

Research report

Employer Engagement and Jobcentre Plus

by Anne Bellis, Maria Sigala and Sara Dewson

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 742

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Anne Bellis, Maria Sigala and Sara Dewson

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Abbreviations

CETL	Customer Engagement Team Leader
CSP	City Strategy Partnership
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DAM	District Account Manager
DEEM	District Employer Engagement Manager
DERM	District External Relations Manager
DLEPC	District LEP Champion
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
FE	Further Education
FND	Flexible New Deal
IB	Incapacity Benefit
IES	Integrated Employment and Skills
IS	Income Support
JRFND	Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LEP	Local Employment Partnership
LEPC	LEP Co-ordinator
LMRA	Labour Market Recruitment Adviser
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
PA	Personal Adviser
PET	Pre-Employment Training
PCG	Priority Customer Group
SME	Small- and medium-sized enterprise

Summary

The DWP commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to evaluate Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs), which were introduced in 2007. LEPs 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 customer group. The policy emphasis was adjusted with the advent of the recession to include newly unemployed Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers.

The 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 first round of interviews took place in autumn 2008 and the second wave in the early part of 2010.

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. The key findings of the research are:

Organisation of Local Employment Partnerships

After the initial implementation period, the delivery of LEPs became integrated into general Jobcentre Plus core business. District Employer Engagement Managers 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; and 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 very 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: the emphasis at the local level was primarily to open up as many locally available vacancies to local jobless people as possible. Although this was not a distinct requirement of LEP policy, there was also very 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, believing some Jobcentre Plus staff were referring the wrong people for interviews.

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 overall as a result of LEPs, although this had started to change in recent months with more small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) involvement, 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 and 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, it is important that Jobcentre Plus takes 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.

1 Introduction

In 2008, the DWP commissioned the IES to undertake an evaluation of LEPs¹.

LEPs were announced in the 2007 Budget as a new way for Jobcentre Plus to engage with employers, to the advantage of relatively hard-to-help customer groups. It was envisaged that LEPs would constitute a mutually advantageous ‘deal’ with certain employers whereby:

- employers would improve access to their vacancies for disadvantaged Jobcentre Plus customers, for example, by offering guaranteed job interviews, reviewing their application procedures and offering Work Trial and work placement opportunities;
- Jobcentre Plus would take steps to improve their understanding of these employers’ requirements, and in so far as individuals from their target customer groups fell short of them, would also improve their employability through measures like customised PET to ensure that they would meet the job requirements.

The scope of LEPs expanded significantly over time in relation to:

- employer targeting (LEPs initially involved only a handful of large employers in the retail sector but subsequently opened up to all employers in all sectors);
- jobseeker characteristics (LEPs were initially aimed only at those unemployed for over six months and were then opened up to all Jobcentre Plus customers).

The purpose of LEPs was to increase the propensity of employers to recruit disadvantaged people into work, and a formal commitment to achieve 250,000 job outcomes for them through LEP by the end of 2010 was put in place. But, as labour market conditions deteriorated, Jobcentre Plus made a further commitment to achieve 93,000 job outcomes for the newly unemployed and 107,000 job outcomes for disadvantaged customer groups during the 2009/10 operational year. LEPs formed part of a wider programme of help designed to improve the functioning of the labour market by connecting workless individuals with vacancies, tackling barriers to employment and enhancing the effectiveness of the job matching processes of Jobcentre Plus and its partners. LEPs came to an end in summer 2010.

1.1 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The aims and objectives of the evaluation have changed over time. At the outset, it was agreed that the research should have sufficient flexibility to change as ministerial concerns and departmental policy developed. Because of the change in government, this report is intended to look at the key lessons from LEPs to inform employer engagement strategy in the future. The main areas of interest are:

- Which elements of the LEP ‘package’ have been most successful and why?
- Why have employers engaged with LEPs?
- What have employers gained from taking part in LEPs?

¹ Local Employment Partnerships have been abbreviated to LEPs throughout this report although they should not be confused with Local Enterprise Partnerships, which are now being established as joint local authority/business-led organisations that will promote local economic development.

- What effect has the economic downturn had on employers' propensity to recruit through LEPs?
- Has the LEP experience encouraged the development of new ways of partnership working for Jobcentre Plus and employers?
- Which customers have benefited from the LEP experience and in what ways?

1.2 Research methodology

The main thrust of the research has been a series of discussions with key actors and stakeholders involved with LEPs over two main points in time. These respondents have included²:

- national Jobcentre Plus, DWP and LSC staff;
- Jobcentre Plus district and local office staff, including District Account Managers, District Employer Engagement Managers, District External Relations Managers, Third Party Provision Managers, LMRAs, Customer Engagement Team Leaders (CETLs), LEP Co-ordinators (LEPC) and LEP Champions;
- local and national employers;
- customers;
- training providers and other stakeholders at a district level.

Interviews have been clustered within eight Jobcentre Plus districts in England, Wales and Scotland and fieldwork has been carried out at two points in time (in the autumn of 2008 and the winter of 2010). Most interviews were carried out face-to-face with a few taking place by telephone where respondents were unable to meet in person. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour (usually shorter interviews for customers and employers and longer interviews for Jobcentre Plus staff and training providers). Employers were recruited via Jobcentre Plus employer engagement staff and included those who had been involved with LEPs. Customers taking part in the research were recruited via the employer and training provider interviews, i.e. customers who had gained employment via LEPs or who were engaged on PET with training providers. All respondents were told about the purpose of the research and guaranteed anonymity before the interviews took place, and consented to participate. Researchers wrote up notes after each interview and also prepared an overview report for each district. Workshops were also held at the end of each round of fieldwork to discuss the key findings coming from the research and to identify the main themes.

The main issues on which the research has focused have centred around the introduction, implementation and organisation of LEPs at national, district and local levels. The research has explored the LEP 'offer' and the outcomes from it. The research has also sought to understand more about employer engagement, the reasons why employers have taken part and what benefits they have accrued from participating in LEPs. The research has also looked in more detail at the provision of PET and customer readiness for work.

The findings from this research are entirely qualitative and specific to the areas in which the research was carried out; they do not represent the experience of LEPs or employer engagement in the round.

² The structure and volume of fieldwork undertaken at each wave of the research is shown in the Appendix.

1.3 Structure of report

This report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 discusses the organisation of LEPs in Jobcentre Plus districts and local offices.
- Chapter 3 explores employer engagement.
- Chapter 4 looks in more detail at PET.
- Chapter 5 discusses the impact of LEPs on customers.
- Chapter 6 offers conclusions and recommendations.

