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# Formative Evaluation of the Employability Skills Pilot Programme

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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## **Glossary**

Glossary text

<b>Acronym/Key word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
CRC	Community Rehabilitation Companies
CW	Careers Wales
DWP	Department of Work and Pensions
ESOC	Essential Skills for Offenders in the Community
ESP	Employability Skills Pilot
JCP	Job Centre Plus
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
LU	Learning Units
WEST	Wales Essential Skills Toolkit
WG	Welsh Government

## **Executive Summary**

This report presents the findings of a formative evaluation of the Employability Skills Pilot (ESP) programme, a Welsh Government programme to support unemployed adults to get a job and stay in work.

Arad Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an independent evaluation of the design and initial implementation of the programme. This report presents findings from the evaluation fieldwork undertaken between October 2016 and January 2017.

The aims of the ESP are to support unemployed adults into sustained employment by improving their employability skills. It specifically targets unemployed adults who are within six months of reaching the labour market. The programme is delivered by four main training providers who offer work preparation training, essential skills if required<sup>1</sup>, and a work placement or employer specific training to those referred to them by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and others.

The aim of this evaluation is to provide a formative assessment of the design and initial implementation of the ESP in order to inform the future development of the programme.

The qualitative evidence used to inform the evaluation findings were gathered from desk-based research; interviews with the four main training providers and four subcontractors; interviews with Welsh Government, JCP and Careers Wales; interviews with 11 participating individuals and three employers.

### **Delivery models**

The delivery models adopted by each of the providers were based on a common approach of receiving referrals (mostly from JCP); reviewing the employability support needs of those referred; providing them with support to increase their employability and guiding them towards sustained employment.

A key feature of the ESP was that providers were given the flexibility to deliver elements of the programme in ways they considered best to engage and support the individuals they worked with. Delivery approaches, therefore, varied across training providers. Two of the delivery models were based on fairly standardised approaches, offering all participants similar support which built on training support models delivered during previous employability programmes. The other two providers offered more tailored approaches delivering support aimed at the specific needs of individual participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Essential Skills Wales qualifications are Communication; Application of Number; Information Communication and Technology (ICT).

Providers who offered a highly flexible and tailored approach, planning all aspects of the delivery around the bespoke needs of participants, offered a closer match to the aims of the programme to 'deliver differently' - as outlined in the ESP delivery specification. However, these providers appeared to find it more challenging to promote their offer to JCP and, therefore, gain referrals.

### **Recruitment and participation**

Each of the four training providers was allocated target numbers of participants to be recruited on to the programme. These comprised mainly of mainstream participants i.e. unemployed individuals on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) but also included some individuals who were recipients of support through the Lift programme<sup>2</sup>. Allocations were also made for offenders serving their sentence in the community to participate in essential skills training. Almost all participants during the evaluation period came from the mainstream category – none came from offenders in the community category.

### **Supporting routes to employment**

Training providers were tasked with supporting participants into good-quality work placements or employer specific training with a view that these would lead to sustained employment opportunities. Providers were given a programme outcome target of supporting 55% of their participants into employment. Most providers considered this to be a challenging target.

Engaging with employers was, therefore, a key aspect of the delivery requirement placed on each provider. Some of the training providers already had established previous links with employers. Other providers had less established links and therefore had to invest more time making those links and encourage employers to participate in the programme. However, in most cases, at the time of writing, the employer engagement process remained at an early stage of development. As such it is not possible to draw firm conclusions relating to how the programme has influenced the nature and direction of the employer engagement process.

### **Commercial viability**

Training providers received funding for delivering specific areas of training and support across two support strands (support into employment (strand 1) and support during the first three months in employment (strand 2)). As such the delivery agreement did not include a set contractual value for each participant. Most of the training providers had not

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<sup>2</sup> The Lift programme aims to provide training and employment opportunities for people living in households where no-one is in work.

previously delivered programmes funded in this way and this created some commercial challenges for them. The main challenge was planning and allocating resources to deliver a programme that was associated with several commercial unknowns.

Most training providers did not expect the delivery of the pilot phase of the programme to be a commercially viable venture for them. This was mainly due to the need to invest in front-loaded costs such as recruiting staff before they could access any funding.

The ESP emphasises access to employment as its primary objective, and the main programme performance measure set for the providers is the 55% of participants into employment target. However, the balance of the funding arrangements available is weighted more heavily towards supporting pre-employment training and support as opposed to employment outcome and in work support. While this encourages providers to deliver the training and support individuals require to gain the sustained employment outcomes, it also incentivises providers to deliver centre based training as a means of ensuring commercial viability.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation**

If providers are to be supported to 'deliver differently', the Welsh Government may need to support providers to promote and market these delivery approaches to JCP and other organisations who support referral routes to the programme. Delivery approaches that meet the criteria of delivering differently may also need more time to establish.

### **Recommendation**

If more than one training provider delivers ESP in the same geographical area, the Welsh Government may want to consider ways to encourage JCP to refer participants to the providers that offer a delivery approach that best suits the needs of individuals.

### **Recommendation**

The Welsh Government may need to continue to work with JCP to ensure that all work coaches fully understand the ESP eligibility criteria and apply a consistent approach to assessing the suitability of potential participants, particularly in relation to their proximity to the labour market.

**Recommendation**

The Welsh Government may need to support the process of clearly identifying and defining the roles of all stakeholders in relation to how they can support individuals towards future ESP participation referral routes.

**Recommendation**

When considering the future funding model for the ESP, the Welsh Government should consider the extent to which the commercial uncertainties, currently associated with its delivery, impacts on the ability or willingness of training providers to bid for future delivery contracts. The ability to spread any commercial risk associated with the programme across a range of other commercial training delivery activity will vary across providers. This is likely to have implications on the type (and possibly size) of provider likely to tender for future contracts.

**Recommendation**

The Welsh Government should consider undertaking further formative evaluation work once the programme has had longer to embed, in order to better understand the facilitators and barriers to delivering a more holistic and individualised service. Future summative evaluations of the ESP should consider whether or not employer specific training delivered through the programme, support employment outcomes that would not otherwise have been achieved. Future evaluations should also review the extent to which employers enable or restrict the mentoring support providers can offer participants during their first three months in sustained employment.



## 1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a formative evaluation of the Employability Skills Pilot (ESP) programme, a Welsh Government programme to support unemployed adults to get a job and stay in work.
- 1.2 Arad Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an independent evaluation of the design and initial implementation of the programme. This report presents findings from the evaluation fieldwork undertaken between October 2016 and January 2017 - soon after the launch of the programme.

### **Employability Skills Pilot Description**

- 1.3 In summer 2016, the Welsh Government issued an invitation to tender to work-based learning providers to deliver the ESP from September 2016 until 31st March 2018, with a 9-month run down period to December 2018 and an option to extend the agreement for a further 12 months.
- 1.4 The programme is aimed at supporting unemployed adults to get a job and stay in work by improving their employability skills. It specifically targets adults who have a reasonable chance of being ready for employment within six months. The programme is delivered by four main training providers who offer work preparation training, essential skills if required<sup>3</sup>, and a work placement or employer specific training to those referred to them by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and others.

### *Eligibility and referral routes*

- 1.5 The Programme is aimed at adults aged 18 or over and who are unemployed and registered with JCP. Eligible participants must be able to complete the programme before being eligible for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Work or new Work and Health Programme<sup>4</sup> and have not achieved a full level 2 qualification or equivalent. Participants will have little current (past three months) or 'relevant' work experience but will be work focused and have a reasonable chance of being ready for employment within six months. The eligibility is checked and confirmed by the JCP work coach who make the referral to the training provider. Careers Wales may also identify individuals and refer, subject to a letter

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<sup>3</sup> Essential skills Wales qualifications are Communication; Application of Number; Information Communication and Technology (ICT).

<sup>4</sup> The referral point varies according to age and type of benefit claimed, for example the referral point is 12 months into their claim for those aged 25+ and claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and 9 months for those aged 18-24 and claiming JSA.

from JCP confirming eligibility. Lift<sup>5</sup> brokers may identify some of their clients who could benefit from ESP and they will work with the local JCP to make the referral.

### *Employability plan*

- 1.6 One of first actions, following a referral to the programme, is the preparation of an employability plan. This is undertaken by the provider for each individual participant. The plan is agreed by both the individual participant and the provider. It outlines what, if any, centre-based training each individual will receive, including the nature and duration of the training. It also includes information relating to each individual's path towards a high-quality work placement or employer specific training. The plan takes into account the results of an essential skills diagnostic assessment undertaken with each participant using the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST)<sup>6</sup>. It also considers the prior learning and employment history of the participant as well as their future employment aspirations and outlines the expected duration of the programme and employment objectives. All individuals (other than offenders in the community – see below) will have a high-quality work placement or employer specific training included as part of their employability plan.

### *Work preparation training*

- 1.7 Providers have the flexibility to deliver elements of the programme as they consider best. As a result, work preparation training can either take place before the commencement of a work placement or alongside it. This element of training might include CV writing, interview preparation and job searching techniques and is usually centre-based.

### *Essential Skills*

- 1.8 The delivery of the essential skills training is tailored around the results of the WEST assessment which is undertaken by the provider with each participant. The training supports participants to gain Essential Skills Wales qualifications up to and including level 2 where needed.

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<sup>5</sup> Lift Programme provides opportunities for people from workless households. It is being delivered in 9 areas and Lift brokers in each area work with individuals or families to overcome barriers to work.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.walesessentialskills.com/?q=node/6>

### *Employer Specific Training*

- 1.9 Providers can deliver bespoke activities in partnership with employers or a sector which is actively seeking to recruit individuals. The employer specific training is a relatively short programme, and can be delivered flexibly up to a maximum of eight weeks.

### *Work Placement*

- 1.10 All participants should be offered a placement of 'meaningful work activities' as part of the programme. The placement should match the individual's needs and employment interests as well as match actual vacancies or areas of emerging demand. Each placement should include a real job interview (or employer feedback when this is not feasible). Placements are expected to last for 120-240 hours and take place during the six-month period of the programme delivery.

### *In-work coaching*

- 1.11 Following a work placement, and if the individual secures sustained employment, the providers may offer monthly in-work coaching for the first three months. The purpose of this coaching is to provide continuity of contact and to help participants overcome any barriers to sustaining employment.

