

Written evidence submitted by the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) (RJ0042)

Introduction

1. ERSA is a UK-wide membership organisation representing over 300 organisations from across the employment support sector, including charities, local authorities, housing associations, social enterprises, funding bodies and private sector organisations striving to change the lives of jobseekers and those looking to advance their careers. Each of our member organisations are a force for good for the families and communities in which our participants live.
2. Since 2005 we have been the representative voice of employment support. We have given the sector a united voice, recognised and shared best practice, and improved understanding of the value the employment support sector brings to the country. Due to our many years of experience within the employment support sector, working with our members and their clients, and our in-depth understanding of employment support programmes – both past and present – we welcome this opportunity to share the views of our sector on this important subject.

The Purpose of Jobcentre Plus

Are the aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) sufficiently ambitious? How effectively is it meeting its aims?

3. The aims and purpose of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) are indeed ambitious. However, ambition needs to be met with sufficient resourcing and tempered by the understanding that there can be no successful transformation of JCP without the involvement and cooperative working of the employment support sector.
4. As an organisation representing charities, local authorities, housing associations, social enterprises, funding bodies and private sector organisations, we appreciate the role JCP performs within the wider employment support and welfare-to-work landscape. Since its inception, some 23 years ago, JCP has been the main contact point in accessing advice and support for many people experiencing unemployment, and it has been at the forefront of how central government understands employment support service delivery.
5. However, for all the ambition of recent central government pronouncements regarding transformation of JCP services, particularly the recent white paper's acknowledgement of long-term health impacts on employment barriers¹, this underestimates the scope of the challenge of assisting long-term unemployed into work. This is due to a number of factors, including; central government's Jobcentre Plus-centric understanding of employment support, a failure to appreciate the resource intensive and dedicated support needed for long-term unemployed individuals (JCP has historically often been best suited for supporting those not facing complex barriers to re-entry to the labour market), the negative image of JCP amongst

¹ [Get Britain Working White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

long-term unemployed and individuals experiencing significant obstacles to employment, and the siloed working nature of JCP in relation to the wider employment support sector.

6. Due to these factors, and wider issues of limited state capacity and significant caseload volume, the effectiveness of JCP has been underperformed ambitions to-date. In this regard we and our member organisations express an optimistic view towards the stated ambitions to driving innovation, strengthening collaboration, and fostering a welcoming environment for JCP customers.
7. However, we also express a concern that such reforms should not come at the expense of the work being carried out on a daily basis by specialist providers within the employment support sector. Innovation and collaboration means the active participation of and engagement with employment support providers, without this we believe that JCP will fail to meet the challenge we currently face as a nation both socially and economically. JCP needs greater oversight and to be more effectively evaluated measured against publicly available KPIs. This standard is applied to private and third sector employment support providers, we see no reason it shouldn't be applied to JCP.
8. People across the UK facing unemployment – including those recently made redundant, the long-term unemployed, and those experiencing significant challenges to joining the workforce – all deserve the opportunities and dedicated wrap around individual support that contracted specialist employment support providers can offer with their expertise, capacity, and ability to address complex needs.

Are there any groups that JCP should be supporting that it is not currently? If so, how should DWP engage with these groups?

9. The issue is not necessarily one of groups that JCP should be supporting but one of individuals. ERSA members feel JCP is not meeting its universal service obligations to existing customers through a combination of: difficulties meeting the complex needs of individual customers, the poor reputation of JCP amongst its customers (particularly those with complex barriers to employment), JCP's siloed working practices and its limited relationship with local communities and employers.
10. Our members who work with individuals with complex needs, such as refugees, single mothers, people with care responsibilities etc., identify JCP's focus on compliance-based interviews and sanctions, over that of personalised and wrap around support, as contributing to gaps in support. The examples of the Work and Health Programme and the Restart scheme offer alternative service delivery models that JCP, in collaboration with employment service providers, to address areas where support is lacking.
11. Overall, JCP should engage with unsupported groups and individuals – those with complex barriers to employment, those unemployed but not in receipt of benefits, socially marginalised groups etc. – through in-depth collaboration with employment support providers across the private and voluntary sectors at both national and local levels. Many ERSA member

organisations have years of expertise, knowledge and community-based relationships that are key to helping people into employment that JCP presently lacks.

To what extent does JCP have an “image problem”? How might this be addressed?

12. As previously mentioned, JCP currently has an image problem with many service users due to the fear that the compliance and sanctions regime instils, particularly amongst those with complex needs and barriers to employment. To address this, JCP should rely on a network of organisations and community groups – ranging from employment support providers to specialist local charities – to engage with JCP customers in a personalised manner that builds trust and curates service delivery to their individual needs.
13. The sanctions and compulsory-based interview regime is counter-productive, undermines trust between JCP staff and customers, and entrenches disengagement amongst some of the most in-need individuals. Greater collaboration with the employment support sector will greatly improve JCP’s image with customers by acting as the mediating institution focused on the individual.