2 Organisation of Local Employment Partnerships

2.1 Background

Arrangements for delivering LEPs were being put in place at the same time as other measures, notably when the revised Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) and the IES system were coming online. In June 2008, LEPs became part of a suite of government initiatives to better integrate the skills and employment offer to both individuals and employers. In line with this, the content and delivery of pre-employment training became more standardised, forming part of the Jobcentre Plus enhanced offer to employers. PET would normally consist of a two-week course, developed in association with employers and (in England) funded mainly by the LSC (since replaced by the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency).

From April 2009, Jobcentre Plus significantly boosted its partnership work with employers by increasing the number of employer engagement personnel working in the field including LEPCs, LMRAs and District Employer Engagement Managers (DEEMs). A new post of 'LEP Champion' was created for each Jobcentre Plus district, to act as a key communicator and local expert on LEP matters.

A further development at this time was the introduction of the recruitment subsidy, with £1,000 paid to employers who took on unemployed people who had been claiming JSA for six months or longer. The subsidy was delivered through an individual voucher system for low-volume recruitment. For bulk recruitment with large-scale employers, the subsidy was marketed as part of the LEP offer and managed through Jobcentre Plus LEP and account management staff.

The following sections explore in further detail how LEPs were being organised at the district and local levels within the eight Jobcentre Plus districts included in this research.

2.2 Organisation of Local Employment Partnerships at district/local level

Interviews with Jobcentre Plus staff at district level found that much of the organisation and delivery of LEPs had been integrated into general business or core working practices, with responsibilities devolved to certain key staff. Although arrangements varied between districts, there was a degree of consistency about the key members of the LEP teams and their designated responsibilities, which are outlined below.

- District External Relations Managers (DERMs) were usually responsible for developing LEP stakeholder and partner relationships at the strategic level.
- DEEMs tended to work more at the operational level and primarily took responsibility for orchestrating and monitoring LEP employer engagement. They also liaised closely with networks of LMRAs and/or centrally managed the LMRAs.
- District Account Managers (DAMs) were usually working with local branches of national employers, larger employers in the area, or larger volumes of vacancies.

- LEPCs provided a number of functions, mainly at the district level. The role in most districts appeared to be mainly administrative, with a focus on collating and monitoring data on LEPs, validation and tracking outcomes and performance against targets. The role could also include communicating LEP information across districts.
- The new LEP Champion role, created in 2009, appeared in most districts to focus primarily on raising the profile of LEPs to employers (e.g. through attendance at conferences or networking meetings) and communicating key messages about the services and incentives available through LEPs, such as the recruitment subsidy. In some districts, the Champion took on the role of ‘LEP expert’, which could include giving training and guidance to LMRAs and advisers, to ensure they were up to speed with the most recent developments and procedures. In some districts LEP Champions were more involved in the administrative processes relating to the validation of outcomes.
- LMRAs were generally the key Jobcentre Plus staff working on employer engagement and LEP sign-up at the local office level. The numbers of LMRAs engaged in LEPs varied from one district to another, usually depending on the size of the district. Their main responsibilities included: promoting LEPs and Jobcentre Plus services to employers; liaising with employers about their vacancies and recruitment needs; and collating and disseminating information about employer sign-ups. The LMRAs also passed on information to PAs about LEP vacancies and the requirements of local employers. Although some LMRAs were managed centrally by the DEEM, it was reported that, on the whole, local Jobcentre Plus offices were fairly autonomous and self-managing in relation to LEP-related activities.

There were variations in the organisation and delivery of LEPs, depending on the size and characteristics of the district. In many areas, responsibility for LEPs was clustered geographically, with key members of staff (e.g. DAMs) looking after different geographical ‘patches’, with regard to employer engagement and account management. Although it was primarily the responsibility of DAMs to sign up large employers, in some districts, delivery of LEP activities could then be devolved to staff in local offices, usually LMRAs. DAMs also tended to have a greater role in LEPs that involved multiple vacancies and/or PET, while LMRAs tended to deal more with local companies and SMEs.

The focus at a local and district office level in most areas has primarily been process- and target-driven. There was little evidence of a strategic approach to LEPs; e.g. identifying growth sectors and targeting employer sign-up, matching the supply-side with demand, identifying barriers to work for customers, integrating LEP/PET provision with other local provision pipelines: the emphasis at the local level was primarily to open up as many locally available vacancies to local jobless people as possible. Although this was not part of LEP policy, there was also little emphasis on the quality of LEP outcomes (e.g. length of job, sustainability of job, progression opportunities, etc.) at the local level.

2.3 Views of Jobcentre Plus staff on Local Employment Partnership processes

2.3.1 Changes over time to organisation of Local Employment Partnerships

As discussed above, most respondents felt that LEPs had largely become embedded in normal working practices within Jobcentre Plus districts. However, in the early stages of the research, some staff considered that LEPs had been introduced in a ‘haphazard’ and ‘rushed’ way, so that in some districts, it had taken time to understand the LEP concept. In particular, as organisational structures were put in place at the same time as national employers were being signed up, this had been the cause of significant delays and frustrations.

Reports from some districts also indicated that LEPs, when first introduced to Jobcentre Plus staff, took a while to become embedded. As a result, many PAs did not always seem to fully understand LEPs, and this often resulted in poor quality referrals to vacancies or provision and in some cases, poor customer awareness of LEP opportunities.

However, later interviews indicated that LEP processes and internal communications in most districts had significantly improved over time. There was general agreement among Jobcentre Plus staff that LEPs had become much more mainstreamed and there was more a sense of ‘working as a team’ around LEPs. LMRAs were communicating more effectively with other Jobcentre Plus staff, particularly advisers, for example through asking for support around job outcome validation.

However, it was felt by staff in some districts that the ‘integration’ of LEPs could still be variable, with advisers in some offices being more aware of and up to speed with LEPs than others. This could particularly be an issue in districts that covered large rural areas, where communicating messages about LEPs was more difficult across smaller local offices.

2.3.2 Dilution of the original purpose of Local Employment Partnerships

There was a widespread feeling across the districts visited that the extension of LEPs to all customer groups in 2009 had also resulted in a dilution of the original purpose of LEPs, i.e. to support the most disadvantaged customer groups into employment. Many staff expressed concerns that Jobcentre Plus had now become more focused on reaching the LEP targets for job outcomes, rather than maintaining and improving the quality of service offered to both employers and customers. According to one LEPC, the changed policy had generated ‘a big new industry of performance capture’, which had taken the focus away from developing more meaningful interventions to benefit the Jobcentre Plus priority groups.

