Welfare Grunters and Workfare Monsters? An Empirical Review of the Operation of Two UK ‘Work Programme’ Centres.

Abstract:

Workfare increases requirements on welfare claimants: a major shift in UK social welfare policy post-1980s. Political, academic and cultural debates surround the ethical basis, and practical operations, of workfare schemes. Moreover, the UK government has claimed that workfare provides value for money in an age of austerity, ‘help and support’ for the long-term unemployed, and ‘incentives’ for increased claimant job-seeking. This article presents results gathered from sociological research into the UK’s ‘Work Programme’ workfare scheme in order to contextualise these debates and contribute to wider academic and social policy workfare analyses. It finds a complex picture: a largely pointless scheme, resented by many participants, but providing a basic social service for some others.

Keywords: Benefits, Welfare-to-Work, Work Programme, Workfare, Social Policy, Unemployment

1. *Introduction*

‘Workfare’ marks a major shift in UK welfare policy towards ‘active’, mandatory schemes which, allegedly, strongly encourage long-term welfare claimants to ‘re-engage’ with the labour market. Tougher enforcement of claimant behavioural requirements such as active job seeking, and attempted claimant behavioural modification, particularly through ‘sanctions’, have been gradually introduced into the UK since the 1980s. However, according to Peck (2001), the full introduction of a ‘workfare state’ based around strict ‘conditionalities’ and participant ‘micro-regulation’ began in earnest following the election of the New Labour government in 1997. This implementation was buoyed by ‘communitarian’ claims that poverty was no longer simply a matter of lack of money, but rather, a complex problem-set of ‘social exclusion’, youth disengagement and cultural degeneration in deprived urban locations (Labour Party, 1997). More recently, the coalition-introduced ‘Work Programme’ [henceforth ‘WP’] has extended Labour’s policies, focusing on putative ‘intergenerational worklessness’, and an alleged culture of pathological welfare-dependency (Smith, 2010).

Significant discussion surrounds the practical administration of workfare, with emphasis placed upon the ‘discretion’ potentially exerted by local welfare administrators (Shildrick *et al.*, 2013). This article uses field research conducted into the WP to provide clear empirical contextualisation to these debates, concluding that, in this case, there was a minimal service, strongly limited by cost restraints and poor local labour markets. However, it also reports some positives of WP practice, such as enhanced social contact and, in some cases, useful, if elementary, training.

The article is structured in the following manner: Section 2 introduces the WP. Section 3 presents an overview of the development of workfare policy and literature in the UK. Section 4 reviews the methods used to gather the data. Section 5 provides the data. Section 6 comprises a summary and conclusion.

1. *The Work Programme*

The WP is a UK workfare scheme rolled out nationally in 2011 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government. It replaced New Labour’s ‘Flexible New Deal’ [henceforth ‘FND’] workfare programme. Differences between the two schemes are arguably empirically limited in terms of service provision. However, the WP drops FND’s controversial compulsory work experience placements, and, in theory, WP providers have significantly more leeway in independently designing programme activities. Moreover, under the FND, only 60% of payments were ‘employment outcome’ based, while the target for the WP is 80% (National Audit Office [henceforth ‘NAO’], 2015: 13).

The WP is intended to help and support long-term (generally over one year) unemployment benefits claimants back into ‘sustained employment’, meaning six months in work (NAO, 2012). Participants include both able-bodied and disabled (dependent on a ‘work capability assessment’) welfare claimants. According to the British government, the purpose of the WP is:

to increase employment [for the long-term unemployed] compared with previous schemes, decrease time spent on benefit, increase time employed for those coming off benefits, and narrow the performance gap between easier and harder to help claimants. (NAO, 2012: 5).

The WP is centrally controlled by HM Government but franchised to 18 ‘prime’ contractors (NAO, 2012: 4). Primes are primarily for-profit companies (two are charities). These 18 primes further subcontract ‘customer’ service delivery to around 900 smaller, local ‘providers’ (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion [henceforth ‘CESI’], 2013: 4). Some primes also operate as providers in their own right.

Providers receive ongoing instalment payments if and when welfare claimants ‘referred’ to them (i.e. sent over from the Job Centre Plus) achieve and sustain employment (Department for Work and Pensions [henceforth ‘DWP’], 2013). The WP is administered within private centres and staff, who deliver training programmes and activities designed in-house, operationally separate from the public job centre. The estimated potential total contract value to private companies of the WP is £3-5 billion (NAO, 2012: 4).

WP attendees are often described as ‘customers’. However, the more neutral term ‘participants’ will be used in this article. Participants might have to attend the WP daily, or only once or twice per month, depending on their caseworker’s discretion and/or the activity being undertaken. WP attendance lasts for up to two years, following which still-unemployed participants were expected to attended a stricter ‘community placement’ programme of mandatory work experience; a programme later scrapped. Three million claimants were predicted to attend the WP between 2011 and 2016 (NAO, 2012: 4).

