

Voices from the Frontline



Written evidence submitted by the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) coalition to the Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry into welfare-to-work provision

Introduction

Voices from the Frontline (VFTF) aims to provide people with experience of multiple needs and those who support them with the opportunity to make their voices heard in current policy debates. The project is part of the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) coalition of Clinks, Homeless Link and Mind, formed to improve policy and services for people facing multiple needs. Together the charities represent over 1,300 frontline organisations and have an interest in the criminal justice, substance misuse, homelessness and mental health sectors.

There are an estimated 58,000 people living with multiple needs across the country.¹ People with multiple needs are defined as those who experience several problems at once, such as homelessness, mental health issues, drug and alcohol misuse and contact with the criminal justice system. As a result of the interaction between these different needs, they are also likely to lead chaotic lives and struggle to access mainstream support services.

For all these reasons, people with multiple needs often feel they are '*invisible*' to the decision makers who act on their behalf. The Committee's inquiry offers the perfect opportunity for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities to provide their insights into what can be done to improve welfare-to-work provision for those furthest away from the labour market.

We would be pleased to arrange for the individuals involved in our work to meet with Committee members to further discuss any of the issues raised in this submission.

Context

A wealth of data exists from across the public and voluntary sectors to show that people with multiple needs are often amongst those furthest from the labour market. For example, in 2014/15 only 15% of homeless people living in residential services were in employment,² whilst in 2013/14 only 19% of people entering drug rehabilitation treatment were in paid work.³ For many, possessing a criminal conviction can represent a serious barrier to employment. Of those released from prison in 2008, 47%

¹ [Hard Edges: Mapping severe and multiple disadvantage](#), LankellyChase Foundation (2015)

² [Annual Review: Support for single homeless people in England](#), Homeless Link (2015)

³ [Adult Drug Statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System \(NTDMS\): 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014](#), Public Health England (2014)

were still claiming out-of-work support after two years.⁴ In the absence of an effective dialogue with employers, it can also be extremely difficult to overcome misconceptions about the ability and willingness of people with multiple needs to work. A recent study by Mind revealed that “fewer than four in ten employers would knowingly employ someone with a mental health issue.”⁵

Over July and August 2015, MEAM held a series of conversations with people with experience of multiple needs and the staff who work with them to discuss the four subject areas outlined by the Committee. Based on their thoughts and experiences, this submission explores some of the reasons why it can be so difficult for people with multiple needs to find work. We have also worked with those who took part to make a series of recommendations to the Committee around how best to improve the employment support provided by initiatives like the Work Programme. The words in italics represent direct quotations from these conversations.⁶ We have used more than the recommended 3,000 words in this submission because we wanted the Committee to get as much of this direct first-hand feedback as possible.

Recommendations

The assessment process

- The range and extent of people’s needs should be determined via the assessment process on day one of an individual’s claim by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and this information should be passed on clearly to the Work Programme.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should look to encourage the use of DPA1 consent forms as a standard part of the assessment process.
- JCP and DWP Partnership Managers should continue to build effective working relationships with local support services, so they can help people to understand why disclosing their needs is so important.
- The DWP should look to build on learning from good practice in supporting vulnerable people currently being undertaken. An example of this from Brighton is highlighted in paragraphs 16 - 20 of this submission.

Employment support

- Specialist employment provision should be offered for jobseekers with multiple, complex barriers to employment.
- This provision should be based on a personalised approach, which offers meaningful opportunities that take advantage of their skills and experience.
- Staff providing employment support should liaise closely with voluntary sector agencies in the local area that are also providing support to claimants, to ensure a coordinated approach.
- Where appropriate, this support should continue once a person has found work.
- This specialist employment provision should also take an active role in opening up new channels of dialogue with employers around the benefits of employing people with multiple needs in paid roles.

⁴ [Offending, Employment and Benefits – emerging findings from the data linkage project](#), Ministry of Justice (2011)

⁵ [We’ve got work to do](#), Mind (2014)

⁶ These conversations were held with 16 people at services in Brighton, Cambridge, London and Oxford.

Finding a better way to incorporate community led provision into the Work Programme

- The new Work Programme should acknowledge the benefits of community led provision and find ways to effectively incentivise voluntary providers to take part.
- In designing the new programme, the DWP should continue to learn from those organisations, which are successfully supporting the 'hardest to help' back to work.
- The DWP should also be actively encouraged to involve people with multiple needs in the re-tendering process. MEAM would be happy to assist the Department in arranging these conversations.

