



Evaluation of the Out of Work Service: Interim Report

Introduction and Methodology

- 1.1 In May 2018, ICF Consulting Services (ICF) and Arad Research were commissioned by Welsh Government to evaluate the Out of Work Service (OoWS), with specific areas for investigation including:
 - The performance of the service in reducing the number of 16-24 year olds Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), those aged over 25 long-term unemployed or economically inactive, and improving participant health and wellbeing;
 - The effectiveness of the delivery process - what is working well or could be improved;
 - Participants' experience of the service, and their outcomes and perceived impacts.
- 1.2 The evaluation methodology comprises an inception/scoping stage, two rounds of qualitative case study fieldwork in five of the seven programme areas, and the analysis of programme monitoring information. This report presents interim findings, based primarily on qualitative fieldwork undertaken between November 2018 and February 2019, and focuses on project delivery, performance, and early insights into outcomes and perceived impacts to date.

The Out of Work Service

- 1.3 The OoWS is one component of the Together for Healthy Working Wales (HWW) strategic programme, launched in September 2016 and operating until August 2020. The project receives £8.8 million under ESF Priority 1 (aimed at tackling poverty through sustainable employment) and £2.7 million under ESF Priority 3 (aimed at youth employment), which combined with match-funding from Welsh Government gives a total budget of £17.3 million.
- 1.4 The OoWS builds on the previous ESF Substance Misuse Peer Mentoring Project to offer holistic employment support to people aged between 16 and 24, and over 25, with substance misuse and/or mental health issues facing multiple challenges to accessing employment or further education. It is delivered across seven lots, aligned to Local Health Board Areas, and by two provider partnerships: Cyfle Cymru (responsible for delivery in five lots) and Plattform (previously Gofal) with NewLink Wales (responsible for delivery in two lots).
- 1.5 The OoWS has several unique features, including the use of peer mentors to support participants engaging in activities to improve their skills, experience and qualifications. Peer

mentors draw on their lived experience of substance misuse and/or mental health conditions to provide support, guidance and advocacy to participants – in a model which encourages an empowering approach where mentor and mentee work jointly to co-produce results

- 1.6 Before setting out the key findings, it is important to reflect on the complex nature of the OoWS target group, which includes individuals facing severe challenges, singly and serially, to finding and sustaining work. The service aims to target those furthest away from the labour market, and many participants will therefore have several unmet needs and complex barriers to employment, also include limiting qualifications and skills, little work experience, insecure housing or economic difficulties. The range in experiences, conditions and personal circumstances requires the OoWS to provide tailored support for each participant accessing the service.

Key Findings

Delivering the Out of Work Service

- 1.7 Peer mentors play a central role in delivery, including: recruitment, mentoring, advocacy and practical support working with employers and stakeholders and maintaining participant records. The main stages of the OoWS delivery model are set out below.

Referral and recruitment

- 1.8 Individuals are referred to the service through a range of routes, most commonly via Jobcentre Plus, with other key sources including the probation service, community drug and alcohol teams, community mental health services, third sector partners and self-referrals. The referral partners interviewed reported positive experiences of working with the service, with many remarking that providers are quick to respond to referrals made to them.
- 1.9 The main referral challenges included competition from other employment services targeting NEETs, a lack of awareness of the scope of the service among potential referral providers, high staff turnover among referral providers and within the service, and unsuitable referrals (e.g. when not at a point in their recovery to benefit from the service). In response, the case study sites had made efforts to develop relationships with referral organisations at the start of the programme and on an ongoing basis. Good practice identified included the provision of introductory/marketing materials (e.g. newsletters) for referral partners and close working with local Jobcentre Plus offices to increase appropriate referrals.
- 1.10 In both Platform and Cyfle Cymru, peer mentors are responsible for recruiting potential participants, with 'long lists' of referrals being reviewed and individuals allocated to peer mentors at weekly meetings. In both lots, each case is assessed to understand how close they are to the labour market and what their individual circumstances are – this can help to inform peer mentor allocation. The peer mentors then contact and sign-up potential participants. Across the service, peer mentors are matched to participants based primarily on mentor availability, although where possible participants may be matched by condition or other characteristics.
- 1.11 Overall, the matching process appears to be working effectively, and complaints or requests to change peer mentor were rare. In any case, participants are likely to see more than one peer mentor. In Cyfle Cymru, participants work with several peer mentors through group activities, and Platform have recruited peripatetic workers to move towards a 'cross-

mentoring' model, to ensure seamless transition in cases where there may be peer mentor vacancies and to ensure continuity of services.