In Year 1 (2011-2012), the WP suffered an approximate 97% failure rate (CESI, 2012: 1). Assessing the longer-term success of the WP is difficult. There have been significant, albeit partisan, debates over the validity of the statistical methods used by the government to calculate outcome figures (CESI, 2015; NAO, 2012). Analysis by the Public and Commercial Services Union (2014: 1) suggests that the WP might have achieved only 3% between 2011 and 2014, with only 48,000 out of 1.5 million programme participants achieving ‘sustainable employment’. CESI (2014: 2) places the figure higher, at 11.1%. However, these statistics must all be considered as guestimates rather than as facts.

With poor performance levels, WP providers planned to cut their spending on provision for the “hardest to help” categories by 54% from 2014 (NAO, 2014: 8). By 2014, numbers of referrals to the WP were down by 45% nationally on the same weeks in the previous year (CESI, 2014: 1). The WP is due to be replaced by the ‘Work and Health Programme’ in 2017, with providers required to bid for new contracts. The new programme will shift the focus of the WP onto, primarily, sickness benefits claimants.

1. *Workfare in the UK: a summary of relevant literature, provenance, rollout and perspectives*

Conditional welfare has been gradually introduced into the UK since the 1980s, ostensibly to address the intersection of several, allegedly, previously intractable social pathologies (Dwyer, 2000). These include, firstly, that unemployment benefit receipt encourages passivity, leading claimants to cease active job seeking (Mead, 1986; Layard *et al*., 1994). Secondly, that this undermines social cohesion by exempting claimants from active community participation (Etzioni, 1998; Mead 2005), or else by leaving claimants marooned in psychologically and economically detrimental states of social exclusion (Labour Party, 1997). Thirdly, that this encourages the formation of ‘underclass’ enclaves where pathological values promote ‘cultures of poverty’ and concomitant rises in criminality, ‘welfare dependency’, anti-social behaviour, hopelessness and teenage pregnancies (Murray, 1984; Mead, 1986; Labour Party, 1997).

Nevertheless, the impetus towards workfare in the UK had many origins, both theoretical and economic. Following the crises of the 1970s, the OECD’s1980 *Welfare State in Crisis* conference concluded that a clash had emerged between economic necessity and the expensive, outdated and passive ‘no strings’ policies of European social democracies. A version of the Swedish welfare model, known as ‘active labour market policies’ (ALMPs), was the recommended solution (OECD, 1981; Lodemel and Trickey, 2000). ALMPs had been successfully integrated into the Swedish social democratic system since 1948 (Daguerre, 2004). However, the success of Swedish ALMPs rested on well-funded, high quality, industry-focused retraining (Layard *et al.*,1994) plus proactive government job creation at guaranteed market level wages. This was, as Digby (1989) notes, ‘workfare’, but not workfare as this term later came to be understood in the UK.

UK workfare has been closely linked to the changing nature of its labour market (Peck, 2001). In 1983, the Thatcher administration reduced inflation to 4.5%, from 18% in 1980, simultaneously creating 3.3 million unemployed (Hoover, 2003: 213). By 1986, the proportion of UK long-term unemployed (jobless for one year or more) had risen to 40%, from 20% in 1979 (Layard *et al.*, 1994: 59). As unemployment rose, so did the number of ‘conditionalities’ attached to unemployment welfare, including: the testing of availability for work; compulsory interviews; and making welfare re-claims more difficult (Peck, 2001: 294). This period also witnessed a significant rise in the media and political stigmatisation of welfare claimants, particularly surrounding allegations of benefit fraud (Westergaard, 1995), and the growing influence of pro-workfare social policy theorist Lawrence Mead (Peck, 2001). Broadly rejecting claims of structural unemployment, Mead (1986) insisted that mandatory attendance at disciplinary workfare institutions was the only solution. This would instil a work ethic into the long-term unemployed, provide basic skills training, and force ‘idlers’ to accept any available low-wage work.

Despite Mead’s growing influence, Conservative steps towards workfare in the UK were tentative. By the mid-1990s, however, the proportion of UK citizens of working age who were over 55 and outside the labour market had risen to 37%, up from 14% in 1977, with around one million of these people having moved onto sickness benefits (Trickey and Walker, 2000: 183). These figures also displayed significant regional differences, suggesting the possibility that, particularly in the north of England, ‘benefit migration’, i.e. claimants strategically shifting from unemployment to sickness benefits, might be occurring in response to increasingly punitive welfare regimes (Trickey and Walker, 2000). Overall, between 1977 and the early 1990s, the numbers of full time males working in the UK economy dropped by 20% (McLaughlin, 1994: 16), while across Europe, nearly half of unemployed workers were by then long-term unemployed (Layard *et al.*,1994: 7).

