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Local economic strategies
for ageing labour markets:
The Life Skills project in
Neath Port Talbot and
Swansea, West Wales, UK

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Local economic strategies for ageing labour markets

**The Life Skills project in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea,
West Wales, UK**

Working Paper

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This paper is one of a series commissioned by the Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Programme of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as part of their work with shrinking and ageing labour markets. The paper takes the form of a case study of a project based on the local authority area of Neath, Port Talbot and Swansea in South West Wales and based on an attempt to bring economically inactive people aged 50 and over in this area, back into employment further education, learning, or voluntary work. It was recognised that many of the older economically inactive have multiple barriers to employment and that placing them in a position to more realistically hope to find employment, would invariably entail a long and complex process or “journey.”

The Life Skills project was funded by the UK charity Shaw Trust, the largest not for profit welfare to work organisation in the UK, by the Big Lottery Fund and the European Social Fund. The project commenced in October 2011 and finished in March 2015. It is hoped that the paper will contribute the discussions continuing within OECD / LEED on best approaches to supporting older job seekers. The methodology adopted for preparing this case study comprised desk research (including reading detailed project reports) and extensive interviews with the project manager Michael Dix Williams.

50+ PEOPLE AND WORK IN THE UK

In the UK¹ 8.22 million people in the 50 to State Pension Age² (SPA) age range were in paid employment in Feb-April 2015, a rate of 69.4% and an increase of 54,000 over the previous 3 months. While these figures seem impressive, the severity of the unemployment problem among older people is understated. 3.35 million people in the 50 – SPA age range are defined as “economically inactive.” Within this there is however, “hidden unemployment”, with around one third of those defined as “retired” or economically inactive, stating they would be willing to work if given suitable job offers³. A combination of factors, not least repeated experience of failure in attempting to find work, can lead older people to define themselves as “early retired”. Barriers to gaining employment for older job seekers, include poor health, lack of suitable skills and too little experience or confidence in the modern labour market just to mention some. One of the issues highlighted by this case study is the need for targeted measures to support those older job seekers who, facing multiple barriers, are sometimes referred to as “hard to reach”.

More older unemployed than workless people of all other ages others are defined as “long term” unemployed. Around 46% of the UK’s 50+ *job seekers* have been unemployed for more than 12 months compared with around 30% of all claimants over 18 years old. One barrier faced by older job seekers is the persistence of ageist attitudes by some employers⁴ - the Government has sought to tackle this by passing anti-age discrimination legislation and amending the law allowing enforced retirement. The need for people to extend their working lives is embraced by Government policy and in 2014 the Department for Work and Pensions released a new action plan⁵ to encourage employers to think positively about older workers and encourage them to work longer.

Despite this policy commitment to the idea of extending working life, older job seekers (in contrast to the younger unemployed / NEETS) have lacked targeted support for their job search efforts.⁶ The structural and cohesion funds of the European Union have provided some opportunities to remedy this absence of support through local initiatives to firstly to develop the less developed regions (the

¹ In the period February to April 2015

² The current SPA for men is 65 whilst for women it is progressively moving towards 65. Women born after 6th December 1953 will be entitled to their state pension at 65. The state pension age is not to be confused with retirement age (even though many people choose to retire at the point when they become entitled to draw their state pension). There is no legal mandatory retirement age in the UK.

³ Research by National Association of Pension Funds, Reported in TAEN Newsletter 2014 http://taen.org.uk/uploads/resources/TAEN_Newsletter_Nov_141.pdf

⁴ TAEN *Survey of Jobseekers Aged 50+* 2013

⁵ Fuller Working Lives: A framework for action June 2014

⁶ During the period from 1999 to 2008 there was a voluntary scheme of support for older job seekers, “New Deal 50 Plus,” which was popular and successful. The period since this time however has been characterised by all age schemes. (Source; Older Workers in Europe, Gratton P)

convergence objective) and to increase regional competitiveness and employment (the regional competitiveness and employment objective).⁷

Box 1. How people are supported back to work in the UK

In the UK, support for the unemployed is given initially by the state agency, Jobcentre Plus (JCP). After twelve months of unemployment during which job seekers are expected to engage in their own job search activities under the guidance of a JCP adviser, they are referred to one of a number of contracted out schemes offering targeted and individualised support. The main schemes are the "Work Programme," and "Work Choice," a specialist programme for people with disabilities. In large measure these schemes rely on a system of incentives to independent welfare to work providers to devise approaches which work, rather than laying down detailed prescribed methods of offering support.