Initial assessment and action planning

- 1.12 On joining the service an assessment of participants' needs, and how the service can best meet them, is undertaken, and an action plan is developed collaboratively between the participant and mentor. The action plan is tailored to the participant's history, aspirations, and needs/distance from the labour market, and reviewed either formally or, in most cases, informally in conversations with peer mentors. In the two lots covered by Platform, the action planning process is centred around a 'Foundation for Change' and the SMART goal planning process, to help participants identify short and long-term goals, the support they need/would like to achieve these goals and any barriers they may have to overcome. In the Cyfle Cymru areas, the process includes using the Employment Wheel, a self-assessment tool measuring baseline and progress against eight categories relating to employment. Progress is reviewed regularly to identify on-going support needs, amend proposed activities and provide feedback on participants' progress. Interviews with peer mentors and participants highlighted that the assessment and action planning processes appear to be working effectively in both Cyfle Cymru and Platform, in spite of differences in content.

Peer mentor support and service provision

- 1.13 The nature and intensity of peer mentor support varies based on the participant's needs, capabilities and progress to date. Those who have progressed well towards recovery, are confident and considered work ready, will receive low-intensity mentoring support (often on a weekly basis) and help with job search or CV preparation. Other participants see their peer mentors more frequently, at least at the outset, depending on their needs. However, even when individual progress has been strong, relapses and crises are possible, so the intensity of peer mentor support can change to reflect this.
- 1.14 Reported average peer mentor caseloads were commonly between 30 and 40 participants, although this would vary at any one point. Most of the peer mentors interviewed considered their caseloads were manageable, as they were supporting participants whose levels of need varied. However, high peer mentor turnover and additional responsibilities (e.g. administrative tasks) has made it difficult for some to focus on providing high quality support as they have had to manage a higher caseload. To help prioritise and plan their workloads, the Cyfle Cymru sites had developed a Red, Amber and Green coding system to classify participants based on the level of support required and the challenges faced in terms of condition; this coding would change as participants progressed through the service depending on how much support they were received.
- 1.15 Overall, the participants interviewed characterised their relationships with their peer mentors as positive and trusting, empowering, and engendering an environment of openness. They also reported that their peer mentors made efforts to keep in touch, treated them as equals, and were available if needed. A few minor criticisms were raised about missed meetings or not keeping in regular contact – which may relate to the size of mentor caseloads.
- 1.16 Peer mentors decide what employment-related support (and at what intensity) participants are offered, based on the participant readiness and ability. The delivery approach is consequently highly flexible and tailored to participant goals and needs. Participants responded positively when asked about their experiences of the services received, often

comparing them favourably to previous experience of mainstream employability and employment support. The type of employment support offered includes:

- **Training courses, qualifications and work-related certifications** - commonly a mix of informal, unaccredited courses (often around personal development, confidence, wellbeing and employability) and more formal, accredited courses and certification (such as First Aid, Food Hygiene, Health and Safety and Information Technology). The most popular work-related certificate appears to be the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card. Providers included peer mentors, online provision, college and third sector providers. Participants appear to enjoy the learning opportunities offered – accredited or not – and tend to take more than one course whilst on the programme.
- **Employability/employment support** - in the Platform lots employability support is provided by peer mentors, whilst the Cyfle Cymru lots use specialist employment advisors. In both cases, employment support includes working directly with employers both before and after placement; preparing participants' CVs; and help with job search, applications and interview preparation.
- **Work experience and voluntary placements** - challenges were reported across the service in finding suitable work placement opportunities for participants, and voluntary placements have tended to be short-term. These challenges will be explored further in the next round of fieldwork. However, given their potential value for helping participants onto longer-term or permanent employment, the low numbers experiencing work placements could suggest further efforts are needed (by both Welsh Government and providers) to enhance employer engagement with the programme.

1.17 Additional financial support was also available, for example, to buy clothing and equipment required for work, which was seen as being important in removing barriers to progression.

Exit from the OoWS

1.18 Participants may leave the service on a planned or an unplanned basis, with the shares exiting by each route varying considerably between case study sites.

1.19 In the case of planned exits, peer mentors, in consultation with participants, decide when they are ready to leave, based on the achievement of their education or employment outcomes and when they feel they have received all the support required. While there is no time limit for participation, the average duration of support is six to seven months, although some had been with the service for over two years. Participants progressing to work are offered additional ('soft landing') support for six months post-exit.

1.20 Unplanned and early exits are inevitable given the challenges facing the target group, with common reasons for early exit including leaving the area, mental health or substance misuse relapses, incarceration, participants concluding that the service is not for them, or where their lives remained too chaotic to continue to engage. All lots described similar approaches to re-establishing contact with participants – exit procedures had been tightened across several lots in recent months to ensure files are closed more quickly.

Performance to date

1.21 At end January 2019, 8,391 individuals had registered with the OoWS, with recruitment increasing steadily in the first 18 months of delivery. While North Wales was the only lot to have exceeded their profiled participation target to the end of Quarter 10, the Cwm Taf,

Gwent, Powys and Western Bay lots had achieved 90 per cent or more of their profiled targets. Participation is closest to the overall programme target for those aged 25 and over.

