 1999, para 53). This challenge is being met in part in the form of a new generation of front line ES personal advisers who have been given greater flexibilities and the task of turning theoretical opportunities and incentives into practical day to day choices. These advisers currently work primarily with New Deal clients and during an initial Gateway or advisory process they aim to identify and tackle barriers and assist with job search. If job placement is not possible for the long term unemployed there is a broad range of mandatory employment and training provision available.

One of the most important developments has been the willingness of the ES to publish, for the first time, the relative success of individual areas and, when controlling for external variables, this has revealed remarkable variations in New Deal performance. This transparency should also be extended to measuring the capabilities and performance of local Jobcentres where the ES has found equivalent variations and acknowledged that the culture and large size, particularly of urban offices, is a key factor in performance and presents a “big challenge” in term of management and delivery of objectives (ESC, 1999, para 14).

In combination with strong labour demand UK unemployment has fallen sharply and the New Deals are enabling more of the long term unemployed to compete for vacancies. Morale in the ES has improved markedly and it seems that the younger long term unemployed in particular have responded positively to the new approach (see, for example, ESC, 1999, para 73; Legard and Ritchie, 1999). However, significant issues and problems continue to emerge in the gap between policy intention and practical implementation. Indeed, the progress of the New Deals has been punctuated by controversies about the degree of local flexibility; about the award and nature of provider contracts; about the involvement and performance of private sector agencies; about the balance between the options; about the numbers of those called to interviews or referred to options who “disappear”; and about the speed with which young unemployed people have been assessed in the Gateway and placed in appropriate support or jobs.

Ironically, as unemployment has fallen and as the ES has begun to assist the groups at most distance from the labour market, they are encountering barriers and revealing weaknesses in other services which, unless tackled, limit the potential for individuals to both take and retain jobs. For example, advisers often find that necessary and appropriate services do not exist. Public transportation systems frequently cannot get people from their homes to the places where there are jobs. Childcare may not be available, or may not be available during non-traditional hours or when children are sick. Few substance abuse or rehabilitation programmes have a strong employment focus. Work based training opportunities for low wage entry-level workers are limited. In the UK one of the most important implementation challenges for the New Deal is to build on the links with transportation, housing, economic development, and other systems that are only now starting to emerge.

However, perhaps the greatest challenge involves tackling what has been described as the ‘revolving door’. Although control group evaluations show that the better designed and resourced programmes of the late 1980s and early 1990s had a significant net impact on job prospects, and that those who participated in work based training were more likely to obtain more secure and better paid work, the evidence also showed that large numbers of participants in even the best programmes were likely to return to unemployment. This ‘revolving door’ effect may reflect labour market realities but it did great damage to the credibility of training and employment programmes amongst the unemployed and managing and minimising its impact will be one of the major tests facing Labour's New Deals. In this context, particular emphasis is now being placed on improving job retention strategies, to ensure that New Deal participants keep the jobs they enter; on the “follow through”, to get effective assistance to those who come to the end of their placements without a job; and to progression, where skill training and follow up support can assist those who do take entry level jobs to be able to make progress to higher paid and more secure employment.

If the New Deals are delivered flexibly, and as intended, they will help to improve the

employability and job prospects of the unemployed and more effectively bridge the “implementation gap”. However, translating worthy policy objectives and theoretical design into day to day practice is fraught with difficulties and unless the programmes open access to worthwhile employment opportunities they will struggle to retain front line credibility, especially in areas of high unemployment.