For people who fall outside the defined ambit of the main welfare to work programmes, support may be given by projects financed by local authorities (often with matched funding from the European Social Fund) or other agencies. Some charitable foundations provide limited funding (often co-financed by the ESF) for back to work activities. The present case study describes such a project in Wales, funded jointly by the European Social Fund and the National Lottery.

It should be stressed that older people in the UK workforce are subject to a policy dichotomy. On one hand an absence of tangible support in seeking jobs has not prevented increasing numbers of them remaining longer in employment - more than a million people over the age of 65 are now in work.⁸ However, older people trying to return to work once redundant or unemployed for any reason, face a troubled path. In survey of 50 + job seekers undertaken by TAEN, 83 per cent said that they felt that employers had rejected them in part because they were seen as "too old"⁹. In April 2015, 43% of job seekers in the 50-65 age range had been unemployed for more than 12 months and qualified for the description as "long term unemployed," the highest proportion of the unemployed in any age cohort.

As can be seen, the generally improving UK economic picture conceals longer term problems of localised unemployment and labour market inactivity among older people. While state back to work agencies have been encouraged to focus much effort on the plight of younger people, the older unemployed and inactive have constituted an intractable and enduring problem which was not being addressed by the mainstream National Government policies to support people back to work. It was in this context that the specific area of Neath, Port Talbot and Swansea called out for an innovative project aimed at providing holistic measures to give older people the skills and confidence to return to the labour market.

⁷ Formerly referred to as objective 1 and objective 2 respectively.

⁸ The ratio of full-time to part time jobs in Swansea and Neath Port-Talbot in 2013 was 95,500 full time to 52,500 part-time. (Office of National Statistics).

⁹ TAEN Survey of Jobseekers Aged 50+ 2013

THE LIFE SKILLS FOR OLDER PEOPLE PROJECT IN NEATH PORT TALBOT AND SWANSEA

Neath Port Talbot and Swansea

The local authority area of Neath Port Talbot stretches from the coast to the borders of the upland Brecon Beacons National Park in West Wales. The lower lying coastal land around Port Talbot is broken by river mouths and areas of development. The upland areas are cut by the valleys of Neath, Dulais, Afan, and Swansea. Coal mining, which began in South Wales in Roman times, has now almost entirely disappeared. Similarly, steel production, for which South Wales was famous throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has declined to a fraction of its former strength. (The Ebbw Vale Steel, Iron & Coal Company founded in 1790, was the largest tinplate producer in the country, until its closure in 2002.) Much of the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a slow process of economic decline in Wales with the disappearance of these industries. The industries have left a legacy of industrial diseases to many of the older inhabitants whilst many years working in coal mines or steel mills has left many individuals with skills that are of little use outside these sectors.

In 2007 the European Union prioritised West Wales and the Valleys to receive economic convergence funding¹⁰, defining a convergence area of some fifteen local authorities¹¹ in which projects could be supported. The area of Neath Port Talbot and Swansea in West Wales is classified as part of a less developed region and eligible for support under the convergence objective criteria.

Within West Wales and the Valleys, the local authority area of Neath Port Talbot currently has 6.9% unemployment comprising 4,500 people looking for work. Swansea has an unemployment rate of 7.8% comprising 3,502 people, which is the highest in the West Wales Convergence Area and throughout the whole of Wales. In July 2015 the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Business Committee issued a report, *Employment Opportunities for the Over 50s*,¹² noting that “There are just over 1.2 million people aged 50 and over in Wales. Statistics show that Welsh people in this age group are less likely to be in work than in most other parts of the UK. Nearly 36% per cent of people aged 50-64 were not in work. This is the second highest in the UK nations, behind Northern Ireland. The unemployment rate for those over 50 is the highest of all the UK nations.”

¹⁰ From 2007-2013 the new European Union structural funds programme introduced concepts of *convergence* and *competitiveness* areas, key priorities in convergence areas being the creation of more and better jobs, reducing the numbers of economically inactive and promoting economic growth for the region. The Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) is the Managing Authority and Certifying Authority for the West Wales and Valleys Convergence programmes.