- 1.22 Two-fifths of all participants were reported as having both substance misuse and mental health issues, slightly more (45 per cent) reported to only have mental health issues, and just 14 per cent reported a substance misuse issue alone. Around two-third of all participants are male, aligning to the target of two to one male to female which reflects the distribution of individuals receiving treatment for substance misuse.
- 1.23 Overall, the service has made considerable progress against two key outcome measures but for all other outcomes less progress has been made than expected at this stage. Importantly, this may be because a number of outcomes have not yet been reported by providers, as they can only be claimed for when the participant leaves the programme (as opposed to when an outcome is actually achieved).
- **Entering paid employment upon leaving:** Nine per cent of all participants leaving the service have entered employment within 28 days of exit (529 of the 5712 participants exiting so far) against the target of 15 per cent. Only three per cent of all participants (151 of 5712 participants) appear to still be in work after six months. Most interviewees indicated that the 15 per cent employment target was challenging, although data collected using the Employment Wheel across all five Cyfle Cymru lots shows that participants feel increasingly capable of being able to find work as they progress.
 - **Work experience and voluntary placements:** only 30 participants had completed a work experience placement by the end of January 2019. Whilst comparatively higher numbers of participants are recorded as completing volunteering opportunities (288 participants), they are likely to vary from one-day events to longer-term roles.
 - **Job searching, qualifications and work-related certifications upon leaving:** the programme appears to be over-performing against its profiled targets for job-search and qualifications gained upon leaving, with the majority of accredited qualifications being mainly Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) Level 1 or 2, although 25 participants were recorded to have left the service with a CQFW Level 3 qualification (importantly, only one qualification per participant can be recorded on the monitoring database). Around six per cent of those exiting also gained a work relevant certification (388 out of 5712 participants).
 - **Entering education and training upon leaving (16-24 year olds only):** the overall ESF target for the number of 16-24 year olds entering education and training is 332 participants, with 125 (38 per cent of programme target) achieving this outcome.
- 1.24 In addition to the outcomes above, the OoWS also contributes to improved health and wellbeing for participants, and to their recovery and re-integration through continued positive support and more effective referral to/engagement with appropriate support providers. Interviews with participants found that the service is seen as more than an employment support programme, with many reporting improved confidence and self-esteem.
- 1.25 Softer outcomes are also captured in the participant Exit forms where these have been completed. Where this data is available, improvements in confidence and the ability to access additional support were reported in over half of the cases, with just under half reporting their mental wellbeing was either better or much better since joining the service.

Perceived impacts – early outlook

- 1.26 While perceived impacts will be explored in the next phase of fieldwork, the service appears to be filling a gap in provision across Wales. Early findings also suggest that the OoWS is achieving the aims of helping to improve labour market prospects for those furthest away from it – although this cannot be evidenced by progress against ESF targets alone.
- 1.27 All project leads felt that the peer mentors were key to the success of the service. Despite the high levels of turnover in nearly all lots, high levels of job satisfaction were described in the peer mentor interviews – often because they felt they were making a difference to other peoples' lives and are getting a chance to be on the 'other side'.

Interim conclusions and early recommendations

Service performance and impact

- 1.28 The rate of recruitment has increased after a slow start in year one, although considerable variation exists between lots. Recruitment rates in several lots will need to increase to achieve overall programme targets, particularly amongst 16-24 NEET participants, and may require redistributing resources or additional peer mentors for delivery.
- 1.29 Participants are achieving a range of outcomes, including actively jobhunting on exit. In addition, they describe how the programme has contributed to a range of 'soft' outcomes including increased confidence, stability and motivation to move forward. While many positive examples were identified, data on 'soft outcomes' collected on the exit forms is not comprehensively captured and reported across the service, and more emphasis could be placed on what are key results for many OoWS participants.

Effectiveness of delivery – process evaluation

- 1.30 The referral, recruitment and peer mentor allocation processes all appear to be working effectively. Whilst matching by participants and mentors by specific characteristic does not appear to be common, this does not seem to be an issue for participants – instead their mentor's ability to relate to them on the same level, with understanding and empathy, and being non-judgemental, appeared to be most important.
- 1.31 The two providers follow different approaches to assessment and action planning, but in both cases the processes appear to be working well. Peer mentors play a central role in helping participants negotiate the programme and access the services available under it.
- 1.32 The combination of personal development and accredited, work-focussed qualifications allows for a range of needs to be met and for participants to progress at their own pace. Early findings suggest that though employability support (e.g. CV development, job search assistance) is welcomed by participants, the share taking up volunteer and work placements is lower than expected. This matters as such placements can have positive benefits for participants away from the workplace for some time or seeking to find work for the first time.

Interim recommendations

- 1.33 Our interim recommendations focus on measures to help ensure the programme achieves its final participation and outcome targets and include: increasing the number of peer mentors; recruiting/redeploying staff to enable mentors to focus on their roles; and using employment specialists in all lot areas - to help meet the service employment targets.

- 1.34 A more strategic approach to employer engagement is also recommended, to increase work placement opportunities and potential permanent opportunities, and Welsh Government could also play a role in addressing employer stigma surrounding mental health and substance misuse histories.

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

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