

Employer Engagement and Jobcentre Plus

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Introduction

Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs), introduced in 2007, aimed to increase the propensity of employers to recruit disadvantaged people into work and were part of a broader effort to connect workless individuals with vacancies, overcoming barriers to work and improving the job matching services offered by Jobcentre Plus and its partners. LEPs were originally aimed at disadvantaged jobseekers who had been out of work for six months or more or who fell into a Jobcentre Plus priority group. The policy emphasis changed with the recession to include newly unemployed Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to evaluate LEPs. This evaluation has centred around two waves of qualitative interviews with a range of personnel: national Jobcentre Plus, DWP and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) staff; Jobcentre Plus district and local staff in eight areas in England, Scotland and Wales; local and national employers; customers; and training providers and other stakeholders at a district level.

The main aims of the research were to explore the successful elements of LEPs, to ascertain why employers had engaged with LEPs and what they had gained from doing so, to look at the impact of LEPs on partnership working and to determine which customers had benefited from taking part. The research also examined the introduction, implementation and organisation of LEPs at national, district and local levels.

Findings

Organisation of LEPs

After the initial implementation period, the delivery of LEPs became integrated into general Jobcentre Plus core business. District Employer Engagement Managers (DEEMs) tended to be responsible for monitoring employer engagement across districts and liaising closely with (and in some cases managing) Labour Market Recruitment Advisers (LMRAs).

LMRAs were key to employer engagement and sign-up to LEPs at the local office level. Their main responsibilities included: promoting LEPs and Jobcentre Plus services to employers; liaising with employers and handling their vacancies and recruitment needs; collecting and disseminating information about employer sign-ups. LMRAs also liaised closely with Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs), passing on information about LEP vacancies and the requirements of local employers to assist with customer referrals.

The focus at local and district office level in relation to LEPs has primarily been process- and target-driven with little evidence of a strategic approach. For example, the research found no strong evidence that Jobcentre Plus or its partners were identifying growth sectors and targeting LEP employer sign-up in these sectors or integrating LEP Pre-Employment Training (PET) provision with local provision pipelines. Although this was not a distinct requirement of LEP policy, there was also little emphasis placed on the quality of LEP job outcomes, i.e. length of job, sustainability of the job, or opportunity for progression at the local level. Significant resources were directed at the validation process for LEP job outcomes in several local offices and districts, which was perceived by many staff working in these offices

to be overly burdensome. However, the decision to introduce extra validation checks was taken at the regional level and was not part of national policy.

LEPs were perceived by Jobcentre Plus staff with a more strategic remit to have strengthened their links with partners (mainly training providers), although LEPs had rarely resulted in the formation of new partnerships. Most training providers engaged in LEP PET, and many employers signing up to LEPs, were already working with Jobcentre Plus.

One of the main advantages of LEPs was the way they promoted longer-term relationships between Jobcentre Plus and employers, which allowed a much better understanding of their needs. Most Jobcentre Plus staff reported that LEPs had improved both the quality and professionalism of the service they offered to employers.

Employer engagement

The primary reason offered by employers for engaging with LEPs was the business need to fill vacancies. Employers also reported that the help available from Jobcentre Plus to assist with the recruitment process was an important driver. Many employers welcomed the free Jobcentre Plus service: free advertising and help with matching and screening candidates, sifting applications and arranging interviews. Some employers, and particularly large employers, were also motivated to take part in LEPs because of their corporate social responsibility.

Employers reported that the most effective way to market LEPs was by word-of-mouth and direct contact with Jobcentre Plus staff. Many employers had recommended LEPs to other employers during business events. Several employers stressed the importance of having a single point of contact at Jobcentre Plus, which helped them to navigate a large and often confusing organisation.

Employers reported mixed views about LEP candidates. Some employers were positive and thought that Jobcentre Plus had spent time and effort identifying and referring job-ready candidates. A number of employers reported that the quality of candidates for LEP vacancies was improving as

they worked more closely with Jobcentre Plus to improve screening and matching procedures and PET provision. However, in some areas employers were concerned about the variable quality of candidates.

Employers were using work trials, work placements, PET and guaranteed interviews as part of LEPs. Many employers were involved in designing PET courses. PET was generally considered to be a successful way of engaging employers and securing participation in LEPs.

Pre-employment training

PET tended to operate in two ways: as bespoke training for an employer with several vacancies (usually a large employer) or more generic and occupation- or sector-specific training for multiple employers (e.g. in security or social care). PET tended to be short at around two-weeks duration, and was aimed at customers who were job-ready but who needed to gain specific occupational skills or knowledge such as manual handling or health and safety, or job interview skills, etc. PET was not appropriate for customers who were further from the labour market and who had more complex or entrenched barriers to work.

In addition to offering jobseekers vocational, soft and job-search skills, PET was also attractive to employers: they were able to meet potential candidates during the training and had a large pool of potential recruits from which to select.

Customers

Customers' experiences of LEPs were positive when they had resulted in employment, or if they had progressed in some way towards employment, for example, attended an open day with an employer or a work trial, or participated in PET. Other customers remained too far away from the labour market for LEP activities to have made a difference; their barriers to work remained entrenched and required alternative forms of help.

Conclusions and recommendations

Employers, Jobcentre Plus and training providers have worked closely together on LEPs and the services provided, and organisational understanding between these stakeholders has been improved. Many employers have reported positively on the service they received and the quality of candidates coming through for vacancies. However, few new employers have come on board as a result of LEPs, and some employers continued to report poor-quality candidates being referred to them.

The key recommendations arising from this study in relation to employer engagement are:

- Jobcentre Plus needs to maintain links with existing employers but also engage new employers and work closely with them to understand their recruitment needs.
- Employer engagement staff within Jobcentre Plus are required to maintain links with employers and, wherever possible, these staff should provide a single point of contact for employers to provide continuity of service.

- Employer-facing staff within Jobcentre Plus need to maintain regular contact with customer-facing staff to ensure that employers' needs are effectively communicated to improve the quality of referrals.
- More generally, Jobcentre Plus must take a strategic overview of provision available locally to customers to prepare them for work: provision pipelines, including PET, are required to meet their needs and get people back in the labour market.

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You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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