¹¹ These were Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend; Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire; Ceredigion; Conwy; Denbigshire; Gwynedd; Isle of Angelsey; Merthyr Tydfil; Neath Port Talbot; Pembrokeshire; Rhondda Cynon Taff; Swansea and Torfaen.

¹² National Assembly for Wales, Enterprise and Business Committee, *Employment Opportunities for People Over 50* July 2015

Box 2. Wales population and labour markets

The Population of Wales comprises 3.082 million people out of a total of 64.1 million in the United Kingdom. Within Wales, population distribution is uneven with large parts of Mid and North Wales comprising low populated rural areas.

1.926 million (62.5%) of Wales residents are in the age range of 16-64. 1.481 million (74.4% of all people) are economically active, compared with 77.8% for the UK as a whole. In June 2015, economic inactivity among the 16-64 age group (excluding students) was 23.3% in Neath, Port Talbot and 17.6% in Swansea – the Neath Port Talbot figure being the highest in the whole of Wales. For the 50-64 age cohort, the pattern is repeated with 67.5% of Neath Port Talbot people in this age range being economically inactive (62.4% in Swansea).

In Wales as a whole, 92,000 were registered unemployed in the period November 2014 to January 2015 while 489,000 (25.6% of all people) were economically inactive, while in February 2015 seasonally adjusted total of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants was 45,700 (3.2%) compared with 2.4% for the whole of the UK. Among 18-24 year olds 4.6% were JSA claimants.

Older people who lose their jobs or who have been unemployed for long periods, are notoriously more reluctant than others to submit to the rules set down for claimants of the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). Hence of 50-64 year olds in Wales, only 1.6 per cent register to claim the allowance – indicating they are actively seeking work.

Grouping all categories of out of work benefits together 13% of people in Wales are claimants compared with 10.2% in the whole of the UK. 11.1 per cent of Wales jobs are in manufacturing (7.8% in the UK as a whole) while 15% are in occupations in the health and social services sectors, compared with only 12.6% in the UK nationally.

Source : Office of National Statistics/ Stats Wales

Governance structure and funding for labour market policies in Wales

The following section explains briefly the Governmental structures and strategic “rules” within which the leaders of the Life Skills project had to operate in seeking funding support.

Welsh Government and Welsh Assembly

The Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government are institutions of devolved Government in the UK. While the Welsh Government does not have independent tax raising powers it has access to EU regional funds through the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO), with which it works collaboratively, even though the latter does not come under the control of the Welsh Government as such. Hence, EU funds for labour market policies are available in Wales through WEFO.

Big Lottery

The Big Lottery, which is a separate organisation and operates at arm’s length from central Government departments, in practice collaborates with several Government Departments to address a whole series of policy areas that are not specifically being dealt with by existing state funded measures and are amenable to a charitable intervention. (See box 3).

The Big Lottery is an important source of funding for labour policy projects (See box 3) that was also used for the Life Skills project.

Box 3. The Big Lottery fund

In the UK the National Lottery is an important element of third sector funding, representing 1.5 per cent of charities' income - the largest single, non-government, investment in the sector over the past decade. Voluntary, public and private sector organisations can apply for funding from various grant programmes from the BIG Lottery Fund (BIG). Projects must bring real improvements to the communities and people most concerned. In Wales, the Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage can influence the strategic direction of the Lottery distributors in Wales. He does this by issuing policy directions. These detail outcomes and priorities that should be delivered in Wales, but do not determine which projects receive funding. The Welsh Government issued such policy directions to the Big Lottery in December 2006.

In 2006 the Big Lottery Fund launched the Stepping Stones Programme in Wales, with the key aims being to help people with significant barriers to learning to acquire the life skills that will enable them to re-engage in learning, volunteering or employment, and to help people facing major changes and long-term challenges in their lives to acquire the life skills that would help them to manage their lives and contribute to their communities. £7 million was invested into the communities across Wales as a result of this programme.

A review of the programme in 2007 concluded that while the Big Lottery Fund had partly succeeded in reaching individuals that could be considered "hard to reach", there was still a significant need for further interventions in this area. In particular there was a need to focus some support on hard to reach older people who were not being supported back to work and who had been largely overlooked by the focus on youth unemployment. The Life Skills project was developed in response to this identified need.

