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Improving employment interventions – key findings from the evaluation of phase 2 of the employment pathfinder

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Key points

- Rates of referral to the second phase of the Employment Pathfinder (EP2) were low in some areas, reflecting both a lack of incentives, in that their referral targets were not cash-linked as in the case of accredited programmes, and reluctance among offender managers to refer offenders who were not motivated to attend.
- Areas which operated a policy of referring all unemployed offenders to education, training and employment (ETE), with the option of deferral where appropriate (e.g. if drug use has not been stabilised), ensured that all who were eligible had an opportunity to benefit from the Pathfinder.
- EP2 highlighted tensions between best ETE practice, which requires tailoring of services to individual needs and learning styles, and central demands for consistency of service delivery.
- While mandatory appointments may improve attendance, incentives, such as a guaranteed job interview, may also foster motivation and compliance, ensuring high completion rates.
- Cash-linked outcome targets that focus on immediate employment may discourage providers from working with the least job-ready. Some acknowledgement of 'distance travelled' or 'value added' needs to be built into targets and the measurement of outcomes.
- The majority of offenders interviewed expressed positive views about the practical help and personal support they had received.
- There was an increase (from 12% to 24%) in offenders with employment among a sample of those who completed EP2 interventions. The results are encouraging, although the sample was likely to be biased towards offenders motivated to find work.
- Unemployment is seldom the only problem in the lives of offenders. It is unrealistic to expect that employment schemes alone will secure a sustained reduction in offending.
- Matching education and training to skills gaps in the local job market is an essential element in helping offenders overcome the disadvantage of a criminal record.
- There is a need to improve systems and procedures for recording employment interventions and their outcome in terms of the numbers who gained and sustained employment.

It is well-established that there is a link between unemployment and offending, although the nature of the relationship is less clear (Tarling, 1982). It is known, however, that the extent and frequency of offending diminishes when offenders gain employment (Farrington *et al.*, 1986; Sarno *et al.*, 2000). There is also evidence that, while the employment prospects of offenders are well below those of non-offenders, attending vocational training and employment programmes can enable them to compete in the labour market (Hurry *et al.*, 2006).

Raising offenders' skills and helping them obtain work has become a priority for the present Government. ETE is one of the key 'Pathways' within the *Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan* (Home Office, 2004). A subsequent Green Paper (HM Government, 2005) outlined a strategy for addressing barriers to employment, emphasising the importance of linking learning and skills programmes to labour market needs. In 2005/06 the National Probation Service introduced a 'shadow' employment target requiring 15,000 offenders to be in employment or vocational training for a continuous period of four weeks. By 2006/07 the target had become cash-linked. But while acknowledging the benefits of work-related training, difficulties in measuring its impact on employment and re-offending were such that the new target was restricted to 15,000 offenders placed into employment and 12,000 retaining employment for at least four weeks (National Probation Directorate, 2006).

The Employment Pathfinder (Phase 1) was initiated in two probation areas in 2001. It aimed to improve the effectiveness of interventions designed to help offenders to find, and sustain, employment. The evaluation of Phase 1 (Haslewood-Pocsik *et al.*, 2004) recommended a number of changes to the systems of referral and provision of ETE services. Building on Phase 1, within the framework of the *Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan*, a second phase of the Employment Pathfinder was initiated in April 2004 in the original two probation areas and five others. As in Phase 1, the broad objectives were to improve the effectiveness of employment work undertaken with offenders.

This summary focuses on the main findings of an evaluation of EP2 undertaken in 2006. Its purpose was to assist in the development of future employment initiatives. Key questions were (a) whether there

were any remaining implementation and operational issues; (b) whether data collection problems which had beset the earlier Pathfinder had been resolved; and (c) whether it was now possible to assess the impact of the scheme in terms of ETE outcomes. The evaluation was designed to draw on: information contained in a centrally maintained database; local records; interviews with those referring to, and providing, ETE assistance; and interviews with offenders receiving such assistance. Data quality problems meant that none of the analyses carried out on centrally held data are reported (see Methodological Note below for details).

