

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Get Britain Working: Reforming Jobcentres, HC 653

Wednesday 12 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Debbie Abrahams (Chair); Johanna Baxter; Steve Darling; Gill German; Frank McNally; John Milne; David Pinto-Duschinsky.

Questions 1 - 50

Witnesses

I: Peter Robertson, Professor of Career Guidance, Edinburgh Napier University; and Becci Newton, Director of Public Policy and Research, Institute for Employment Studies.

II: Jane Gratton, Deputy Director, Public Policy, British Chambers of Commerce; and Saira Hussain, Employment Policy Champion, Federation of Small Businesses.

III: Ramesh Moher, Director, New Challenge; and Elizabeth Taylor, Chief Executive, Employment Related Services Association.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Edinburgh Napier University \(RJ0022\)](#)

[Institute for Employment Studies \(IES\) \(RJ0033\)](#)

[New Challenge \(RJ0009\)](#)

[Employment Related Services Association \(ERSA\) \(RJ0042\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Peter Robertson and Becci Newton.

Q1 Chair: A warm welcome to the first oral evidence session of our inquiry into the “Get Britain Working” White Paper and particularly the reform in jobcentres. It is a pleasure to welcome the first panel in our first session. Perhaps you would like to introduce yourselves, starting with Professor Robertson.

Peter Robertson: Hello. I am Pete Robertson. I am a Professor of Career Guidance at Edinburgh Napier University, where I teach careers service practice and policy. I am also currently the President of the Career Development Institute, which is the UK’s professional body for career development practitioners.

Becci Newton: Hi. I am Becci Newton. I am Director of Employment Policy Research at the Institute for Employment Studies. We are an independent research organisation of some 50 years’ standing, looking into employment, unemployment and active labour market policy.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. We will all ask some questions, and I will kick off. To what extent is the White Paper’s diagnosis of the problems with jobcentre employment support correct? Do you think there is anything that might be missing or could be added?

Becci Newton: The diagnosis is broadly right, and it aligns with information we have published in our Commission on the Future of Employment Support. We have 1.56 million people who are unemployed and 9.29 million people who are economically inactive. We need a service that can support people to enter and sustain work and to do better at that.

Our analysis shows that the workless population are becoming more complex in respect of their needs. They are experiencing longer-term worklessness. They need a service that can support and reach out and really make the difference, and have a more varied and differentiated support model. The other side of it is being able to help people progress in work, to advance, to further their skillsets and to become more productive for employers. It needs a more holistic approach.

The idea of moving to multi-format, multi-location, from a national service through to localised provision, taking support to where people are, is really important, particularly for some of those who are furthest away from the labour market. We also need the engagement of employers to make this work and to understand how best we can meet employers’ needs through building the connection between the service and the vacancies that they have on offer.

I suppose my one point would be that labour market demand has been falling. We are 110,000 vacancies below the level seen last year. It is slightly above where we were pre-pandemic, but it is a very challenging



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situation. We need to build our skillset to work effectively with employers, as well as for employers to understand that jobcentres, a new employment and careers service, will have a pool of talent that could help meet their needs.

Peter Robertson: Yes, broadly, the White Paper's diagnosis is accurate, and I agree that it is very much in line with the Commission on the Future of Employment Support's report, which is an excellent piece of work. I very much agree with that.

It is appropriate to focus on growing the active working population as a route to economic growth because other routes are probably more difficult. It is a very appropriate focus. Issues of age, gender, health and geography are addressed very well in the White Paper. I agree that local responses are necessary and having services that are well attuned to local labour markets and have some discretion to respond to local labour market conditions is really important. Margate is not the same as central Glasgow; we need different responses, so that is great.

Where the White Paper talks about precarity, I feel that some of those issues are best addressed through employment law and employment protections, perhaps, rather than through employment support services, which cannot necessarily fix all of those issues.

Perhaps one area that we could bring out is that the White Paper talks about a youth guarantee. A standard response of European Governments to higher youth unemployment is to promise places in education and training, so a youth guarantee is a good thing. To back that up, we need a clear delivery model for careers services to young people who have left school. We currently have structures within school, but once people have left school, in England, it is somewhat patchy. We need clarity on that and a promise of a service to those young people.

Q3 **Chair:** What about particular cohorts that jobcentres might focus on? Are there particular groups that you think jobcentres need to focus that they are not currently?

Peter Robertson: I have already mentioned young people. We have seen a big growth in youth unemployment, to some extent associated with the growth in mental health conditions. We need a clear—

Q4 **Chair:** Why do you think they are not engaging at the moment?

Peter Robertson: Well, another focus would be older workers. A fascinating study a few years ago provided a pilot study by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. It provided a career review to people in mid-career—50-plus, essentially. It was a very successful project. We do not have a targeted service for older workers, but they are likely to have slightly different issues from those beginning or in mid-career, in terms of health, finance, issues with dependants, grandchildren and so on, and managing health conditions. A focused



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approach to the 50-plus group is valuable, as well as a focused approach to the new entrants to the labour market.

Q5 Chair: You mentioned that there is no post-education engagement or delivery mechanism for young people. How should that change?

Peter Robertson: We should promise to offer a careers service consistently throughout the UK to young people who have left school. I am not saying there is no provision. There is provision, but it is arranged somewhat differently in different parts of England, as compared with the home nations, where there is a consistent model.

Chair: That is very helpful indeed. Thank you.

Q6 Johanna Baxter: Good morning. Thanks for attending this morning. Following on from that, what does the evidence show about the effectiveness of work coaches and are there any changes you would like to see to the work coaching model?

Becci Newton: The White Paper identifies that the satisfaction levels with work coaches are very high, and that is the case. However, that is only the people who are current meeting work coaches. The gap in who is reached by the service needs to be traversed to make a new employment and careers service effective.

We can argue—and some people do—that the service as it currently stands is overweighted on benefits administration and that claimant needs are less at the forefront than whether they are meeting quite generic and sometimes counterproductive conditions of claiming, such as a volume of applications per week, rather than thinking about real quality and well-matched sets of applications to help labour market transitions. But actually, work coaches are really good at delivering employability support. They are really effective at building relationships.

I have evaluated programmes over the years. For example, in the 2015 ESA reform evaluation, we could see how effective the work coach relationship can be where there can be a rapport built and a shared belief between claimant and work coach that they will be able to achieve work and make that transition and work together towards it. People with health conditions, older people and those with intersectional issues affecting their lives will experience setbacks, but the work coach continuity is a really important factor. Throughout the active labour market literature, you will find continuity of advisory support as a very important factor.

They can be very effective. They are great at jobseeking support and helping people understand how to do that. If you are older, the ways of finding work are different from when you were younger. You can get all that impact from a work coach. Where we will need to consider, in a new service, the differentiation, it is the difference that a careers adviser can make within that. Our work coaches are very good at helping people with the job getting. If you have a reasonable goal and it seems well matched to your local labour market, or the labour market that is accessible to



you, a work coach can help facilitate that transition for you. However, if you are a career changer, you have left a job and the labour market is changing—we know that employer demands are changing and we have growth and decline occupations—you do not understand the opportunities available to you. You may not understand how your skills fit in this changed world. You really need to be working with somebody to help you identify your strengths and how that matches to occupation more generally, and then more readily go back to employability support from a work coach to think about, “What is the opportunity for you locally and how we can best get you across to that?”

We saw some effective stuff in programmes such as the health-led trials, which embed individual placement support and—you will see this in primary care and community care settings, and it is sort of part of the package—brokerage with employers to find out where the vacancies are, to support job carving, job design and job matching. That is an area where we want really good co-ordination but also to push hard to achieve those transitions, to put towards the 80% target.

Q7 Johanna Baxter: Thank you for that. That goes to the earlier point that your colleague made about people needing different things in employment support. Somebody in their mid-50s who is transitioning from one job will have very different needs from somebody who is entering the workforce for the first time.

The DWP has 16,000 work coaches, and case loads are sometimes in excess of 100 claimants per work coach. Do you think the Department has enough work coaches to get that relationship you just outlined, to develop the knowledge of individual claimants, to get them the support and to point them in the direction that they might need?

Becci Newton: It is a really interesting point. Of course the workforce is not simply the work coaches working within jobcentres in DWP; we also have employment advisers in employment support organisations who are very specialised. That continued collaboration is really important. There is a wealth of knowledge in those providers and through programmes such as Restart around how to help longer-term unemployed people. As I described, people who are workless are facing quite lengthy periods of worklessness and their needs are complex. We need to capitalise on the support there.