This point was reinforced by staff at the local level, who acknowledged that the change of focus had made it easier to sell LEPs to employers because of the availability of a wider range of candidates:

‘...being a bit cynical about it, you could say it made selling it slightly easier because it opened up to day one customers, whereas before we were taking six months plus, people with disabilities, lone parents...the much more hard to place groups...it’s made it easier or quicker for us to fill the vacancy and register a Local Employment Partnership start.’

(LMRA)

The policy intent for LEPs was for employers to work in partnership with Jobcentre Plus to provide priority customers with an opportunity to get back into employment, whilst developing the skills to stay and progress in work. As part of this employers may have changed their recruitment practices so that Jobcentre Plus’ Priority Customer Groups (PCGs) would not be at a disadvantage when applying for vacancies or to work with Jobcentre Plus to develop pre-employment training in order to up-skill those customers. There was no requirement for the job to be permanent or last for a specific length of time, although voluntary work and self-employment did not count as the job had to meet legislation for the national minimum wage. Measuring the length of time in work was not a Management Information requirement for performance reporting. Jobcentre Plus administrative records show that, during the three-year life of LEPs, more than 750,000 people found work in over 190,000 workplaces. Over 500,000 of these customers were from PCGs 1 and 2, for example, lone parents, long-term unemployed of six months or more, in receipt of Incapacity Benefit (IB), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or Income Support (IS), and other disadvantaged customers.

2.3.3 Increased administrative burden

There was a fairly general consensus across the districts that LEPs had significantly increased the administrative workload of the Jobcentre Plus staff involved at various levels, particularly following the extension. Many interviewees expressed concern about the additional pressure on time and resources created by the validation process, which was seen to have grown in intensity over time:

'...creating the statistics...does take up an awful lot of time – the validation process has just grown and grown. We do it at district level, at regional level and at head office level as well...and we use an awful lot of resource just capturing outcomes that have already happened and I think a lot of those resources might be better spent working with employers directly.'

(DEEM)

Some respondents felt strongly that the resources expended on the process of claiming and validating outcomes would have been better invested in more customer- or employer-facing activities³:

'...in terms of the amount of resource that goes into maintaining good performance around validation that is an issue...that in some ways deflects us from doing more good work with employers...'

(DERM)

Staff in some districts reported frustrations with the 48-hour call back (vacancy) process. Once an employer has placed a vacancy, LMRAs are required to call them within 48 hours to get any further outstanding details and sign them up to a LEP if they have not already done so. This process was perceived as overly bureaucratic and detracting from the main purpose: to provide a service to local employers and to fill their vacancies with suitable recruits, particularly with the requirement to try and sign employers up to LEPs if they had not already done so.

On the other hand, the change from a written to a verbal LEP agreement with employers was generally felt to have made employer sign-up easier and less bureaucratic overall.

2.4 Local Employment Partnerships and partnership working

Jobcentre Plus staff with a more strategic remit felt that LEPs had helped to strengthen their existing links with key partners (mainly training providers) in the district and had led to improved communication and collaborative working. However, there was little evidence that LEPs had resulted in the establishment of new partnerships. Most PET providers had worked with Jobcentre Plus before and many employers that had engaged in LEPs were already users of Jobcentre Plus services.

In the later stages, collaboration with employers and training providers was reported generally to have improved in most districts, largely as a result of regular, ongoing communication to organise PET. Whereas, previously, there had been a more competitive relationship between training providers, LEPs were seen to have introduced a more co-ordinated and transparent approach. Jobcentre Plus often approached training providers directly to put together PET courses and then worked closely with them to ensure a steady flow of customers to take part in the courses; relationships with providers were generally perceived to have strengthened over time.

³ The validation process was determined by regional and district offices, not national policy, and some regions and districts introduced additional checks in order to improve their overall validation rates.

In some districts, LEPs were seen to fit in strategically with a number of other initiatives, particularly where high levels of deprivation and unemployment had attracted various funding streams, (such as City Strategy and European Social Fund funding), which Jobcentre Plus and its partners could access to support employability training for customers. Location within a City Strategy Partnership (CSP) area seemed to be particularly advantageous in encouraging this collaborative approach. In one district, for example, the LEP team worked very closely with the CSP around employer engagement and the development of tailored employability and skills programmes with employers and training providers. The CSP team was co-located in the Jobcentre Plus offices, which facilitated more effective partnership working.

2.5 Value added of Local Employment Partnerships

According to Jobcentre Plus staff, one main advantage of LEPs was the way they were helping the organisation to develop longer-term working relationships with employers and a better understanding of their needs. It provided an ‘umbrella’ for all Jobcentre Plus employer engagement activities and was a valuable tool for marketing their services to employers. In addition, LEPs had helped to provide more tangible evidence of job outcomes and customers’ routes into work and had introduced a more systematic way of monitoring performance and job outcomes.

Most Jobcentre Plus staff interviewed were confident that LEPs had improved the quality and professionalism of the service they were able to offer to employers. In many districts, it was felt that the relationship between Jobcentre Plus and employers had improved as a result.

Despite concerns about changes to the original purpose of LEPs following the extension, many districts reported that they were still reaching the priority groups and were continuing to meet their job outcome targets for long-term unemployed people. There was evidence of employers (particularly in the public sector) with an ongoing commitment to supporting the needs of disadvantaged groups, such as lone parents and people on incapacity benefits:

‘There are employers out there who are keen on helping people who have been out of work for longer periods of time.’

(LEP Champion)

3 Employer engagement

This chapter first of all considers the different types of employers engaging with LEPs and the level of their engagement. It identifies the key drivers of engagement and reasons for employer participation and the impact of the recruitment subsidy. The chapter goes on to explore the effectiveness of different employer engagement strategies, as well as employer views of LEPs and the service offered by Jobcentre Plus. Finally, it considers the main outcomes of employer engagement for Jobcentre Plus, employers and customers.

3.1 Types of employers engaging with Local Employment Partnerships

The main employers engaged with LEPs in the early stages tended to be established Jobcentre Plus users and mainly larger organisations in the private sector, although there were a number of examples of employers in the public sector (most notably local authorities and NHS Trusts) using PET and other LEP services as part of their recruitment strategies. Over time, all types of employers (large, medium and smaller employers from all sectors) have started to take up LEPs.

Jobcentre Plus districts reported that they had begun to make more progress in recent months in encouraging smaller employers to sign up to LEP. For one (largely rural) district, the LEP provided an opportunity to consolidate business support services already offered to SMEs, which constituted the majority of employers in the district. In another area, the employer engagement team had themselves identified a need to make stronger links with SMEs and had addressed this by setting up an SME recruitment service. Five new staff had been recruited to develop this service which was beginning to pay off in terms of raising their profile with SMEs and encouraging them to sign up to LEPs. National policy changes had also encouraged districts and local staff to target smaller employers and offer a more customised recruitment service to them.