People with multiple needs and the current labour market

1. People with multiple needs will often struggle to disclose their full levels of need when first approaching a service like JCP:

"You're coming from a desperate place. Quite often... they're coming in with no benefits... and they're coming into a service, they immediately have to be on benefits in order to maintain that accommodation... So they're just going to say 'yes, yes, yes, I understand, I agree and I sign'... and actually in a claimant commitment there's a lot to sign your name against... Even for those who have a full understanding, they're so fearful of saying 'I can't meet my claimant commitment' that they won't say 'actually, I don't think I can manage that'. They'll just say 'yes' for fear of ending up with nothing."

2. In particular, women experiencing multiple needs will face unique challenges to disclosing their needs:

*"The anxiety of just going for the benefits and things in the first place is really huge for a lot of women. They feel guilty about having benefits... the abuse that they've taken for a lot of years: that they would be scroungers; they wouldn't be able to live on their own; they wouldn't be able to live without a partner... All of that kind of stuff is really triggering for them."*⁷

3. Yet, despite not always wishing to disclose them, these needs will create serious barriers to employment. They will also interact with one another, adding to their complexity:

"Lack of accommodation is absolutely at the forefront of people's difficulties in finding work and then coming off from that the vulnerabilities that got them into that situation in the first place: mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), ex-military, transgender issues. We have them all here [at the support service], acquired brain injuries."

4. In addition to these unique barriers to employment, people also often lack the softer skills needed to find work:

⁷ [Voices from the Frontline: Listening to people with multiple needs and those who support them](#), Making Every Adult Matter (2014)

“When you talk about barriers, one of the key things is around [people’s] confidence; that things have failed before... that can leave people feeling quite insecure and not having a great deal of belief in themselves.”

5. This lack of self-confidence means that people are less able to participate in a process, which requires emotional resilience, as well as a specific set of skills:

“They could have little relevant work experience... and then particularly people have issues around IT... if you just go and tell everybody to apply online, a lot of people take that as ‘we’re not interested’, or they would still have that barrier of an online application form, even though they’re perfectly capable of, say, being a cleaner or a warehouse operative.”

6. Despite these difficulties, people with multiple needs still possess a clear desire to work:

“...it would be nice to go back to work. I’ve always wanted to work, I’ve not sat around. My best job was at a supermarket. It was my very first job when I left school and I worked all the way through and that’s what I miss, I definitely miss it... I hate it now... I like meeting people, good communication, I’m a good team player... I’m a people person.”

7. However, even for those who find work, barriers can still exist:

“...people with very complex needs can get a job, but then the upheaval that causes is probably one of the most significant barriers to people maintaining work because if you get a job today all your benefits stop. You risk your Housing Benefit stopping. You’re suddenly responsible for all your funding where you have to declare your wage slips to get any of the means tested benefits like Housing Benefit.”

8. As a result, a significant part of voluntary agencies’ work is providing in-work support:

“I think that just to think because someone gets a job [and] gets paid is going to mean that they’re more independent [is wrong]... in reality, people are still vulnerable. We find at the project where people get paid monthly, they’re coming to the end of the month, it’s their first month’s pay; we’re often giving out notices just so it’s clear to people that they pay their rent, otherwise they will be homeless again.”

The Work Programme

9. A major concern expressed about the Work Programme is that it can struggle to adapt to the needs of those who are unable to engage with more standard forms of support:

“My experience was that it was generic, it was absolutely hopeless at differentiating between levels of need. There was no formal assessment of those needs and certainly there was no interaction with the voluntary agencies... those people that really were the whole target of that programme would just really be left aside... because they were hard to reach... and had multiple problems you didn’t have the capacity... to work with them on.”

10. In practical terms, this means that advisors do not always have the time to work with people with more complex needs:

"If I wanted to see her [the advisor], it was difficult for one and the other one is if I was stuck with a form to fill in, I could do some bits of it, but when I spoke to my advisor up there she was sort of like 'yeah, I'll be there with you in a minute' and I thought you're supposed to be here to help me to get a job".