EP2 in practice: key issues and implications for future employment initiatives

EP2 comprised a groupwork programme – WorkWise – intended to enhance motivation to improve work-related skills and to seek employment, and nine modules providing employment-related knowledge and skills, including disclosure of previous convictions to potential employers, writing a CV and communication skills. EP2 was to be targeted on offenders whose score on the Offender Assessment System (OASys) indicated that unemployment was a contributory factor in their offending. Eligibility was subsequently extended to all unemployed offenders. Unemployed offenders assessed as likely to benefit from a motivational programme (those with high OASys scores on ETE and Thinking and Behaviour) were to attend WorkWise first. They could be allocated to any, or all, of the skills modules according to their needs. The modules were generally delivered by external ETE advisors, whereas in most areas probation staff were trained to deliver the WorkWise programme.

Selection and referral

New schemes for offenders can take some time to become established. Giving them new names and logos is sometimes done with the intention of signalling a fresh start; sometimes it is a funding requirement. However, the impact on referral rates can be counterproductive as this fails to capitalise on the trust an established 'brand name' can bring. For this reason, a number of areas downplayed the degree of change and focused on the continuity EP2 represented.

In some areas, an initial resistance to EP2 among offender managers stemmed from a lack of confidence in the impact of ETE interventions upon offending, coupled with reservations about requirements to meet centrally imposed targets for referral, completion and ETE outcomes. Others, more pragmatically, were unwilling to prioritise EP2 since employment targets were not (at that time) cash-linked. Some respondents opposed central target setting on the grounds that this did not take account of individual offenders' needs and contributed to high attrition rates. There were indications that subsequent pressure to meet referral targets encouraged an indiscriminate approach on the part of offender managers. This, in turn, created difficulties for ETE providers, jeopardising their ability to achieve their own completion and outcome targets. Moreover, targets couched in terms of achieving and sustaining employment were commonly regarded by probation staff and ETE providers as an unrealistically high aspiration for many of those referred. The removal of vocational training as a valid outcome measure also placed ETE advisors under pressure to secure work placements and jobs regardless of their suitability.

Lincolnshire Probation had devised a system that sought to address any lack of engagement on the part of offender managers while avoiding inappropriate or untimely referral and the associated waste of resources. This area operated on a presumption in favour of referral in the case of offenders eligible for EP2, while allowing offender managers to negotiate a deferral or, very exceptionally, not refer when an offender's other problems (e.g. unstable drug use) would interfere with their benefiting from EP2. Decisions to defer attendance were regularly reviewed.

Asked about their expectations regarding EP2, most of the offenders we interviewed said that they had none. They had attended because they were told to by their supervisors. Consistent with the focus on obtaining employment, some had been under the impression that EP2 was a 'job bureau' rather than a programme which sought to equip them with the skills needed to get themselves jobs. While a few were disappointed subsequently that they had not secured jobs, others simply wished that they had been better prepared and advised of the benefits they might derive from participation. Providing a clearer message about what someone might expect to gain from ETE services would be a simple way of improving levels of attendance and satisfaction.

WorkWise

A minority of probation staff judged that most offenders were keen to work and would therefore not benefit from the WorkWise programme. Low referral rates were also said to reflect concerns about the lack of an evidence base for WorkWise. This encouraged offender managers to prioritise other programmes designed to challenge offending behaviour where the evidence-base had been verified through an accreditation process. One other explanation for low numbers of referrals to WorkWise was the difficulty in bringing together groups of suitable offenders. In both urban and rural localities the distance offenders often had to travel to attend the programme proved to be a major hurdle. One area addressed the problem by running WorkWise in probation hostels, although this was not an effective way of targeting those in most need. Delivering the programme on a one-to-one basis in offenders' homes ensured high attendance and completion rates but lost the benefit of group interaction (and had health and safety implications).