In 1991, Layard and Philpott’s *Stopping Unemployment* - an influential study, particularly amongst emerging ‘New Labour’ cadres (Peck, 2001) - argued that well-run workfare schemes could solve long-term unemployment. In 1992, as the number of UK service sector jobs (regular destinations for workfare participants (Peck, 2001)) increased 23.8% from 1979 figures (McLaughlin, 1994: 14), the OECD again published a report urging the introduction of ALMPs (Lodemel and Trickey, 2000).

With the 1997 election of ‘New Labour’, both Mead’s vision of a stricter welfare system based around ‘active’ reciprocity, and the OECD’s workfare recommendations, achieved substantial, if not complete, political rollout. Introducing a suite of workfare programmes known as the ‘New Deal’, Tony Blair claimed that: “A modern notion of citizenship gives rights but demands obligations, shows respect but wants it back, grants opportunity but insists on responsibility” (Dwyer, 2002: 274). Blair had been significantly influenced by the work of sociologist Amitai Etzioni (Dwyer, 2002), whose ‘communitarian’ philosophy proposed that “the community is responsible for […] ensuring the basic needs of all who genuinely cannot provide for themselves” (Etzioni, 1998: 49), but also that this responsibility required counterbalance from an insistence upon reciprocal social duties. New Labour’s new philosophy was thus “predicated on work (or workfare) as a condition of citizenship and ‘communitarian’ principles of obligations and duties” (Walker and Chase, 2014: 141). In 1998, Anthony Giddens’ *The Third Way* intellectually crowned the centre-left’s shift to workfare by arguing that “unemployment benefits, for example, should carry the obligation to look actively for work” (Giddens, 1998: 65). In the same year, Peter Mandelson was candid as to workfare’s fundamental purpose: “[the] welfare-to-work programme makes the labour market flexible… It increases the supply of labour in the economy, its quality and its employability” (Dostal, 2008: 28). Tackling a youth unemployment rate of 23.3% was a particular priority. However, Labour’s flagship *New Deal for Young People* was found to aggravate unemployment and insecure working conditions by flooding the market with cheap, temporary workers (Sunley *et al.*, 2001).

The first full workfare scheme for the long-term unemployed, New Labour’s FND, appeared in 2009. The FND brought the *New Deal* schemes under the same umbrella scheme and tightened the requirements placed upon the unemployed, including an impetus to skills development, and the need to take part in mandatory work experience placements where possible. A significantly greater emphasis was also placed upon private providers to administer the scheme. FND providers were paid primarily on a payments-by-results basis, i.e. by how many long-term unemployed participants were placed back into work (Vegeris *et al.*, 2011). This was intended to be an “imaginative welfare-to-work programme to put the long-term workless back to work and to cut social security costs” (Labour Party, 1997: 13). This included jobseeker’s allowance claimants, but also single parents and the disabled. However, the ambitions were wider. According to welfare minister Peter Hain, speaking in 2003: “we must push forwards with further reform […] focusing on the 4.5 million people of working age on out-of-work benefits.” Nevertheless, only 5.6% of New Deal participants ever matriculated into employment (CESI 2012: 1).

In 2010, the newly elected Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government cancelled the FND and introduced the WP (DWP, 2011), claiming: “The Work Programme represents a new era of delivering public services” (HM Government, 2011). The government proposed that, to restore fairness to the welfare system, a workfare programme was required that would “ensure that receipt of benefits for those able to work is conditional on their willingness to work” (Smith, 2010: 23).

Drawing on similar experiments in the US (Sanger, 2003), the UK government’s proposed new solution to long-term unemployment was what Dostal (2008) describes as ‘market welfare’. This involves breaking welfare provision into multiple private payments-by-results franchises creating a ‘market’ in which individual firms, centres and even individual centre workers, will compete in a ‘succeed or perish’ survival of the fittest (DWP, 2012; HM Government, 2011). As the worst performing providers become ‘extinct’, the remaining providers ‘evolve’: that is, they operate more successfully, take more market share and so attract the best staff in a virtuous circle. Where welfare claimants are considered ‘very hard to reach’, significantly higher outcome payments are offered to encourage improvements to service provision (NAO, 2014). In an environment of austerity, this approach held both punitive and pecuniary appeal, with claims that workfare would lead to significant welfare savings in the long run (NAO, 2014).

The UK government proposed that, by following this evolutionary approach, the long-term unemployed would be offered an increasingly efficient suite of ‘tailored help and support’ (HM Government, 2011). Moreover, that due to an intensified evolutionary environment, the WP would be superior to previous welfare schemes, and particularly the FND, in helping claimants achieve sustainable employment; if necessary by supporting them as they undertook several short-term roles (NAO, 2014).

By contrast, opponents of the WP, and of workfare more generally, characterise it as a bullying system that forces the poor, sick and vulnerable to attend pointless schemes, and to endure humiliating practices, slave labour and/or enforced low-paid work. Moreover, that it ‘parks and creams’ the most and least employable participants while prosecuting a punitive ‘sanctions’ policy that is often gender-biased due to its acute impact upon carers (Peck, 2001; Pateman, 2005; Herd *et al.*,2005). Additionally, that in order to support late capitalist political and economic objectives, including cheap labour and coercive social control of the increasing numbers of poor, the rollout of workfare has been accompanied by a deeply socially divisive demonisation of welfare claimants (Westergaard, 1995; Wacquant, 2010). Hence, according to Dwyer (2000: 210): “The increasing application of a principle of conditionality once again marks the formal acceptance and approval of deserving/undeserving distinction within public welfare arrangements.”