What should be the role of JCP in getting those who have been out of the workforce in the long-term ready to begin a journey into work?

14. The role of JCP in the journey to work for long-term unemployed individuals should ideally be one of facilitating signposting to specialist support providers – whether they be employment support providers, mental health services, advocacy groups, advice charities etc. – and providing a point of contact for help and advice.
15. JCP has an important role to play in serving as a hub for support services and specialist provision, particularly as digital technology and AI offer new points of interaction for service users, but individuals with complex needs require signposting to specialist service providers following initial assessment.

The experience in Jobcentre Plus

How effective is the support provided by Work Coaches, particularly to groups that experience disadvantages or particular challenges in the labour market (e.g. young people, disabled people, older workers)?

16. While there are some positive aspects to local JCP provision, with the commissioning of local services and charities via local budgets, the overall opinion of most organisations within employment support sector is that, while Work Coaches often perform difficult tasks in challenging circumstances, their ability to effectively support JCP customers with challenging barriers to employment is limited at best.
17. A combination of limited resource allocation, the size of individual Work Coach caseloads, and the complexity of needs from long-term unemployed JCP customers, means that Work Coaches are not always best placed in the present system to assist people into work beyond those customers with minimal support needs.

18. To better support those experiencing disadvantage and particular or complex challenges, there needs to be greater collaboration between JCP and the employment support sector to deliver personalised, effective support that empowers customers, ensures support is accessible, and avoids duplication of services.

How suitable is the JCP estate for achieving the Government's aims, and meeting the needs of different claimants? What models could it look at to improve its facilities?

19. The current estate is unsuitable for achieving what the Government has set out and particularly for meeting the needs of a wide range of claimants (and, indeed, non-benefit claimant customers.) Aside from the general culture and atmosphere of JCP buildings generated by the sanctions and compulsion regime, the estate itself is totally unsuited for those service users with the most complex barriers to employment and those long-term unemployed. Many ERSA members have informed us they believe that the JCP estate needs to be significantly updated to make it more welcoming, encouraging to customers, and preserving of the individual's dignity.
20. When it comes to models to look towards for improving facilities, then ERSA would direct attention to the success generated by Restart programme service suppliers. All eight Restart primes have established welcoming environments for participants on the Restart scheme with additional services on site that encourage participants to engage in the main service and the additional offers. This model empowers suppliers to deliver welcoming, encouraging, and dignified support to service users that eschews the confrontational and infantilising approach of the JCP sanctions regime.

What opportunities exist for digital and AI-tools to improve JCP?

21. The expansion of digital tech, including smartphones and apps, over the last two decades, and the growing potential for future applications of AI in public services access and delivery, has great potential for JCP. Unfortunately, JCP and central government have been slow to embrace digital innovation in service delivery to customers and have remained stuck in an analogue only model, whereas across OECD countries – particularly Canada² – the opposite is the case.
22. Utilisation of digital technologies found in everyday life, such as digital assistance with CV curation, AI used matching skills and qualifications with jobs, push notifications to encourage proactive and positive behaviours on the part of the customer, remote access to services via smartphones, 24/7 access to information and documents for customer convenience, and virtual appointments with coaches and mental health counsellors.
23. All of the above-mentioned technologies and services are widely utilised across modern life and the private sector. If effectively absorbed into JCP practices, they have the potential to transform service provision through streamlining user interfaces, reducing inefficiencies, and eliminating duplication of services.
24. However, ERSA member organisations stress that any rollout of digital technologies should be done with a) a commitment that digitisation does not mean a reduction in the quality or

² [A new dawn for public employment services | OECD](#)

provision of in-person support, and b) outside providers, such as employment support services, are integrated fully into any digital interface.

25. As with in-person JCP services, there can be no successful transformation of JCP without the employment support sector.

Working with others

How well does JCP connect with external partners? For example, schools, further education, employment support organisations and the third sector?

26. The track record of JCP engaging and working with external partners differs between the national and local levels. For some of ERSA's larger members, JCP represents the main referral route for employment support cases. JCP has many such longstanding relationships which continue to work relatively well. However, there is a distinct lack of utilisation of local collaboration with local charities, schools, FE institutions, and employers.
27. This is not always the fault of JCP. Some Jobcentres utilise their local budgets to effectively engage with local external partners. However, it is often the case that local employers can be difficult to engage with as they see little benefit for their businesses and FE providers are often underfunded and do not have the capacity to engage fully with outreach from their local JCP.