We need to change the opportunities work coaches have to work with their case loads. It is too high. If we are bringing in staffing from the careers service to join together with work coaches in delivery, we need careful triaging to know when a case can be handed over to a careers service when the need is there—if somebody needs support around decision making, how to manage careers and so forth. We also might want to think about who needs more intensive support and more specialised support in jobseeking to move closer, and that might be where employment support organisations come in.



Work coaches play a really important role in the first phase of jobseeking—that rapid activation period. It would be great if we could help them to focus on the claimant within that, to help that process, rather than to be overly focused on compliance with benefits conditionality, which can be counterproductive, as I described.

Q8 John Milne: Good morning. As you know, the Government plan to introduce a new jobs and careers service. What have been the shortcomings of the current jobcentre offering and what might be a more effective approach?

Becci Newton: I think it is the sense, for claimants, that this is to show you have complied with the conditions to receive your welfare benefit. Over many research studies and evaluations for the Department that I have done, we have encountered people who do not find the jobcentre a very approachable place. There is security on the door; you could not bring your children if you were not able to get care; the coaches have to focus on whether you have applied for 20 jobs this week and whether you are able to demonstrate that you have looked for work for 35 hours a week. There is not sufficient focus on, "Let's help surface those strengths. Let's help you understand what's available in the local labour market."

That big volume of applications is a problem to employers engaging with the service because, rather than getting high-quality applications, they just get a huge volume to sift from people who are not necessarily motivated for the work. If we could have a greater focus on people heading towards well-matched vacancies that they are motivated to take an interest in, we could get more engagement from employers and achieve a better quality of service all round, having the focus on employment and careers rather than benefits administration.

That will be there. I think you can trust your work coaches to know and report if they do not feel somebody is engaging in a search. Sometimes, rigid rules—"If you miss a claim and we can't understand the reasons why you might have missed your appointment, you have just missed it and we're going to sanction you"—are unhelpful, and it is unhelpful to push people towards poverty. You want them to come to support. That is what we want from a service. It is rights and responsibilities. I would never argue against that, but we want a service to be approachable.

One of the ambitions, which I truly believe in, is that this should be helping people who are in work to advance in their careers, to be able to push further, and that would deliver on economic prosperity, but also health and wellbeing and social outcomes for individuals. Again, to over-foreground the benefits element and not centre on the employment and careers services that are offered belies what we could be offering and underplays what we could do.

Peter Robertson: I agree with that. It is worth bearing in mind that employment support services in a number of English-speaking countries have had a doctrine of "work first": "Get people into a job as quickly as



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possible. If they are attached to the labour market, they will find another job; it will all work out.” There has been a tendency in a number of countries, including the UK, to push people into jobs as quickly as possible. It is a short-termist view. It changes the relationship with the person because they become an object of policy rather than a human with their own needs and motivations. We tend to treat people as objects, and the evidence suggests it has not really worked that well across a number of countries.

This link to welfare conditionality enhances the problem. Sanctioning people is problematic because many adults are unemployed for important reasons or multiple reasons. Sanctioning them is not necessarily effective: they cannot necessarily leave the house if they have a disabled child they must be there for. People face many barriers—lack of skills, qualifications or confidence; lack of transport in some rural areas. There are substantive barriers to work.

I would like us to move away from a “work first” doctrine towards a “career first” doctrine, where we look at people holistically, we look at their strengths and weaknesses, and we think long term, help them plan long term and set long-term goals for themselves. Often that might mean going through education and training and skills development before entering the workforce. I would like to see a culture change and a shift in doctrine, if possible.

Q9 John Milne: That leads into my next question. Professor Robertson, you have written about a “considerable cultural gulf” between jobcentres and careers services. What are the implications for the likely success of combining jobcentres and careers services, given where they are starting from?

Peter Robertson: It is easy to conflate careers services and employment services because superficially they sound very similar, or to stick a careers label on an employment support service and think it is a careers service.

There are differences. Careers services are professional services. They are staffed by people with graduate or postgraduate-level training. They use assessment skills, counselling skills and information skills. Drawing on a substantive information base is necessary to underpin that. They also provide education. It is a hybrid with advanced-level skills involved. Like health professionals, they have professional ethics. They are putting the person in front of them first. They can design solutions to new problems or innovative solutions to a specific client group. All of this leads to a different sort of relationship with the service user from that you might get at an employment support service, where the focus is often on jobseeking support.

They are different, and I have seen some evidence from other countries suggesting that where careers services are embedded within public employment services, the culture can undermine the character of those



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careers services and weaken their value. It is important to have a clear separation and find some way, either institutionally or culturally within the organisation, of preserving the benefits that careers services can bring.

- Q10 **John Milne:** That is getting to the heart of it. There is a risk by combining these services: we want to upgrade the work element and not reduce the career element, but we are in danger of doing the exact reverse. Becci, is that achievable, or likely to come out on the right side of history?

Becci Newton: I firmly believe that there needs to be effort put into culture change within the services if we want to have true integration and to build better understanding on both sides of the benefits of the work each does. While we have had co-location and the opportunity for a referral pathway to the National Careers Service over many years, work coaches themselves will refer on the basis of, "It's to get your CV done." Their vision, or at least how they talk to claimants about what a careers service might offer, is quite limited, and I wonder how far that reflects their understanding of the value of speaking with a careers professional to gain the higher-level inputs that you can get around careers management, careers thinking, your skillsets and building confidence.

Many of the people coming through are at a really low ebb. People who are furthest away from the labour market cannot move into these rapid activation phases. They do work. "Work first" can work for some people, but it is not right for everybody. Some people need something more holistic, which might lead you on a different path, and some people need the opportunity to think and refocus. Unless you can create the culture change and the valuing of both elements, you could lose the baby with the bathwater.

I have observed over the years that work coaches like to feel that they are in charge of the case. They may need to acquire more trust of what can happen with another adviser and, while they go more to the background and let somebody be in the lead, to trust that the other partner can lead on that—the work coach can continue to have some engagement, but that support can be led well by the careers service to help the person be more ready to enter employment.

- Q11 **John Milne:** I recently sat in on a careers session in my constituency of Horsham. It was impressive, because there was a sort of private sector vibe; it felt not like an institutional box-ticking exercise, but like they were really trying, as they would for any paying candidate. We would be afraid to lose that.

How should the Government measure this? Targets affect the way institutions behave, so what would constitute success and how should they measure it?

Peter Robertson: That is a really tough question but a really important one. There has sometimes been a tendency for employment support,



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where it is contracted out, to have perverse incentives—targeting that is too severe, which encourages or forces providers to cream off those who are closest to the labour market and support them, or to engage excessively in surveillance and monitoring behaviour rather than helping behaviour. It is important to be careful about setting criteria.

I would make a case for saying that there are no single measures and no simplistic measures. We have had this in schools recently with Ofsted: “You can’t just say, ‘You’re a good school’ or ‘You’re a bad school’. No, let’s have a more nuanced approach.” I would argue for that in this context as well. We have seen shift over time from, “Have you got someone a job?” to “Have you got them a job that they’ve kept for three months” and then six months, and so on. We have seen some attempts to change success criteria in terms of retention, which is progress.

I think some of what this service could do is getting people into skills development, so we should be counting outcomes—if somebody has accessed volunteering or an FE course or a training programme. We could broaden out those sorts of measures and possibly use some attitudinal measures as well. Boosting someone’s confidence and making them more proactive makes a big difference in their life, not just in their employment. Some charities get frustrated that they know they are doing good work with people, but it does not count for their outcome measures and it does not count for their funding. They have changed someone’s life, but it does not count because they do not have a job. A broader range of measures is useful.

I would also argue for introducing the user’s perspective and the user’s voice. Again, there has been this tendency to see people as objects on the receiving end of policy, but why do we not have user satisfaction as an important outcome measure? Why do we not have users involved in the design and governance of the service? That is the kind of thing you get in mental health services; it is not a completely radical suggestion. I think that is something we should look at.

Q12 Frank McNally: Good morning to you both. Can I ask about the role of devolved Governments and Administrations? In Scotland we have a situation where skills and careers are devolved to the Scottish Government, and we see levels of devolution in Wales and Northern Ireland. The White Paper recognises that there will have to be different arrangements across devolved Administrations, but there is limited detail at this stage about how that will work in practice. How do you see the proposals operating differently across the devolved nations? Do you envisage that there could be implications for the impact of the reforms or the experience of those accessing the service?

Peter Robertson: I am based in Scotland, so this is dear to my heart. First, in Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities delivers, so it is different Government departmental structure. In some ways, some of the issues we are talking about today are not a problem there because their careers services have been civil servants working closely with the



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equivalent to jobcentres for many years. It is a closer relationship and their careers services are co-located in their jobs and benefits offices.

