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EVALUATION OF THE LIFT PROGRAMME

Phase 2: Implementation Study - The Structural Form and Operational Practice of Lift

SUMMARY

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In March 2015, the Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the Lift Programme. Commencing in January 2014, the programme is designed to respond to the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan 2013 and, more specifically, to the commitment to provide 5,000 training and employment opportunities for people in long-term workless households¹ by the end of 2017.
- 1.2 The Lift Programme operates in nine delivery areas based on 12 Communities First Clusters² across Wales. In each delivery area, small teams of Mentors have been recruited to engage working-age adults living in long-term workless households. Eligible participants access the Programme voluntarily, with the Mentors assessing a participant's aspirations for employment, training or education and helping them to develop personal development (action) plans to structure their move towards work. Suitable training and employment opportunities are then identified.

¹ A workless household is one in which no-one aged 16 or over is in employment. These members may be unemployed or inactive. Inactive members may be unavailable to work because of, for example, family commitments, retirement or study, or they may be unable to work through sickness or disability (ONS 2014)

² There are 52 Clusters in total covering the most deprived communities (10 per cent) in Wales.

1.3 Mentors identify training and employment opportunities at a local level. At a national level, Welsh Government departments, public bodies and others have been invited to expand the pool of employment and training opportunities that may be suitable locally for long-term workless people; these include Local Health Boards, Registered Social Landlords, and opportunities within Education and Skills Programmes.

Scope and Aims of the Evaluation

1.4 The evaluation has two overarching aims:

- (i) To assess how the programme has been set up in each of the nine delivery areas and how it is being operated; and
- (ii) To provide an indication of its effectiveness in helping participants to find work or to undergo activities that significantly boost their job prospects.

1.5 The evaluation is being delivered over three phases, with the first phase focused on understanding the inherent logic model underpinning Lift. The second phase focused on the Programme's implementation; i.e. how the Programme has been set up in each area and what processes are being applied. The third phase will review the effectiveness of the Programme in achieving its intended outcomes including an analysis of the costs and benefits accrued by the participants.

Approach

1.6 The research involved

- Interviews with Programme management representatives to gain perspectives on the Programme's progress to date and lessons learnt.
- A review of monitoring systems in each delivery area to identify what specific data is being captured, how it is being stored and to what extent the data can be used to track a participant's journey and outcome.
- Site visits to each delivery area to gain an insight into the delivery model adopted in each area and to understand how Lift aligns to other provision in the area by interviewing Lift Mentors and Cluster Managers.
- A telephone survey that was carried out with 105 Lift participants who had engaged with the programme over the previous six months, to probe their employment situation prior to any engagement with Lift and their first impressions and experiences of the programme.

- A telephone survey of ten employers who have Lift participants in work experience placements or in permanent roles within their organisations. The survey explored how employers first became aware of the Lift Programme and their experiences of engaging and employing Lift participants.

2. Key findings

2.1 The Lift Programme targets a series of localities with a diverse range of characteristics. Consequently, the Programme delivery model has been designed with a high degree of flexibility and this has enabled it to adapt to local circumstances and retain a person-centred approach.

Rationale

2.2 Tackling poverty is one of the Welsh Government's highest priorities and given the substantial evidence that links worklessness to poverty there is ample justification for policy intervention of this nature. Whilst there is clearly a relationship between unemployment and poverty, there is also increased evidence of in-work poverty. The Programme's emphasis on securing nationally brokered opportunities that are perceived to offer strong career opportunities illustrates that Lift is, at least in part, seeking to address this increasingly evident socio-economic challenge.

Resources

- 2.3 Lift operates on a limited budget. In most delivery areas, the Programme has made effective use of the platform offered by Communities First Clusters. The model for the programme delivery anticipated reliance upon the Clusters for promotion, referral and engagement, which is reflected in delivery areas to varying degrees.
- 2.4 The allocation of staff to the Programme predominantly reflects suggested allocations in the business plan (namely two Mentors/Brokers per Cluster), with additional staffing only evident where the delivery area has been expanded or where the Cluster is particularly large. This level of resource for a Programme providing high intensity support appears sufficient, although employers are reporting that they would appreciate a greater level of support. Furthermore, this level of resource brings with it a high degree of risk regarding continuity. The loss of one staff member can significantly undermine the delivery of the Programme.
- 2.5 The business plan stressed the importance of nationally brokered opportunities. Their number, range and relevance to Lift participants has increased as the Programme has progressed. Mentors have reported that participants perceive national opportunities as jobs

with strong employment/career prospects, which adds to their perceived value. The geographical distribution of employment opportunities, however, is far from uniform: while two delivery areas are dominated by nationally brokered opportunities, several are benefitting from very few.