Source : Big Lottery Website and explanation from Shaw Trust's Life Skills Project Leader, Michael Dix-Williams

Focus on Youth Unemployment

In Wales, during the period from 2010 onwards, youth unemployment had become a major concern of both the UK National Government and the Welsh Assembly, while unemployment among older people was a relatively neglected area. This strong targeting of European funds on youth related projects limited the scope for new projects dealing with older people's employment support needs and was particularly evident in the main Government programme from 2011 onwards, the Work Programme. It was in this context that the Life Skills for Older People project was established as a highly localised intervention to support this neglected group – the 50+ economically inactive or long term unemployed person.

Strategic Planning by Welsh European Funding Office

WEFO has adopted 'co-ordinating plans' to achieve strategic purposes through "linked interventions". To explain this – a whole series of projects or "interventions" are supported by WEFO, typically led by welfare to work organisations, local government, learning and skills organisations and third sector bodies. All of these bids for projects based on tenders or project calls. The calls are considered according to a number of defined criteria strategically selected to achieve the objectives of the programme. In the current European Structural Fund programme for Wales¹³, the programme's specific objectives include targeting unemployment, worklessness and barriers to sustainable employment¹⁴. Specific Objectives 1 and 3, which

¹³ Welsh European Funding Office November 2014

¹⁴ Ibid page 6

apply the Convergence Criteria¹⁵, are to “Increase the employability of those closest to the labour market and at most risk of poverty” (SO1), and “to reduce under-employment or absence rates for employed individuals with health limiting conditions and/or barriers to sustainable engagement with the labour market” (SO3). At the same time, SO2 (which applies to regions outside the defined Convergence area, including Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan¹⁶) provides an alternative route to support for older people as follows; “to increase the employability of economically inactive and long term unemployed people over 25 years, who have complex barriers to employment (includes people over 54 years of age).”

Need and “opportunities” for projects supporting older job seekers

There was a problem of substantial long term unemployment among older people and therefore a *need* for something to be done. On the face of it, it might be thought that this state of need would create “an opportunity” for a project – providing that the funders were willing to spend money on the particular age cohort concerned. In general however, there was little opportunity to find funding support for projects targeting the older job seeker who as a group seemed to be missing out. (In theory older people could have been included in projects supporting job seekers across all age ranges but they appear to have lost out to decisions to support youth projects as a policy preference). The Life Skills project saw the light of day as a result of a realisation of this generational inequity. The Big Lottery wanted to support something that was not being done at the time – see the comments at the end of box 3. The Life Skills for Older People project was in effect a pilot initiative to support older job seekers as an exception to this main stream strategic direction.

The Life Skills projects: objectives, implementation and achievements

The Neath Port Talbot and Swansea Life Skills project was commissioned by the Big Lottery and WEFO as part of an agenda to address Economic Inactivity in both the Convergence and Competitiveness areas within Wales. The project was funded by Big Lottery Fund money being matched at source by the European Social Fund.

The project in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea, was designed by Shaw Trust, a large UK charity that works in partnership with public sector organisations to provide employment services for disabled and disadvantaged people of all kinds. The objective of the project was to identify participants from the Older Age bracket (fifty and above) within the Convergence area of Neath Port Talbot and Swansea and offer them a suite of services to enable them to enter into Further Education, Learning, Voluntary Work and Employment. The project began at the beginning of October 2011. Participants enrolling on the project were able to access services addressing both social and economic barriers to work through individually tailored support to help achieve goals and objectives. The project ended on 9th March 2015. A further project based on the Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff was also secured, though this area was not eligible for convergence funding.

Objectives

More specifically, the objectives of the Life Skills project were to enable a minimum of 750 individuals aged 50 or over at the time of engagement from within the ‘Convergence areas’ of Wales who are unemployed or economically inactive and not in education or training to develop their life skills, increase their confidence, re-engage with and continue to access education, learning, volunteering or employment; and develop individual long-term support plans to enable participants to continue to access

¹⁵ Applicable to West Wales and the Valleys

¹⁶ See later for information about a second project which was undertaken by Shaw Trust in this area

and remain in education, learning or employment opportunities. Therefore, the focus was not merely on getting people into jobs, but to move them in the direction of employment and employability.