In Scotland, we have Skills Development Scotland as the national careers service. It has been working with Jobcentre Plus for years and is now beginning to co-locate and deliver on their premises. In Scotland we also have, to some extent, devolution of employment—the subcontracted employment support services been devolved. There is the “no one left behind” provision.

In Wales, Working Wales is a programme delivered by Careers Wales for adults, which again refers to and back from the jobcentre and delivers some services within the jobcentre. Like in Scotland, they do some rapid response to redundancies if there is a factory closure or something like that.

Each of the home nations has a strong and independent careers service that is able to maintain its character as a careers service while delivering on jobcentre or equivalent premises. That is an interesting model. It suggests that it is possible to think of jobcentres as a delivery platform for other services coming in.

I think that is interesting because jobcentres are reaching a part of the population that most need services, whether that is public health or financial advice or whatever. Thinking about them as a good platform for reaching the people of working age who most need support to prevent them from having major problems down the line is useful. If you are interested, have a look at the Working Wales website, which shows how these services can be humanised nicely.

The only other thing I would say is that in the Commission on the Future of Employment Support report—well, perhaps I should leave this to Becci—there is a suggestion of greater devolution of employment support services. I cannot see any reason not to do that, because they can integrate and respond to local labour markets more easily. There may be a case for reserving powers over benefits and employment law because you want a level playing field, perhaps, but for employment support I cannot see why we would not want to give people regional control.

Becci Newton: Yes, I agree with that, absolutely. I point to the different maturities of devolution within the different nations. You want to embrace the best of what has been achieved, but it shows that we can have differentiation and respond to the needs of different contexts quite well while having some consistency at the same time.

The local labour market partnerships are worth thinking about in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has narrowed the employment gap and so we would not want to lose that. I was also going to talk about “no one left behind” in Scotland. There is also some great work in Wales. There is Working Wales, but also a framework for young people’s outcomes and integrated support there.



We need to learn from the best in the nations while also appreciating that they are at different stages of devolution, so the UK-wide offer will need to be differentiated to respond to those different devo contexts.

Q13 Frank McNally: I appreciate that. I suppose that leads on nicely to my second question, which is about some of the lessons that can be learned from the practices that have been put in place by devolved Administrations. Could you outline some examples of areas that are working in a good way or areas that are causing concern, which the Department could perhaps learn from as it goes through this journey?

Peter Robertson: A similar thing is happening in Wales, but in Scotland we have a service called PACE—Partnership Action for Continuing Employment—which is about trying to prevent people from becoming unemployed when there is a redundancy event. It is multi-agency working, with the careers service, Skills Development Scotland, taking a lead but a range of agencies—jobcentres, chambers of commerce, Citizens Advice—involved. They come together to provide rapid response.

That is interesting because when people think about those who are unemployed—it is a bit like a bath. There are flows and stocks. The plug is people leaving unemployment and the focus is always on that end, but you also want to stop people coming in the other end from the tap. Reducing unemployment also means stopping people entering that state by intervening promptly. That can save a lot of resources down the line. PACE is an example of an attempt to do that. Of course, it is politically very acceptable because Governments can be seen to be responding rapidly to a local concern.

Becci Newton: I would have to go away and put something together in writing, if that is okay.

Frank McNally: Yes, no problem. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. Of course, you are welcome to submit some evidence following on from that. The last question to this panel is from Jo Baxter.

Q14 Johanna Baxter: We have talked a little bit about balancing employment assistance and benefits monitoring. Are there any lessons that we can learn from other countries in terms of how they have introduced a more holistic welfare-to-work approach? I am thinking maybe of Australia or Germany. Do you have any specific knowledge or examples that you can share with us on that?

Peter Robertson: I can say a few things. I do not have great expertise in this field. My understanding of Australia is that they have been quite involved in “work first” approaches, and they have been very innovative as well. I am not sure they are necessarily the best model to look to.

There are a number of countries in northern Europe, including the Netherlands, Germany and Finland, that have used their public employment service—their jobcentre equivalent—as a major delivery



point for careers services. Where countries do that, they tend to prioritise young people. However, lots of countries, like us, are having trouble with numbers of qualified staff in careers and employment support services. A lot of countries are tending to focus on the skills and labour supply issues. Economic drivers are paramount in the design of those services.

To digress slightly as it has come into my mind, on this issue of qualified staff, the Department for Education has been talking about training 1,000 careers advisers. That was a manifesto promise, or a promise before the election. It is exploring the practicalities of doing that. One thing to flag up about that is that it is talking about funding training but does not have in mind jobs for those people to go on to. There is potentially a need for the DFE and the DWP to be in dialogue and ask, "If that investment happens, how will we make sure those people end up in delivery jobs?" I do not think a pathway to that has yet been found.

Becci Newton: In the international space, I have explored in the past the Nordic flexicurity models that try to provide some resilience between periods of being in work and out of work and have those programmes of upskilling, but that is a different tax context and a different investment context. I agree that Australia has been more "work first".

We have looked into characteristics of different international models, comparing work in the UK, Australia and the US. We found a stronger predominance in good work employment support models for occupational pathway support and training support and placement in the US, interestingly. This resonates most strongly with our sector-based work academies approach—doing a bit of screening, making sure you have somebody motivated to enter a particular sector or occupation, and then building the skillset and getting a placement to get that transition. The other model is a bit more adviser-led with wider support, focused again on understanding the individual and then brokering holistic support relationships around them that can help them move themselves into employment.

Among the general lessons that we were able to derive was that you need the individual to have the motivation. Working on understanding where they are at and then helping move that to be aligned with what is available in the labour market is important. We need the dual customer notion—it is not just individuals who are claimants or seeking employment and careers support; it is employers too. We need to understand both sides. We need strong partnerships. I know that is in the White Paper, and that is really important. The skills and capabilities of the adviser are really important, too.

The bit we have not talked about yet is how important follow-up support is. We were talking about measures of success. We are often thinking about the ability to sustain work. I think we should be sustaining work rather than sustaining a particular job; it is very unlikely that we will have a career for life. It should be work that is appropriate to the



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individual, because that makes it more likely that they can sustain it. Being able to stay with them, particularly for the first phase of employment entry or re-entry, can help overcome some of the obstacles they might experience in the first phase of work.

I have seen some wonderful examples of how advisers have been able to intervene to build an employer's understanding of issues that a young person has been encountering, and that has switched around the relationship and the employer has been really willing to build support for that young person to help them stay in work. So it is being able to be there to support and to broker where needed. Not everybody wants an adviser brokering in their employer relationship, but some really do appreciate it. That is a bit of the support patchwork that we did not discuss, but it is an important part.

Chair: Thank you so much. That concludes our questions to this panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jane Gratton and Saira Hussain.

Q15 **Chair:** A warm welcome to our second panel in this oral evidence session for our reforming jobcentres inquiry. Perhaps we could start with some introductions.

Jane Gratton: Good morning, all. I am Jane Gratton. I am Deputy Director of Policy at the British Chambers of Commerce. Across the UK there are 51 chambers of commerce. We are place-based organisations representing over 50,000 businesses of all sizes and all sectors but predominantly small and medium-sized companies.

Saira Hussain: Good morning, everyone. I am Saira Hussain, Employment Policy Chair at the Federation of Small Businesses. I am also a small business owner. I lead a female-led architectural practice in Burnley, my home town, and Manchester.

Chair: Fantastic. David Pinto-Duschinsky.

Q16 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Thank you so much, Jane and Saira, for coming in. We heard earlier about the academic take on the strengths and areas of potential improvement for Jobcentre Plus, but employers are some of the key actors in this. Ultimately, it is a brokerage service that is trying to help you find the right employees and help them move into labour market attachment.

I want to start with a broad question, which is maybe a tiny bit leading. Your engagement is critical to Jobcentre Plus's success. I am conscious that the starting point is that only one in six employers uses Jobcentre Plus. Why do you think that is? What does Jobcentre Plus get right for you as an employer and for different types of employers? What



challenges does it face?

Jane Gratton: Yes, there is very low awareness and engagement among our members. Our latest research showed that only 14% of members had engaged with jobcentres in the last 12 months. It is predominantly the larger firms that engage. Only 8% of businesses with fewer than 10 employees had engaged. They tend to engage either at the jobs fairs that jobcentres hold or at their own business premises.

Why do so few engage? Unfortunately, where they have engaged, they may have not had the optimum experience. Businesses are looking for an efficient, reliable, predictable service. They do not always get that. The feedback we have had is that when they have invested time in the process, candidates might not attend the interviews that are offered. They might not turn up for the first shift or they might not return for a second shift. If they are employed for a day or two, or even a week or so, they quickly leave that job. There is a sense of lack of preparedness. From an employer perspective, if you are, as an SME, time poor, resource poor and need an efficient service, you can be reluctant to re-engage if you have had a difficult or unsatisfactory experience the first time. Sometimes there is a perception of a box-ticking approach, where the candidate is turning up but has no real intention of taking the job, and a feeling that the jobcentre does not always fully understand the needs of employers.