Workfare in practice has been predicted to succumb to ‘street level’ modifications by hard-pressed local administrators, whose use of discretion in practical application is likely to affect service delivery. Fletcher (2011), for example, finds that administrators may use their roles both to ‘police’ legitimate access to benefits, but also to exercise claimant-friendly leniency in order to boost their professional self-esteem. However, Jensen and Tufte’s (2014) analysis of Norwegian ‘welfare reform’ predicts a potential shift in the locus of decision making, away from ‘front-line’ administrators and towards local managers as key agents of discretion, leading to a standardisation of centre practices. Fuertes and Lindsay (2015), for example, discovered an increasingly standardised level of service on the WP, focussed on minimal training, including CV writing and basic ‘job seeking’ activities, with little practical benefit to jobseekers. Newton *et al.*’s (2012) review of WP practice also discovered a poor level of service, primarily due to cost restraints, plus some hostility between claimants and staff.

Shildrick *et al.* (2013) propose that while ‘street level’ discretion remains important, overall, workfare still prosecutes the widespread exploitation of low-paid and unemployed workers, often justified by anti-welfare claimant rhetoric. Patrick (2014) concurs, but finds a clear ‘mismatch’ between such government narratives, particularly of welfare claiming as a ‘lifestyle choice’, and the willingnessto work of many welfare claimants, noting that claimants often work hard simply to survive while also regularly engaging in various forms of essential but unpaid caring work.

1. *Methods.*

The data presented here come primarily from 18 days’ full-time fieldwork embedded within two WP centres in two separate towns in the north of England. The centres were run by the same provider, which was subcontracted to one prime. The research was conducted in the summer of 2014 for a PhD, completed in 2016.

Each centre served around 1,500 participants at any one time, divided between JSA (Jobseeker’s Allowance) claimants and ESA (employment and support allowance – i.e. sickness benefits) claimants. Centre ‘A’ had twelve staff members, including: two advisers for the 25+ JSA age group; two for the ESA group; one for the 18-25 JSA age group; one sustained employment adviser; two ‘complex families’ advisers (technically part of a different programme); a placement officer; a receptionist; and two peripatetic managers (who divided their time between both centres). Centre ‘B’ had fifteen staff members, divided into the same proportions as Centre A’s, save for one extra 25+ adviser, a trainee receptionist and a complex families administrator. There was little operational difference between the centres, and only a slight difference in unemployment rates in their catchment areas.

The data were gathered via three methods: participant observation, interviews with centre staff, and interviews with centre participants. Over the 18 days, observations were conducted covering all aspects of general centre operations, including participant ‘review’ interviews, ‘job club’ sessions, staff meetings, staff training and participant courses, plus all aspects of the centres’ administration including the referral, exiting and sanctions processes, reception activities and foodbank voucher administration. I was given my own desk in both centres and permitted to pick and choose whatever I wanted to observe and whoever I wanted to speak to. Staff also gave provided detailed rundowns on all centre practices.

In-depth discussions were conducted on a rolling basis with 23 members of staff. This included centre management, customer advisers, trainers, a self-employment adviser, complex families staff, two senior prime managers, two peripatetic trainers, one self-employment adviser and administrators/receptionists. Discussions were often contextualised by practical activities, leading to an ethnographic immersion and quasi-participant observation approach. Interview questions were generally oriented towards drawing out a practical understanding of daily life inside the centres. Thirty-one interviews were conducted with WP participants. Reflecting WP statistics nationally, this included 9 women (4 on sickness benefits and 5 on standard unemployment benefits) and 22 men (6 on sickness benefits and 16 on standard unemployment benefits). Sampling was opportunistic. Interviewee ages ranged from 18 to early 60s, and included a broad spectrum of people at various stages of WP attendance, from just starting through to almost completing two years. Participant interviews focused on the centres’ services, atmosphere and efficacy, and lasted, on average, between 25-45 minutes. Interviews were also initially conducted with 11 WP attendees from two other providers (6 female, 5 male), the coordinator of a local anti-workfare group, and two local foodbank managers. These helped to contextualise and construct the interview questions used in the later research.