The “overarching” objective of the project was described as being, “...to identify a participants’ barriers to work, agree goals, areas for self-development and upskilling and to engage them in activities to support these objectives.” Shaw Trust see the primary barriers to gaining work among the 50+ client group as including:

- Low confidence and low self-esteem
- Poor social skills/life skills
- Long term unemployment
- Low levels of vocational skills
- Social barriers including care responsibilities or a criminal history.

Removal of the above barriers is an essential element of moving individuals closer to becoming job-ready.

How was the Life Skills project implemented?

In the first six months of delivery Shaw Trust set up working partnerships with local training providers who offered a range of *vocational and developmental training opportunities*, volunteering services to source *work placements* and local employers with whom they had secured *paid employment opportunities*.

The project set a target to these providers to work with 750 eligible participants across the Neath Port Talbot and Swansea area over the three and a half year period. For the purpose of monitoring the achievements of the project, a range of key performance indicators (KPIs) were chosen, measuring success in development of motivation, confidence and self-development among clients. These KPIs included placing clients in volunteering positions, gaining their commitment to courses of vocational learning (ending with National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ’s) or other accredited qualifications), further learning including essential or “basic skills” and employment. (The performance of the project against these KPIs will be considered in detail later in the paper.)

Softer outcomes targeting the removal of barriers to work included providing clients with care support and measurement of their progress towards employment or “distance travelled”, to use the jargon.

The funding model of the project consisted of quarterly management fees paid directly by the Big Lottery with additional fees being chargeable by the charity for success in getting clients into jobs and then, sustained outcomes achieved over a longer period (in other words, a system of payment by results).

A system of tailored support was devised to support the removal of barriers for 50+ unemployed people. This included:

- *One to one support*: Clients were referred to the project by the local offices of Jobcentre Plus. All clients were supported by qualified Shaw Trust Development Officers (DOs) –each client being matched with an experienced DO who provided necessary advice and one to one support.

- *Work skills training:* An eight week course was provided to clients to help them achieve a “basic skills” qualification, a further qualification to BTEC standard and a further module to help develop confidence and motivation. The work skills training element of the programme was provided by outsourced training providers able to provide courses that satisfied the personal aspirations of clients.
- *Work Wise Sessions:* This was a service based on the “Job Club” model which supports job search, CV writing and applying for work. Additional services were provided such as “vocational profiling” and a tool promoting a “work is good for you” message.
- *Voluntary Placements:* Shaw Trust worked with local employers, including TATA Steel, Neath Port Talbot Council and the Driving License and Vehicle Licensing Authority (based in Swansea) to provide placement opportunities for clients, enabling them to gain the skills and experience needed to enter paid employment.
- *Enabling Funding:* Shaw Trust maintained an enabling fund which was intended to help reduce financial barriers to participating in job search and training. The fund exists to provide support with such costs as child/grandchild care, clothing, equipment costs and travel expenses.

Achievements

Neath Port Talbot and Swansea has a background rich in historical struggle with difficult social and economic conditions, many remote villages, strong industrial cultures and attitudes and experience of depression in periods when many people lost employment, sometimes through closures and mass redundancies. The Life Skills for Older People project was able to achieve successful employment outcomes for 37% of its clients who were placed in jobs with 41% of these sustaining their placements through to 6-months. The project manager commented positively on the attitudes of the people participating in the project, suggesting they had played a large part in overcoming worklessness by their strong beliefs in the social and economic importance of being able to earn a living.

Table 1 below provides a synthesis of the project’s performance against key performance indicators.