Framed against that, to the second part of the question about what they get right, where there is a good relationship with an employer—where time has been taken to understand what the employer needs, what time the employer has, what the job will entail and what attributes, behaviours and skills the individual will need, and to build a solid relationship—it works very well. Some businesses say to us, “We’ve got a good relationship and it’s great.” When employers are interviewing or are asked to interview a huge cohort of people and then they do not end up offering a job to anyone, it can feel more disappointing.

Saira Hussain: I am a small business owner and an employer. I have used the jobcentre in the past. We have set out our criteria to the jobcentre and been sent applicants, and we have found that the applicants who have come to us have not matched the job role. We have had applicants who are really unmotivated. Many do not turn up. Of the ones who do turn up, I remember once having someone say, “We’ve only come here to show the jobcentre that we’re making an active effort to look for a job.” Also, we have struggled with giving feedback to the jobcentre. We have felt like they do not really want to hear it, and there is no follow-up from the jobcentre: “We’ve sent you 10 applicants. Were any of them employed? If not, why not?” None of that happened. That really put us off the jobcentre, as a small business employer.

We have not had any large amounts of feedback from FSB members who have experienced working well with jobcentres. Occasionally we will have



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members talk about a positive experience with an individual at the jobcentre rather than the jobcentre as a whole.

- Q17 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Thank you both for that. If I step back from what you are saying, it sounds like the experience with the jobcentre fundamentally is driven by the degree to which you find individuals who are much more demand-led and start from employer's requirements and actively work back and think about the match, but that is very case by case. Are there any good examples of best practice that your members have flagged up that you can share with the Committee?

Jane Gratton: There are some good examples. I was talking to one of our chambers in Cambridgeshire yesterday, and they were talking really positively about a local jobcentre hub that had set up. It was bringing the service out of a jobcentre premises into a more neutral environment where jobseekers were connecting with employers, training and employment advice in one little hub. They said that was an innovative approach where everybody is focused on looking at the needs of the individual but also the needs of the employer, seeing the employer as a customer as well as the individual. There really are some positive experiences, but it is not universal. It is not consistently positive.

Saira Hussain: I have already mentioned that our positive experiences have been based on individuals at the jobcentre rather than the jobcentre as a whole, but no personal experience of FSB members where they have come back and said that the jobcentre as a whole has been a really positive experience.

- Q18 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** That is a really clear message about the importance of having staff who understand the labour market, are connected, understand requirements and then do follow-up. The other thing that struck me, Jane, from what you said was the gulf between large employers, who are often trying to do scale recruitments and so will try to use a scale service, and small employers. You said only 8% of your SME members are engaging with Jobcentre Plus. Could you say more about that? I would love to hear from both of you—because, clearly, so many of the firms in our economy are SMEs—about the specific issues for SMEs.

Jane Gratton: It goes back to awareness of the service that jobcentres can offer. They are not naturally looking there in the first instance. They will advertise a job on their website; they will go word of mouth—"Do you have anyone else in your friendship group or family who might want to come and work?"—or they might go to the recruitment and job posting boards. They are time poor and resource poor. They do not have HR services at hand. They do not have learning and development resources at hand like the larger firms. They are doing multiple jobs and balancing lots of priorities, so, as I said, they need that efficient service.

My understanding is that larger firms tend to have a national contact and have service more tailored to what they need if they are recruiting in



numbers at a national level. Smaller employers will want to build trust in someone at the local level. They might not be recruiting all the time; they might only have occasional jobs, but they want to be able to build up that trust.

I think one of the solutions is for jobcentres to learn how to network and engage with more employers. They can use local intermediaries. They can use chambers of commerce, because this is what we do. Our day job is to engage employers and inform employers and other local organisations that convene employers, provide information and signpost. It would be helpful if we had a better connection between jobcentres and employer organisations to get that information out. Critically, it is about understanding the local labour market—who the employers are, what jobs they are creating, where the opportunities are—and making sure that, when candidates come to interview, they are work ready, motivated and understand the opportunities in the organisation.

With four in five employers struggling to recruit at the moment, they want to reach out to more diverse talent pools. They have told us that. They are offering flexible working. They do not know how to do job design and job carve-out, which we were hearing about earlier—most of them will not understand what that means, how to do that and the benefits of it—but, with support, they are willing to do it.

There is a lot of opportunity, and our members have responded very positively to the White Paper and what it is saying. There is opportunity there. We just need to make it work.

Q19 David Pinto-Duschinsky: Is there a brand issue as well? People talked earlier about preparedness and soft skills. Everyone is aware that Jobcentre Plus exists, so in that sense there is quite high awareness, but then they do not use it. Some of that is just that the job boards and so on are closest to hand, but is there also a brand issue there? Are they worried about the quality and preparedness of applicants as well? Is that something we need to look at?

Jane Gratton: I think it is about, “Is the candidate right for my role?” A business will want to make sure that the skills of candidates coming forward match, and they will look for potential. It is important to say that it is not always about somebody being a perfect fit for the role. Businesses will look for potential and where they can help shape and train. They are very positive about that, but you need to have the fundamentals in place when the candidate comes to the interview, and the motivation and the right behaviours.

On brand, many employers might look at the jobcentre as more of a benefit processing organisation than a recruitment service for them. Maybe there is a more of an awareness process to go through.

Saira Hussain: On branding, to follow on from what Jane said, as an employer it is a really negative perception of what you get from the



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jobcentre. I think we see people who are at the jobcentre as people who sign on rather than people who are jobseekers, and that perception needs to change. Also, with the approach that we get from the people who work at the jobcentre, we feel as though small businesses are less of a priority than big businesses. We also feel like the jobcentre is not relevant to us.

The jobcentre needs to understand that small businesses might recruit one person every year, rather than the 10 people that a large business might recruit every year, but that does not mean that we are less of a priority. Maybe a scheme could be designed around infrequent-use employers rather than big businesses that might use you every other day.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: That is fantastic. Thank you.

Q20 **Gill German:** Thank you for joining us today. It has already been incredibly helpful to hear a business take on this work.

The "Get Britain Working" White Paper talks about how there is currently insufficient adjustment for local market trends and local labour markets. We have touched on this a little. What do you think about how jobcentre staff currently understand the local labour market and the needs of local businesses? Jane, you mentioned that your organisation is very much place-based, and I know that the Government are keen on moving towards a place-based approach. I suppose my question is about current understanding at jobcentre level and then going on to how we can make that better if it is not all it could be.

Jane Gratton: I think there is some understanding, I think there is a recognition that there needs to be more understanding, and we probably have a long way to go. That is how I would sum it up.

The chambers are running 32 of the local skills improvement plans across England, and these have brought together in the first few months around 65,000 engaged businesses that are struggling to recruit and want to reach out to different pools of talent and get support on how to access training. We know that the DWP is beginning to engage with that forum. That offers a fantastic source of local data on where the opportunities are and where the skills gaps are, and it also offers a pool of engaged, motivated employers. I think use of LSIPs will become increasingly important.

Chambers and other local business organisations understand the local labour market and we are more than happy to work with colleagues across the jobcentres to help share that information, but that is critical. That understanding will help shape the local services and make sure that people are ready for the opportunities.

Saira Hussain: For us in the architectural sector, we think that maybe jobcentres could liaise with local universities to bring us candidates. When we put an architectural job out, we rarely get a response, but we



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feel that when we speak to the local universities, there are plenty of candidates that could be sent our way.

- Q21 **Gill German:** Do you feel that it would be helpful for local organisations, within the jobcentre or perhaps working with external partners, to undertake something like a mapping exercise of what is in the local area? Sometimes it seems that there is not always an understanding of what work is available in the local area specific to it. It is different in Glasgow than in north Wales, where my constituency is, for example.

Jane Gratton: Yes, that local place-based approach, and understanding that the local labour market is not a one-size-fits-all for all parts of the country, as there is not a one-size-fits-all for every individual, is crucial.

- Q22 **Gill German:** Great. Let me push a little on what you think could be done better. Jane, you talked about there being a really good start with the work that is going on with the chambers of commerce. Can you see any next steps in that work that we could start taking forward?

Jane Gratton: There is certainly opportunity for closer collaboration between the DWP locally and chambers of commerce, and more sharing of the data that LSIPs are providing. All that data is there locally. It is rich and hyper-local. Helping and training jobcentre staff to utilise that and understand it would be really important. There are lots of opportunities.

