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# Skills Gateway for Adults Mid-Programme Evaluation

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## Executive Summary

### 1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 In July 2014, the Welsh Government outlined its strategic approach to the delivery of employment and skills support for individuals, of which the Skills Gateway for Adults (SGfA) is a core part.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 The SGfA is a single access point for individuals seeking employment support in Wales and provides multiple routes to engagement (telephone, online, face-to-face), and is delivered by Careers Wales as part of its suite of advice and guidance service.
- 1.3 Wavehill Ltd and York Consulting Ltd were commissioned to conduct a mid-term programme evaluation of SGfA. The evaluation aimed to establish the effectiveness and efficiency of SGfA in facilitating access to employment and skills support for individuals as well as identifying lessons learned to support the development and improvement of the service.
- 1.4 Evaluation objectives included:
  - determining levels of awareness of SGfA
  - to explore its effectiveness in moving clients closer to the labour market, to understand the effectiveness of the engagement routes
  - to measure advisor and client satisfaction
  - to consider the consistency and comprehensiveness of the brokerage function, to determine how useful the assessment process has been, and to analyse the functionality of the SGfA website maintained by Careers Wales.
- 1.5 In addition, the evaluation sought to evaluate the use and fitness for purpose of the online bespoke tools, particularly the Employment Routes tool.
- 1.6 The evaluation methodology included a review of documentation and management data, interviews with key stakeholders, an online survey of Careers Wales delivery staff, in-depth interviews with

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<sup>1</sup> *Skills Implementation Plan: Delivering the Policy Statement on Skills* (Welsh Government, 2014):  
<http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/140714-skills-implementation-plan-en.pdf>

front line delivery staff, observations of staff-client interactions at delivery centres, and monitoring of web site usage over a four-week period.

- 1.7 The research methodology was calibrated to maximise the collection of qualitative data to provide context and additional information to quantitative data gathered from service monitoring and evaluation data and the online survey.
- 1.8 Where relevant, the evaluation was conducted either in Welsh or English, and the evaluation was able to assess service delivery to Welsh language medium clients.
- 1.9 Whereas it had initially been thought possible to explore questions from the Omnibus National Survey for Wales relating to awareness of SGfA among potential client groups, in practice this was not viable as the response rates to the two questions were too low for meaningful analysis.
- 1.10 The evaluation did not directly engage with service users and anticipated data from the European Social Fund beneficiary survey was unavailable within the timescales for the study.

## **2. Key findings**

### **Service overview**

- 2.1 The review of programme documentation found that the SGfA is well embedded in wider economic development initiatives, working with regional consortia and through strong joint working with partners such as Jobcentre Plus.
- 2.2 The service makes extensive use of the internet as a vehicle to client engagement and information delivery. The SGfA web site maintained by Careers Wales forms one of the primary routes of engagement and hosts the Employment Routes tool that has been developed for SGfA.
- 2.3 The service aims to provide consistency and impartiality, whilst raising awareness of support among potential beneficiaries. Support through the service assists individuals 18 years +back into work, and equips individuals seeking employment –The service comprises five elements: engagement, assessment, guidance, referral, and tracking and supporting. Bespoke tools have been developed to assist Careers Advisors in delivering these elements of the service.
- 2.4 The primary tools maintained by Careers Wales for the SGfA service are the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit, Employment Routes and the Employment and Skills Action Plans.
- 2.5 The service Theory of Change is clear and has clearly defined expected outcomes including greater efficiencies for employers (a bigger pool of qualified applicants, reduced recruitment costs), increased skills and productivity in the economy, and the reduction of unemployment and sustainability of employment.

### **Outputs and outcomes**

- 2.6 The review of the monitoring and evaluation data shows that the service has shown progression in outputs in 2016/17 over the previous year of delivery and has exceeded targets that were set at the outset of delivery. The increase in outputs was seen across all regions of service delivery.
- 2.7 In 2016/17, the proportion of individuals being referred into SGfA from Jobcentre Plus relative to self referrals rose, indicating a greater degree of awareness of SGfA among Jobcentre Plus staff.
- 2.8 Quarterly progress reports reviewed reflect a range of successful practices and formative learning to improve the performance of the service.

- 2.9 There was a four-fold increase in referrals to skills provision from 2015/16 to 2016/17, a six-fold increase in clients entering skills provision, a three-fold increase in those entering employment and a three-fold increase in those producing a CV.
- 2.10 These increases in outcomes were observed across all regions, with South East Wales recording the highest increases in referrals to skills provision, clients entering skills provision, and clients entering employment; the largest increase in clients producing a CV was in West Wales.