The data are limited in three key ways. Firstly, they cover, primarily, only one provider, working for one prime. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised nationally. It should also be noted that different studies use different methods, hence comparisons with other studies’ findings must be approached cautiously. Secondly, WP operation already involves much interviewing, making most respondents unusually experienced at fielding questions. Both staff and participants may therefore have been articulating well-rehearsed perspectives. Thirdly, qualitative methods inevitably involve some researcher bias - particularly when it comes to emphasising data. To partially resolve this issue, data are presented that relate most directly to the functioning of WP centres compared to government and critical claims, and which, in good faith, appear to most generally represent the broad opinions of staff and welfare claimants. The purpose of this article is not to frame the resultant data in any particular theoretical perspective, but rather to present them as straightforwardly as possible. Ethical considerations were held in mind at all times. Claimants, staff, and the companies involved were all financially vulnerable to negative revelations and/or implications regarding their activities. An ongoing process of assurances as to confidentiality and right not to participate, or to limit participation, was observed. This included a right to withdraw consent at a later stage by contacting the researcher. All names are pseudonyms.

1. *The Data*

*Did the WP intensify the pressure on the unemployed to find work?*

A poor labour market, plus the personal circumstances of the participants (including many participants with health problems), apparently mitigated against this in many cases. As staff member ‘Trisha’ stated, there were many participants with “serious illnesses, mental and physical” and numerous “people who are older, just not getting back into work because… yeah, they’ve given up hope but they’re not what the jobs market is after.”

Participants attended the centres for one ‘adviser review interview’ per month, usually lasting around 15-30 minutes. Some participants came in for ‘job club’ (i.e. computer-based job-search), once a month. However, job club was largely voluntary and infrequently attended. In total, an average participant spent only around one, occasionally two, hours per month in-centre, including waiting times.

The primary ‘pressure’ on participants came not from being compelled to attain, or remain, in work, but from their integration within a stressful administrative regime including mandated attendance and the threat of ‘sanctions’ (suspension of benefits). Participants had to be continually vigilant to avoid minor infractions such as lateness, failing to apply for enough, or appropriate (i.e. that staff thought that participants could achieve), jobs, bringing children into the centre, forgetting an appointment time, or not completing some minor activity or general aspect of mandatory paperwork. Infractions might attract a serious financial penalty. Reflecting general claimant opinion, participant ‘Sue’ thus stated: “So you’re thinking if you turn up one minute late your kids won’t have anything to eat. You won’t be able to heat the house,” while staff member ‘Charles’ – whose negative views were in a singular minority amongst staff - reported that: “If you [participants] don’t behave, they’ll starve you… take everything away from you.”

Each customer-facing staff member was likely to raise two or three sanctions per day, although, in many cases, these were automatically triggered by the administrative system (i.e. for non-attendance or lateness.)

Advisers were expected to issue strict ‘actions towards work’, which participants were mandated to fulfil before their next monthly meeting. However, most participants’ primary ‘workfare’ activity was to continue to search for work in their own time, including applying for, on average, 5-10 vacancies per week. As one participant stated: “*Erm*, my actions towards work at the moment are to keep applying for the positions that I’m going for.”

Participants kept a ‘jobs log’ listing vacancies applied for, but the authenticity of these applications was rarely checked. Moreover, staff stated that, at times, they would waive this applications requirement due to the personal difficulties being faced by participants. Staff member ‘Pauline’, for instance, stated that sanctioning a vulnerable participant for failing to complete a jobs log was not an appropriate action because it would not help to build a “relationship of trust.” Many claimants, however, argued that staff regularly and punitively sanctioned, with little regard to their difficult circumstances. Staff also generally argued that individuals facing deep and intractable life crises - such as homelessness, addiction or severe mental health breakdowns - were not always well served by intensified job search requirements. As staff member ‘Erica’ said of one “very vulnerable” participant, whose ‘actions towards work’ were simply to “keep coming into the centre”: “It’s a soft outcome. Just keeping him going is enough for now. Not like you think, is it? We’re not monsters really.” Strong evidence was observed that ‘caseworkers’ did spend a great deal of time in social and ‘soft’, non-work related, discussions with claimants.

Claimants completed monthly ‘personalised actions towards work’. For new participants, working on a CV or completing the centre’s basic paperwork – such as a ‘BOC’ (better off in work calculation) or a ‘skills check’ - constituted these ‘actions’. However, after around three months, general centre practice was to make working towards ‘overcoming barriers’ a participant’s personalised actions. Hence, for the vast majority of participants, contacting the dentist, or the council housing officer, or going to the doctor, or continuing to attend language classes, therapy or counselling services, or any one of countless other personal and domestic actions, many of which were tasks that employed people might also need to complete, became ‘actions towards work’. These same actions were, according to staff, often kept ‘live’, i.e. ongoing, for several months. Staff argued that this was inevitable as claimants could not get into or sustain work without overcoming such ‘barriers’. Moreover, the computerised administration system required that *some* action to overcome a ‘barrier’ had to be inputted at each adviser review meeting. Hence, engaging participants in often highly personalised, general discussions about their private lives and social circumstances had become an essential and primary aspect of adviser review meetings, as this was where and how alleged barriers were identified.