Table 1. Life Skills project key performance indicators and achievements

KPI	Target for 2013-14	Actual achieved
“Provide long term development support plans for all participants.”	264	259
Provide caring support to participants who have caring responsibilities (caring responsibilities for elderly parents or relatives may contribute to having to leave a job or make it difficult to start a new one)	36	0
Support participants in gaining basic / essential skills qualifications	192	148
Engage participants in further learning – exit outcome. (The lower the number exiting a course of further learning prematurely, the more successful the project might be taken to be.)	12	4
Participants completing a package of training (minimum 16 hours).”	18	19
Enable 17 % of the total number of participants to gain NVQ Level 1, 2 or above qualifications, or recognised equivalents. NVQs are competence based qualifications and show that the individual can do the work for which the award has been given to the National Standard. NVQs are accepted readily by employers.	132	127
Engage 14% of participants in volunteering and work experience opportunities. Voluntary work is seen as an important means of activating people who have been out of the labour market for some time as well as being socially useful and giving the individual a sense of self-worth, confidence and the opportunity to acquire direct experience of the world of work.	60	60
Engage 10 to 18 %of participants in employment The targets reflect a realistic assessment of the difficulties faced by this group, the state of the labour market and the length of the “journey back to work”. The figures demonstrate achievements against different time measures of sustainability.	90 (day one in job) 38 (six months) 37 (sustained for one year)	92 40 34

Source: Shaw Trust Report on Life Skills project

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE LIFE SKILLS PROJECT

By using an approach that focused on understanding and tackling the specific barriers to work faced by individuals, the Life Skills project was able to deliver results that were close to and in some respects in excess of its initiating targets. Performance of the project was not simply measured in “hard” outcomes but in terms of “softer” achievements. That is to say that success should not just be judged by the numbers of clients who managed to secure jobs (one of “hard” outcomes) but also by the “softer” outcomes such as engaging in voluntary activity and learning much needed skills, which would place clients in a stronger position to get and retain employment. In short, the approach recognised that progress on the “journey” from inactivity to full employment is for many people, a difficult business of making incremental gains. The attitudes of participants and the range of activities and support they were offered, were judged by the project manager to have contributed to a successful outcome of the project.

Economic impact of the Life Skills Project on Neath-Port Talbot and Swansea

Fostering local economic development generally requires a mixture of measures, including efforts to maximise the employability of people residing in the local area concerned by getting them back into work and raising their skills levels. Barriers such as health issues and skills deficiencies have to be overcome as well as the unhelpful and negative mind-sets that may be induced through long term unemployment. How far could the Life Skills project be said to have succeeded then as a local economic initiative?

The purpose of the pilot was not only to offer tangible support to older people seeking to work in an economically depressed area of Wales, but to try to learn what works best with such a client group. The project manager offered a number of helpful reflections on this point (see box 4).

Box 4. Lessons learnt from the Life Skills project - a view from the project manager

1. **Delivery:** The project is accessible to all of our service-users where and when they need it. We work very much with an outreach philosophy ensuring the most remote communities are able to gain the support of the service.
2. **Services:** The interventions available to service-users are tailored to meet their own needs and while we run scheduled training programmes we are always receptive to sponsoring an individual training course that meets a specific developmental need.
3. **Development Officers:** The project in Neath Port Talbot Swansea has five Development Officers (DOs) who each operate their own geographical area and manage their own dedicated caseload. Each service-user has access to their DO every day either at outreach venues, telephone or e-contact. The DO is the co-ordinator of the client journey and will select interventions to meet specific needs.
4. **Outcomes/Achievements:** The projects have achieved much success with participants that are clearly disadvantaged in terms of the proportionate levels of support available to them to gain employment. We have gained excellent results in the levels of participants gaining employment, skills and greater independence.
5. We have learnt how best to maximise the opportunities of this target group including the importance of employer engagement to remove the myths about employing older people and general workplace discrimination, recognising that social barriers need addressing as well as economic barriers to improve the chances for employment to be sustainable. Ensuring that training and development needs are always addressed to ensure that labour market opportunities are maximised.

The project officer's comments (summarised in box 4) include a number of lessons which could be potentially useful in creating further projects of a similar kind. Elements of the approach adopted included; making the project delivery flexible and widely accessible irrespective of personal location or mobility issues; flexibility in the provision of services (including training) to meet the unique needs of individual participants; staffing the project so that participants enjoyed a direct and personal relationship with "their" development officer; building confidence and seeing progress along the road back to employment as a naturally staged and incremental "journey" and working with employers in ways which in part encourage them to "buy-in" to the social and equality objectives of giving people who are older and/or long term unemployed "a chance" to start out again in a job.

It might be said that the project was too small to have a significant and measurable impact on the wider economy of Wales or the Convergence Area of West Wales and the Valleys. Nevertheless, given that the aim of the BIG Lottery and the Welsh Government was to run small scale pilots in the Convergence area, the project should be seen as both successful and potentially significant.

