

Jobs Growth Wales + Follow up review

Executive summary

This report focuses on improvement areas identified in Estyn's initial monitoring visit report (Estyn, 2023) and in the Welsh Government's formative evaluation of Jobs Growth Wales+ (Welsh Government, 2024). We evaluated:

- the referral processes and participants' experiences during this phase
- how well curriculum delivery meets the diverse needs of participants and prepares them for progressing into further learning or employment.

To gather evidence for this report, we visited all five lead contractors, including 21 sub-contractor partners, across a total of 49 Jobs Growth Wales+ (JGW+) delivery centres across Wales. We observed sessions; spoke with participants; undertook desk research to review referral processes; analysed key performance information across the contract and met employers and other stakeholders.

Since the initial monitoring visits, the referral process has been strengthened considerably through effective collaboration between lead contractors, Working Wales and the Welsh Government. Revised referral documentation has enhanced the capture of necessary detail around participants' individual needs and helped place participants more accurately on the best strand of support. The process for sharing information about participants with additional learning needs (ALN) however has become less efficient, as the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021) prevents Working Wales from sharing Individual Development Plans (IDPs) directly with contractors on referral into the programme.

The growing use of direct referrals has allowed providers to identify demand for the programme and to start participants more quickly. However, rising demand for places and participants remaining on programmes for longer have led to waiting lists in some regions, creating delays in participant start dates and increasing the risk of disengagement.

The majority of participants on the JGW+ programme were on the engagement strand, with many presenting significant barriers to progressing further such as mental health concerns and confidence issues. Providers offered strong well-being support, including sessions focused on anxiety management, healthy lifestyles, and personal development. Most providers employed support services such as resilience coaches and counsellors which participants valued and regularly accessed.

Providers generally encouraged participant progression through the programme strands and into employment or further education and training, with identified progression pathways and expected timelines. However, a few participants on the engagement strand were not making the progress they were capable of due to a reluctance to progress on to work placement opportunities, preferring to remain in-centre where they felt more secure around their friends, tutors and coaches.

On the advancement strand, the availability of sector-specific provision was too variable across

different parts of Wales. In some areas, participants had a wide range of choice of provision in sectors such as construction, care and retail, however in other areas, programmes were focussed on general employability qualifications. As a result, not all young people can access provision that is tailored to their individual preference. In a few cases, there was a lack of distinction between delivery on engagement and advancement which left a few participants unclear about their progression opportunities. Many participants on the advancement strand quickly accessed work placement opportunities, however, a few had to wait for placements due to challenges providers faced with accessing sufficient work placement opportunities across vocational areas.

The employment strand continued to be underused with providers reporting overly bureaucratic funding requirements and being able to source alternative employment opportunities for those ready to progress into work. As a result, most providers prioritise their resource allocation into satisfying demand for other programme strands.

Most participants expressed positive experiences of the programme, appreciating the supportive learning environments and personalised attention from staff. They reported high levels of pastoral support and valued the range of enrichment activities providers offer which they say helps to build their confidence, social and team working skills.

Our recommendations

Contractors should:

- Ensure a clear distinction between engagement and advancement curriculum, and that all participants understand their opportunities for progression
- Stretch and motivate all participants to achieve to the best of their abilities, particularly in progressing from centre-based activity into work placement, further education & training or employment once they are ready
- Continue to develop employer engagement strategies to ensure participants can access timely sector-specific work placements aligned with their career aspirations

The Welsh Government should:

- Review the structure of strands, particularly the effectiveness of the employment strand, with consideration of an alternative strand for participants that have the most significant barriers to progression
- Consider alternative measures other than programme destinations as a positive outcome, particularly for those furthest from progression into further education, training or employment
- Ensure that contracted provision across all regions includes a choice of provider and appropriate choice of sector specific programmes
- Consider how funding methodologies and allocations can best meet the increasing demands for the programme

All stakeholders involved in delivering JGW+ should:

- Evaluate processes for sharing of information to ensure that contractors receive timely information on participants with additional learning needs (ALN) and an Individual Development Plan (IDP), allowing necessary support to be offered at the earliest opportunity.