Where there were few, or no barriers, ‘poor mental approach’ or ‘bad attitude’ was regularly cited by staff as a primary barrier. As staff member ‘Erica’ stated:

Because that’s the biggest barrier […]. Thinking that getting into work is like… it’s just not imaginable. It’s a barrier in a lot of customers’ lives. They don’t see it. A job. Money. It’s so out of their world they can’t imagine themselves having those things. They see it as something that someone else has, never them.

However, it is possible that the stress and disappointment of beingunemployed, or being on the WP itself, was transformed by staff, via workfare review interviews, into a putative cause *of* continued unemployment. As participant Silvio put it: “They think that’s like, you’re either depressed with it all, or you’ve got a mental condition because you question why this bullshit [the programme] is happening and they’re getting away with it.”

*Did the centres offer ‘tailored help and support’?*

The centres appeared to be running the WP on a tight budget. As one senior prime manager put it: “This just isn’t the standard of provision that we expect. […] The whole idea is that we move past all the old cheapskate ways of doing things… Fifteen-minute discussions about *how’s life?* It’s not on.” This manager stated that the provider had “promised the earth” in its initial bid, but was unable to fulfil the contract obligations due to a significant underestimation of running, staffing and staff training costs. Customer-facing staff member ‘Holly’ later added that “…yeah, no way is enough money and people working on this. It’s a budget operation.”

Field observation confirmed that the centres offered a generic and minimal service. Staff conducted preliminary in-depth discussions with participants, exploring their work histories, ambitions, qualifications and skills. After this, one-on-one and group training was available. This appeared to be high quality and delivered by professionally qualified tutors. However, this training was limited to basic skills, particularly rudimentary computer literacy, plus job-seeking, generic CV writing, interview techniques and ‘confidence building’.Some participants did find this useful, but a majority found it pointless, or else too limited. Participant ‘Silvio’, for instance, claimed that the courses were demeaning and “very low quality.” There was no evidence of services for more highly educated or higher-skilled individuals. According to degree-educated participant ‘Selena’, speaking of an in-house training course:

It was embarrassing to be there, because it’s… they don’t mean it to be patronising to me but it really was. I mean it was just so basic. So unbelievably basic, it was like… well I’m not a three-year-old.

There was also some evidence that participants were expected to complete these basic courses more than once, to ‘refresh’ their knowledge, and regardless of their current skills-level or previous experience.

*Did the centres by-pass the supposed tendency of old welfare systems to become ‘passive’ benefits and advice services?*

The general operations of the centre had become significantly oriented towards what I came to describe as ‘life triage’; that is, offering (wanted or otherwise) guidance, help and support, counselling and advice for almost every conceivable life problem. As staff member ‘Loretta’ put it: “We do so much problem solving, counselling services. But that’s part of the long-term approach. It doesn’t fit with the targets, but it’s the reality.” While this has a staff ‘spin’ or positivity on it, it nevertheless represents the reality; staff did little more than signposting.

The idea that state run welfare services become ‘part of the problem’ by transforming their operations into benefits advice services (Centre for Social Justice, 2013) is predicated on the notion that staff are not under enough pressure to ‘get results’ (Mead, 2005). However, staff were under immense pressure to achieve targets; so much so that four staff members described this directly as bullying that had led to a mental health breakdown, and this stress was palpable in the field. As staff member ‘Loretta’ put it, echoing a general and strongly articulated staff consensus: “We’ve been put under unbelievable stress with that [meeting targets with falling caseloads] because they’re putting the pressure on intensive levels… really, the bullying is like, it makes you sick.”

Customer-facing staff spent most of their time acting as unqualified social-work ‘keyworkers’, or, on a lesser level, as someone to talk to who resolved participants’ personal problems - or else as someone who attempted to do this, whether the participant wanted them to or not. This ‘social work’ approach was explicitly resented by approximately half of the claimant participants interviewed. One, ‘Silvio’ – a volunteer – articulated the broad sentiment:

Because you’ve got the investigation into your mental approach. Like, yeah, if it’s like you’re depressed then *oh, a job at the call centre’ll lift you right up*. So yeah, they are… right into your private life, because they think it’s like… they’re your social worker, yeah? So that’s what I’m saying… that’s nothing like what I was expecting when it was sold to me.

Most staff claimed that the primary successes of the centres were their ‘soft outcomes’, i.e. providing – as they saw it - a useful, or even essential, social service. As staff member ‘Trisha’ put it: “Being able to come in, talk to someone. I have participants who wouldn’t speak to another soul if they didn’t come in here to see me. You can’t put a price on that.” In one centre, some ESA claimants faced no pressure whatsoever to get into work. Their ‘job club’ had been transformed into a social event, offering trips to the museum and other social activities. This was not because staff were incompetent or negligent, but rather, because the participants were viewed by staff as poorly and vulnerable. Pressurising such individuals to find work appeared to staff to be not only pointless, but also cruel.

Several participants thoroughly enjoyed attending the centre, albeit *solely* for purposes of social contact. As one ‘social club’ member, ‘Alfonzo’, put it: “We do a lot of activities. [Our adviser] arranges a lot of different things for us. And it’s exercises we can do, games, social activities, word puzzles. And we do quizzes. We get lots of things to do. Our leader […] does all that.”