3.2 Drivers of engagement

The main rationale for employers to engage with LEPs was the business need to fill vacancies. However, employers also cited the support available from Jobcentre Plus to assist with the recruitment process as a key driver. A commonly cited reason for participation in LEPs given in interviews with both large and small employers was the appeal of a free recruitment package, including such services as: advertising vacancies, matching and screening candidates, sifting applications and arranging interviews. These services were particularly attractive to SMEs who often lacked the capacity to manage the recruitment process themselves:

'I think it's being their HR...because times have changed you'll get so many people applying for that one job and they just can't physically cope with the number of applications coming through, so helping them with that...and also I think the extra advice because sometimes you'll get a small company and they only need to fill a job once every year or once every couple of years and they just don't know how to write that advert so being there to do that for them and advising them on what to put in and the must-haves that they need for that job, I think that's a big help.'

(LEPC)

The offer of a free recruitment service also appealed to many large employers, such as retail companies planning to open a new branch in the district. It was reported that, in the current economic climate, many firms were looking to reduce their cost base, including fees they would previously have paid to recruitment or employment agencies.

Many large employers, both public and private sector, were also motivated by their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies and a commitment to improving employment opportunities for people from local disadvantaged communities:

'...there remain employers out there with a social conscience...it's a surprising number of employers out there who do want to give people a chance.'

(DERM)

For some employers, LEP suited both their social inclusion and cost reduction agendas. One respondent from a local authority commented that, although regeneration and social inclusion was their primary motivation for participating, the LEP also fitted in well with their need to cut down on recruitment costs.

Work trials were also cited as an incentive for many employers. Some small employers, for example, liked to make use of work trials as a 'safety net' to minimise risks to themselves and the employee, before offering a more permanent contract.

3.2.1 Role of the recruitment subsidy

Across the districts included in the research, it appeared that Jobcentre Plus staff were routinely promoting the recruitment subsidy to employers signing up to LEP. However, the overall perception was that take-up had not been as high as expected, as employers were generally more interested in the quality of the candidate and getting the right person for the job. The subsidy could, therefore, be seen as a 'happy bonus' for the employer if the customer proved to be a suitable candidate.

This message was reinforced by a survey, carried out in one district, of employers who had used the recruitment subsidy. The findings indicated that it had not had a significant influence on their recruitment strategies. In another district, larger employers were reported to consider the recruitment subsidy as not worth the paperwork involved in claiming it, or to not make a distinction between LEP employees and others.

Although it was recognised that the recruitment subsidy could offer more of an incentive to smaller employers, the overall consensus was that it was not viewed as a key driver to recruitment.

3.3 Impact of the recession

There was agreement across the districts that the recession had had an impact on the overall number of jobs available. Some sectors had been more badly affected than others, such as construction, hospitality and manufacturing. In one district, it was reported that large employers in manufacturing and retail had not recruited new staff for over a year. In another district, some LEP employers in both the private and voluntary sectors had only been able to offer work placements rather than paid work – although there were accounts of how this experience had helped customers into jobs elsewhere. However, the availability of entry-level jobs in other sectors was reported to be holding up well, such as the care sector, customer services and call centres.

It was also generally reported that the recession was bringing about a change in the profile of the Jobcentre Plus customer group now coming within the LEP category, with an increased number of more highly-qualified people, who had recently been made redundant. As employers now had the

luxury of being able to recruit from a wider pool of applicants and select those with higher-level skills, this was making it more difficult for long-term unemployed people with complex barriers to compete in a shrinking labour market. As one Jobcentre Plus manager pointed out, the LEP offer might not be necessarily strong enough to convince some employers, particularly SMEs, to recruit Jobcentre Plus customers likely to require additional training or support:

'The bottom line is that SMEs work lean and they cannot carry staff, so the whole concept of giving somebody a chance and training them up carries a risk.'

(DEEM)

Despite this, there were various examples given of employers who had specifically targeted disadvantaged customer groups for certain job opportunities. For example:

- one large private company had recruited a number of lone parents for part-time jobs and had targeted this group through Sure Start centres;
- a large public-sector organisation had particularly targeted the long-term unemployed and people on incapacity benefits for PET training and had successfully recruited many of the participants.

3.4 Local Employment Partnership vacancies

An early phase of the research identified that the majority of LEP vacancies were for entry-level jobs in sectors experiencing recruitment shortages, such as retail, hospitality, health and social care, security and customer service (call) centres. This finding remained consistent throughout the evaluation.

However, some districts later reported an increase in higher-level jobs now falling into the LEP category, such as managerial posts. This was partly seen as due to the LEP extension and the fact that Jobcentre Plus were able to cast the net wider. The wider range of LEP vacancies being filled was also attributed to the impact of the recession (see above) and the subsequent changes in the customer group:

'...with the change with the recession we now have a lot more customers who are at a professional level and people that we feel more able to match up to jobs.'

(DEEM)

3.5 Employer engagement strategies and employer views of the Jobcentre Plus service

Overall, it appeared that LEPs had provided new impetus to Jobcentre Plus, and particularly local offices, to provide a more comprehensive and professional recruitment service to employers. LEPs were broadly welcomed by Jobcentre Plus personnel, who saw the initiative as representing a return to a more employer-responsive service.

Jobcentre Plus staff at district level employed a wide range of methods to engage with employers, including emails, phone calls, meetings, etc. to discuss their recruitment needs and requirements. They also organised presentations and events, such as employer breakfasts. Some Jobcentre Plus respondents emphasised the importance of face-to-face contact in order to develop a more personal relationship with the employer.

This point was reinforced by employers, who reported that the most important and effective ways of marketing LEPs, from their point of view, had been word-of-mouth and as a result of direct contact and engagement, particularly from DAMs and LMRAs. Many employers could recall attending launch events, during which they could learn about LEPs and hear about other employers' experiences.

Many employers reported that they had recommended LEPs (in particular PET) to other companies during networking and business events. These employers were so satisfied with their LEP experiences that they had recommended them to other business contacts.

At the local level, the role of the LMRA was key to the process of making initial contact with employers and signing them up to LEP. The responsibilities of LMRAs typically included:

- liaising with employers about their vacancies and recruitment needs;
- promoting LEPs to employers and explaining what services were available;
- capturing information about which employers had verbally agreed to participate in LEP and passing this up to district level;
- liaising with PAs about which employers were signed up to LEP and the LEP vacancies becoming available locally. In some districts, the LMRAs were offering regular briefings to PAs and other staff about local labour market and employer requirements.