Activities

- 2.6 The Lift Programme was designed to be heavily reliant upon referrals from other organisations and this is the case. Relationships with key referral agencies such as local Jobcentres have strengthened as the Programme has progressed. However, the quality of referrals depends on individual relationships, which vary greatly from one Jobcentre to another, and from one Work Coach to another. The organisation/programme origin of other referrals to the Programme varies markedly between delivery areas.
- 2.7 Another factor that aids engagement and referrals is the fact that Lift is community-based. Delivery areas where facilities are based in prominent locations that enjoy high footfall are benefitting most from ad hoc engagement through drop-ins or self-referrals.
- 2.8 Building trust is perceived to be critical to the success of the Programme and all Mentors ensure it is a priority during initial engagement with participants. The association with the Cluster, the disassociation with mainstream service provision, and the voluntary nature of engagement have all helped in this regard.
- 2.9 The approach to building trust is also highly consistent with the application of a person-centred approach. Participants value this approach and the ability of Mentors to engage with them on an informal basis.

Action Planning

- 2.10 In some areas, action planning is a central element of the Lift delivery model; in others, it is more peripheral to the approach. Some Mentors felt it placed undue pressure on participants, whilst others felt it was critical for identifying goals.

Training and Employment Opportunities

- 2.11 Participants on the Lift Programme frequently require support for 12 months or more to help them progress towards employment. These participants are often constrained by multiple barriers to employment.³ Integration with other localised provision enables Mentors to broker to other support if there are immediate priorities/barriers that need addressing before employment, training or volunteering opportunities can be explored.

³ The nature and diversity of barriers to employment are explored in some depth within the main report

- 2.12 Delivery areas have established suitable routes to employment and training. In most delivery areas, local employers are reportedly unaware that they are recruiting Lift participants as participants typically secure employment through the open market. In the remaining areas, local employers generally offer work placement opportunities where participants may progress on to permanent positions with that employer.
- 2.13 Areas that are more geographically isolated, or have accessibility constraints, are most likely to identify challenges in the identification of suitable opportunities for their participants.
- 2.14 Nationally brokered opportunities are highly valued in locations where they play a significant role and are reportedly viewed enviously by other Programmes. However, they tend to be most prominent in the most accessible locations where, paradoxically, local training and employment opportunities would be more prevalent. This leads to a situation where some areas feel saturated with opportunities whilst other areas face challenges in identifying a sufficient number of suitable opportunities for their participants.
- 2.15 Additional/alternative funding was made available to Mentors through the Barrier Fund. The Barrier Fund provides a flexible resource to Mentors to assist them in overcoming any significant barriers faced by an individual in gaining or moving towards employment. The Barrier Fund is highly valued by all Mentors, with its flexibility and ease of access being particularly important. This has meant that the Barrier Fund has become a highly responsive tool that can react to barriers as they emerge. Its effectiveness has gained wider recognition with other provision readily referring to the offer as a more straightforward alternative to their own.

Integration of Activities

- 2.16 The Lift Programme has, in the majority of areas, aligned well with existing provision. The introduction of Communities for Work (CfW) has raised concerns amongst some delivery staff, although as the implementation of CfW progresses the concerns are beginning to subside. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the volume of referrals in some delivery areas has increased since its launch, which could reflect close alignment and clear delineation between the two intervention strategies.

Post-Employment Support

- 2.17 Support for participants once they gain a work placement and/or employment is currently undefined, partly because of the challenges of maintaining contact with a participant once they are in post. Employer feedback from the research was mixed and suggests that once a suitable outcome is secured the Mentors are limited in their ability to support participants

and/or employers to help a participant sustain their employment, perhaps due to capacity limitations.

Participant Perspectives

2.18 Participants are mostly positive about the support they've received through the Programme. A high proportion have been long-term unemployed or have never worked, with only a few having engaged in previous initiatives to support them into employment; suggesting that Lift is effective at engaging with those hard to reach. Where participants have engaged in previous support Programmes, over three quarters prefer the approach adopted through Lift. It will be important for the next phase of the research to analyse the extent to which the perceived value of the Lift Programme translates into sustained employment outcomes.

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Full Report available at: < <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-lift-programme/?lang=en> >

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.