*Was the WP ‘evolving’ better services?*

While staff noted that ‘the business had changed’ to become ‘harder-faced’ and more target driven – a process that Sanger (2003) links directly to the privatisation of welfare provision – staff who had previously worked on the FND noted that their current operations offered the same syllabus of occasional adviser meetings, basic skills workshops and ‘job club’.

A very small minority of participants did find the centres’ services useful in terms of job outcomes, and a large minority felt that some aspects of the centres’ services were positive. Moreover, those who had already found work and left the centres were not interviewed. However, most participants found the centres’ work-focussed services to be pointless, too limited, or of low quality. Rather than ‘evolution’, workfare staff, methods and providers – and in some cases participants - appeared to have passed from one policy ‘generation’ to the next. As staff member ‘Trisha’, who had worked on several previous schemes, put it: “They introduce a new scheme, we do it, it runs out, we jump over to the next big idea. That’s how it’s been, all the way through.” There were many other similar indications of short-termism in staff and management attitudes. Surviving the current contract was far more important to all staff than the notion of improved services sometime in the future – although all staff did want such improvements to occur. Rather than a ‘survival of the fittest’ leading to increasingly superior services, the centres and staff merely sought to survive, adapting standards and expectations to the difficult circumstances and limited budgets in the here and now.

*'Did the WP help participants into sustained employment?*

The government’s target of ‘sustainable employment’ meant six months in work. However, these six months could be made up of several short spells of employment. However, one of the stated purposes of the WP was to support the participant base, where necessary, in moving between short spells of employment as they rebuilt a ‘work habit’ (DWP, 2011). According to managers interviewed, around 40% of job outcomes within the centres researched were cases where participants had taken more than one job. Some had taken more than two. The record was eleven. Around 30% of those participants who had experienced one short spell in employment did not have another spell, and so did not achieve ‘sustained employment’.

There was strong evidence, drawn from all customer-facing staff and many claimants, that the centres worked primarily with the lowest levels of the employment market, and call centres in particular - whose constant turnover of WP referrals was said by one staff member to be “keeping the company [the provider] afloat.” Supplying cheap, temporary labour – ‘churning’ – was described as part of the “darker side” of the WP by one staff member who claimed to have significant experience of this practice. However, staff generally argued that the long-term unemployed had few realistic options *other* than to do this type of work, and that such roles acted as temporary ‘stepping stones’ to superior positions. As staff member ‘Bryan’ put it, “even if it isn’t the best job in the world, it’s a re-entry, and a stepping stone. It’s experience, something on the CV. I’d do it if I was in their shoes, definitely, just to get back on the ladder.”

However, ‘churning’ was not a major aspect of the WP in this instance. Most participants remained unemployed, and were described by one claimant participant as “in storage.” Staff were struggling to meet individual monthly targets of up to six job starts per month out of caseloads of between 120-180 people. With around only 3% of participants achieving job starts monthly, it is therefore logically and statistically impossible that large numbers of participants were being ‘churned’. The centres did not officially operate a forced labour or work placement scheme, and no evidence of such was found. Work placements were felt by staff to be pointless, as employers rarely wanted unwilling workfare ‘employees’.

The programme’s effect on job outcomes is difficult to assess. To meet minimal targets, staff claimed to rely heavily upon employable ‘green light’ participants being referred to them, as these were likely to get into work regardless of the programme. As ‘Trisha’ put it: “I rely on the new blood. I check every new month… you see who you’ve got. Some are always just passing through, you know the natural off-flow into employment? They’re always good for your quota,” adding, “If someone’s ready for work then they’re gone sooner, aren’t they? If they’re absolutely hard-core, underclass, unemployed, won’t work or can’t work, they park themselves, or they get parked.” Moreover, significantly higher payments for more difficult-to-employ categories of participant made little difference to this reality according to staff. While staff views cannot be taken at face-value, it seems unlikely that they would emphasise their own broad pointlessness if it were untrue.

Many ESA participants clearly *were* ill, and some appeared to be far too sick to be on the programme, never mind work; for example, suffering from serious strokes, heart conditions or severe depression. Staff argued that no amount of incentive payment could conceivably alter an intractably unemployable status. As staff member ‘Leonie’ put it:

…you know if you’ve got bad knees like Derek, you’re living half your life through hospital appointments or in pain. It’s hard to place someone in work if they’re going through ongoing medical treatments.

No empirical evidence whatsoever was found of ‘intergenerational unemployment’, although several staff did firmly believe in its existence.