In terms of the signing-up process itself, most respondents commented that the initial written agreement between employer and Jobcentre Plus had been burdensome and something of a disincentive. It was generally felt that the change to a verbal agreement, and the introduction of less stringent criteria, had helped to simplify the process and make it less onerous for employers.

Overall feedback from employers to Jobcentre Plus about LEP had been mainly positive and this was supported by positive views expressed in employer interviews. As already discussed, one of the main benefits from the employer perspective was being able to access the Jobcentre Plus recruitment service free of charge, thus reducing the costs of their own recruitment process.

One employer (a large hotel chain) gave an example of the Jobcentre Plus recruitment service offered prior to a new hotel opening in the district. Firstly, Jobcentre Plus arranged a recruitment day for candidates to meet their prospective employer. They also screened applications and laid on some pre-employment training in customer service skills.

Many employers said that they had a good working relationship with Jobcentre Plus and explained how building up a relationship with individual members of Jobcentre Plus staff was essential to this. In particular, employers emphasised the importance of having a 'single point of contact' at Jobcentre Plus, which provided them with a clear reference point within a large and often confusing organisation. Interviews with both LEP teams and employers indicated that, where Jobcentre Plus had put additional time and effort into building employer relationships, this had paid off in terms of employers' satisfaction with the service. In more than one district, employers interviewed had singled out particular members of Jobcentre Plus staff for praise; for example, for the work they had carried out in organising recruitment drives and other events.

Other employers emphasised the importance of effective partnership working around LEPs and the value of regular meetings and communication with Jobcentre Plus in order to improve the recruitment process. For example, one large private-sector employer said that they always reviewed the recruitment process with Jobcentre Plus to look for ways in which it could be improved the next time.

However, there were some concerns expressed about the risks of 'initiative overload' in the Jobcentre Plus offer to employers (e.g. Future Jobs Fund, National Apprenticeship Scheme, etc.).

3.6 Employers' views on customer job readiness

There were mixed views from employers about the quality of candidates coming through the LEP process. Some employers had had mainly positive experiences, reporting that Jobcentre Plus staff had put a lot of time and effort into identifying job-ready candidates. Others commented that the suitability of candidates was improving all the time, as they were working together with Jobcentre Plus and training providers to improve screening and matching procedures and PET. In other districts, however, employers expressed concern about the variable quality of the LEP candidates coming through and said there had been various examples of 'the wrong people' being sent for interviews.

It appears from these findings that advisers in some districts were more employer-focused than others, had a clearer understanding of the local labour market and were better at referring customers to suitable LEP vacancies. Interviews with some Jobcentre Plus district-level staff indicated their awareness of the need to focus more attention on the client-readiness aspects of LEPs. In order to make appropriate referrals, advisers needed to understand what employers wanted from new recruits. The skills employers were most keen to identify at the recruitment stage were employability skills or softer skills, including positive attitudes to work, communication skills, timekeeping, etc. Advisers also needed to support customers in improving these skills, since they could act as significant barriers to employment and LEP opportunities.

One employer engagement manager acknowledged their variable performance in job-matching and felt that, at times, there could be tensions between Jobcentre Plus' employer-facing role and the pressure to get customers off benefits and into jobs.

In some districts, there was evidence of strategies being developed to improve customer-readiness for LEP vacancies. In some cases, for example, a 'traffic-light' system was in operation to assess customers' LEP-readiness. According to this system, customers placed in the 'green' category were deemed to be job-ready and were 'caseloaded' by advisers for LEP matching. Customers identified as 'amber' were considered to need some additional help before moving onto the LEP caseload; while customers in the 'red' category were viewed as being furthest from the labour market and in need of considerable time and support in order to become job-ready. In one district, a matching clerk was working full-time to match green customers to LEP vacancies. There were variations on this approach within many districts, where customers were specifically caseloaded for LEP opportunities once they were deemed LEP eligible.

One district was piloting a new way of working, which involved employer-engagement staff working with advisers to caseload clients and categorise them in terms of skills, job-readiness and support required. This allowed advisers to better advise customers, challenging their job aspirations in line with opportunities that were actually available in the local labour market. Jobcentre Plus were looking to implement this approach across the district by the start of the following operational year.

3.7 Employer involvement in Local Employment Partnerships

Employers made use of a range of LEP elements including work trials and work placements, PET and guaranteed interviews to LEP-eligible customers. Work trials and placements have been positively received by many employers and were seen as providing an opportunity to both the employer and customer to ‘try before you buy’. Work trials offered a built-in safety net for the customer, who could decline the offer of a job from the employer without losing benefits.

PET was another successful method of engaging employers to participate in LEPs and there were many examples from the research of repeat business with many (mainly large) employers using it as a regular source of recruitment. There was evidence too of many employers contributing to the design and delivery of PET programmes (see Chapter 4 for more information on PET).

Examples of PET included:

- customer service training for applicants for jobs in a call centre; the two-day programme was jointly designed by the employer and a training provider;
- an eight-week training course with a major retailer resulting in recruitments in-store;
- up to 12 weeks of training for local authority positions in administration, schools, health and leisure, and land and environmental services;
- a seven-week training course for nursing assistants with work placements offered to participants through a CSP;
- a training programme for care workers offered by a private care company;
- a two-week training course for healthcare assistants, followed by three weeks’ work experience with a NHS Trust. The employer played a major role in the design of the programme, which focused on the generic skills required for working in the health sector, e.g. first aid, health and safety, food hygiene and infection control.

LEPs have also provided a way for Jobcentre Plus staff to challenge employers’ recruitment practices and encourage them to refine their processes and/or applicant criteria/person specification, thus opening doors for disadvantaged jobseekers to apply for vacancies.

3.8 Outcomes from employer engagement

3.8.1 Outcomes for Jobcentre Plus

Overall, employer engagement under LEPs was viewed by Jobcentre Plus managers and staff as a positive development: LEPs were seen as re-focusing Jobcentre Plus on providing an enhanced service to employers and provided tangible evidence of customers progressing into work. In some districts, it was thought that LEPs had added value through the additional staffing resources dedicated to employer engagement and the improved service resulting from this. Another positive, from the point of view of Jobcentre Plus, was repeat business from LEP employers.

However, the general view (among Jobcentre Plus and employers) was that LEPs represented the ‘re-branding’ and marketing of the existing Jobcentre Plus services (albeit enhanced) to employers rather than providing a completely new service and as discussed in Section 2.5, LEPs provided an ‘umbrella’ for all Jobcentre Plus employer engagement activities.