11. Others expressed frustration that there had been no investigation into their aspirations and what was available to help them achieve their aims:

"Instead of saying to you 'hey, what does your dad do?', or 'what kind of industry are you interested in?', 'oh, I noticed you've been long term unemployed, what do you want to get into?'... what they're trying to do is tick the box. Yes, we can tick boxes all day, but you're not dealing with the problem. All we're doing is making the problem fit in with our boxes, tick, tick, I've got a lot of those ticks, but what do those ticks really tell me about you? Nothing!"

12. This left people with a sense that their involvement in the programme had very little to do with bettering their employment prospects:

"They need to find out more about the person. Sometimes what I think they're dealing with is a short-term problem, but we need a long term solution... People are unemployed for a reason, so basically what you should be doing is looking for that reason and finding a solution, finding a way forward... the thing is it's a numbers game, they need to make their numbers add up."

13. For those who had been found work, a lack of understanding around their needs meant that the roles they were offered were often inappropriate:

"We had one chap who was on JSA and was on the Work Programme and he was asked to work in a nightclub, cleaning nightclubs, which obviously as an alcoholic he wasn't able to do. He was telling them 'if you give me the keys to a nightclub, I will drink all your beer and I will let my mates in to drink all your beer as well'".

14. People felt that these issues stemmed mainly from a shortage of specialist skills and local knowledge amongst those delivering the employment support:

"I wouldn't say the Work Programme providers have the necessary levels of expertise and just can't dedicate the time to support clients who need that kind of support, or have the range of local partnerships and knowledge and understanding about who to refer or signpost somebody on to if say their housing is an issue, or if they're suffering from domestic abuse... so they're limited because they don't know the local organisations from the area and I think that's important".

15. People also commented that they felt there wasn't enough effort from within the Work Programme to build partnerships with those in the voluntary sector who do possess the relevant skills and knowledge:

"The very first thing that the Work Programme should be doing is asking us about our clients. What I'm surprised by is that we're not getting calls from the Work Programme... the first thing they should do is let us know they're working with that client, finding out how we can work together to support this client to make the best of their opportunities and how we can we allay their fears, particularly clients who are on ESA."

Supporting the hardest to help

16. As part of a current joint initiative in Brighton and Hove, support services have been working in partnership with local JCP branches to improve support for vulnerable people. Better use is being made of the DWP's existing DPA1 consent forms, which are designed to identify whether claimants possess any additional levels of need. The DPA1 consent form:

"...places a marker on the client's account, so that when anyone from the DWP accesses this account they'll see that there's a vulnerability marker there and they should then act differently according to the DWP guidelines."⁸

17. Claimants also complete an individualised letter, which goes into greater detail. This includes:

"...where the person is staying, what kind of work we're doing with them and any deeper issues, which might result in barriers to them attending the Work Programme or shaping the claimant commitment."

18. Significantly, local support services have played a crucial role in helping people to better understand why they should disclose their needs:

"The hardest part of the pilot was finding the right language, initially, to convince people that this was a safe environment in which to disclose.... that we're working in partnership in order to support them and to make sure that... they're on the right pathway, rather than the DWP working against them, which is the feeling that existed prior to this pilot... So I'm saying to them 'look, disclose that you have a problem that affects your day-to-day life. That you're a prison leaver; that you're a recovering drug addict... because then they'll be able to shape their support to that vulnerability."

19. As a result, more realistic expectations are being set for claimants:

"...instead of saying 35 job searches this week: it's meet with your support worker; attend your substance misuse service; and meet with your probation officer..., rather than the previous dishonest conversation and that change I think is invaluable. Now we've only had one sanction since this pilot started [in February 2013]".

20. It has also opened up new opportunities for partnership working between local support services and DWP staff:

"As part of this pilot... we had a lady, a Social Justice Champion... come here to talk to the chaps [in the service]. She spoke to them for about an hour about various things and afterwards she said to me 'oh my God, that was such an eye opener for me, you know at the Jobcentre all we see is bits of paper and a person sitting in front of us at that moment, like a snapshot in time'... because you don't see that. They have their aims, their targets, their Work Programme, but they don't see what it's like for people coming in and I think this partnership working has opened that up for them."

21. There is clearly potential for this initiative to inform practice within the Work Programme more widely:

⁸ The initiative started with work focused upon vulnerability markers. It then progressed into a wider partnership between support services, the local authority and the DWP. Working together they have attempted to find ways of increasing employability and skills amongst vulnerable people. This has included accessing DWP grant funded schemes to support people in the city.