‘*Zero-work*’ *self-employment*

For a few months before the research period began, the centres had experienced a significant fall in caseloads due to most of the ‘bulk’ of long-term unemployed being already transferred to the WP. Hence, there were too few ‘green-light’ participants arriving each month to make reaching targets relatively straightforward. Furthermore, over the longer-term, following initially unexpectedly higher levels of JSA referrals, changes in participant referral rules saw an increasing ratio of ESA to JSA participants mandated to the WP (House of Commons Library, 2016: 22). With ESA participants being statistically harder to get back into work, this added significantly to the difficulties of meeting targets. Staff claimed that they were forced to go back and attempt to get what one called ‘the grunters’ back into work: “I have to go back on that group and think about who are the best grunters.” However, this was, apparently, proving extremely difficult, not least because many of these people simply could not work, or else, according to staff, were unwanted by the labour market. Within this context, ‘zero-work self-employment’ – i.e. signing participants over to self-employment, for which they received an almost equal (to benefits) sum in paid tax-credits, housing benefits and free prescriptions, regardless of whether they worked or not - appeared as a potential solution. People who underwent this status transfer did not need to earn any money to remain eligible and in receipt of tax credits. While the centres operated what appeared to be an excellent small-business start-up advice service, zero-work self-employment remained a well-known issue, as ‘Lionel’ put it: “to be honest it’s not like HMRC are going to come in and audit a sole trader, so yeah, you could just switch over [to tax credits] and stay in bed.” A senior manager confirmed this view. Self-employment possibly was a suitable option for some participants, Small business adviser ‘Edgar’ described it as “a brilliant solution to a particular problem of long-term unemployed participants that no one wants to know.” However, a staff member with specialist knowledge stated that zero-work self-employment was:

[…] a massive issue. I know for a fact that right across the board that providers are scamming it […] right across the Work Programme. It’s a neutron bomb scandal waiting to go off […] It’s underwriting a big part of the Work Programme’s outcome rate.

*Conclusion*

The data highlight the problems of interpreting key terms, whether for policy implementation or for subsequent analysis. For example, those participants who achieved ‘sustainable employment’ did so, in around 40% of cases, by taking two or more roles. This meets the government’s contract expectations, and could be viewed as a supportive ‘stepping stones’ approach to employment. However, terming this ‘sustained employment’ might be considered somewhat misleading.

Call centre work was a primary destination for centre participants, followed by other lower-tier roles, matching claims that workfare supplies the labour market with lower-wage, insecure workers (Peck, 2001). Staff generally argued that this was inevitable as part of a longer-term transition into better work; participants often that it was humiliating and inconsiderate of their prior work experience. The phenomenon of more employable participants finding work sooner was also described as an inevitability, rather than deliberate ‘creaming’.

Zero-work self-employment was a significant moral hazard. Although not illegal, it raises questions over the large number of self-employment starts that made up falls in unemployment in 2014, leading to “Self-employment [being] higher than at any point over [the] past 40 years” (Office for National Statistics, 2014: 1).

No evidence was found of a ‘market welfare’ impetus to ‘evolve’ superior services (DWP, 2011), although, this is difficult to assess from a small study. There was, similarly, little evidence of any meaningful ‘help and support’ to find work. Training was extremely basic, and, like all the centre operations, severely limited by budget constraints. CV writing, interview practise and basic computer literacy were the primary forms of training available. While this was good quality and useful for numerous participants, these data support the findings of Newton *et al.* (2012) and Fuertes and Lindsay (2015). However, the centres didprovide a highly ‘personalised’ service in terms of engaging participants in discussions to locate their alleged ‘barriers’. That these discussions often had little to do, directly, with work or employability, can be seen as inevitable (as the staff did), because it was ‘necessary’ to get customers’ lives back on an ‘even keel’. Alternatively, as the transformation of centre operation into a ‘soft outcomes’ amateur counselling and advice service in lieu of a more proactive, and better funded employment focused programme. Many participants resented this ‘social work’ approach, which partially supports findings by Herd *et al.*, (2005) and Peck (2001) that workfare is often humiliating and psychologically intrusive.

For many participants, attendance at the centres was extremely stressful, particularly due to the threat of sanctions following minor infractions. Several spoke of bullying. While this matches the strict ‘paternalistic’ approach recommended by Lawrence Mead and other workfare advocates, the poor job outcome rates of the centres would seem to suggest that this approach has little impact on unemployment rates. It is also difficult to see how this facilitated community cohesion (Etzioni, 1998) or welfare ‘reciprocity’ (Giddens, 1998). Arguably, these data partially support claims that workfare constitutes an unnecessarily punitive regime (Dwyer, 2000; Peck, 2001).

A surprising finding was that almost half of the participants interviewed felt that the centres provided positive social contact for *some* people, albeit contact generally unconnected to employability. This indicates that caution is advised when accusing workfare of one-dimensionally representing bullying, parking and creaming and/or exploitation (e.g. Peck, 2001; Herd *et al.*, 2005), or else that it is a positive and revolutionary change in welfare provision (Labour Party, 1997; HM Government, 2011). The data in this case present a more complex and nuanced picture, with both participants and staff articulating a range of positive and negative elements existing simultaneously within the same field.

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