### *Essential skills for offenders in the community (ESOC)*

- 1.12 Offenders in the community are eligible for the essential skills element of the programme only, and are referred to the providers by the National Probation Service or the Wales Community Rehabilitation Company, who also check eligibility.

### *Funding and allocations*

- 1.13 Over the contract period ESP aims to support up to 4,000 adults. The total value of the programme, if run until March 2018, is just over £8 million. Regional allocations have been set for the programme starts (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Regional Allocations**

Region	Total starts (including Lift but not ESOC)	Essential Skills for Offenders in the Community (ESOC)	Lift
North Wales	540	60	22
South West and Mid Wales	1,080	120	45
South East Wales and Valleys	1,980	220	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,600</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>150</b>

1.14 Chapter 3 sets out how the Programme is being delivered in practice.

### **Aims and objectives of the evaluation**

1.15 The aims of the evaluation were to provide a formative assessment of the design and initial implementation of the ESP in order to inform the development of the programme and future decision making around activities to increase employability and skills. The specific objectives were to evaluate the:

- Assessment and referral process;
- Delivery model;
- Provision, and;
- Employer engagement.

### *Future programme*

1.16 A new all-age employability programme is being developed, responding to the -

‘growing body of evidence suggesting that our current suite of programmes is too complex and fragmented, making it difficult to develop a coherent pathway to employment for a jobseeker and resulting in support that can sometimes be inflexible in responding to individual need’.

The aim is to -

‘bring together the activities ... into a single employability support programme that will better meet the needs of those requiring support to gain and, retain jobs and to progress within the workplace’<sup>7</sup>.

This evaluation informs the process of designing the new programme to be introduced in 2018.

<sup>7</sup> The Minister for Skills and Science’s Statement on Employability Support in Wales, Record of proceedings 05/07/2016 <http://www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/pages/rop.aspx?MeetingID=3614&language=en#417701>)

## **Report structure**

1.17 In the remainder of this report, we discuss:

- the methodology;
- an overview of the delivery approaches;
- the implementation of the programme in terms of marketing and referral, needs assessment, employer engagement, sustaining employment;
- commercial viability;
- a summary of participant's experiences;
- conclusions and recommendations.

## **2. Methodology**

2.1 This chapter outlines the research methods used for the evaluation. It also explains the rationale as well as the strengths and limitations of the methods used.

2.2 The evaluation gathered qualitative evidence using the following methods:

- Desk-based review;
- Semi-structured interviews with representatives of the four training providers and four of the subcontractors;
- Semi-structured interviews with Welsh Government officials, JCP, Careers Wales;
- Participant interviews – interviews were conducted with 12 unemployed adults who had started to receive support under the programme;
- Employer interviews – three employers were interviewed.

### **Desk-based research**

2.3 The evaluation team reviewed background documents relating to the programme, namely the training providers' applications, Welsh Government guidance to the training provides, and the promotional materials.

### **Interviews with Welsh Government Officials**

A list of Welsh Government stakeholders was agreed to be invited for interview to discuss the design and implementation of the programme. The purpose of this was to explore the evaluation questions in detail with those individuals who has been involved in the design and / or management of the programme and / or involved in planning of the future all age programme. A topic guide was drawn up as a basis for the semi-structured interviews which were carried out with four individuals. Interviews also took place with a further two Welsh Government officials delivering associated programmes.

### **Offender Management strand**

2.4 Telephone interviews took place with policy officials responsible for managing the offender strand of the programme. Interviews were also undertaken with representatives from the National Offender Management Service and the Wales Community Rehabilitation Company probation.

## **Interviews with Training providers**

- 2.5 A mix of telephone and face to face interviews took place with directors and operation managers at the training providers. These interviews explored the processes and procedures of setting up and delivering ESP, the main successes and challenges in the early implementation phase of the programme and any lessons for the future.

## **Subcontractors**

- 2.6 Two of the training providers have subcontracted elements of their delivery and as such interviews took place with four sub-contractors.

## **Participant interviews**

- 2.7 Only a small number of participants had been referred on ESP at the time of carrying out the evaluation fieldwork (approx. 70 altogether, mostly from one provider). A sample of 11 of these participants were interviewed. No referrals had come from the offender strand, and very few from Lift. The evaluation does not therefore include the views of participants from these strands.
- 2.8 As the programme had only recently started the contact with participating adults took place as late in the evaluation period as possible. This allowed as much programme delivery to take place before contacting them as the timeframe of the evaluation fieldwork allowed. Interviews with participants took place in mid-December 2016; some further interviews and follow-up interviews took place in January 2017.
- 2.9 Training Provider 1: The contact details of 15 participants (out of 60 starts) were provided, eight of whom agreed to take part in a telephone interview. Of those, six were interviewed early in the fieldwork period (December) and a follow-up interview made with three of them six weeks later (an attempt was made to contact the other three but was unsuccessful). Two adults were interviewed towards the end of the fieldwork period (mid-January) but the timescale of the evaluation did not allow for a follow-up interview with these two.
- 2.10 Training Provider 2: Face-to-face interviews took place with three participants at their work placement in early January 2017.
- 2.11 Training Provider 3: Although a small number of adults had started on the programme by the end of the fieldwork period, it was deemed too early in the process to contact them.

- 2.12 Training Provider 4: Only a handful of participants had been referred to provider 4 by the end of the fieldwork period, so no contacts were available for interview within the available timeframe.

### *Sampling issues*

- 2.13 It was not possible nor practical to choose a random sample of participants to interview. Participants were instead selected from a convenience sample based on their availability and willingness to respond to a request for interview. The evidence from these participant interviews should therefore be read with some degree of caution as the providers may have introduced the evaluation team to a certain type of adult participant<sup>8</sup>. Caution when interpreting responses from participants may also be required at this stage as the sample was small and those who were referred to the ESP right at the start of the programme may differ in terms of needs and suitability compared to those who may participate during later delivery stages. This again may skew the representation of the sample to some extent.
- 2.14 Other limitations to the evidence provided by participants in this report, relate to any research connected to jobcentres and benefits, in that respondents might not have fully understood the independence and anonymity of the evaluation research (despite reassurances from the research team) and may feel 'obliged' to provide positive responses.

### **Employer interviews**

- 2.15 Discussions took place with three employers – one telephone interview with an employer involved in the Employer Specific Training strand with provider 3 and two face to face interviews with employers delivering work placements for provider 2.

### **Monitoring data**

- 2.16 No monitoring data was available at the time of writing, but future evaluation exercises will be able to draw on this data.

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted however, that providers were asked to use a random selection process to identify potential participants to interview (e.g. every fourth participant listed alphabetically on a register). There is no reason to suggest that the providers did not use this process in their selection.



### **3. Delivery Approaches**

3.1 In this Section, we discuss the delivery approaches that have been established for the ESP and consider the key lessons for the design of the future programme.

#### **Delivery Models**

3.2 In September 2016, the Welsh Government produced an outline delivery model structure for the ESP which was presented to the four training providers as a guide to support the planning of their own delivery approaches (see figure 3.1 below).

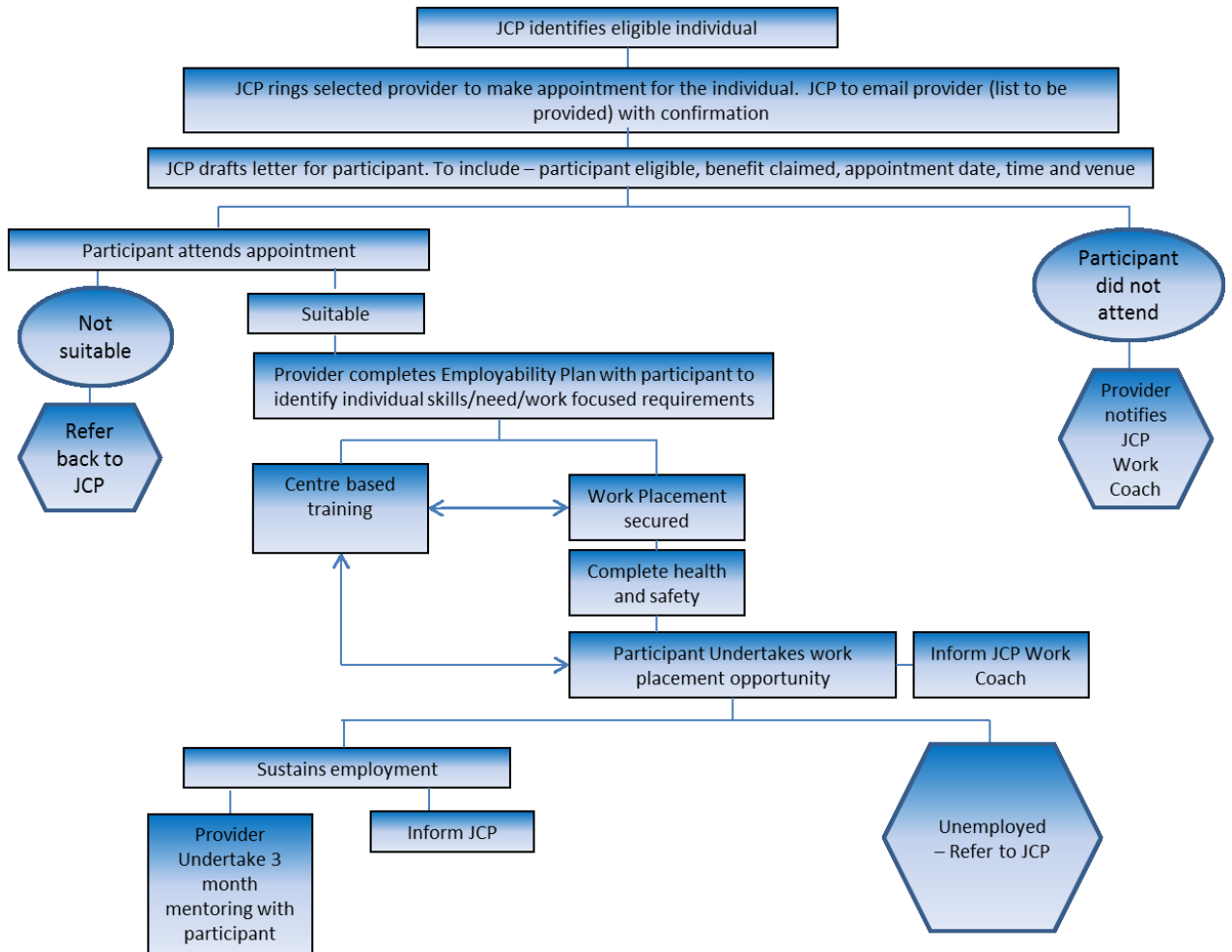
3.3 The delivery guide outlined that in most cases (except for offenders in the community) it was expected that referrals to the programme would come through the job centres. JCP work coaches would review the current circumstances of their clients and assess their eligibility for the programme (see section 1.5). Individuals considered eligible and suitable for the programme at this point would then be referred to the training provider.