Saira Hussain: In conversation with small businesses and in my 10 years in business—the jobcentre is walking distance from me, but we have never really had a conversation about what my business might need. Maybe look at dedicated small business advisers and look at applicants who actually match job criteria to save small business owners time. At the end of the day, small businesses do not have a dedicated person who deals with recruitment as a large business might. The business owner takes time out of running the business to go to the jobcentre. Understand that small businesses are completely different from big businesses and time is of the essence. Also, on feedback mechanisms, if they do send us applicants, make sure that they take our feedback to know why it did not work and how they might approach things differently the next time.

- Q23 **Gill German:** In a nutshell, greater partnership working between employers and jobcentres, and making that match so it has some longevity.

Saira Hussain: Yes.

Jane Gratton: Yes, and I think from the careers side, understanding the realities of modern manufacturing and the roles that are available, and the different types of jobs that are available now. It is about having a more thorough understanding, using local networks, so that they can work with jobseekers on what it is really going to be like, and on how you



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get into work and then progress in these jobs, because you understand the opportunities.

Gill German: Thank you. I could talk to you all day, but I am conscious that we need to move on.

Q24 **Johanna Baxter:** I think that is really helpful in terms of better understanding the practicalities of the relationships on the ground. Moving on from your organisations' role as employer stakeholders to policy development, what do you see as the right role for your organisations in helping to shape and drive the reforms that we need to see in jobcentres?

Jane Gratton: As I said, we are place-based. Our role is to support businesses and to support local areas to thrive and grow, creating economic development and opportunities for individuals in local communities. We work with a broad range of local stakeholders, local authorities and other partners. That is what we do best: engaging with businesses and representing them in that environment. Whether or not we are providing a local skills improvement plan, we have the connections with employers, so we can make employers aware, we can get information out to employers, and we can convene them and provide opportunities for jobcentre staff to speak to employers.

I guess our role in that is to support and help broker that partnership and closer working. We tend to know the sorts of things that employers are looking for in terms of preparedness for work and basic skills—teamworking and employability skills—and we can support employers if a job is not a perfect match by signposting them to sources of help and support on how they can change job design and carve out jobs, and all those things, and on the sector-based work academies and so on. I guess for us it is signposting, informing and convening businesses, and convening businesses with other stakeholders, to share that information.

Saira Hussain: The FSB has had a fairly good few years working with the DWP on policymaking. We have had a good conversation with the Government. However, we feel that these days a lot of the talk is around the Employment Rights Bill rather than getting people back into work, so maybe we want to bring the conversation back on to getting people into work.

Q25 **Johanna Baxter:** Is the DWP having conversations about the reforms to jobcentres with either the FSB or with the chambers, to your knowledge? Is there any engagement on the policy development side of things?

Jane Gratton: Sorry, I probably did not answer your question. Yes, very much so. We meet regularly with DWP policy staff, and have been doing for a long time, in the labour market engagement group, where we talk about shaping these policies nationally. There is good engagement, and we are very keen to continue that.



Q26 David Pinto-Duschinsky: It has been really interesting listening to you. For me it is a bit of a case of back to the future. I worked on exactly these issues, terrifyingly, 27 years ago. One of the really striking things is that you are mentioning now many of the same themes that came up then. One of the big themes that was very current then was the idea that the system needed to be more demand-led, so driven backwards from the needs of employers. Johanna has picked up the role you play nationally in helping to shape policy. I suppose the other side of being demand-led is the very tailored local responsiveness. We have heard in response to Gill's questions about local capacity, but at that local level, where we are talking about the local policy of what people are focusing on and the capacity, how do you feel that employers are being engaged?

Jane Gratton: It tends to be that a representative of a chamber or other local business organisation will be involved with the economic development forums and certainly with the local growth plans. With all of those economic stakeholders, businesses will have a voice around the table, so they will be involved, very often through the chamber rep, in discussing what is required and how we will deliver what is needed locally.

Q27 David Pinto-Duschinsky: There is quite a big gap between that, which is a general, "How you best engage business?", and something sufficiently tailored that it helps individual businesses and makes it attractive. Is that fair?

Jane Gratton: Well, I think that is the next level. Once you have agreed on what is needed locally, the implementation is the key bit and, again, chambers and our business representatives would be keen to be involved.

Saira Hussain: I think the FSB will have to write to you with a response on that question.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: That is fine.

Q28 Steve Darling: Thank you for coming along today; we appreciate you giving up your time for us. You have already hinted at what you would like to see prioritised, but can you lay it out a bit more in black and white what you think the priorities should be for the new jobs and careers service?

Saira Hussain: I have said it before, but design a service around infrequent-use employers—small businesses that do not use the jobcentres as often as big businesses—possibly look at schemes that have worked in the past, such as the kickstart scheme, and look at feedback mechanisms and making more support available to small businesses, possibly through dedicated small business advisers.

Q29 Steve Darling: Can you unpack that a bit more? You talked about the kickstart scheme. How did that work particularly well for you, if that is a good example, and are there any others?



Saira Hussain: With the kickstart scheme there was more of a demand from employers and fewer employees available, so it started off quite slowly, but as soon as employers got into it, it stopped. Maybe re-look at things that small business employers felt worked.

Jane Gratton: I agree that it is not a one-size-fits-all, and we should make sure that the service is supportive of occasional use by small business and more regular, more volume use by a larger firm. The key thing for us is better networking and better involvement of DWP jobcentres in the local business community. It is about raising awareness, building trust, understanding what the employer needs and ensuring that you treat the employer as the customer. That is the key thing that will bring employers back time and again to use the service and create more opportunities for individuals coming through.

Q30 **Steve Darling:** Thank you. How could you better work with the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of employing more diverse communities, whether it is people with a disability or people who are neurodiverse? As employers, how could the DWP help you on that journey? I am aware of some large employers who have entered that market quite deeply, but for small employers I am sure it is a bit more challenging. I would welcome your reflections on that, please.

Jane Gratton: Our research shows that around two thirds of businesses do not have in place any specific initiatives for diverse workforces. Larger firms will, but smaller firms do not have anything proactive in place in general to recruit, retain or train diverse workforces. It is not that they do not want to; they are very willing to, and they might tend to do it naturally and organically rather than thinking of it as an initiative. The barriers will be, as we said earlier, lack of an internal HR resource, lack of confidence in how to do it and fear of getting it wrong—fear of doing or saying the wrong thing and the potential implications of that. They are very willing to do it but fear getting it wrong and the reputational risk or disruption it might cause.

When we talked to businesses about this, they are very happy to make adjustments where they can with flexible working and fitting in around an individual's needs and so on, but they will need help with that if a candidate is coming for an interview who potentially has health or disability barriers to work, so that they fully understand that and get support in making adjustments. There is no lack of willingness to do this. Firms tell us time and again that they want to reach out and offer local opportunities to everybody, but it is about giving them the confidence to do so and having that wraparound support for the employer as well as the individual.

Saira Hussain: To follow on from what Jane said, I am the employer that would be more than happy to take someone on but, like she said, we do not have the confidence. I would be more than happy, but there is the fear of getting something wrong and not doing everything by the book. If



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we had a more usable, say, jobcentre that offered us that support, we could go to them for advice.

- Q31 **Steve Darling:** The DWP runs the Disability Confident employer scheme. Is it worth the paper it is written on for your organisations? Not that that is a loaded question, of course.

Jane Gratton: We ran a workplace equity commission a year or so back and we talked to employers who use the Disability Confident scheme, and they were very supportive. The conclusion is that it can do more, but it is a fantastic way of building confidence and introducing employers to the opportunity—of getting them to think about what can be done and not looking at barriers but looking at the art of the possible and shaping attitudes. I think it is a great scheme. Our members report that they are happy with it.

Steve Darling: I am pleased to hear that.

- Q32 **Chair:** We have a few minutes, so can I follow up on a couple of questions? On retention—you probably heard the previous witness's metaphor of the plug in the bath—do you get support from the DWP and jobcentres on what you can do to ensure that you retain workers who become sick or disabled? If you do not have any specific answers, that is fine—if you could write to us, that would be wonderful—but do you have anything that you would like to say now?

Saira Hussain: I have no experience of it.

Jane Gratton: Lots of employers who have used Access to Work have said, "It's a great service but it needs more resourcing. Once we get what we need it's great; it's just that it can take a little while to get an appointment and to get things sorted." It is very positive from that perspective.