Table 1: The JSA regime 2000/2001

Time	Event	Content	Possible Referral
Week 1	New Jobseeker Interview (46 mins)	* Interview by ES Adviser * Jobseekers Agreement (JSAg) * Labour Market (LM) based discussion * Permitted Period (if any) (up to 13 weeks when search can be restricted to 'usual occupation')	* New Deal if returning to JSA within 13 weeks * Job finder plus caseloading provision if returning to JSA after completing or leaving WBLA
Each 2 Weeks	Fortnightly job search review (4.5 mins up to 6 months unemployment, 7 mins thereafter)	* LM based discussion of methods used to seek work * JSA eligibility discussion	
Sometime between 1 and 13 weeks	End of Permitted Period Review (20 mins)	* Review and revision of JSAg * LM based discussion * JSA eligibility discussion	
Week 13	13 week interview (20 mins)	* If no Permitted Period review, LM based discussion and review of JSAg * JSA eligibility discussion	
Week 26	Restart Interview (40 minutes) (repeated every 26 weeks)	* LM based discussion * JSA eligibility discussion * training and other programme opportunities (some mandatory)	
	Initial New Deal Interview (those aged 18 to 24)+	* New Deal Opportunities * LM based discussion	* New Deal Gateway and subsequent options of subsidised employment, full time education or training, or work in the voluntary sector of environmental task force.

+ The New Deal for those over 25 is a less resource intensive set of options (including advice, training and employment subsidies) which is mandatory after two years of unemployment. The Government has announced that it will enhance the advisory process for this group and will further "substantially strengthen" this New Deal in April 2001 with "high quality, job-focused opportunities, including job search help, training and work experience".

Table 2: Main GB Jobsearch and Training Programmes 1996/1997

Caseload Interviews	A series of structured interviews carried out on a one-to-one basis between an ES adviser (ESA) and an unemployed person aimed at identifying the best way of getting work. In 1994, a 1-2-1 programme was introduced for young people aged between 18 and 25 who had been out of work for over a year. This was followed by a similar Jobfinder programme in 1996/97 aimed at those out of work for over two years.
Jobclub	Aimed at unemployed people who had usually been out of work for over six months. Participation could last for several months and involves guidance with job search skills, intensive job search activity and access to resources such as telephones, newspapers and stationery. Jobclub attendance was usually voluntary.
Jobplan Workshop	A compulsory one week course, introduced in 1993, aimed at helping long-term unemployed people to set job goals and compete successfully for employment and training programme opportunities. Jobseekers were normally referred to Jobplan Workshop at their 12-month Restart interview.
Project Work	A pilot scheme introduced in 1996 aimed at 18 to 50 year olds unemployed for two years or more. It combined an initial period of up to 13 weeks intensive jobsearch assistance with an ESA followed by a 13 week mandatory work experience placement where participants received their benefit plus £10 a week.
Programme Centres	These were piloted in 1996/97 and extended to other regions the following year. The Centres have replaced rigidly structured jobsearch programmes, such as Jobclubs, with a modular approach where clients are assessed and given more tailored assistance. They also have resource areas where clients attend for agreed periods to actively apply for jobs and other opportunities.
Restart Courses	A compulsory two-week course, introduced in 1986, lasting two weeks combining half-day workshops with linked jobsearch activity. Jobseekers were normally referred to a Restart Course at their 24 month Restart interview.
Restart Interviews	A mandatory counselling interview which unemployed people are required to attend after each six months of unemployment. The aim is to review the job search activities of the unemployed person and an adviser will offer help from a 'menu' of programme opportunities to those who need extra assistance.
Workwise	Intensive compulsory four week job search assistance courses aimed at people aged between 18 and 25 who had been unemployed for over a year. Introduced nationally in 1995 and referred to as Worklink in Scotland.
TfW/WBLA	Training for Work. TfW was available to those aged between 18 and 63 who had been unemployed for 6 months or more. In 1997/98 it was replaced by the New Deal for those aged between 18 and 24 and by Work Based Learning for Adults for the long term unemployed aged over 25.
Work Trials	Work Trials enable Jobseekers to work for potential employers on a trial basis for up to three weeks. Jobseekers continue to receive their Jobseekers Allowance plus travel and meal expenses. A Jobseeker must normally have been unemployed for at least six months prior to starting. If for any reason the Work Trial is unsuccessful, the Jobseeker continues to claim JSA and there are usually no benefit penalties.
Workstart	Pilot employment subsidy schemes aimed at the long-term unemployed. The basic model was introduced in 1993 and offered employers six-month subsidies of £60 a week for taking on people who had been unemployed for over two years. Other variations of payments and client groups were tried between 1995 and 1997 and similar employment subsidies remain a key element of the New Deals for the young and older long term unemployed

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