3.4 During the first appointment with the training provider the suitability of the individual for the programme would be assessed again. Those who were not considered to be suitable at this stage would be referred back to the job centre. Those considered suitable would be provided with an employability plan. The plan should outline any skill development needs participants may have e.g. essential skills training and / or work preparation training (CV writing, interview preparation and practice, job-search techniques and inter-personal skills). The employability plan should also outline opportunities for the individual to gain access to a high-quality work placement or employer specific training.

3.5 Based on the needs identified in the employability plan the individual should then be offered centre based training, if needed, to address identified skills needs or supported to secure a work placement opportunity. Those provided with centre based training should also be supported into a work placement opportunity. The centre-based training could either be delivered alongside the work placement or completed before starting the work placement.

3.6 The aim at this stage is that the work placement should lead to sustained employment. Those who are offered sustained employment should receive three months mentoring support from the training provider. Those who do not gain sustained employment through the programme would be referred back to the job centre at the end of the programme period.

**Figure 3.1 ESP delivery structure model provided by the Welsh Government**

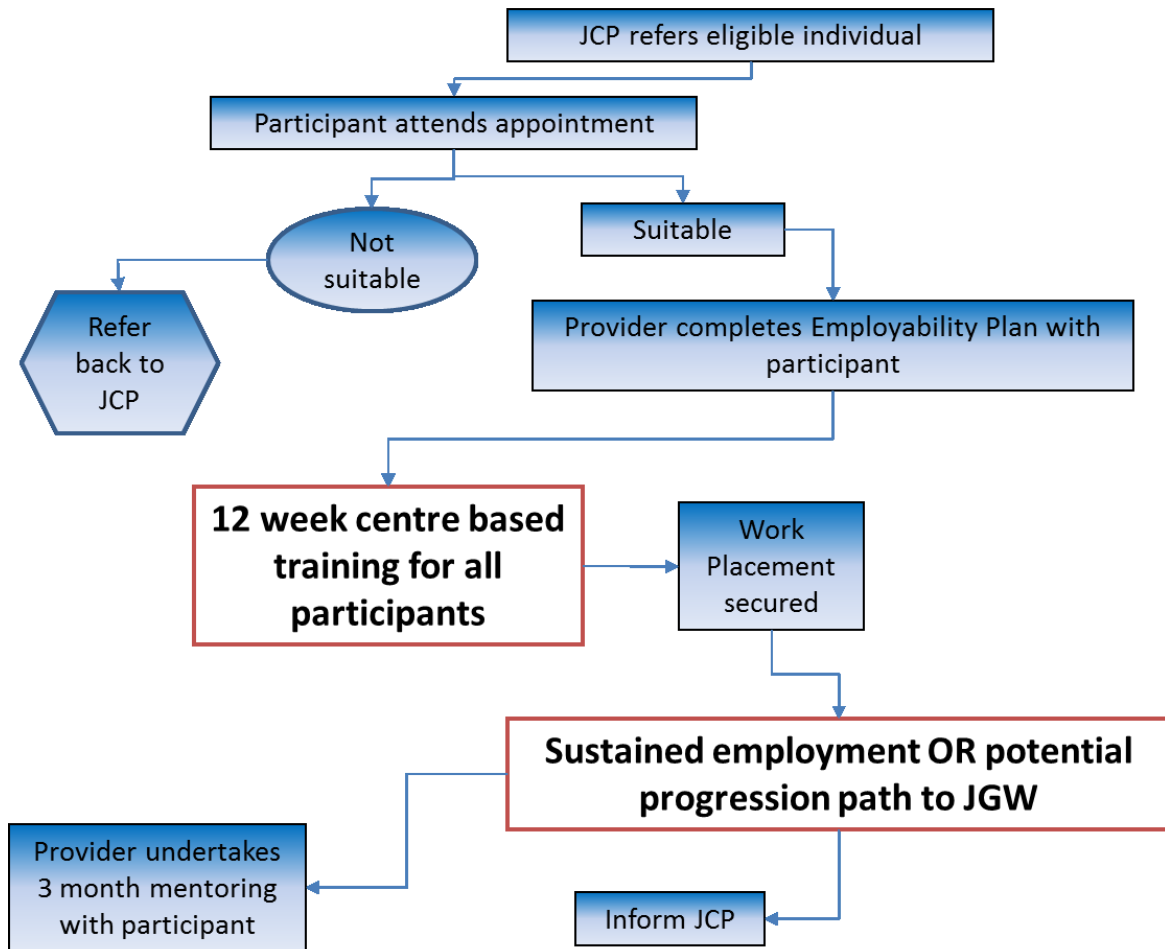


Source: Welsh Government correspondence with training providers, October 2016.

- 3.7 Although the guidance provided an outline delivery structure that training providers were expected to follow, a key feature of ESP was that providers were given the flexibility to deliver elements of the programme in ways they considered best to engage and support the individuals they worked with. Delivery approaches therefore varied across training providers. Some training providers delivered the programme within a relatively standard approach whereby all participants followed a similar training and support pathway leading to work placement or job specific training. Other providers adopted a more tailored approach adjusting the support provision around the specific needs of individuals.
- 3.8 The variations in the delivery models are illustrated in Figures 3.2 to 3.5 below. In each of the figures, the delivery approaches adopted by each training provider that differ from those adopted by other providers are summarised in bold font within the red boxes. Individual training providers are not named in the sections that follow, instead they are referred to as training provider 1,2,3 and 4.

## Provider 1 Delivery Model

Figure 3.2 – Overview of training provider 1 delivery model



- 3.9 Training provider 1 (as with most training providers) received all its referrals directly from the job centres. During their first appointment with the training provider, the suitability of the referred participant was assessed alongside their skills needs, previous work experience and preferred employment routes. These were then included in the employability plan issued to each participant. The recruitment and initial assessment processes adopted by training provider 1 were very similar to those adopted across all four training providers. The main difference in the delivery model implemented by training provider 1's was its approach to centre based training.
- 3.10 Following the initial assessment of training needs undertaken during the first appointment of training needs, all ESP participants recruited by training provider 1 received centre based training – usually up to 12 weeks – before being allocated to a work placement. The focus of the training received during these 12 weeks varied according to the needs of individuals identified during the initial assessments. Although the training sessions were delivered in groups, the training

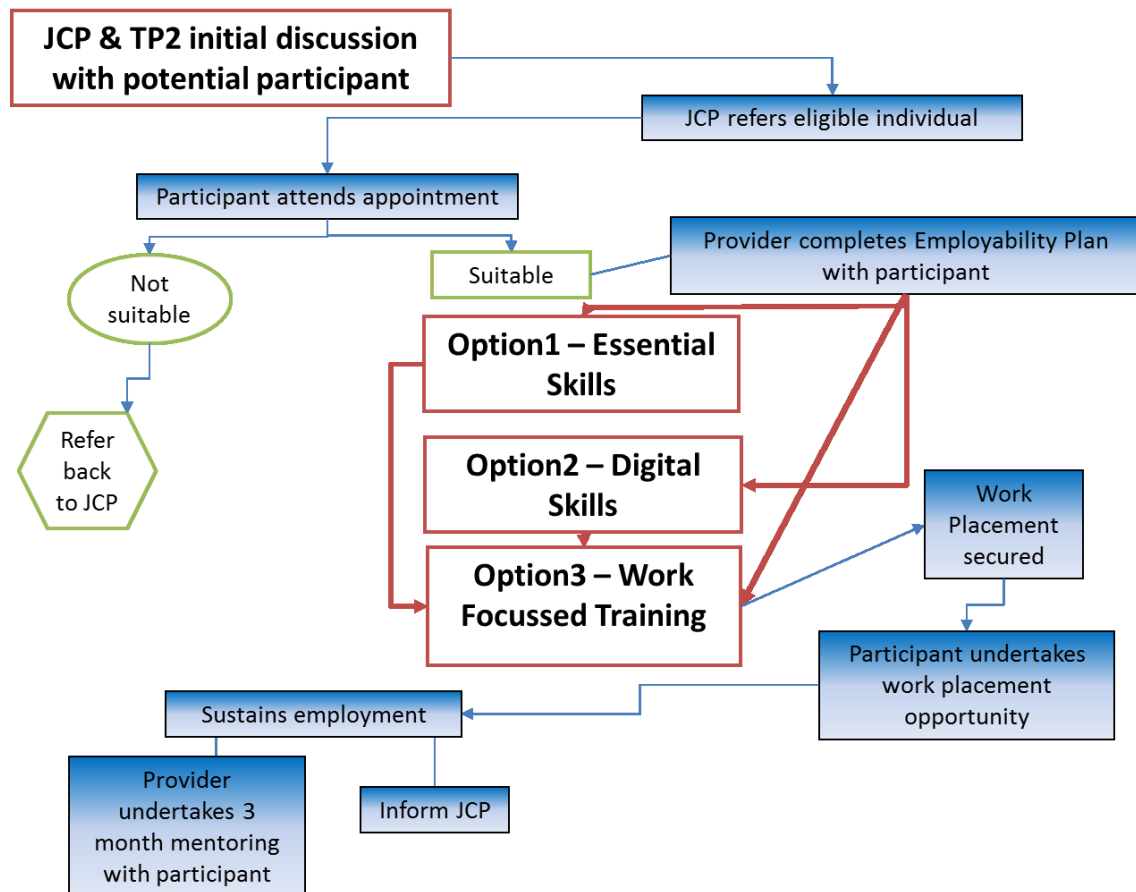
wasn't always delivered in a typical classroom style environment where the tutor stands in the front and everyone focusses on the same specific topic at the same time. Instead participants often worked on their own skill needs but in a group environment with a tutor present to provide support and guidance where required. For example, essential skills training was delivered using workbook resources which participants could work through at their own level and pace but in a centre based classroom with other participants. During each session, the tutor would move around the room offering individuals within the group support with specific areas they found challenging.