I think it is worth saying as well that businesses at the moment are talking a lot about workplace health and the importance of keeping people in work who are experiencing health difficulties or become disabled for whatever reason. Employers want to do that because they have invested in their skills. They have good relationships with those individuals and they want to hang on to them. Employers are looking for ways to prevent people from falling out of work. That is a massive priority for us. I can write to you with some of the ideas that we have for that.

- Q33 **Chair:** Thank you. We have been focusing on jobcentres, but the "Get Britain Working" White Paper proposes merging the careers service with them. What engagement do employers currently have with the careers service? I was struck by the point Saira made that you engage more with your local university to recruit. What sort of engagement have you had with careers services?



Saira Hussain: We as a small business contact the university directly and say, “This is the job that we have available”—an architectural job or a planning job. We find ourselves contacting universities and colleges directly where they have T-levels and apprentices and degree graduates. We do not have anyone in between working with us to say, “We’ll find you someone locally.” That is a bit of a struggle for us, because we have to go out there and find the right people in the universities and colleges.

Q34 **Chair:** Do you tend to use the jobcentre for entry-level jobs?

Saira Hussain: Yes, jobs like admin, customer service—that sort of thing.

Q35 **Chair:** All right. Jane, may I ask you the same about involvement with the careers service?

Jane Gratton: Less so nationally, but I think chambers on the ground would have a good working relationship with the National Careers Service through the local skills improvement plans at the moment. We think that the proposed reform to bring the two together is a really good idea that makes good sense.

Chair: Those are all the questions that we have for this panel. Thank you so much. Please do get in touch if you have more information that you would like to share with us.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ramesh Moher and Elizabeth Taylor.

Q36 **Chair:** Welcome to our third panel in this first oral evidence session of our reforming jobcentres inquiry. Would you like to introduce yourselves?

Elizabeth Taylor: I am Elizabeth Taylor. I am the Chief Executive of the Employment Related Services Association. We call ourselves ERSA, so I will stick with that.

Chair: Absolutely. A very glamorous name, by the way.

Elizabeth Taylor: It is, I know; I have to live with it. We represent organisations that deliver employment support. We represent the organisations that work alongside the jobcentre. They can be large private organisations, third sector, local authorities—a chamber of commerce is even in membership. It is mostly third sector, delivering some DWP contracts, so the big national provisions, but a lot of small, specialist health-related, sector-focused, youth-focused, older workers-focused—the whole gamut. We work closely alongside work coaches and colleagues in Jobcentre Plus.



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Ramesh Moher: Good morning. My name is Ramesh Moher. I am the Director of an organisation called New Challenge. We are a small community interest company. We are based in Brent, but we deliver various contracts around London. Our primary contract is the National Careers Service, but we also deliver adult skills funded courses through the Greater London Authority and a community outreach programme. We have worked on the National Careers Service since its inception in 2012. It has gone through various contract changes over that time. Before that, we worked on the Next Step contract, which was a very different beast.

Chair: Thank you. Frank McNally will ask the first question.

Q37 **Frank McNally:** Good morning to you both. I am grateful to you for outlining some of the relationships that you currently have with Jobcentre Plus. I want to unpack that a little further, because the Committee is keen to get a sense of the effectiveness of the work and engagement that your members have with Jobcentre Plus.

Elizabeth, in your experience and engagement with Jobcentre Plus, is there anything that you would say works particularly well? Are there particular challenges that you think we need to take into consideration in exploring this area further? Finally, how does that vary across your members? The experience might be different from sector to sector, so could you give us a wee bit more information about that relationship?

Elizabeth Taylor: First, I will say that the employment support sector organisations support the work of Jobcentre Plus. Some organisations will deliver national provisions like Restart and the work and health programme. I say "national"; they are not in the four nations, but in England and Wales. Those relationships are based on referrals from Jobcentre Plus, usually with trigger points where somebody has run out of weeks of working with the Jobcentre Plus work coach and moves on to something like restart. It is not always clear how long somebody has been unemployed, because it will be based on how long they have claimed universal credit.

There is a journey that goes through jobcentres and out to what I will call outsourced provision. I think those relationships work really well, but there are lots of problems. We heard earlier today how large some of those work coaches' case loads are. Often, when you are working with an individual and you want a point of reference back to the work coach, it is not the same work coach and people do not always have those relationships.

I think there is a lack of recognition that the sector picks up the people who do not have a good service or have not got to a good outcome with the jobcentre, but they are good relationships within the confines of people being referred, mandated, the conditionality and the expectation about going on provision.



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Then there are other provisions that are voluntary or are funded outside the main Department for Work and Pensions funding source, whether it is health, shared prosperity—in the old days ESF—funded through local authorities or some of the devolved contracts. That is a different relationship with the jobcentre, but there is still that interaction because you are still working with the claimant and Jobcentre Plus has the responsibility for—you know, the claimant commitment or whatever.

What is really lacking is putting the individual at the centre of it. There always seems to be a line where somebody goes from having a Jobcentre Plus work coach out on to a provision and the relationship gets pushed down the road, and you do not ring up and talk about Charlie any more because he is suddenly your client. Since the work programme, it has been a competitive environment. The sector was asked to demonstrate how we performed better than the jobcentre, and that is not always healthy when you want to put the individual first and get them into good work and the right job. It should not be a competition; it should be a journey for the individual.

The other thing is that there are a lot of smaller specialist providers who are in jobcentres all day every day supporting the work of work coaches, and often that goes unrecognised. Jobcentre Plus work coaches may get somebody into work and the resource that has been put into them may have come from an organisation that is working with women, an organisation that is helping with childcare, an organisation with transport solutions, or the Access to Work provider or the NCS provider. It is not always recognised. It should not be an either/or.

One of the things that I feel strongly about Jobcentre Plus reform is that it cannot and will not happen without the employment support sector and recognition of how we need to work alongside each other. It has to be that rich tapestry. I think that is what we bring in what is often a difficult circumstance.

Q38 Frank McNally: So it is more effective transparency and more effective partnership.

Elizabeth Taylor: Partnership, I would say, yes.

Q39 Frank McNally: Ramesh, do you have anything to add from your perspective as a smaller organisation? How does it differ for you—again, both in terms of weaknesses and strengths?

Ramesh Moher: One of the things that should not get lost here is that about 60% of people who come to the National Careers Service are directed through the DWP—that is from a piece of research I looked at—which means that about 40% come through different avenues. It is important to bear that in mind.

We are one of those organisations that has careers advisers in jobcentres full time, Monday to Friday, sitting alongside the work coaches and



supporting their customers with their careers. In terms of the practicalities and challenges, it is like everything else. Some things work well. Some individual work coaches are fantastic and really engaged and will make the referrals; others are less so. There is inconsistent engagement across the board.

One of the other things we have come up against throughout the whole period from 2012 is that the NCS is seen as a CV-writing service. That is almost the mindset of the DWP—that is what it wants and that is what the NCS will be—although it then does not fully gain and understand the full gamut and range of skills and experience that a careers adviser can bring and does bring in using the whole array of careers tools at their disposal. Colleagues talked earlier today about the knowledge—labour market information and intelligence—they have. We are very much engaged with all sorts of different provision out there. It could be referring people to skills bootcamps, to adult skills funded provision, to UK SPF NEET provision, and so on. They have a lot of knowledge and a lot of tools at their disposal, but I do not think that is always appreciated by jobcentre staff, because what they want in the here and now is a CV.

One of the other key things is that we see customers coming to us who seem to have been lost in the system. They come to us and we find that they may have been unemployed for many years and they still have ESOL issues and low digital skills. The question is, why is that allowed to happen? One place where we could work more closely together is in going in and doing early triage from week one or two, and asking, “What are the barriers?” Let us address those straightaway rather than leaving them for years and ending up with a situation where the individual’s confidence and motivation has completely disappeared and it makes everybody’s job far harder.

Frank McNally: Thank you for your perspective.

Q40 **Gill German:** Thank you both for attending and for your written evidence, which has been incredibly helpful. I want to ask a little bit about a term that Elizabeth used in her written evidence: a “Jobcentre Plus-centric understanding of employment support”. I am really interested in what you mean by that term and what the impact has been on how we are running things currently, and, from that, how we can do better.

Elizabeth Taylor: This was gathered from evidence that some members provided in writing our submission, but it is something that has been known and said for years. I think it comes from the culture of it being the same organisation that is managing benefits, and making people justify and prove their eligibility for benefits. I believe in conditionality—you should be actively looking for work or whatever—but it drives some perverse behaviour sometimes.

We had the experience of people being forced to take any job, with the assumption that if you took any job you would get a better job and it



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would lead to a career. We have learned that it has not. Not only have we learned that it has not within the sector's experience, but organisations like the Work Foundation have done research that has proved that getting any job leaves you stuck in low-paid work.