Despite these difficulties, some EP2 managers and tutors believed that WorkWise could be highly effective in building confidence and motivation. Others were sceptical of the programme's potential to motivate offenders to seek work, but saw it as effective in improving thinking skills and personal development within a work context. Tutors and offenders who had attended WorkWise valued the practical exercises as they encouraged participants to recognise skills they already possessed. The group setting enabled participants to practise new job-related skills (such as interview techniques) in a safe environment. A criticism of WorkWise voiced by the tutors was that its highly structured design allowed little scope to tailor the sessions to individual needs or to encourage active participation. Some tutors and participants also found the reiteration of the learning unduly repetitive. Taken together, such views and experiences suggest that a shorter motivational programme, that makes allowance for variation in participants' requirements and learning styles, may go some way to overcoming shortcomings in WorkWise and encouraging higher rates of referral.

The EP2 modular approach

EP2 was designed to accord with certain 'what works' principles about what is effective in reducing re-offending. One such principle – programme

integrity – emphasises strict adherence to agreed procedure and programme content. But it is important that ETE interventions with offenders also take account of another body of knowledge about what works in getting low-skilled and poorly qualified adults into employment (e.g. Dench *et al.*, 2006), otherwise much of the reason for involving ETE experts is lost. A key message from the first phase of the Pathfinder was that EP2 needed to prove a more individually tailored approach commensurate with the diversity of offenders' employment histories and ETE needs (Haslewood-Pocsik *et al.*, 2004). External providers of EP2 believed that the emphasis on achieving consistency in the delivery of modules across the seven areas undermined the exercise of legitimate professional discretion in individual cases. Delivering modules sequentially was also perceived as too rigid as it was often preferable to tackle several employment issues simultaneously, for example, conducting a job search while creating a CV or working on the disclosure of conviction. The latter approach, which advisors tended to adopt in the later stages of EP2, ensured that offenders saw the relevance of the modules and could practice their new skills without delay. ETE advisors stressed that they were trained to examine possible remedies to problems jointly with their clients and, crucially, to ensure that the client has a sense of 'ownership' of the targets and action plan. As the Pathfinder progressed, advisors adapted the modular structure in ways that enabled them to respond effectively to an offender's needs and learning style.

Analysis of a sample of 257 case files indicated that issues around disclosing convictions were the most frequently recorded need (in two-thirds of cases) and the related module was the most frequently delivered and completed. This supports the view commonly expressed by EP2 providers and participants that having a criminal record is, in itself, an obstacle to employment, even if an offender is otherwise employable. ETE advisors and offenders singled out the Offence Disclosure module for praise. Offenders who had attended one or more EP2 appointments also valued the regular contact with ETE advisors. The latter were described as supportive, motivating and non-judgmental. These characteristics are among those recent research highlights as essential within a supervisor/supervisee relationship (McNeill, 2006).

Responding to non-attendance

Attrition rates for the WorkWise programme were high, reflecting the fact that, by definition, those selected were poorly motivated to improve their skills and find employment, but also that attendance was rarely compulsory.

While there was some support for the provision of WorkWise as a Specified Activity within a court order, offender managers were generally opposed to mandatory appointments, arguing that coerced attendance may result in offenders being unco-operative and disinclined to gain from the experience. Even when appointments were mandatory, this did not necessarily result in breach action. Of course, there was a risk that overzealous enforcement might result in breach before the offender could be brought to realise the value of EP2, especially in the case of offenders chosen to attend a motivational programme. One counter-argument, advanced by some providers of EP2, was that failing to enforce appointments conveyed a negative message to offenders about the importance of improving their employment prospects, creating a "legitimacy vacuum" for those tasked with providing ETE services (Haslewood-Pocsik *et al.*, 2004). A second objection to lax enforcement was that it encouraged those tasked with meeting centrally imposed completion and outcome targets to concentrate on offenders who were well-motivated and were probably also the most job-ready and employable.