It seems clear that the kind of approach adopted by Shaw Trust and further developed and described by the project manager Michael Dix-Williams in this case study could lay the basis for further work of the same kind, targeted at older job seekers in a much enlarged programme. The costs and benefits of such a developed programme are beyond the scope of the present case study. While the data used for this case study was collected some months before the project closed at the end of March 2015, we now know that it achieved virtually all of the performance targets set at the outset and in a number of cases, exceeded them.

Looking forward

Against the background of The Wales European Funding Office placing a relatively low priority on the needs of older job seekers in its 2007-2013 European Structural Funds programme, the Life Skills for Older People project provided a way marker for the future. It is of interest that the Wales European Funding Office, and the Welsh Government have adopted a series of specific objectives in the Structural Fund Programme 2014-2020 which open opportunities for tenders to be issued to individual providers or consortia with a view to supporting older job seekers.

One inconsistency between the Structural Fund programme and the Life Skills for Older People project relates to a difference in eligibility ages. The structural funds Programme defines "older workers" as being over 54 whilst the Life Skills for Older People project took the age of 50 as a starting point. Given that there is no hard and fast rule as to when the barriers of age might become an issue, it would be unfortunate if this higher age became a restricting factor in participation in any new projects. Time will tell whether this difference has much material impact, but at least it remains an odd and hard to explain inconsistency which could pose problems in future projects.

Finally, for age specific targeted approaches to have a really significant impact on local economies, it seems obvious that the lessons applied from small scale successful projects will not be enough unless they can be scaled up substantially. Of course, projects of this kind will inevitably be shaped by the conditions laid down by funders. Whether arbitrary cut-off points of participants (in terms of age and geography) have any real rationale in terms of the needs of a local population or economic unit is open to doubt. Basing eligibility for funding criteria on a pre-defined "economic convergence area," for example may exclude local areas that are in nearly as much need and quite close by. This is illustrated in the present case by the fact that *two* projects were in fact developed by Shaw Trust in parallel. The first, for Neath, Port Talbot and Swansea and the subject of this case study, was inside the convergence area whilst the second project, for Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan, was outside it but inside the East Wales Regional Competitiveness and Employment Area. In presenting the case for the project therefore, the bid writers had to justify it within the different criteria of the latter programme.

On the other hand, so long as economic development policies are pragmatically based on the distribution of finite resources to the maximisation of aggregate benefit, it will hardly be surprising when the borders of disadvantaged communities or specific local areas are approached, if opportunities to support people in need seem uneven. All this said, hopefully, more localised approaches to decision making will provide some answers. It is worth pointing out that regional government and devolution of economic policy are rising up the agenda in the United Kingdom. (This is partly as a result of the rise of Nationalism in Scotland and the concessions, agreed by all the main Westminster parties, that Scotland will be given substantial new powers in the aftermath of the close referendum result of 2014.) These changes will have ramifications for the Government of Wales and other parts of the UK in future, although it is not yet, clear in what ways the scope for locally determined economic and welfare to work measures will change as a consequence. It is arguable that the UK Government's strong focus on youth has in fact concealed a neglect of older workers. The latter, whilst they have been growing numerically in the UK's labour force, still represent an under employed and under-utilised resource at a time when business leaders are increasingly complaining of skill shortages¹⁷ and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development have produced a report demonstrating that older workers will be increasingly important for business operations¹⁸.

Whilst the present case study focuses entirely on supply side activity, the demand side must not be forgotten. In point of fact, much has been done and is being done to upgrade the economic infrastructure in Wales and create the circumstances for growth of new businesses, which might be classified as demand side activity. One hopes that such efforts are being complemented by a recognition of the value the ageing workforce might bring to development and business success.

Quite simply, if people are to work longer and therefore to increase the number of active members of the workforce, new jobs will need to be created which it will be possible and appropriate for older workers *to do*. This will create new challenges not only for product and business development specialists, but for HR leaders who can influence the design of work and jobs alike. People with health or other limiting conditions will need to know that their conditions will not present barriers to work. Similarly, people who have roles caring for elderly parents or other family members (which will be increasingly the case as they become older) will need to know that this will not debar them from active work. Projects such as Life Skills for Older People are valuable, though there may be a need for other innovative measures targeting a wider constituency and variety of older job seekers to run alongside them.