### **Provider 2 Delivery Model**

- 3.11 A key difference in the delivery approach adopted by training provider 2, compared to the other training providers, was the additional time and resources they committed to supporting the initial referral process. All training providers placed considerable emphasis on engaging with job centres to inform them of the programme and the support available. This was a key marketing activity for providers to ensure they gained the referrals needed to meet their participation targets.
- 3.12 Training provider 2, however, took this engagement one step further. A representative of the training provider would spend a morning or an afternoon each week in one of the main job centres located within the geographical area they operated in. During each half day session, the representative from training provider 2 would meet potential ESP participants to inform them of the programme and assess their eligibility and suitability. The training provider representative would then notify the job centre learning coaches which individuals they considered most suitable for the programme. The learning coach would then refer these individuals onto the programme.
- 3.13 Training provider 2 adopted this approach to limit what they considered to be the potential risk of receiving referrals from the job centres that were not suitable for the programme – (i.e. individuals who require more support to gain employment than could be delivered within the 6-month timeframe of the ESP). Although training providers have the opportunity, during the first contact session, to further review the suitability of participants and refer those considered unsuitable back to the job centre, training provider 2 was concerned that taking this action on a frequent basis may damage their longer-term relationships with the job centres. On the other hand, recruiting referrals from the job centre of participants who are

further than 6 months away from the labour market would reduce the training provider's ability to reach their employment outcome targets. Committing resources to support the initial review and referral processes was therefore considered a way of addressing these concerns.

**Figure 3.3 – Overview of training provider 2 delivery model**



3.14 Those recruited on to ESP by training provider 2 would undergo an initial needs assessment including an essential skills assessment. As with the delivery model adopted by training provider 1, all participants recruited by training provider 2 received at least some form of centre based training. Unlike training provider 1, the duration of this training varied according to the needs identified.

3.15 Recruited participants were directed to one of three training support options:

- Those who required support with their essential skills were directed towards **Option 1** which provided focussed training on numeracy, literacy as well as job search and communication skills.
- Those who required digital skills support were directed to **Option 2** which provided training on internet and computer basics; online job searches and applications.
- Those who had the required essential skills and digital skills were directed towards **Option 3** which provided work focussed training. This option related to

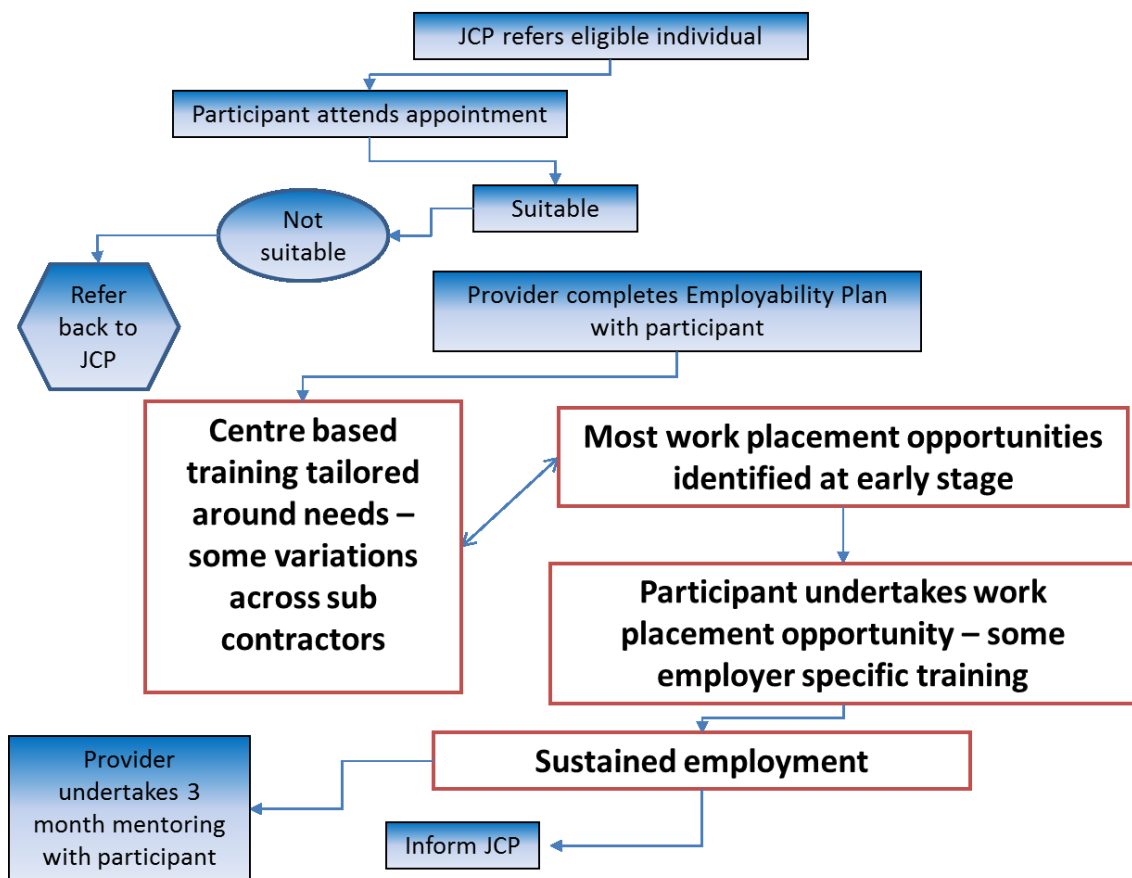
those who were almost ready to take on a work placement. It provided work focussed skills including supported employer interviews.

3.16 Participation in any of these options were designed with the aim that they would lead to a work placement. Those participating in option 3 had the opportunity to access work placement opportunities following less centre based training than those participating in options 1 and 2.

### Provider 3 Delivery Model

3.17 The delivery models implemented by training providers 1 and 2 (see figures 3.2 and 3.3 above) were based on an approach of recruiting participants on to the programme with a view to address their training needs first before engaging with employers to seek out work placement or job specific training opportunities. Training provider 3's approach (illustrated in figure 3.4 below) on the other hand was to recruit individuals on to the programme with a view of supporting them into a work placement as soon as possible, offering training if and as required.

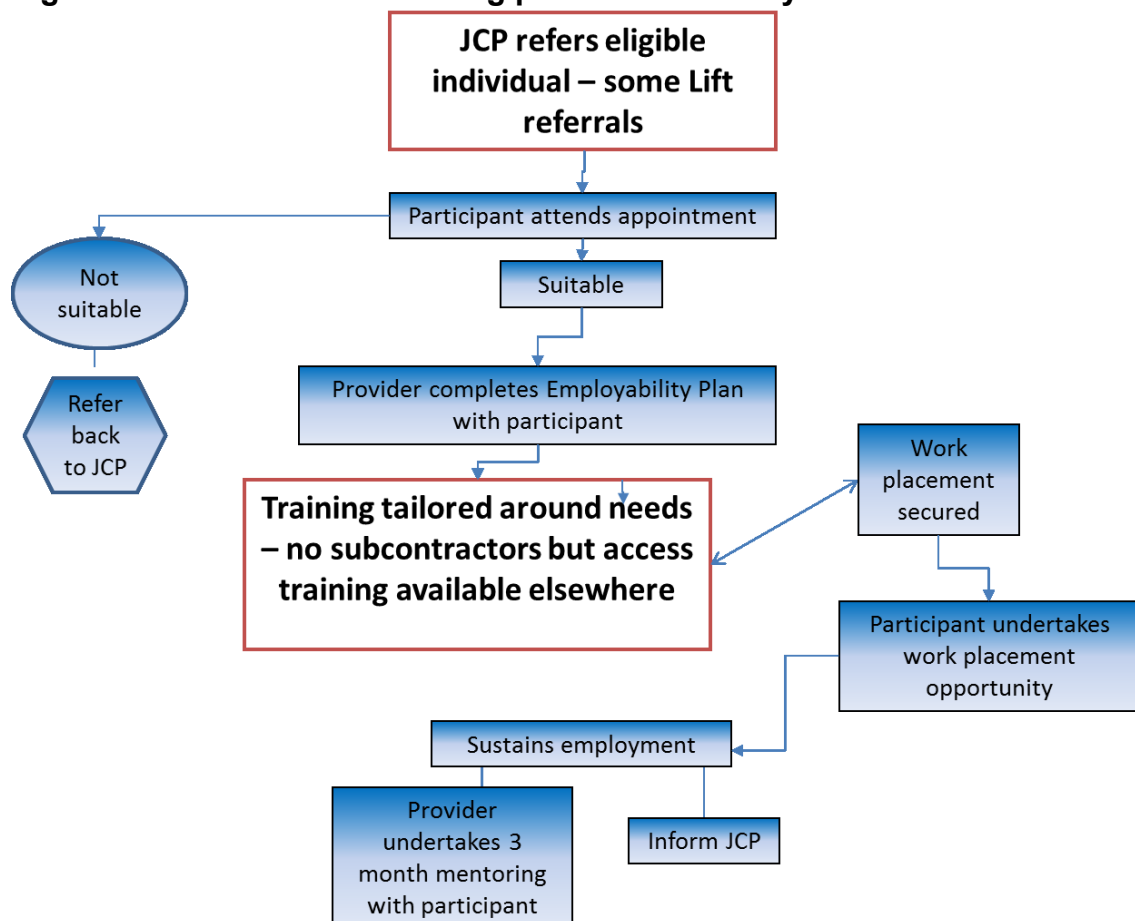
**Figure 3.4 – Overview of training provider 3 delivery model**



- 3.18 Participants identified by training provider 3 during the initial assessment who required additional training support such as essential skills were provided with the training they required. However, the emphasis at the outset was to support individuals into the workplace at the earliest opportunity and not necessarily support them into training with a view of securing work placement or employment opportunities at a later stage of the delivery process.
- 3.19 In many cases training provider 3 (and their delivery subcontractors) had employers in mind who were able to take on ESP work placements at their workplace. At the time of undertaking the assessment (December 2016) training provider 3 had not recruited many participants on to the programme. This was due to some delays in setting up contractual arrangements including agreements with their subcontractors.