How could JCP improve the way that it works with those employers who already use its services?

28. ERSA member organisations consistently raise issues with JCP's lack of collaboration and partnership with external organisations at both a national and local level. While recognising 'pockets' of excellence where JCP works well with employers, broadly ERSA members cite a poor track record when it comes to engaging with *local* employers. As one ERSA member, notes: 'it feels like they [JCP] go for the easy wins which leads again to one size fits all, while they ignore the more local, SME employers.'
29. To improve the way JCP works with employers already engaged, we argue that this requires the onboarding of previous points made in this submission regarding innovation, digital technology, and deeper collaboration with the employment support sector. Having dedicated account managers charged with fostering stronger and deeper partnerships with local employers. ERSA members feel there is a great opportunity for JCP to tap into pools of local resources and also to emphasise to local employers that JCP – if properly integrated with the charitable and employment support sectors – has the potential to be a long-term recruitment stream, rather than a one-off job vacancy fulfilment.

How could JCP reach a greater number and diversity of employers in order to offer a wider range of opportunity?

30. At present, there is a strong feeling among our member organisations that JCP's communication strategies need to be significantly reviewed and improved. There is a view amongst ERSA members that there is a need for JCP to have staff who, as one put it, understand the needs of employers 'from both an operational and strategic perspective.' To fulfil this requires seamless integration within the forthcoming combined and strategic

authorities, to better inform communication and engagement strategies with a more diverse range of employers.

31. In addition, as mentioned previously, reaching greater numbers of diverse employers also ties into improving the image of JCP – both with potential job applicants and employers.

Careers services

What change should a new jobs and careers service prioritise to move beyond the support currently offered by JCP and the National Careers Service?

32. At present JCP Work Coaches are not qualified to give careers advice and guidance during their appointments. The time-limited, conditionality appointment approach of JCP makes long-term career guidance next to impossible. With regards to the advice given by National Careers Service, the view of many in the employment support sector is that it is in urgent need of updating and unfit for the labour market of the 2020s.
33. Both services currently offer a light touch, high-volume level of support, and there needs to be more variation to meet a range of customer needs from career development to overcoming complex barriers to employment. As one frontline employment support colleague told us: ‘It [the present jobs and careers service] needs to be delivered as one service that can support job entry, and careers support throughout a user’s working life.’
34. The National Careers Service Advisers have historically filled a gap in JCP provision to provide basic job searching tools and support, such as CV production, interview support and support accessing job search websites. Gaps in current provision of support to JCP customers need to be filled, either by giving Work Coaches time to support with CVs, job searching techniques and interview support, better use of digital tools (AI CV production), or by contracting out this support early on in the customer journey. This would allow qualified careers advisers to support with effective careers advice for people unsure of job goals or wanting advice on re-training and re-skilling after potentially many years out of the job market.
35. The present careers service model, which currently provides time-limited, prescribed interventions, is not fit for purpose. A national service that provides consistent information, advice, and guidance, which is fed by local and regional economic intelligence, has the potential to be a careers service that can provide added value, enhanced support rather than duplicating support readily available by many currently funded programmes.

How can a new jobs and careers service support people to progress in their careers?

36. A new jobs and careers service that is delivered by professionals, who are qualified in careers advice and guidance, is viewed by many ERSA members as essential to helping people progress their careers. Using the skills, knowledge, expertise and professionalism of the National Careers Service to work alongside Work Coaches, who possess in-person knowledge of their customers, and can make specific targeted referrals, would constitute a significant improvement on current provision.

To what extent will the new jobs and careers service anticipate future skills gaps, and take action to address those gaps before they are realised?

37. There is a great potential for a new jobs and careers service to anticipate the future shape of the labour market. As one ERSA member notes about the present system: ‘National Careers Service, advisers are always refreshing or updating their skills and continuous professional development (CPD) is key to all advisers staying up-to-date with labour market information and knowing how the labour market is likely to change as time goes on. Observing labour market trends is very important and advisers have access to a host of resources and training, which is underpinned by their professional career guidance qualification (Level 4 minimum).’ They also cite National Careers Service London’s utilisation of careerslondon.org and careersinspiration.co.uk as effective tools for up-to-date information.
38. Creating strong ties with industry and bodies representing employers (i.e. Confederation of British Industry (CBI); British Chambers of Commerce (BCC); Federation of Small Businesses (FSB); Institute of Directors (IoD), Make UK etc.) is also vital to ensuring that the new service is kept informed about anticipated changing trends and skills gaps. Also forecasting from National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and Department for Education (DfE) are also useful potential sources.

Are there any international examples that the Department should draw on for the new jobs and careers service?

39. The usage of AI and digital technologies in Canada is informative here.³

³ [A new dawn for public employment services | OECD](#)