

Lancashire County Council Beacon Case Study – Tackling Worklessness

During the last ten to fifteen years Worklessness has become an increasing problem in Lancashire, as elsewhere in the country. Lancashire County Council, working closely with Jobcentre Plus, District Councils and the Voluntary Faith and Community Sector developed and implemented a simple and effective approach to tackle this. Over a period of 22 months, the authority contacted 14,000 longer term incapacity and lone parent claimants and invited them to attend local events. This resulted in over 2,200 people expressing an interest in working and with 483 long term benefit claimants returning to work.

Background

In 2006 there were 106,540 people claiming “Out-of-Work” benefits in Lancashire, 72,890 of which claimed an incapacity or lone parent benefit. Prior to the Local Area Agreement (LAA), activity to address Worklessness was led by Job Centre Plus (JCP). The support of other partners, including District Councils and the County Council, varied from area to area and the resource available to tackle the problem was equally variable, focusing mainly on Neighbourhood Renewal Fund areas and funding.

In the development of Lancashire’s LAA, Worklessness was identified as a priority theme, with the focus being on those claiming Incapacity Benefit and Lone Parent Benefit; the people seen as most difficult to place in to employment. With the average ‘length of stay’ on Incapacity Benefit nationally viewed to be eight years and with Job Centre Plus not routinely working with people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit, this was viewed as an important opportunity to reduce the number of people claiming ‘Out-of-Work’ benefits by supporting these people to (re)enter employment.

Key Learning's

- Worklessness an increasing problem in the UK, including Lancashire.
- Priority theme of Regional Economic Strategy and Lancashire LAA.
- Approach to support people claiming an Incapacity Benefit or Lone Parent Benefit for more than 6-months into sustainable employment.
- Prior to the LAA, activity to address Worklessness was led by Job Centre Plus (JC+) with the support of partners, and their resources available to contribute to work, varying from area to area and often focused on four Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) areas.
- The focus of the LAA has fundamentally altered these relationships, sparking much closer working and broadening of the programme between Job Centre Plus (JC+), all 12 District LSPs and Councils, and the County LSP and Council.

The added value of these strengthened relationships has been to enable Jobcentre Centre Plus to target customers they would not normally have reached and employers who would not normally have offered opportunities to the target groups.

Adding value to Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus is the only partner with access to all benefit claimants. Using the action plan, partners prepared a marketing strategy which committed to personally contacting the entire target customer group during the three years of the LAA. This involved:

- recognising seasonal fluctuations and behaviour patterns amongst the target group. For example, a lone-parent mailing was sent in September to coincide with the new school term
- extending existing approaches to cover areas of the county which had no employability delivery amongst public organisations other than Jobcentre Plus. For example, South Ribble held its first jobs fair and linked it with a networking event for training providers
- using surveys to determine and try to meet the needs and desires of the target group. For example matching skills needs to training and personal development courses run by the council's Adult Learning
- hosting a range of job and opportunities fairs, led by different partners, including private sector employers and ourselves. For example we led five events promoting public sector working to black and minority ethnic communities, encouraging applications from attendees. This approach has already achieved the challenging LAA stretch target nine months early, with almost 500 Lancashire residents from the most deprived communities having secured work

Analysis of performance shows that we have tended to support people who have claimed benefits for between 6 and 24 months. Government papers state that the average length of stay on incapacity benefit is eight years. With average incapacity benefit entitlement being £7,750, a typical eight year claim would total £62,000. Given our current performance we can therefore claim a county-wide saving of £22.3 million, £46,500 per person. Having reviewed the cost of this intervention, each job entry costs approximately only £28.

Outcomes

Partners recognised that Jobcentre Plus was uniquely positioned in having the names and addresses of all benefit claimants in Lancashire. To date this information has been used to:

- Over a period of 22 months, the authority contacted 14,000 longer term incapacity and lone parent claimants and invited them to attend local events.
- 480 long-term Incapacity and Lone Parent benefit claimants gaining sustainable employment.

- Over 30 job-fair events were held resulting in over 2,200 people expressing an interest in working and 520 people were placed in sustainable employment.
- All this was achieved with a unit cost of an additional £28 per person.
- Where letters have invited responses, these have been collated and JCP now has a detailed list of claimants interested in returning to work.

Nicola claimed incapacity benefit for 9 years before securing work in Haslingden
Shayeda claimed lone-parent benefit for 6 years before working in Preston for the Immigration Advisory service.

Lessons learned and dealing with challenges

One of the most significant lessons learned in this approach has been the importance of working closely with key partners and putting trust in those partners that have the knowledge and experience to tackle difficult issues. It is about partners working together *under these lead bodies* to bring about change and added value.

Those involved in the work have also realised the importance of seeing the project as an evolving and organic piece of work. A commitment to constantly reviewing what did and did not work has allowed those involved to adapt the project as it has progressed.

From a resource perspective, this work has shown that a relatively small intervention in terms of cost yields a result in terms of people coming off benefit and moving into work.

In the specific arena of Worklessness it has proven valuable to adopt the employer-led approach to tackling Worklessness. That is sourcing and promoting vacancies and opportunities as much as concentrating spending the majority of time on the individual recipients of Incapacity Benefit.

Conclusion

The approach taken through the LAA in Lancashire to Worklessness shows that there are people on Incapacity Benefit and Lone Parent Benefit who are clearly job-ready, as 215 people have gone into sustainable employment.

The approach also suggests that targeting people on these benefits, that are interested in working, brings results and may return significant savings.

The approach raises the prospect of some of these savings being reinvested in sustaining the mailings and jobs-fairs, and in developing 'work-trials' to enable the public sector to participate more in national schemes to reduce Worklessness.

The approach enhances local employer's recruitment processes and has been developed to enable them to embrace it as one part of a recruitment and workforce strategy

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