“I would say there is a big gap with what the Jobcentre is doing around those vulnerability markers and what the Work Programme is doing. I don't know if the Work Programme is necessarily on board at all with the vulnerability markers... I think it's a lot easier to deal with the Jobcentre directly and for people working with the Jobcentre. You can talk to the Social Justice Champion and they communicate with the person's worker in the Jobcentre and that seems to resolve those issues a lot quicker.”

22. It is vital that the Work Programme and other welfare to work activities look to learn from and engage with initiatives like the one in Brighton, which is proving successful in supporting the 'hardest to help' back to work:

“I think they [the Work Programme] need to learn from those agencies that are having success... would they be interested in what we're doing?... They could be looking to learn from what is working, but I don't know if that drive exists. At the moment, they represent something we're trying to get round... it isn't about it being a political thing at all. This is about what works.”

Personalised, innovative, community led provision

23. Through working with people on a daily basis, voluntary services with a knowledge of the local area (i.e. 'community led provision') will have a unique insight into people's capabilities as regards work:

“We're not setting people up to work at this point. We're setting people up to get their lives ready to think about working at some point. We're at a much earlier stage, but at a stage where if we can put the work in at this point, it might save them from going back around again: losing their benefit, losing their accommodation, back on the street.”

24. This insight is also vital in helping people to overcome specific barriers to employment. For example, a recent report by Clinks draws attention to the role that women's centres provide in offering local, specialist, holistic and gender specific support to vulnerable women:

“The women come through the door here and they can be dealt with from beginning to end and they've got everything they need... all the women here have developed their pathways to give them those signposts.”⁹

25. For those closer to the labour market, local voluntary services will possess a strong understanding of how people can be meaningfully engaged in opportunities, which take advantage of their skills and experiences:

“...people who are fighting fit and healthy may mentally be able to cope with stacking shelves in Poundland for two weeks. However, people on the recovery pathway, they need something meaningful in order to give them the encouragement and the motivation and the confidence... We've seen people very successfully move on and then carry on to be drug councillors... It's something they recognise, they empathise with and they understand”.

⁹ [Who cares? What next for women offender services?](#), Clinks (2014)

26. Local voluntary services are also in an excellent position to assertively broker relationships with local employers around the possibility of wider paid roles for people with experience of multiple needs:

“I think what employers have found is that they’ve got very few people who have very little time to talk to organisations in the third sector about changing the way that they do recruitment, but if you’ve got 12 local organisations and the City Council and the District Council... we all have this one partnership and we’d like to talk to you about how you do recruitment and we’d like to support you to recruit better, then I think that changes the conversation considerably.”

27. Crucially, these conversations require input from partners with specialist skills and knowledge, who can offer wider support to employers:

“I think whether or not they’re [employers] concerned [about employing people with multiple needs], there are certainly perceptions and the only way to counter those in a sustainable way is to have much stronger narratives... bust a few myths certainly around mental health, around homelessness... around employing people with an offending history. Employers need support to do that properly as well. So by acknowledging that it’s not about making employers feel bad about themselves, it’s making them feel more confident that they can and should be employing people and that the benefits of employing the men and women we’re talking about massively outweigh the cons.”

28. Despite the obvious benefits of local voluntary provision, people expressed scepticism that the Work Programme in its current format could be compatible with this way of working:

“It doesn’t feel as though there’s any space any more for community based organisations in big government initiatives... I’m not saying that we can’t have incentives in terms of how payment is rewarded, but I think it’s also acknowledging that small organisations will incur a cost, regardless of how many people are supported. It can’t be 100% PbR [Payment by Results]... I don’t think there’s any harm in having a more diverse offer. It’s acknowledging that people are facing more complex problems and a wider ranging more sophisticated programme is just an acknowledgement of how things have changed.”

29. In deciding what a “more diverse offer” should look like, it is vital to offer people with multiple needs the opportunity to make their voices heard as part of the re-tendering process:

“[it’s important] to involve the men and women you’re looking to support. The design, the evaluation, the awareness of the whole process... Again, it’s giving more responsibility and taking a few more, not risks, but trying different ways of involving people to hear their perspectives and not assuming that they don’t know the answers themselves.”

Thank you for considering this submission. We would be happy to expand on any aspect, if helpful.

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