### Provider 4 Delivery Model

Figure 3.5 – Overview of training provider 4 delivery model



- 3.20 Training provider 4's delivery model was the most tailored and least prescribed approach of all four of the training providers. The focus of the delivery design was on 'individualism' and providing bespoke support to match the training needs and employment preferences of participants. Training provider 4 did not want to provide what they considered to be a 'sheep dip' approach to programme delivery where all participants receive the same training and support regardless of their needs.
- 3.21 The intention was to look at the person first to review their needs and match these against the provision that was already being delivered in the area by other organisations alongside what training provider 4 could deliver themselves. The model aimed at building partnership relations with other organisations with a view to buy in any training required. Training provider 4 consider their approach to be one of supporting a delivery network to support the specific needs of individual participants and avoid or reduce any unnecessary duplication of support provision.
- 3.22 The tailored approach delivered by training provider 4 matches the wider ESP aim to *'challenge the provider network to deliver differently, to put together more flexible and tailored packages of support.'* However, by adopting this tailored or 'different' delivery approach, training provider 4 found it much more challenging to promote and market their support offer to job centres. As a result, at the time of our assessment, training provider 4 had received very few referrals from the job centres. However, training provider 4 had received some referrals through the Lift programme, a referral route that none of the other providers had recruited participants through.

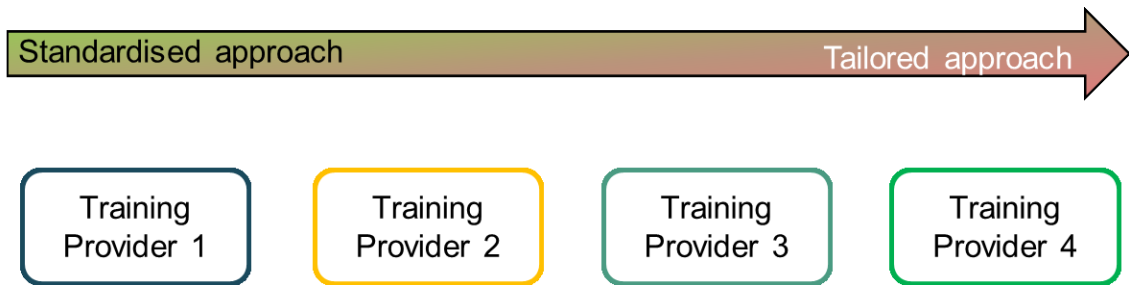
### **Overview of Approaches**

- 3.23 The delivery models summarised above illustrate the differences between the relatively standardised approach adopted by training provider 1 to a tailored approach adopted by training provider 4 (see figure 3.6). It is too early at this stage to draw any conclusions as to which delivery model results in the best outcomes for individual participants as none of those recruited to the programme, at the time of our assessment, had reached the end of their six-month support period.
- 3.24 The approach adopted by training provider 4 closely matches the requirement included in the delivery specification issued by the Welsh Government to training providers to deliver differently. The approach adopted by training providers 1 and 2 relating to centre based training on the other hand appeared to replicate those in previous employability skills support programmes delivered by these providers. As



such the training approaches adopted by these two training providers may not fall within the requirement of 'delivering differently'.

**Figure 3.6 – Overview of delivery approaches**



3.25 The main differences in the performance of each training provider in delivering the programme to date has been the rate of enrolling adults to start the programme. Training providers who have offered a relatively standardised approach to ESP delivery have recruited more individuals on to the programme than those who offered a more tailored approach. This is due to differing referral rates from job centres. These differing referral rates are likely to be due in part to previous relationships established between job centres and individual training providers. They also partly reflect the marketing approaches of the individual training providers, their preparedness in terms of staff and contracts in place at the launch date and the extent to which job centres understand the delivery model concept and the support offered by the training provider. These points are further addressed in the sections that follow.

## 4. Implementing the programme

4.1 The sections that follow focus in more detail areas of the delivery models summarised in section 3. Specific areas focussed upon include:

- Marketing and Referral;
- Needs assessment and centre based training;
- Employer engagement and work placements;
- Sustained employment;
- Commercial viability.

### Routes to programme participation

4.2 Training providers commissioned to deliver the ESP were allocated target numbers of programme participant starts. The allocation targets outlined the expectation that most ESP participants would sit within the mainstream category i.e. unemployed individuals on JSA referred to the programme via JCP. Over the contract period up until March 2018 ESP aims to support up to 4,000 adults, of whom 3,600 would be from the mainstream category (see 1.13).

4.3 A significantly smaller proportion of the programme starts were expected to be Lift<sup>9</sup> beneficiaries who could be referred to the programme via their mentors – some 150 individuals across Wales. A small proportion of ESP participants were also expected to be offenders serving their sentences in the community (400 individuals). These individuals would only be eligible for the essential skills element of the ESP and their participation route to the programme would be via links between the training providers and the National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC).

4.4 During the delivery time frame under review within this evaluation (September 2016 to January 2017) three of the four training providers focussed only on recruiting mainstream participants onto the programme via JCP. The exception being training provider 4 which did liaise with the Lift programme delivery team to identify participants who had addressed many of their longer-term barriers to employment via the support already received and were now considered to be at a suitable stage to participate in ESP. Preliminary discussions have taken place between one provider and the probation service but no referrals have been made yet.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/lift/?lang=en>

- 4.5 None of the providers in the period leading up to January 2017 had engaged with the probation services to consider options for supporting offenders in the community. The general consensus across the training providers consulted was that given what they considered to be challenging delivery timescales that they would need to focus their efforts, during the initial delivery stages, on recruiting mainstream participants onto the programme to ensure sufficient participation take up rates.
- 4.6 Most of the training providers also noted some concerns and therefore slight reluctance to take on offenders in the community participants at this stage. Some were of the view that there was uncertainty surrounding the practical arrangements and therefore the financial viability of delivering essential skills training to offenders in the community. One provider, for example, was of the view that the delivery of essential skills training to offenders in the community may need to be done on a one to one basis. If this were the case, then the funding arrangements of the programme would not cover the delivery costs.
- 4.7 The concerns voiced were not a suggestion that the training providers did not intend to deliver on their commitments to provide training support to offenders in the community. Instead they reflected intentions to place a lower priority or 'put off' this area of delivery until they had made sufficient gains in recruiting mainstream participants.

### **Marketing**

- 4.8 Individual participants have, to date, primarily been recruited onto the ESP via a referral route through JCP. To secure these referrals, training providers have invested time and resources, particularly during the early stages of delivery, to promote and market the support provision they offer through the ESP. This has been done mainly via direct contact with JSP representatives and the use of marketing materials produced by the individual training providers (and approved by Welsh Government).
- 4.9 Two of the training providers already had strong links with job centres which they had established during the delivery of previous employability skills programmes in Wales. For these training providers gaining access to JCP managers and learning coaches to 'sell' their ESP provision was relatively easy. These training providers subsequently received many referrals from the job centres operating in their delivery area. On the other hand, training providers who had not previously established links with the JCP managers and branches, struggled to promote their

support offer to job centres and consequently the number of referrals they received were low.

- 4.10 The ESP offer provided by some of the training providers included elements of centre based training that were similar to those delivered in predecessor employability skills programmes. These aspects of the delivery models were therefore already familiar to many JCP representatives. As such JCP representatives could easily relate to them and feel sufficiently confident in them to refer their clients onto the programme. The training providers who offered a delivery approach that was different to that provided in previous programmes, and therefore unfamiliar to JCP representatives, found it more challenging to promote their ESP offer to job centres. This prompted some training providers to claim that knowledge of the ESP among JCP representatives was often low and suggested that the Welsh Government could have played a larger role in promoting the ESP to JCP prior to the initial training provider engagement. Interviews with the JCP however revealed that material raising awareness of the programme was disseminated widely among JCP regions.
- 4.11 The success or otherwise of the marketing and promotional efforts appears to encourage JCP to refer eligible ESP participants to the training provider with whom they are most familiar. In geographic areas where only one training provider is delivering the programme this may not be an issue as JCP will refer clients to the nearest available training provider. However, in geographic areas where more than one training provider is delivering the ESP, and therefore competing for participants, then this could be an issue.
- 4.12 As noted in section 3 above, the delivery models of providers are not homogeneous and therefore do not offer participants support delivered in the same way. Therefore, in areas where two or more training providers are delivering the programme, referring individuals to the delivery model that JCP are most familiar with may not necessarily be a referral to the delivery model that best serves the needs of the individual.

#### **Reviewing eligibility and suitability**

- 4.13 Among the eligibility criteria for ESP participants is the requirement that they are within six months of reaching the labour market. Those who require longer term support before gaining employment should be considered unsuitable for the ESP programme and possibly referred to other possible support options. The process of reviewing the eligibility of potential participants fell within the role of JCP.

4.14 Learning Coaches within job centres often had a longstanding working relationship with their clients and were therefore in a good position to assess their eligibility and suitability for the programme. However, training providers recognised that it was not always possible to accurately assess whether an individual was within six months of being ready to gain employment. Recruiting individuals referred to the programme from JCP that were not able to access employment within six months placed limitations of the extent to which training providers could achieve their employability outcome targets. To limit this risk, all training providers further reviewed the suitability of individuals referred to them during the first post referral appointment. Those who were considered unsuitable at this stage were referred back to JCP. One training provider took this one step further to commit resources to support JCP staff to review the suitability of potential participants prior to being referred to the programme.

#### **The referral process**

- 4.15 The process of referring ESP participants from JCP to training providers appeared, in most cases, to work well. The only concerns raised by training providers were that occasionally referred individuals did not turn up to the first appointment with the correct referral letters. This placed some additional administrative burdens on the providers. This suggests that the future roll out of the programme could benefit from the introduction of other methods, such as the use of electronic referral letters, to ease current administration burdens.
- 4.16 A couple of the training providers also noted that those referred to the programme did not always know that their participation was voluntary. As such some left the programme shortly after being recruited on to it which created some frustrations to the providers. This prompted some training providers to question whether JCP made it clear to their clients, at the initial referral stage, that the programme was voluntary or whether participants simply assumed that the programme was compulsory - as is the case with some other programmes.
- 4.17 Careers Wales are also a source for referrals, albeit one that still must go through JCP to confirm eligibility. Careers Wales and the providers had met and established links from the programme's outset but at the time of writing no referrals had been made through this route. The Careers Wales representative explained that in theory the suitability in taking part in ESP could be more easily identified by a careers coach but that obtaining the eligibility letter from the JCP

could serve as potential barrier for some adults who didn't want to use the job centre, or who had confidence issues in raising it with their work coach.