## **Fieldwork**

- 2.11 As part of the research for this evaluation, we gathered 76 responses to an online survey of delivery staff. In addition, we conducted an extensive in-depth interview with an additional sample of 20 front line delivery staff.
- 2.12 The distribution of the survey and interview sample was relatively evenly geographically spread across Wales.
- 2.13 Front line delivery staff are either Careers Advisors or Employability Coaches. Staff tend to be engaged in many of the five elements of SGfA delivery (an average of 3.7 across the survey sample).
- 2.14 Staff report that they have a high level of understanding of SGfA. However, they feel that the understanding of SGfA is lower among non Careers Wales practitioners, and even lower among potential clients.
- 2.15 Staff report that in their judgement the process of engagement has been effective and tend to see the most effective route as being face-to-face.
- 2.16 Both survey and interview respondents emphasised the value and importance of building trusted relationships with clients in order to maximise the effectiveness of the assessment and guidance processes.
- 2.17 Triangulation for the preceding research was provided by observations of staff client interactions in delivery centres in both one to one and group settings. The evaluation team observed the process of gaining trust and confidence and were able to verify the link with generating successful outcomes (completion of an Employability Skills Action plan, referral, etc.).
- 2.18 Front line staff reported general satisfaction with the bespoke tools developed for the service. Centre observation demonstrated the usefulness of the tools and the way in which they are used to complete the assessment, guidance, and referral process.
- 2.19 Some staff did report concerns with some aspects of the tools. In some cases, staff told us that they did not feel that the Employability Routes tool is sufficiently up to date, in other cases staff told us that they felt that the Skills to Succeed online learning modules that are optionally used are less relevant to the clients served by SGfA.
- 2.20 We note our research shows that Welsh Government and Careers Wales management are very conscious of the need to keep the Employment Routes tool as updated as possible and have made this a priority issue.
- 2.21 Front line delivery staff see guidance as being one of the most critical steps of the SGfA service, and they feel that in general they have sufficient tools and resources to provide effective and relevant guidance and referrals.
- 2.22 Front line delivery staff in our sample identified issues with the variability in tracking and follow-up, and we observed that there are quite a wide range of approaches.

- 2.23 The evaluation found that front line staff are generally well-informed about local, regional, and national employability initiatives as well as the general landscape of employment and skills training, indicating that they are well prepared to assist clients with more general labour market progression and career management skills.
- 2.24 We conducted a detailed monitoring of web site usage, including detailed analysis of individual sessions and site navigation.
- 2.25 We found no areas of concern, and the data that we gathered revealed that clients are generally able to navigate the web pages and retrieve the relevant information. We did note some minor areas of Customer Struggle<sup>2</sup> that are probably associated with the time taken to read large amounts of information retrieved through searches.
- 2.26 Overall, we found that Careers Wales front line staff are very positive about SGfA, and that they can identify definite outcomes that are related to the overall service design and implementation. Staff report that many clients would not have entered into referral programmes or employment had they not been clients of SGfA.
- 2.27 Staff feel that the SGfA service has been very empowering for their ability to successfully guide and refer clients, and that the service has built a strong sense of self-efficacy among Careers Wales delivery staff.
- 2.28 Staff identified the presence of mental health issues in clients as one of the most challenging areas of their work for SGfA.

### **3. Conclusions/Recommendations**

- 3.1 We found that the SGfA is generally a well-managed and delivered service that is meeting or exceeding its output targets.
- 3.2 The evaluation showed that SGfA has been successful in building a strong degree of support from delivery staff and a strong sense of engagement and self-efficacy that is a significant wider outcome.
- 3.3 There is some evidence that occasionally clients with less developed IT skills may struggle with the online elements of SGfA.
- 3.4 The web site is well designed and generally clear and serves the intended purpose as a principal route for clients to engage with SGfA.
- 3.5 We did find inconsistency in approaches to tracking and follow-up. It is acknowledged by the evaluation team that post-engagement tracking is the hardest element of the service to deliver consistently by its very nature since clients may fall out of contact or not return calls, etc.
- 3.6 From the findings of this report, we have issued a number of recommendations which may contribute to further enhancing the high level of delivery of SGfA. We recommend that;
- Careers Wales and programme management study ways of capturing long term outcomes to improve tracking. Currently advisors report tracking clients on average between one and two months post referral. Longer term tracking could enhance the understanding of the building of effective career and labour market management skills.

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<sup>2</sup> “Customer Struggle” is the term used in the data analysis industry to refer to identified difficulties in web site navigation.

- Following on the previous recommendation, we recommend that steps be explored to enhance post referral/outcomes data capture to improve the consistency of tracking and follow up. We found that delivery staff were not confident that the Insight Outreach tool currently used is sufficiently adapted for post referral data capture.
- Careers Wales conduct an on-going review of the online tools used in programme delivery and enhance guidance to staff for usage. Whilst we found that Careers Wales have developed appropriate bespoke tools and have taken efforts to ensure that information used in those tools is current, there were still delivery staff who reported various issues with the use of the tools.
- As part of that on-going review, we recommend that Careers Wales take into account the gap between the perceptions of the front-line delivery staff who reported that they felt the Employment Routes tool may not have up to date information and the efforts that Welsh Government and the Careers Wales management team have invested to ensure that the Employment Routes tool is up to date. This perceptual gap may be closed by enhanced guidance and training for delivery staff.
- Careers Wales continue to explore ways to increase training for front line staff to deal with mental health issues as part of the assessment and guidance process. Front line delivery staff reported that mental health issues among clients are one of the biggest barriers to effective assessment and labour market progression and that they feel under prepared to deal with those challenges. This issue is not specific to SGfA, but we recommend that training provided to staff under SGfA be reviewed where appropriate.
- The web site should be reviewed to explore the presentation of information, and to enhance client feedback. Our findings showed that the web site is well designed, managed, and implemented; however, we did find that a few clients appeared to struggle a little with pages on which large amounts of information are displayed (the Employment Routes pages). As part of the on going monitoring of web site performance, we recommend that particular attention be paid to these information heavy pages and that remedial action be taken if rates of client struggle show any upwards trend.

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Full Research Report: Skills Gateway for Adults (SGfA) Mid-Programme Evaluation

Available at: <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/Evaluation-skills-gateway-adults/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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