One way of improving compliance is through incentives. ETE advisors stressed the role of incentives in securing attendance in one-to-one work after the first appointment. For example, there would be an understanding that at the next session they would work with the offender to conduct a tailored job search or complete a personalised CV. In the case of WorkWise, an incentive adopted in Leicestershire and Rutland was to enable offenders who attended all ten sessions to complete 20% of their unpaid work hours in a fortnight. Other incentives could include guaranteed job interviews, which might be achieved through the Government's plans to work more closely with potential employers in identifying skills shortages and providing relevant training (HM Government, 2005; HM Government, 2006).

Onward referral

In all seven areas advice and guidance were available to EP2 participants beyond the point at which work identified in their EP2 'action plan' had been completed. Referral arrangements to other voluntary sector agencies following completion of EP2 modules was also fairly well-developed in most areas, enabling participants to move on to training, work placements, or help in searching for employment. On the other hand, the link to Jobcentre Plus was problematic in several areas. This relationship was historically weak, possibly because Jobcentre Plus's targets encouraged a focus on its own definition of high need (which excluded offending) or with those who are considered 'job-ready'. One Jobcentre Plus representative also suggested that offenders may not access the full range of services Jobcentre Plus offer because they fear that this may result in reduced benefit payments. An additional area of tension between Jobcentre Plus and ETE providers concerned the arrangements for sharing information about EP2 offenders. Where links between EP2 tutors and Jobcentre Plus were strong (as in one district in Devon and Cornwall) these difficulties were surmounted and the organisation played a part in reinforcing learning and skills covered by EP2. The Government's decision to include offenders in the Jobcentre Plus target structure for 2006/07, along with other disadvantaged groups, provides greater incentives for Jobcentre Plus staff to help offenders find work.

EP2 and the labour market

An important ingredient of any initiative designed to improve offenders' employment prospects is an appreciation of the gaps in the local skills base and the provision of training that matches the needs of local employers. Although in some areas Jobcentre Plus were nominally leading on this, their efforts were generally considered by probation staff and external ETE providers to be ineffective. Some areas, especially Norfolk, had tried to fill the gap but they were hampered by a lack of resources. Tapping into employment opportunities effectively, particularly in rural areas which tend to have many small businesses and few large companies, requires a more structured and properly resourced effort

if it is to stand a chance of persuading employers to take on ex-offenders. In recognition of this, towards the end of the Pathfinder, ETE agencies in Leicestershire and London engaged a member of staff to work with local employers with a view to identifying suitable jobs and the skills employers require in their workforce. The evaluation timetable was such that it was not possible to examine the effectiveness of these 'job developers'.

Measuring impact

This study was intended to assess whether the data problems identified in the first Employment Pathfinder had been resolved rather than to provide definitive results about the impact of EP2. In six of the seven project areas, the problems persisted and the data held centrally were judged to be unreliable. In the remaining area, Lincolnshire, the data entered on the IAPS (Interim Accredited Programme Software) central database were used to check on referral practices. Because the information had local management value, some effort was invested in ensuring that the information IAPS contained was accurate. In the other areas, major improvements were needed in the procedures and systems for recording employment interventions.

The generally poor quality of centrally held data meant that information concerning who attended EP2, the elements they completed, and the numbers who gained employment or a training place, was derived exclusively from the sample of 257 case files. This sample was biased towards those who maintained contact with EP2 because outcome information on other cases (mainly drop-outs) was seldom available in ETE provider files. It is highly likely that these offenders were more motivated to obtain employment than those who dropped out. However motivation alone is unlikely to enable offenders to overcome the barriers to employment that they commonly face. The results are, therefore, encouraging in that the proportion in employment at the start of their contact with EP2 increased from 12% (N=30) to 24% (N=62) and a further 26 (10%) had begun working as volunteers or had registered for a course (see Table 1).