### **Suitability Assessment and Centre-based training**

4.18 Individuals referred on to the programme are invited to an initial meeting with the training provider. During this meeting, the eligibility of the individual is confirmed and suitability reassessed. At this stage, the training provider will also discuss previous work experience as well as preferences relating to future work direction. The training provider will then assess the essential skills needs of participants using the WEST toolkit<sup>10</sup> alongside a review of other employability skills needs. The information gathered is used to develop an employability plan for each individual. The assessment process leading to the production of the employability plan was delivered in a similar manner across all providers. However, the focus of the employability plan differed according to the deliver approach model adopted (see section 3).

4.19 The focus on centre based training varied across training providers according to the delivery model approach adopted (again see section 3). The different approaches to centre based training appears to partly reflect an understanding of needs and partly continuing with training approaches delivered during previous employability support programmes. The delivery approaches adopted also reflect the funding arrangements in place to deliver this pilot phase of ESP which did incentivise providers towards the delivery of centre based training (see section 5).

### **Employer Engagement and Work placements**

4.20 At the time of undertaking this formative evaluation, only a small proportion of participants recruited on to the programme had gained work placements. However, the process of engaging with employers to secure work placements and / or work specific training had already started.

4.21 The timing of the employer engagement varied according to the delivery model adopted by the training provider. As noted in section 3, some training providers, and subcontractors, engaged with employers only after the centre based training had been established. Other providers and subcontractors focused on employer engagement at an earlier stage of the delivery process.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.walesessentialskills.com/?q=node/6>

- 4.22 Some of the training providers already had established links with employers (in one case the subcontractor was the training arm of a large employer - Abertawe a Bro Morgannwg University Health Board (ABMUHB)) which enabled them to identify work placements and employment opportunities relatively quickly. Other providers had less established links with employers and therefore had to invest more time making those links and encourage employers to participate in the programme. One provider had started working with their local job centre to share employer contact details in order to gain access to more employer engagement opportunities.
- 4.23 In most cases the employers engaged by providers, in the period leading up to January 2017, had responded positively to the ESP and were keen to offer participants work placement opportunities. Some employers considered participating in the programme as an opportunity to deliver on areas of their corporate responsibility; others considered it a means by which to recruit the staff they needed and some simply wanted to support individuals in to work by giving them the work experience they needed.
- 4.24 Many of the employers who were participating in the programme appeared happy to do so as they trusted the training provider to find them a work placement participant or potential employee that would be suitable to the position they had available. Matching the employment route preferences and abilities of individual participants with the availability of work placement and employment opportunities has been a challenge, especially in rural areas where employment opportunities may be less accessible.
- 4.25 Some employers however, were reluctant to participate in the programme. Some large employers were concerned that taking on work placements would be seen by others as an exploitation of workers.
- 4.26 Participants who were matched up with employers had the opportunity to undertake between 120 and 240 hours of work placement activity over a period of six months. Some of the work placements opportunities that had been taken up by participants, at the time of writing, were linked to current work vacancies which the participants could apply for at the end of their placement; some were linked to potential future vacancies that were not available yet but may provide an employment opportunity for participants at a later date. Other placements provided an opportunity for participants to gain valuable experience but were not linked with any current employment opportunities. Some of the work placements offered

participants vocational training as part of the placement, others provided relevant experience but did not necessarily include any job specific training. The work placement opportunities that had been taken up during the evaluation period varied therefore in the degree to which they provided training and / or a recognised path to sustained employment with the employer in question.

### **Employer Specific Training**

- 4.27 As part of the employer engagement process, providers were looking for companies or organisations who were in the process of recruiting to a number of posts. A couple of examples such as this did arise during the evaluation period and they created the opportunity for the training provider to deliver bespoke training and support to some of the participants that matched the job opportunities available. The employer in turn offered all ESP participants who had received the training a guaranteed job interview for the vacancies.
- 4.28 The employer specific training offered a potential quick route to employment for some participants. Gaining employment is the only outcome measure of the ESP. To this end therefore, the employer specific training can be considered a successful pathway to the desired outcomes of the programme. However, it may also raise the question whether the same employment outcomes could be achieved without the support of the programme. There is no robust evidence available at the moment to either support or challenge this question. Gathering such evidence may need to be a focus of future summative evaluations of the programme.

### **Gaining sustained employment**

- 4.29 All training providers were given a programme outcome target of supporting 55% of their participants into employment. Most providers considered this to be a challenging target, although one provider had set themselves and their subcontractors an internal target of 65%. The main challenge to achieving this target, anticipated by training providers, was the uncertainties associated with the programme. These uncertainties included how close to the labour market (or work ready) participants referred to the programme were likely to be. They also included uncertainties as to the availability of employment opportunities to meet the needs and suitability of participants.



- 4.30 During the timeframe of this evaluation very few participants had reached the point where they could take up any available sustained employment opportunities. It is not possible at this stage therefore to review progress against these outcome targets. Training providers were nevertheless anticipating that more participants would soon be in a position to access employment opportunities. Most providers had therefore, planned their delivery of the in-work mentoring support which they are required to provide to participants during their first three months in sustained employment.
- 4.31 Providers recognised the first 4 weeks of the in-work mentoring as a particularly important area of support as this was a key period when participants were vulnerable to drop out of the programme due to financial reasons. One training provider noted that, in their experience, individuals find the adjustment of moving from receiving a weekly benefit payment to receiving a wage paid monthly difficult to manage in the first few weeks of employment. The mentoring support needed to be mindful of this therefore, possible offering guidance to participants as to how they could best manage this financial transition.
- 4.32 In order to provide the three month in-work mentoring to participants, the training providers must gain the consent and support of the employers to access individuals at their place of work. Some challenges to gaining this support from employers had already been experienced. One employer, consulted as part of this evaluation, who had recently employed some ESP participants noted that they considered the training provider's delivery of mentoring support during the first three months of employment as unnecessary and 'a little bit inconvenient'. Future summative evaluations may need to review whether challenges of this nature are common across employers who take on ESP supported participants.

## **5. Commercial Viability**

- 5.1 The commercial viability of delivering the ESP was a key consideration for the training providers contracted to deliver the programme. Training providers receive funding for delivering specific areas of training and support. As such the delivery agreement does not include a set contractual value for each participant. Instead providers are paid on the support outputs they deliver to each individual (see Figure 4.1).
- 5.2 Most of the training providers had not previously delivered programmes funded in this way and this created some commercial challenges for them. The main challenge was planning and allocating resources to deliver a programme that was associated with a number of commercial unknowns.
- 5.3 One training provider programme lead noted that in the absence of a known or agreed contractual value which they could present to their board of directors, it had been difficult for them to gain the support they needed within their own organisation to proceed with the delivery of the programme.
- 5.4 Most of the providers also noted that they had to invest in front-loaded costs such as recruiting staff before they could recruit participants and therefore access any funding.
- 5.5 In most cases the training providers consulted did not expect the delivery of the programme, at least during the initial pilot phase, to be a commercially viable venture for them. This was based on the assumption that they may not be able to recoup the initial set up investment costs within the delivery timescales available for the pilot. Most providers noted that they were reliant on the commercial value of other contracts which they were also delivering to support the upfront costs required to deliver the ESP. This may suggest that the current funding structure favours larger training providers who have the capacity to deliver a wide range of commercial activities that can absorb some of the costs and commercial uncertainties associated with the ESP.
- 5.6 Those consulted were of the view that some commercial and performance measure uncertainties associated with the programme stem from the varying degree to which participants, at the point of referral and recruitment, are ready or otherwise to access the labour market. Participants recruited on to the programme who are ready to access employment with little support will contribute to the employment outcomes of the providers. However, if the provider has very few

opportunities to provide any 'fundable' support to these individuals through the programme, then these participants may not generate much commercial value to the provider. On the other hand, participants who are further away from the labour market may not be ready to gain employment within the timeframe of the programme. These participants will not contribute to the employment outcome targets of the provider. However, providing these participants with several hours of centre based training would enable the provider to access more funding and therefore increase the commercial value of these participants to the provider.

- 5.7 In theory, the scenario examples discussed in paragraph 5.5 should not have an impact on providers as individuals who are either very close or more than six months away from the labour market should not be referred on to the programme. However, as noted elsewhere in this report, assessing an individuals' distance from the labour market at the referral stage can be challenging. As such it may be inevitable that some participants referred to the programme may be closer or further away from the labour market than initially anticipated. The point remains however, that there appears to be a trade-off between the relatively higher commercial value of participants who require more support such as centre based training, and the outcome performance value of participants who can access sustainable employment with relatively little support.
- 5.8 The funding arrangements in place for the ESP pilot incentivise centre based training. The ESP funding is allocated within two strands. Strand 1 includes funding for supporting individuals in work placements, providing employer specific training, work preparation training, essential skills training and vocational skills training. Strand 2 includes funding to deliver the in-work mentoring support delivered during the first three months of sustained employment. The funding is allocated according to the number of learning units (LUs) delivered under each strand. Strand 1 can include up to 80 LUs depending on the nature and hours of support provided. Strand 2 on the other can only include a maximum of 24 LUs (see Figure 4.1). Training providers seeking to maximise the commercial value of each participant are therefore incentivised to deliver as many LUs as possible to individuals within strand 1 before supporting them towards sustained employment and access to funding via strand 2. Therefore, although the programme emphasises access to employment as its primary objective, the balance of the funding arrangements available are weighted more heavily towards supporting pre-employment training and support.

**Figure 4.1: ESP Funding Model**

<p>Funding for ESP is payable in two strands:</p> <p><b>Strand 1</b> funding covers the training needed to support unemployed adults to get a job and covers activities such as work placements, employer specific training, work preparation training, and Essential Skills provision.</p> <p><b>Strand 2</b> funding covers the in-work coaching and support needed to help individuals to sustain employment and is only payable where an individual has successfully achieved a job outcome.</p> <p>Each component of the ESP model is expressed in terms of learning units (LUs); the £value for each LU being £23.18.</p>	
<b>Strand 1</b>	
<b>Centre based training</b>	Each individual participant qualifies for 1 LU unit for every 6 hours of centre-based training they receive.
<b>Work Based Delivery</b>	Each individual participant qualifies for 1 LU for every 12 hours of time in the workplace as part of a work placement or whilst undertaking Employer Specific Training <sup>11</sup> .
<b>Welsh Medium and Bilingual Delivery</b>	An uplift payment of 25% is made for provision which is delivered bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.
<b>Outcome Payment</b>	Outcome payments are set at a flat rate of £250 (10.8 LUs) for each successful job outcome.
<b>Capping Funding</b>	The level of activity undertaken by an individual on Strand 1 is subject to a cap of 80 LUs <sup>12</sup> . This includes any centre-based uplift LUs, but excludes any LUs for entry funding or Welsh-medium bilingual delivery.
<b>Strand 2</b>	
<b>In Work Coaching</b>	Each individual participant qualifies for 8 LUs for every month in employment, payable for a maximum of 3 months. This is payable once the individual participant has sustained employment for 3 months. Providers must produce evidence of the in-work coaching provided which should include a minimum of 3 in-work coaching visits over the 3-month period. Individual participants who have undertaken Employer Specific Training as part of their ESP are not eligible for funding under Strand 2.
<b>Capping Funding</b>	The maximum funding available under Strand 2 activity is 24 LUs.