When we use that term what we are saying is that benefits drive the culture within jobcentres. There is whole thing of being able to go there only if you have an appointment, and the security guards on the door; it is not a welcoming environment. People only go there because they want to receive their benefits. I am sure there are exceptions. I think it works really well for people who have just come out of work and need to get back into work quickly, but it does not make the individual, with all their complexities—childcare needs, care responsibilities, whatever—the focus. It is all about “into a job, into a job, into a job” and it does not work.

- Q41 **Gill German:** Ramesh, that seems to touch on your comment about a CV-writing service, and how the NCS is seen as a means to an end to get people through the system. Would that be your take?

Ramesh Moher: Yes, quite quickly. The objective is to move them on as quickly as possible, but I do not think that works. The whole idea of any job, a good job, a career, does not necessarily work. You end up with a revolving-door situation where you get people back fairly quickly after a short-term contract or some other short-term opportunity. They come back because they have not been given the scope to build their career as a result of that.

- Q42 **Gill German:** Is it safe to say that you welcome the move away from that “work first” ethos that is coming through from the White Paper that the Government have put forward?

Elizabeth Taylor: As a trade body of employment support organisations, we did a piece of work two years ago, and we really embraced the good work agenda. We think getting the right job and a good job keeps people in work, and giving them a little bit longer to get the right job has a better longer-term return on investment for the taxpayer. If you want to attract people back into the labour market—we have the big challenge of economic inactivity and the challenge of a million young people who are NEET—they need to see that they can get the job they want. They need to see that as a positive future rather than something punitive, which is the perception that some of them have of what that are going to be made to do now. It does not take much longer, and it does not take much more money; it just takes a different approach. That is where we need to get to.

Ramesh Moher: And there are opportunities out there, in terms of skills coupled with employers offering opportunities at the end of it. The skills bootcamps are an example, as are the skills academies across London, which have been quite successful in different sectors.



Q43 Gill German: The obvious next question is: what would a non-Jobcentre Plus-centric model look like? I think that touches on that—and using the external organisations that you represent, Elizabeth, to get through the very complicated journey from long-term unemployment back into work. What would you love to see at the end of this journey?

Elizabeth Taylor: What I would like to see in the new jobcentres—we really embrace this idea and think it is a good one, but we have to recognise that the work coaches in those jobcentres cannot do everything—is more employment support providers and more community-based organisations. I would like to see all the jobcentres co-locating with those organisations.

Because work coaches at the moment focus on benefits and getting people quickly into work, they do not always have the necessary tools in their toolbox. This is not a criticism of the individuals, but people have complex barriers, and we need to have those in-house resources and partner resources to work on the wider issues faced by parents and carers, by people who have difficult personal circumstances with domestic violence, or by prison leavers or people doing community-based custodial sentences.

That is the reality of people not in work. In the jobcentres of the future, there have to be people you can draw upon to have different relationships and different conversations with. They should be open-door, too; people should be able to just turn up and not be challenged by the security guard about what time their appointment is. That is what happens now.

Q44 Gill German: Where do you see the careers service fitting into a new model of how to do things?

Ramesh Moher: From our direct experience, we feel it is very much an undervalued service. It has been underfunded—like many services, I guess. We are allowed to do one funded session per individual per 12-month period. Anything beyond that is not funded, and the funding is very small and challenging.

We would like to see a bit more of a journey with the customer. If they need one support session, that is absolutely fine—there might be those who are closer to the labour market who might just need a tweak to their CV or a bit of support around what the opportunities are locally—but there are others who embark on a longer journey, and it would be useful to have the ability to provide them with two or three sessions over a 12-month period, which was more akin to the Next Step model.

I will give you a direct example. As of today, we do not know if we will have any funding from 1 April. The prime has been told by the DFE that it is imminent, but from a small business perspective, in the supply chain for London there is one prime and 11 partners or subcontractors, and they are a real mix. They are colleges, private companies and third sector



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organisations such as us. We do not even know as of today whether we will have funding to pay for staffing as of 1 April. I am hoping it comes through, but we do not know. When you are treated like that, you have the sense of being undervalued. You are thinking, "Where's the commitment to this?"

Coming back to the question, I think it is about a little bit more funding. It is not an expensive service, but it would be better if we could support people who need more interventions over a period of time rather than being limited to one session.

Gill German: Rather than ticking the box.

Ramesh Moher: Ticking the box, yes.

Q45 **Steve Darling:** Thank you both for the work that you do with people in our communities. I know from organisations like Eat That Frog and Sound Communities in my community of Torbay what a real difference you make to people's lives. It genuinely is life changing. Ramesh, in your written evidence you talked about people being "recycled" through the system. I think you have already alluded to that, but can you paint the picture a little more? I also invite you both to dare to imagine that the Government disinvested in the DWP and front-loaded investment in the third sector. What could that look like?

Ramesh Moher: The revolving door is something we see daily, and not just in jobcentres, but in organisations where we are working out in the community, where we might be providing National Careers Service support to individuals. It is quite common. I guess there is a lot of variation across the country. We are based in Brent, but we also work with partners in east London, where you have large communities of people who may not have English as a first language. We see people who have been unemployed for many years, and they come to the careers service and they are really struggling with their spoken English and their literacy.

We feel that cannot be right. Something is going wrong at the start. Why is this not being picked up really early? Why is it not being addressed from day one? Really, there should be enough provision out there in colleges and community-based organisations that are delivering, for example, ESOL provision. There is also a big problem with digital skills. With all the changes that are going on, there is a real danger that people will be left behind because they do not have the digital skills. Again, we find that inexcusable. There is provision out there. There is plenty of provision across London, funded through the GLA and from other pots. Why is that not being addressed?

The second question leads on from that. If we were given a little bit more funding, we could do more and be a lot more proactive and engage more over a sustained period for those who need it most. That would be quite liberating.



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Elizabeth Taylor: I will take the revolving door first. People often cycle through different support provisions, and I think it is because we do not get it right in the first place. That is not a criticism of anything, if they have had an NCS intervention or whatever, because, as Ramesh has just said, that is it for the year. Often, people go through these trigger points: they have been unemployed for nine months so they go on a certain provision, and then they have been employed and they go on another provision. There are people who break that cycle, and there are good examples of that in the employment support sector, but it is not a perfect environment.

Yesterday I was at an organisation called St Giles Trust in Southwark, and 45% of people who use their services self-refer. Most of those self-referrals move into work that they stay in, because it is a different environment. It links in with talking about, "What do you want your future to look like? What skills do you need to get there? What support do you need? How do we sort out your transport? How do we access other things?" It is a different conversation, and it is those conversations that break that cycle.

On the other part of your question, about the DWP and the third sector, I think the DWP are really good at the benefit process. We saw how well they stepped up in the covid pandemic to process new claims and all the rest of it. They are really good for the first 12 or 13 weeks of a claim with people who are ready to move into work. But if people have come back on to their case load because they have shifted from a legacy benefit to universal credit or whatever, they just seem to stay in the system until they get out and get to employment support provision.

It is about the third sector, but it is not just about the third sector. It is more community-based and partnership-based, with a really good range of specialists within organisations or other community partners. That is when you break those cycles. The DWP of the future for me would be doing the benefits—the first weeks of a claim—and then engaging partners. That is what I think Jobcentre Plus reform should look like. Whether we will get there or not I do not know.

Steve Darling: Thank you. That is really insightful.

Q46 **John Milne:** Ramesh, it is remarkable that you are not sure of your funding past 1 April, which is not very far away.

We are looking at the possible merger of Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service. That would be a big organisational change and there are always pros and cons to those. What do you see as the risks of the merger?

Ramesh Moher: The National Careers Service is quite a complicated model. You have the different regions, with primes in all those regions and a number of organisations on the supply chains, which might be colleges, third sector organisations or private sector organisations. It is



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complicated. A lot of things happen when there is an information vacuum. We have been constantly inquiring of jobcentre staff, "What's happening? What's going on with the merger?" and they say, "We don't know." There is a lot of discussion about the merger and that causes uncertainty. That is one point that I wanted to pick up on.

Sorry, what was the question?

John Milne: It was about the risks.

Ramesh Moher: Yes. One risk is a demotivated workforce. Another is not recognising the different skillsets that are currently there. For example, all the National Careers Service advisers are minimum level 4-qualified to be able to work on the contract. Those are fairly expensive qualifications that are funded by the organisations delivering the contract, but more than that, it is a lot of time invested in professional development. Some of these qualifications can require up to 280 guided learning hours and 450 hours of their time in total. A lot of knowledge and skills come through that.