3.8.2 Outcomes for employers

There were a number of benefits for LEP employers, including:

- Access to a free recruitment service from Jobcentre Plus.

One local authority undertook a considerable amount of bulk recruitment, e.g. administrative staff, gardeners, neighbourhood wardens, parking inspectors, etc. The main advantage of using a LEP was that it helped them reduce their fees to recruitment agencies.

- Access to other Jobcentre Plus services, including work trials and PET.

The joint development of a successful PET programme with Jobcentre Plus was cited by a representative from an NHS Trust as the most positive LEP outcome from their point of view. The programme had attracted the interest of Government ministers and had also raised the profile of the organisation with the local community, where there were high levels of unemployment. It had also led to around 150 people getting jobs with the Trust as a result. Many of the recruits were either long-term unemployed or on incapacity benefits.

- Many employers expressed satisfaction with the quality of LEP employees and confirmed that Jobcentre Plus was sending them job-ready candidates. However, as noted above, other employers had found the quality of LEP applicants to be too variable.

4 Pre-Employment Training

This chapter details the research findings on PET, which was a key offer under LEPs. First it looks at the type of training providers involved with PET and their experience working with the main LEP customer groups. It then covers the PET models of provision including length, content and the extent to which it takes into account different employer requirements and customer circumstances.

4.1 Pre-Employment Training providers

Providers of PET ranged from private sector businesses to Further Education (FE) colleges and not-for-profit organisations. Many training providers had a history of delivering employment-related training and most were delivering training for other welfare-to-work programmes and initiatives including: Flexible New Deal (FND); Train to Gain; Pathways to Work and Progress to Work.

Some PET providers had significant experience of working with particular groups of Jobcentre Plus customers, e.g. younger customers, customers with substance misuse problems or disabled people. Many training providers also had good knowledge of, and were well placed in, local communities, particularly those with high levels of deprivation and worklessness. Importantly, many training providers already had well established relationships with local employers and could sign them up to and engage them in LEP activities. As discussed in Section 2.4, relationships between Jobcentre Plus and PET providers was perceived to have strengthened over time as a result of working closely to put on PET courses. Jobcentre Plus usually co-ordinated PET provision, engaging training providers to put on the training in response to employers' needs (see Section 4.5).

4.2 Pre-Employment Training models

Overall, there was no single model of PET; rather, different ways of managing and delivering PET were identified. Employer size and the number of vacancies influenced the delivery of PET provision. In the main, PET operated in two forms: one was bespoke training for (usually large) employers with several vacancies and the other was more generic and occupation-/sector-specific training which provided a customer/applicant pipeline for multiple employers.

4.3 The duration of Pre-Employment Training

One distinctive feature of PET was its short length. PET could last from a couple of days to up to 13 weeks but the typical length of the provision was two weeks. In some cases, extending PET beyond two weeks was considered to complicate the process because customers could lose their entitlement to benefits.

The shorter length of PET, compared with other types of training, was welcomed by many training providers: it allowed them to offer more employer-specific, targeted training:

'We can offer training courses in a training centre or in a workplace but for us the LEP courses, where you have an employer who is already engaged who is guaranteeing these people an interview, is far more...you know, it's a short course, is more efficient for an individual rather than sitting in a classroom, when they want a job, then you need skills to do it and we are actually giving them in a two-week, short, sharp course as much of the skills as possible that employers are going to need, plus the interview techniques and the application form help which will give them a much better chance to get a job.'

(Private sector training provider)

Some training providers, however, acknowledged that due to its short duration, PET was more suitable for those who were ‘fairly job ready’ whilst some customers including the longer-term unemployed needed training for ‘a little longer’.

4.4 The content of Pre-Employment Training

PET provision, which could take place at training provider or employer premises, typically included:

- short modular courses with sector skills routeways in industries such as retail, hospitality, warehousing, health and social care, and construction;
- job-search modules including soft skills (confidence building and motivation), CV preparation, interview skills, mock interviews and help with the application process;
- some general induction into workplace culture such as understanding the employer and work ethic, the need for good timekeeping or team working;
- more general skills (e.g. IT) or skills for employer-specific needs, e.g. customer care, manual handling, health and safety, etc.

4.5 The role of employers in the design of Pre-Employment Training

In the early stages of LEPs, PET was nearly always employer-led and designed and this has continued to be the case.

‘We basically ask them what they [employers] want and we tell them: “OK we are going to embed this and this at that time”. We also had occasions when the employers came during one of these sessions, you know, just to see them, how they’re doing, how they interact with each other, that sort of thing.’

(Training provider, private sector)

Involving the employer so closely in the design of the PET provision is perceived by training providers and Jobcentre Plus to work well in persuading employers to provide guaranteed interviews to customers.

However, the research uncovered some examples where the employer was happy to have minimum involvement with the design of PET and sourcing appropriate training providers.

‘The whole business of training providers is a maze, but we do not have to worry about that because our [Jobcentre Plus] account manager just deals with it and we are telling them that we are looking to recruit, say ten gardeners, or something like that and they get on to it. We are not really involved in that and neither should we be. We talked to them about what we want and they get on and arrange things for us.’

(Public sector employer)

4.6 Outcomes from Pre-Employment Training

In addition to strengthening vocational, soft and job-search skills, PET was also seen as a useful tool for 'selling' customers to potential employers. For Jobcentre Plus and training provider staff, PET not only made their customers more employable but they also made them more appealing candidates for prospective employers.

'PET is one of the key ways of overcoming any reservations that an employer might have about moving these customers into work.'

(DEEM)

For some, however, PET was perceived as being far more useful to employers than customers, particularly if the latter had some distance to travel before becoming job-ready.

'Is [PET] a glorified induction for the employer?'

(LEPC)

There is little Management Information on the success or otherwise of PET provision and so no account or analysis can be taken of the cost of running PET and the positive outcomes or benefit from it. Anecdotally however, most employers have been very happy with the results from PET courses and feel it is an effective source of recruitment.

Some of the key customer target groups for LEPs included people living in deprived communities, long-term unemployed customers, IB claimants, lone parents, and people with multiple disadvantages. The barriers that these people commonly face when making a return to work include those relating to: the infrastructure (e.g. transport and childcare); entrenched worklessness; health problems; alcohol and/or drug abuse; financial problems and debt. Many LEP-eligible customers require some form of 'pre' pre-employment training and there was a general sense that many LEP eligible customers were not LEP ready and so could not benefit from the PET available.