<sup>11</sup> Any group-based delivery undertaken in the workplace, e.g. as part of the delivery of Employer Specific Training is regarded as centre-based delivery.

<sup>12</sup> The exception to this is where individuals are undertaking Employer Specific Training where the level of activity will be subject to a cap of 40 LUs.

## 6. Participant Experiences

- 6.1 The views of 11 adult participants were gathered as part of this formative evaluation and summarised in this section.

### Participant profile

- 6.2 The contact details of 15 adults who had started on the programme were received from provider 1 and telephone interviews took place with eight of them. A further three face-to-face interviews took place during workplace visits arranged by provider 2. In total 11 adults were interviewed: eight adults supported by provider 1 (telephone interviews with 5 women and 3 men) and three by provider 2 (face-to-face interviews with 3 men). Care should be taken when interpreting these findings as this is a very small number of cases. The participant experiences reported in this chapter therefore should be read as an insight into aspects of the delivery of the programme in some locations by two providers rather than representing the programme as a whole.
- 6.3 The sample is not representative of the total participants in the project due to sample being drawn from only two providers (as they were the only ones with enough starts at the time of carrying out the fieldwork). With such a small number, no attempt was made to sample according to any variable other than area. Note also that those interviewed by telephone were those who responded to a text or answerphone invite to take part and those interviewed face-to-face were arranged by the provider and as such may not be representative of the whole participant population.

### Research findings

#### *Awareness of and engagement with ESP*

- 6.4 When asked how they became aware of the programme, the key role of the work coach<sup>13</sup> at their local Jobcentre was evident from the responses, with all of the respondents stating that they had been referred by the Jobcentre. Participants were asked where they had met with the provider for the first time and for all of those who could remember, this was at the Jobcentre, either as an individual appointment or as a small group.

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<sup>13</sup> Work Coaches are front-line Department of Work and Pensions staff based in Jobcentres

6.5 None of the adults recalled receiving any written description of the programme prior to starting, with the programme being verbally described to them firstly by their work coach and then by the provider. As far as the adults could recall, it seems that the description of the programme from the work coaches was very brief, for example, ‘they didn’t tell me much, just said “turn up at the Jobcentre next week”’.

*Motivations for taking part*

6.6 Respondents were asked what had appealed to them about the opportunity and their reasons for taking part. Some half of the adults interviewed did not actively choose to take part but rather were ‘told to go on it’ by their work coach, explaining that ‘I don’t know [what appealed]– they just force you don’t they’. One participant thought that she had to do the course as her benefits would be cut otherwise, but it is not clear whether the other participants had misunderstood the voluntary nature of the opportunity or not. Other adults (some half of the adults interviewed) expressed a more positive motivation for taking part, because it was an opportunity to ‘do something’,

‘I’d only been with the Jobcentre a couple of weeks. At one of the first appointments, she [work coach] mentioned this course, I thought, ‘might as well.’

‘I thought it would be good to get into a bit of routine - no reason not to [do the course]’.

At this very early stage in both the delivery of the programme, and in the interviewees’ participation, the feedback was positive and the idea of the course was very much welcomed: one participant viewed it as a means of addressing the hurdle of getting any with employers as the first step to returning to the world of work,

‘That’s the trouble I have, getting them [employers] to know me and getting a job’

6.7 Once they had received more information the adults were more keen on the programme and motivated to stay with it, with the work placement and the chance of a job at the end of it being a motivation,

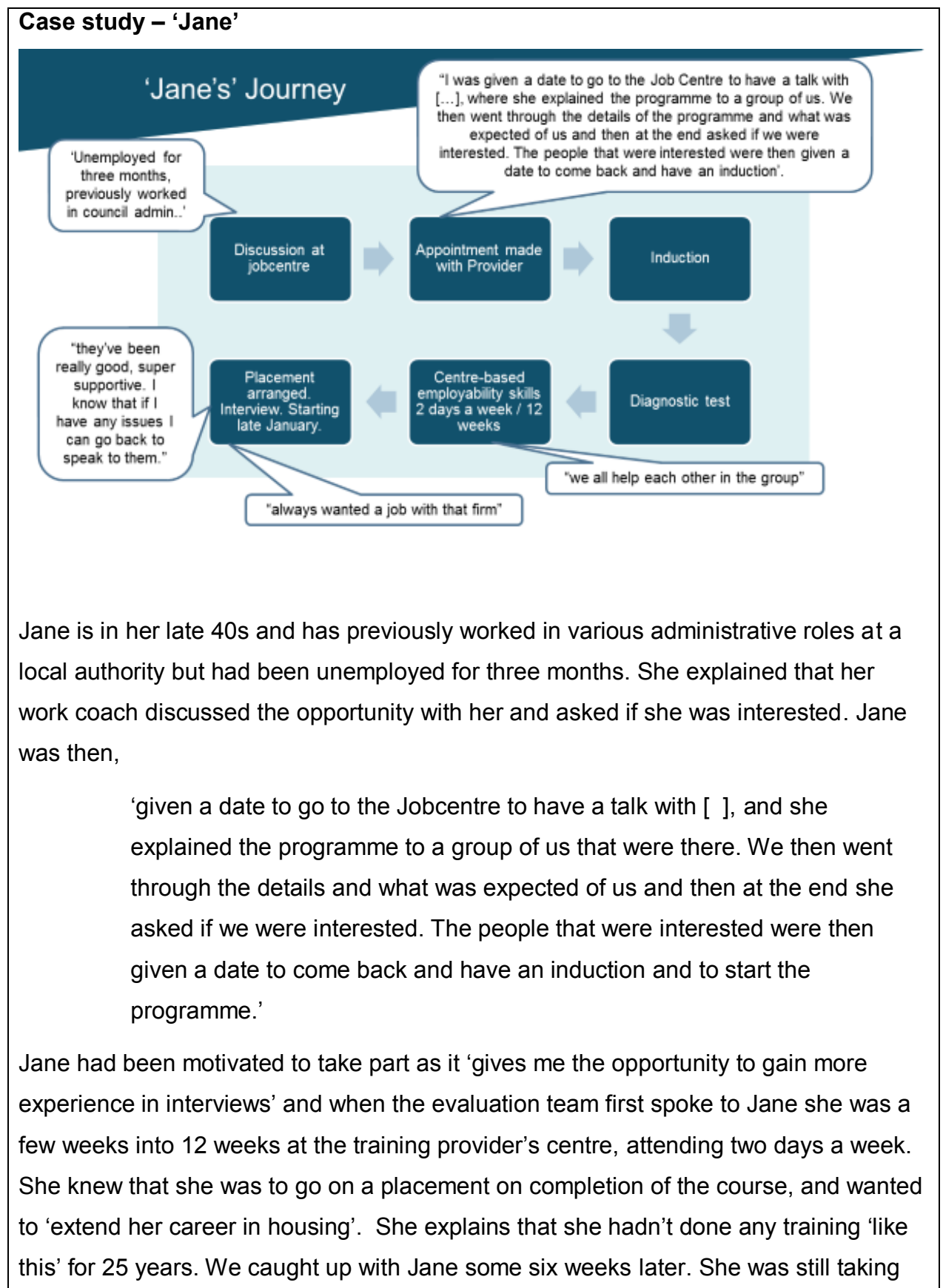
‘[I’m motivated] because they’ve led us to believe that 60/70% will be getting a job at the end of it’.

‘It will help me get back into work.’

#### *Overview of the ESP experience*

- 6.8 Seven of the eight adults following the programme with provider 1 had not started on their work placement and could only report on the referral and on the centre-based work preparation which they had received. The adults with provider 1 were all taking part in a set 12 weeks of course-based activity, attending the centre for two days a week. The activities include improving CVs, writing cover letters, learning about transferable skills, interview techniques and job searching. All of those interviewed reported that they were enjoying the course, with one going further and explaining that he’s ‘been more productive since starting on the course’.
- 6.9 Four of the adults interviewed had started on a work placement, and although very early days the experience is a positive one. One participant supported by training provider 2 had been out of work for almost twenty years. He had a strong desire to work and had previously applied for many jobs. However, he often lacked the confidence and communication skills required at job interviews. His work placement with a furniture recycling company offered him the opportunity to demonstrate to a potential employer his work ethos and capability - an opportunity he may not have had outside the support of the programme.
- 6.10 Another participant supported by training provider 2 had been made redundant a few years ago, from a job he had held for over 15 years. He was looking for an administration job but lacked experience. His current work experience placement with a crime prevention service enabled him to gain administrative experience with a reputable employer. It was uncertain whether the placement would lead directly to an employment opportunity. However, the employer had agreed to provide a reference to support future job applications if a suitable position could not be found at his current place of work. See also ‘Robert’s’ case study.
- 6.11 Participants were asked whether they had been given an opportunity to develop Welsh language skills as part of their involvement with the ESP and whether they had taken up any offer. Of the eight who received a depth interview, three recalled being offered an opportunity to develop Welsh language skills while the others either couldn’t remember or didn’t think it had been offered. They commented that

this wasn't something that was applicable to them, explaining that 'I'm no good at Welsh' or 'I'm too old for all of that'. A couple of participants remarked that all the forms they'd received were bilingual and assumed that others could 'get everything' in Welsh if they wished.



Jane is in her late 40s and has previously worked in various administrative roles at a local authority but had been unemployed for three months. She explained that her work coach discussed the opportunity with her and asked if she was interested. Jane was then,

'given a date to go to the Jobcentre to have a talk with [ ], and she explained the programme to a group of us that were there. We then went through the details and what was expected of us and then at the end she asked if we were interested. The people that were interested were then given a date to come back and have an induction and to start the programme.'