Table 1: Employment at first contact and post EP2

Employment	At EP2		After EP2	
	No	%	No	%
Unemployed/ unable to work	212	82	27	10
Mainly employed	30	12	62	24
Volunteer	-	-	3	1
Student	-	-	23	9
Unclear	15	6	82	32
Still on EP2	N/A	N/A	23	9
Abandoned/ lost contact	N/A	N/A	20	8
Returned to custody	N/A	N/A	7	3
Other	N/A	N/A	10	4
Total	257	100	257	100

Conclusions

EP2 acted as a catalyst in a number of areas for improving links with ETE providers and enlarging the range of services available to offenders. Improvements in existing systems for assessing and addressing employment-related needs were also attributed to the Pathfinder. One result of the more systematic process of selection and referral was that it captured more offenders with the potential to benefit from ETE provision. It could be said, however, that in the drive to ensure that EP2 was delivered as designed, insufficient attention was paid to the weaknesses of a 'one size fits all' approach highlighted in the first phase of the Pathfinder.

It is important to ensure that any centrally devised management information system is widely seen as having local utility. The routine and accurate recording of a small number of key output and outcome indicators is preferable to imposing larger data collection requirements on busy professionals. The intention to produce monitoring information as a by-product of a new management information system is to be welcomed, but will not, of itself, resolve the data quality issues identified in this evaluation.

A criminal record is a disadvantage to anyone seeking a job even if they have useful skills and a history of employment. In fact, most of those targeted by ETE interventions have had negative experiences in education and work. Even those who wish to work may be reluctant to switch from benefits to low-paid employment. With their poor educational attainment and skills, such offenders are ill-equipped to compete with non-offenders for a limited pool of well-paid jobs with career prospects, especially as unemployment is seldom the only problem offenders face. A degree of realism about what ETE assistance can achieve is required to ensure that schemes are not set up to fail. ETE providers can move offenders towards job-readiness through improving their skills and motivation, but they cannot be expected to lead the majority of offenders into sustainable jobs. Neither is it realistic to expect that helping offenders into jobs will necessarily trigger desistance from offending. Cash-linked targets that fail to reflect this may discourage the provision of the very qualifications, vocational and 'soft' skills, that for many offenders are essential bridges to sustainable employment.

Training leading to qualifications in fields where there are known labour shortages may offset the disadvantage of having a criminal record. It may also encourage offenders into employment by opening up better-paid work with prospects for advancement.

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Methodological note:

Examining whether allocation and data collection issues had been resolved entailed an examination of data held on all those referred to EP2 on a centrally maintained database during the last six months of 2005. This exercise was expected to yield information on factors such as age, sex, type of current principal offence and sentence, details of the modules to be attended, levels of attendance and employment outcomes achieved within three months of referral. It was anticipated that IAPS would also be used as a sampling frame from which to draw a one-in-seven random sample of case records (weighted for area size) to collect additional information on offenders' educational and criminal histories and to examine the way their employment status changed between joining and exiting EP2. The poor quality of IAPS data in six of the seven areas was such that it could not be used to generate results about impact or as a sampling frame. All quantitative analyses described in this report are therefore based on the local records sample (N=257) which was drawn at random using either local registers or simply taking every seventh file from filing cabinets. For the reasons explained above this approach biased the sample towards those who maintained contact with EP2 providers.

The third element of the data collection process involved conducting interviews with all seven programme managers and a range of other professionals in four of the areas (comprising 15 offender managers and other probation staff) and 12 ETE providers (including two senior members of Jobcentre Plus with experience of working in partnership with the Probation Service). These interviews sought views on the implementation and delivery of EP2 and on its value compared to other employment services offenders could access. Finally, 32 offenders referred to EP2 in the same four areas were interviewed about their experiences of EP2 and any other help they had received. Although interviews with offenders who had dropped out of the scheme were sought, this sample is biased towards those who maintained contact.