5 Customers

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Jobcentre Plus customers involved in LEPs. In particular, it considers:

- the key characteristics of customers who took part;
- their reasons for participation and activities undertaken;
- the main outcomes achieved;
- their views on the most helpful LEP elements;
- their views on any further support required for finding work.

A total of 66 customers involved with LEPs were interviewed during the course of the research, either individually or in small focus groups.

5.1 Customer characteristics

In the early stages of LEPs, and before the extension, Jobcentre Plus were identifying LEP-eligible customers according to the key priority groups (i.e. lone parents, IB claimants, people out of work for six months or more, other disadvantaged groups). In some districts, Jobcentre Plus staff indicated that there was not any one customer group benefiting from a LEP and that there were similar results across all claimant groups. However, there was a feeling in other areas that there might be more lone parent and IB claimants benefiting and this was reinforced by employer and training provider interviews.

In one district, there was a particularly strong focus on customers on IB, as there were such high numbers in the district. Even before the LEP extension, the Jobcentre Plus team thought that so many of their customers were disadvantaged that identifying eligibility was not a particular challenge for them.

Common barriers to employment faced by customers across the Jobcentre Plus districts included:

- **Lack of confidence:** this was a key issue for many of the customers interviewed, particularly where they had been out of the labour market for a considerable length of time or had little previous work experience.
- **Childcare issues and family responsibilities:** some training providers reported that lone parents could miss out because of the shift patterns required for many jobs or lack of childcare provision.
- **Health issues:** IB claimants and others with health or disability problems could also find it more difficult to find employment through LEPs.
- **Age** could also be an issue for some groups of jobseekers. In some cases, there were barriers faced by the older (50+) age group. On the other hand, some employers were apparently wary of young people in the 16-19 age group, who had never worked and lacked qualifications, as they were perceived as having ‘attitude problems’.
- **Lack of skills and qualifications:** some training providers reported that many customers had problems with writing and spelling, which put them at a disadvantage, for example when filling in application forms.
- **Other barriers included:** lack of transport; a history of ‘worklessness’ in the family; alcohol and drug abuse; homelessness and past convictions.

5.2 Activities undertaken

Customers interviewed had participated in various LEP activities which have been described elsewhere in this report, including PET training, work trials, work placements, etc.

5.2.1 Pre-Employment Training

Many customers had attended 'generic' PET programmes, typically lasting two weeks and covering job-search skills, CV preparation, interview techniques, communication and presentation skills. These employability-focused programmes appeared to be more useful for customers who had no previous work experience, had been out of work for some time or lacked confidence in applying for jobs or attending interviews. In a few cases, the respondent did not speak English as their first language and lacked UK work experience and references. These customers tended to be unfamiliar with the UK workplace culture and the job application process. They, therefore, benefited from this type of training in terms of finding out more about the types of jobs available in their localities and how to present themselves to employers.

S had overseas qualifications and spoke French as her first language. She had undertaken a two-week PET course at a training provider, consisting mainly of communication skills and interview techniques. This had helped her enormously, and given her the confidence to go for a job interview, which had led to employment as a customer sales assistant.

In some cases, the training was more specifically focused on the skills required within particular sectors. For example, PET training designed in collaboration with NHS Trusts could include such elements as health and safety, food hygiene and manual handling; whereas courses for LEP applicants wishing to work in the retail sector usually focused on customer service skills. Where these courses included a work placement, they were considered particularly valuable by respondents and in some cases had led to permanent employment.

C had attended PET training which had led to a job in the catering department of a large retail company. The main barriers she had faced were: no previous work experience, lack of qualifications and a hearing disability. The training had consisted of health and safety and food hygiene; it also provided information about the kind of personal qualities and skills the employer was looking for. C felt she had gained in confidence as a result of the training.

5.2.2 Work trials

As already mentioned, work trials were reported by Jobcentre Plus staff to be helpful for customers concerned about the risks of coming off benefits, particularly if the job then later proved to be unsuitable for them. This point was echoed by some of the customers interviewed who had had first-hand experience of work trials. Another frequent comment was that the work trial had helped build their confidence.

Y had attended an interview at a retail organisation and then completed a two-week work trial. Prior to this, she had been out of work for 20 years, bringing up her children. She was then offered a permanent job by the company as a part-time sales assistant. Although she said she would still have applied for the job without the work trial, it had helped to make her feel more confident and allowed her to find out more about what the job entailed.

Some customers interviewed later in the research, who had little or no work experience, commented that it had become more difficult to find jobs since the recession because there was so much more competition. Therefore, the work-trial/work-placement element of training was seen as even more important.

5.3 Outcomes from Local Employment Partnerships

For many LEP customers the most important outcome was obviously progression into full-time work. Some former Jobcentre Plus customers who had been successful in finding work with a LEP employer agreed to be interviewed in the workplace about their experiences. The following case studies illustrate the types of barriers faced by these individuals and how involvement in LEP activities had helped to overcome them.

B had been unemployed for around nine years and, despite taking some part-time courses at college to improve her chances of getting a job, she felt there were a number of issues preventing her from finding employment. These included: having a long gap in her employment history, little confidence in conducting a job-search, completing an application form or taking part in a job interview. She was also anxious about the financial implications of coming off benefits. B joined a 'Working for Health' PET programme run by her local NHS Trust through LEP and felt that this had helped her to overcome her main barriers. The six-week programme supported her with her job-search, interview techniques and completing application forms and also made her aware of the range of job opportunities available within the NHS. More importantly, the programme offered a two-week placement in a gynaecology ward, which enabled her to get back into the habit of interacting with people in the workplace. The training also provided her with valuable insights into manual handling, infection control and health and safety, which improved her confidence in applying for jobs within the Trust. Less than three months after completing the programme, she took up a full-time permanent post as an auxiliary nurse in a local hospital. She reported that she had settled into the team well and was enjoying her job.

5.4 Customer views on the Local Employment Partnership experience

Interviews with customers indicated that their experience of LEPs was likely to be more positive where:

- the LEP support available had successfully resulted in employment;
- there had been an opportunity to engage with the employer and find out about the job beforehand, e.g. through dedicated open days or work trials. The opportunity to have a work trial was particularly beneficial for long-term unemployed customers who were worried about the risks of coming off benefits and then finding that the job was not suitable;
- they had received appropriate preparation for the LEP vacancy, either through PET or a briefing from the PA;
- a positive relationship had been established with a personal adviser. Some customers' experience of this had been variable. For example, some reported that they had had very little information about LEPs from their advisers and no pro-active support in applying for LEP jobs. In some cases there had even been misleading information provided (e.g. about what health information had to be disclosed at the initial job application stage).