Jane had been motivated to take part as it 'gives me the opportunity to gain more experience in interviews' and when the evaluation team first spoke to Jane she was a few weeks into 12 weeks at the training provider's centre, attending two days a week. She knew that she was to go on a placement on completion of the course, and wanted to 'extend her career in housing'. She explains that she hadn't done any training 'like this' for 25 years. We caught up with Jane some six weeks later. She was still taking



part in the programme and after having received the help with CV and interview techniques, Jane had spoken with her Placement Officer, explaining her experience in previous roles, and explaining what she was looking for in a job. The training provider has sourced a placement for her and organised an interview with a housing firm and Jane is due to start her placement the following week as an administrator there. During her placement, she will be visiting the centre one day a week to keep in touch on how everything is going.

Jane reflects that the course has been positive and that 'we all help each other in the group. She feels supported by her placement officer, 'they've been really good, super supportive. I know that if I have any issues I can go back to speak to them.' Jane is looking forward to starting her placement as she's 'always wanted a job with that firm.'

#### *Participant Evaluation of the programme*

- 6.12 All respondents were asked to provide a view on the support that they had received so far. All respondents were positive about their experience, explaining that 'it's been really good so far' and 'everything was great. I could just drop in if I had any problems, they're very supportive.'
- 6.13 Participants were asked whether they had received similar support in the past. Three of the eleven participants had done so – one had 'been on a course to do my CV and stuff before, so [she] didn't see the point of doing it again' and felt that this support was 'exactly the same'. Another had been referred to a 'course' by the job centre previously and found ESP to be 'so much better.' A third participant had been on several courses but rated this opportunity more highly because of its informal nature and the link to a work placement.

### **Case study – ‘Robert’**

Robert is 21 and has been unemployed for four months. He was previously in college for a year studying IT level 2 but had only chosen that course as friends of his were there.

When we first spoke with Robert he had just started on the training provider’s course. He didn’t recall receiving much information about the programme at the outset, and explains that ‘[the work coach] didn’t tell me much, just said ‘turn up at the job centre next week’ for the appointment with the training provider. The appointment was ‘quite a long meeting’ and although Robert can’t recall what they talked about he thinks they covered ‘things like sorting out help with CV’.

He then started the programme, which appealed to Robert as a chance to learn basic skills and get ready for a job, and he hopes it will lead to a work placement and work. In practice, the programme for Robert means going twice a week to ‘classes’ at the provider’s centre, where he ‘does literacy and job searches’; he’s ‘enjoying it’. Some activities can be difficult for Robert because he gets nervous and suffers anxiety but the course is ‘easier because there’s only 8 of us and it’s always the same teacher’. The provider has explained to him that there’s a counsellor available, but he hasn’t yet needed to take up the offer.

We caught up with Robert a few weeks later and he had started the placement that week at a supermarket. Due to his manager being on holiday that same week he’s only worked the minimum amount (4 hours a day) for four days. He’s hoping to work more hours when the manager is back. He’s ‘really enjoying’ his first week.

Robert felt much better about the prospect of going on a placement and felt more confident after attending the training provider’s course. They ‘covered everything - cover letter, CV, interview techniques’ which he used in the interview for the placement. The placement was set up by the provider after Robert had explained that he wanted to work in a warehouse / retail environment. He was given various options and chose the supermarket which is very convenient to his home, being one street away. He has been told that if everything works out he could get a full-time job at the end of the placement.

Robert felt that the provider covered everything and gave him confidence to start a placement and eventually a full-time job.

## **7. Conclusions and recommendations**

- 7.1 Progress in the delivery of the ESP in the period leading up to January 2017 has been steady, although slower than initially anticipated. Some of the delivery delays were linked to initial set up challenges including establishing contractual agreements between training providers and subcontractors and recruiting delivery staff. For some providers, however, the delivery challenges, and consequent delays, continued beyond initial set up issues. As a result, delivery progress has not been consistent across all the training providers.

### **Participant referral rates**

- 7.2 Some providers received many referrals to the programme and started delivering support to participants at a relatively early stage. Others have received fewer referrals during the same delivery period.
- 7.3 Variations in referral and recruitment rates across providers are likely to reflect the different delivery models adopted by the four main providers. Two of the delivery models were based on fairly standardised approaches, building on training support models delivered during previous employability programmes. The other two providers produced more tailored approaches which focussing more on the requirement set out in the delivery specification to deliver differently.
- 7.4 Training providers who offered standardised delivery approaches received a higher volume of referrals from JCP in the period leading to January 2017 compared with the providers who offered a more tailored delivery approach. Previously established links and working relationships with JCP appeared to be a key success factor in gaining these referrals. Training providers offering a more standardised approach also used their access to these existing links to successfully promote a delivery approach that, in many cases, was already familiar to JCP representatives. Providers who offered a highly flexible and tailored approach, planning all aspects of the delivery around the bespoke needs of participants, offered a closer match to the aims of the programme as outlined in the ESP delivery specification. However, these providers appeared to find it more challenging to promote their offer to JCP and therefore gain referrals.

**Recommendation**

If providers are to be supported to 'deliver differently', the Welsh Government may need to support them to promote and market these delivery approaches to JCP and other organisations who provide referral routes to the programme. Delivery approaches that meet the criteria of delivering differently may also need more time to establish.

**Recommendation**

If more than one training provider delivers ESP in the same geographical area, the Welsh Government may want to consider ways to encourage JCP to refer participants to the providers that offer a delivery approach that best suits the needs of individuals.

**Recommendation**

The Welsh Government may need to continue to work with JCP to ensure that all work coaches fully understand the ESP eligibility criteria and apply a consistent approach to assessing the suitability of potential participants, particularly in relation to their proximity to the labour market.

- 7.5 All training providers were allocated a number of participants. These comprised mainly of mainstream participants i.e. unemployed individuals on JSA but also included some individuals who were recipients of support through the Lift programme. Allocations were also made for offenders serving their sentence in the community to participate in essential skills training.
- 7.6 Except for one provider, the marketing and recruitment efforts of the training providers, during the period under review, focussed only on gaining mainstream participants. No effort was made during that time to recruit offenders in the community.
- 7.7 Careers Wales are also a source for referrals, albeit one that still must go through JCP and a route that had not resulted in any referrals to date. Definite data for this referral route will not be available over the life of the programme as there is no mechanism to log the referrals from Careers Wales to ESP

### **Recommendation**

The Welsh Government may need to support the process of clearly identifying and defining the roles of all stakeholders in relation to how they can support individuals towards future ESP participation referral routes.

### **Employer engagement**

- 7.8 The timing of employer engagement also varied according to the delivery model adopted by providers. Those who offered a more standardised delivery approach waited until they had established the training provision for participants before moving on to focussing on employer engagement. Other providers focussed on engaging with employers at an earlier stage of the delivery process.
- 7.9 The extent to which providers engaged with 'new' employers i.e. those who had not participated in previous programmes also varied. Providers typically approached employers they were familiar with first before moving on to engage with new contacts.
- 7.10 The nature and the timing of employer engagement was often influenced by the employment preferences of participants as well as the recruitment opportunities available at the time. This prompted claims from providers that they could not rely entirely on their contact with existing employers and that creating new contacts was necessary. However, in most cases, at the time of writing, the employer engagement process remained at an early stage of development. As such it is not possible to draw firm conclusions relating to how the programme has influenced the nature and direction of the engagement process.
- 7.11 Training providers reported that most employers appeared supportive and willing to take on work placement participants and potential employees supported by the programme. A key element of the support was that they trusted the training provider to put forward only those individuals who were suitable for their place of work. However, not all employers have been supportive of the programme. A minority of, mainly larger, employers expressed concerns to the training providers that offering unpaid work placements through the programme could lead to misconceptions of staff exploitation, which they feared could tarnish the reputation and commercial value of their brand.

## **Commercial viability**

- 7.12 Most training providers did not expect the delivery of the pilot phase of the programme to be a commercially viable venture for them. They expected the initial set up and delivery costs to exceed the short-term income they would gain from the funding during this time.
- 7.13 The commercial value of the programme differs according to the level of support delivered by the training providers to each participant, which in turn is (or should be) dependent on the level support required by each individual. Individuals referred to the programme who require a lot of centre based training support are potentially more commercially valuable to training providers than participants who are ready to access the labour market with very little support. On the other hand, participants who can potentially access sustained employment with very little support are more likely to contribute towards the employment outcome target of 55% of all participants, set for each provider.
- 7.14 For training providers, therefore, there appears to be a trade-off between the commercial value and the programme outcome value of individual participants. The ideal participant appears to be someone who requires at least some centre-based training support but who can access sustained employment within the programme timeframe; thus providing commercial and outcome value to the providers.
- 7.15 The support needs and distance from the labour market of individuals is largely dependent on the 'type' of individuals referred to the programme by JCP. This in turn is dependent on the suitability of the assessment processes adopted by JCP representatives. The reliance on JCP to refer suitable participants to the programme poses a potential commercial and performance measure risk to providers. This has been managed to some extent by a second round of assessments during participants' first meetings with the training provider and, in one case, the training provider offering pre-referral assessment support to JCP.
- 7.16 The funding structure currently supporting the programme is weighted towards pre-employment support. While this encourages providers to deliver the training and support individuals require to gain the sustained employment outcomes the programme aims at, it also incentivises providers to deliver centre based training as a means of ensuring commercial viability.

7.17 The planned support package to be delivered to each participant are assessed during the initial review of needs and outlined within individual employability plans. It is these plans and not the funding that should decide the nature and volume of support provided. However, the current funding structure does encourage the development of delivery models that include at least some centre-based training for all participants.

**Recommendation**

When considering the future funding model for the ESP, the Welsh Government should consider the extent to which the commercial uncertainties, currently associated with its delivery, impacts on the ability or willingness of training providers to bid for future delivery contracts. The ability to spread any commercial risk associated with the programme across a range of other commercial training delivery activity will vary across providers. This is likely to have implications on the type (and possibly size) of provider likely to tender for future contracts.

**Recommendation**

The Welsh Government should consider undertaking further formative evaluation work once the programme has had longer to embed, in order to better understand the facilitators and barriers to delivering a more holistic and individualised service. Future summative evaluations of the ESP should consider whether or not employer specific training delivered through the programme, support employment outcomes that would not otherwise have been achieved. Future evaluations should also review the extent to which employers enable or restrict the mentoring support providers can offer participants during their first three months in sustained employment.