Also, it is not just about careers advice. There are career theories elements that are covered by the professionals delivering the National Careers Service. There is an element of coaching—putting your arm around someone and saying, "You can do this." It is motivational interviewing techniques. You are at risk of losing that. The work coaches might do a little bit of initial job search, but fundamentally, for them, it is about making sure their customers are meeting their conditionality to ensure that they get their benefits. As someone alluded to earlier, they have huge case loads and maybe only seven to 10 minutes with each customer. What can you do in terms of careers advice or job brokerage in that time? Very little.

John Milne: A short career, perhaps. Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Taylor: I feel duty bound to say that it is not just NCS that has funding uncertainty. The shared prosperity fund has never delivered at the scale of the European social fund. Twenty-four of the local authorities did not put people and skills in their SPF investment plans. Those that did have had a 60% cut. It is not always a 60% cut on people and skills; it is across the SPF, so we are seeing that depleted and organisations making people redundant. We have seen the tail-off of the work and health programme, which stopped taking referrals last September.

We are losing experience and expertise out of the sector every day and it is hard to get it back. These are the individuals in the organisations that we need to get Britain working and for Jobcentre Plus transformation too. I am pleased to be here today, but there is some urgency in getting to the end of this conversation and knowing what is on the other side of it. There is a proven case that investment in employment support has a return on investment, and we need to start moving on to that point soon.



Q47 John Milne: Do you think that a jobcentre is the right or optimal place to deliver career and employment support, in principle?

Ramesh Moher: I think it is questionable, for many of the reasons that have been picked up. They can feel quite a threatening environment. I have been to jobcentres where you are met by a wall of security people, and it can be quite intimidating for some people. A lot of the discussions occur in open plan, so there might be confidentiality issues. We have never really been given a separate space where we are allowed to undertake career interviews, and quite sensitive issues might come up during those conversations. There is also the fabric of the building, sometimes. If someone is going into a building that looks quite tired and in need of investment, that might reflect on the person's belief in themselves: "I'm not worthy of this." It is a mixture of those things.

The network of jobcentres around the country and the communities that they reach is a good thing, although there have been quite a few jobcentre closures over a period of time, and you have then had less National Careers Service provision close to individuals who might need it. I think something like 35% to 40% of individuals are seen outside of jobcentres, in a college or a third sector organisation such as St Giles, for example—we actually did some work with them years ago. I think it would need to be looked at. Potentially, but not in the way the current model is set up, and certainly not the environment.

Elizabeth Taylor: I absolutely agree about the environment. It is difficult to get through that door. Also, the jobcentre estate has reduced over the years, so people have to travel to get there. Not every UK town has a jobcentre. People do not always realise that. When employment support provision is delivered, there is an expectation that it will set up centres or find co-location. It is easier to access employment support outside of the jobcentre just because of the physical locations of places. Also—I think it was said in one of the earlier evidence sessions—you cannot take your child with you. You cannot take your elderly parent, who you are going to take to a medical appointment afterwards, with you. It is very rigid and time-bound and then you are out the door.

They are not easy to access and it is not easy to get over the threshold, and they have declined over the last few years. People are behind screens. I know that happened for health issues with the pandemic, but they were there before and they have not been taken down. It is a strange environment.

Q48 John Milne: Careers advisers and work coaches require different skills and approaches. How would you describe these different approaches, and do you think they can be successfully combined in the same place?

Ramesh Moher: As I said earlier, I think they are very different skillsets. Work coaches do a lot of benefits administration. The interviews with individuals are quite short and are really about conditionality: "What have you done in the last fortnight? Show me what you have done. What are



you going to do?" That is pretty much it. It is quite short. Careers advisers, as I say, have those foundational qualifications and the service has been professionalised over the years. I do believe that they have a completely different skillset. They look at the longer-term picture. Sometimes it can be short term, depending on the individual circumstances, but it is not a one-size-fits-all. It is very much looking at someone's needs. In some cases it might be a few tweaks here and there to a CV, but in other cases it might take a lot more steps for the individual who is being supported to become closer to the workforce. Often, there is a skills gap that needs to be addressed, and the careers adviser is able to look at that, analyse it, evaluate it and make some recommendations based on that.

Elizabeth Taylor: I think that work coaches can be expected to do too much. They become jack of all trades and master of none. They are really good at the benefits processing and at getting people close to the labour market into work, but they are expected to do other things. They are now expected to be self-employment advisers. That is very specialist. It should not be put in a work coach brief. I do not think careers advice should be put in that. There will have to be investment in training specialisms within the new jobcentres. Why not use the partners that are in those communities who have those specialisms to come in and deliver that? You do not need to completely reinvent this; you just need to change the culture.

Q49 **John Milne:** Finally, I will ask a question I asked a previous panel: how should the Government measure success and therefore, in effect, set targets?

Elizabeth Taylor: It is inevitable that we want to see people in work—that is what everybody is here for, whether it is the jobcentre or employment support—but there needs to be recognition of some of the barriers that get broken down. Closely aligning employment support with skills would be a better future, so that you are preparing people for work and that gets recognised. It is about not just getting people into any job, but getting people into a job where they progress, and recognising in-work progression and having better relationships with employers so that if somebody is in work and they progress, the relationship is there so that you can backfill and keep people moving.

Those are the things that should be measured in future. There have been in the past things like ESF programmes, where there were lots of soft outcomes and outputs. I think in the end those softer ones did lead to the harder job-outcome, job-retention ones. We should not dismiss them as being soft, because they are part of a journey.

Ramesh Moher: In the National Careers Service at the moment there is quite a heavy emphasis on tracking and outcomes. We are funded for one session per individual over 12 months, and then we are funded for outcomes—a learning outcome or a job outcome. For the job outcomes,



the measures used by the DFE at the moment are four weeks sustained, 16 hours continuous over those four weeks, and a learning outcome would be accredited learning, so the qualification would have to be on the Ofqual register.

Those are the metrics that we work to at the moment. It is key that we are looking at employment rates—we want to get people back into work—but what is the quality of that work? Is it sustained? Measures over 13 weeks or six months are really useful, but whether they are meeting the London living wage, for example, would be quite an important consideration too.

For those who sit before that and need to take the journey to get to the point of being able to go into work, there are some things that I do not think are being measured at the moment, including people's ESOL, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. As part of some process, we need to ask, "Do you have the skillset? Are you ready? Are we addressing those barriers?" Those could be measured. For digital skills, we could do some basic assessments to find out whether people have the ability to use tech to enable them. Other things would be around CVs: is their CV fit for purpose and ready to go?

Some of the softer skills elements that Liz was just talking about are really important around confidence and motivation, because those are the things you need as foundations before you can move on into work.

Q50 David Pinto-Duschinsky: You brought a smile to my face, Elizabeth, because I was for many years a trustee of the St Giles Trust. It is fantastic to hear that its good work continues.

We have heard a lot about intermediaries. At one level that is fantastic; at another level, I have to say that we have been having this conversation for 25 years. It is not depressing, but it reminds me how far we still have to go. I want to touch on the point you made about advancement, Elizabeth. We have not really talked at all about advancement. The Government have talked about using advancement as a key part of the offer. We know from the way poverty and the low-wage labour market work that you need to get advancement; otherwise, people just stagnate and get trapped in a low-pay/no-pay cycle. We also know that IAG on its own, and a bit of CV help, does not really do anything for advancement. What will the merger need to accomplish so that it can provide advancement support rather than just a sticking plaster?

Ramesh Moher: One of the key things is skills. What we can do at the moment is quite limited, but funding for more sessions over a period with the same careers adviser, if that is feasible—obviously, if people move out of area, that is a different matter—could enable a relationship where they look at the journey and the skills gap and say, "I'm going into this job. Okay, it's not ideal, but what can I do in terms of skills to address that and improve my career trajectory?" Having a model that is a little bit more sustainable from a career perspective would be really useful. Rather



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than just that one intervention, it would be more of a journey with an individual, helping them make the advancement that you talk about.

Elizabeth Taylor: When we look at that kind of progression in work, it is different for each individual. Everybody will want to earn more money, and maybe the goal has to be financial, but that should not always be driven by working more hours, because that can be difficult for parents and people with care responsibilities. Being able to move to better jobs that are better remunerated is a real goal for people, and that is where skills come in. Creating an environment of good work where people have job satisfaction, so they stay in work and their health and wellbeing is good, is what we should be aiming for. We should have the opportunity to do those things now.

Chair: I have one more question, but we have run over time, so could you write to me with a response? It is about AI and digital skills. Ramesh, I think, mentioned the importance of a person-centred approach. What is the balance between the use of AI and digital and a more person-centred approach, and how can we ensure that we mitigate risks in the use of AI and digital? Thank you so much. It has been an incredibly informative session.