5.5 Outstanding needs/other help required to find work

5.5.1 In-work support

One of the issues (raised by both customers and Jobcentre Plus staff) was the need for customer follow-up or aftercare once in employment, whether this is provided by Jobcentre Plus or a training provider. Respondents reported that some customers gaining work via LEPs (particularly those who were harder-to-help or who had been out of work for a long time) required ongoing in-work support to ensure their positive job outcomes were sustained. Although some training providers were doing this, it was largely on an informal or ad hoc basis.

Many customers interviewed highlighted in some way the importance of aftercare support, from either the employer or Jobcentre Plus. In one district, where customers had required further support once in work, this had generally been provided via the employer. Although there were some instances where the Jobcentre Plus adviser had contacted the customer to find out how they were settling in, this had not been on a consistent basis.

Lack of confidence appeared to be a major issue for some customers when starting in paid work after a long period of unemployment; some customers could also find it difficult adjusting to the timekeeping required. A 'firm but flexible' approach to this by employers seemed to be the most productive in gradually getting LEP employees back into a 'work culture'.

There were examples of employers who were reluctant to recruit certain disadvantaged customers, often due to their lack of resource to provide the aftercare and ongoing support they felt would be necessary.

5.5.2 Further training

Some young people who were interviewed had been offered work placements with LEP employers, which was providing them with valuable work experience. As they typically lacked skills and qualifications, their main priority was to find a vocational course at the local FE college or to get an apprenticeship, in order to improve their employment prospects for the future.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Employers, Jobcentre Plus and PET providers have worked closely together on LEPs and the services provided, and organisational understanding between these key stakeholders has been enhanced in many cases. Jobcentre Plus reported that they had established long-term, responsive relationships with employers and training providers as a result of LEPs and many employers were positive about the service they had received and the quality of candidates coming through for vacancies. However, few new employers have come on board as a result of LEPs, although this had started to change in recent months with more SME involvement, and some employers continued to report poor quality candidates being referred to them.

The key to successful working relationships and positive job outcomes for customers is effective communication: between Jobcentre Plus and employers to establish and be clear about employers' needs, and between employer and customer-facing staff in Jobcentre Plus to ensure that job-ready candidates are referred for vacancies. Provision is also important: under LEPs, PET provided the opportunity to fine-tune customers for job opportunities, and to do so specifically geared to employers' needs, but this type of provision was not appropriate for customers who remained some distance from the labour market.

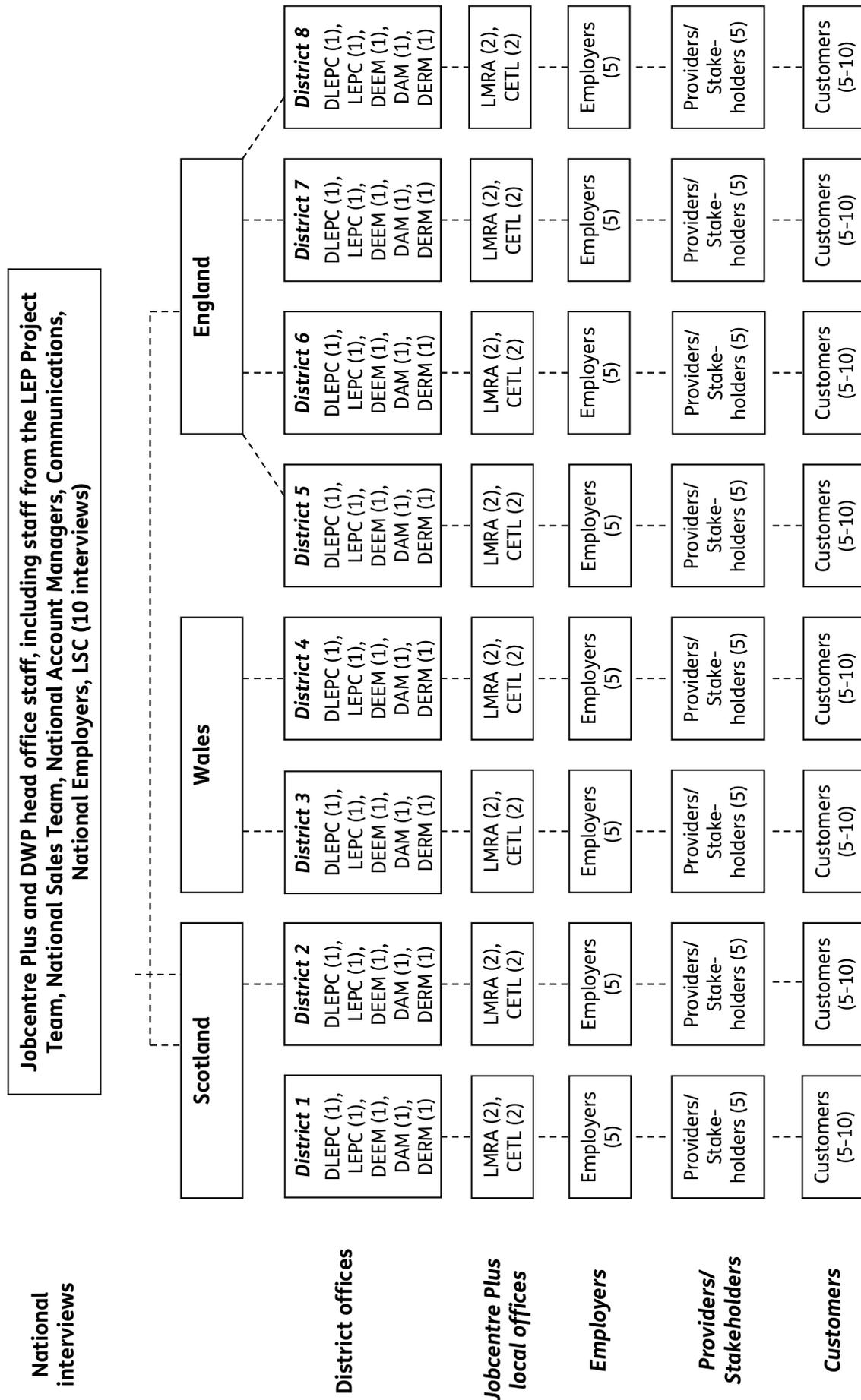
The key recommendations arising from this study in relation to employer engagement are:

- Jobcentre Plus need to continue to maintain links with existing employers and to 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, it is important that Jobcentre Plus takes 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.

Appendix

Overview of fieldwork

Figure A.1 Overview of fieldwork



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 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.

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