¹⁷ Price Waterhouse Survey of Business Leaders June 2015

¹⁸ CIPD / ILC UK Report June 25th 2015

Transferable lessons

Part of the value of case studies lies in their potential to provide lessons that may be replicated elsewhere. The findings of the Life Skills for Older Workers project can be captured in the following summary.

- The purpose of the project was to offer tangible support to older people in an economically depressed area. It was recognised at the outset that they had many barriers to employment, including health conditions, skills deficiencies and negative mind sets about their own capacity to work or the likelihood of employers to offer them jobs. All of these elements need to be dealt with. The approach in this project was to support clients in drawing up their own unique “development support plan,” and to tailor interventions and support around that. Different clients, in different circumstances needed different forms of support or “intervention.” The project had to deal with individuals and treat people as individuals.
- The project was delivered in a way that made it widely accessible. Development officers went to locations close to where clients lived rather than expecting them to make difficult journeys by public transport.
- Services were tailored to individual clients – for example training that was quite specific to the needs of a particular client could be provided if it met a particular developmental need. The project needed the ability to work with other providers offering a wide range of possible forms of support on a sub-contract basis.
- An important part of the project included working with employers to encourage the adoption of positive attitudes and identify training needs for candidates to be presented for consideration. This included working with them to eliminate false ideas and stereotypes about clients
- Overcoming barriers faced by clients was seen as a continuing journey – clients with a “difficult journey” back to work could not be expected to make the trip in one go. Making progress along the journey was considered a partial success even if it fell short of the ultimate goal of a sustainable job.
- A key element was the appointment of suitable development officers. All clients have a relationship with “their” development officer and can phone him or her when necessary – including at weekends sometimes.
- Giving clients support for caring responsibilities was part of the project – in fact this was not an especially well used service but an underlying explanation for this may well be that the project was not reaching people staying at home because of care responsibilities.
- Gaining basic/ essential skills and competencies in reading, writing, numeracy and IT were key aspects of the training on offer.

While the approach could be distinguished from the “work first” approach, employability skills like attending and doing well in an interview, writing a good CV or job application letter and understanding the job search process were all part of the project and considered essential skills to impart. A commitment to further learning beyond the project was an important “soft” outcome as were voluntary work and work experience seen as useful and positive ways of supporting clients. If these approaches can be transferred to other projects it would seem that there is every possibility of successful projects being established that will have truly transformative impacts on the abilities of older people to make an economic contribution.

CONCLUSIONS

The overarching objectives of the project were to identify participants' barriers to work, agree goals, areas for self-development and upskilling and to engage them in activities to support these objectives and in this way move them progressively along the sometimes long and stony road from labour market inactivity towards sustainable work. The primary barriers to gaining work among the 50+ client group were seen as including, Low confidence and low self-esteem, poor social skills/life skills, long term unemployment, low levels of vocational skills, social barriers including care responsibilities or a criminal history. Removal of these barriers was seen as an essential element of moving individuals closer to becoming job-ready. In the results of the project throughout the period of its operation, it would seem that this analysis was correct. Impressive numbers of clients achieved the key performance indicators of the project, in large measure ascribed by the project manager to being a consequence of the positive attitudes of the project's participants.

While the despondency and low self-esteem occasioned by long experience of worklessness and inactivity was undoubtedly a barrier for the project's clients to overcome, there seemed to be evidence here of a "gutsier" determination, itself perhaps a product of life-times spent in hard grafting work in steel manufacture and coal mining. A hopeful conclusion could be that empowering older people who have lost their jobs some time previously can be overcome by the right combination of flexible support delivered to address their individual needs and to help them overcome their individual barriers. The journey back to work is seldom straight forward for such people, but belief, fortitude and the right combination of skilled support to help overcome health and skills deficits can certainly make a difference to future economic life chances and employability.

Having suffered the blows of unemployment and diminution of their working capacity which followed, many of Shaw Trust's clients had experienced decline in both their health and employability. Lacking employability skills, basic skills and technical competences in ICT, many may even have lost the *will to work*. The experience of the project, *Life Skills for Older People in the Convergence Area* however, was that, given the right support and encouragement, they can regain sufficient skills and self-confidence to approach the labour market once again and re-enter it.

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