Evaluation of the Out of Work Service – Final Report

1.   Introduction and Methodology

In May 2018, Welsh Government appointed ICF Consulting Services (ICF) and Arad Research to evaluate the Out of Work Service (OoWS). The evaluation aimed to assess the delivery, performance and perceived impact of the OoWS against the aims, objectives and targets set for it. This **Final Report** updates and advances the findings and recommendations presented at the interim stage[1], and provides:

- Further insight into project delivery to date, including the experience and perspective of participants, peer mentors and delivery staff, to inform future service delivery;
- An assessment of programme progress and performance to end of October 2019;
- Insights into the outcomes, perceived impact and legacy of the OoWS; and
- Lessons for future development and commissioning.

The evaluation followed a mixed methods approach. Firstly, area case studies were undertaken in five lots at two time points (September to December 2018 and August to October 2019) to explore service implementation and performance. Interviewees comprised project lead(s) and key staff, peer mentors and employment specialists, delivery partners (defined here training providers or referral organisations), participants, and employers (in the second fieldwork round). At both time-points a telephone interview with the project lead in the two remaining lots was also undertaken to allow findings to be triangulated. Secondly, programme monitoring information (MI) was analysed, alongside a sample of soft outcome data provided by the projects and findings from the ESF Leaver's Survey. Finally, a half-day workshop was held in December 2019 for programme stakeholders and Welsh Government representatives to discuss the emerging findings.

2.   Key Findings

Delivering the Out of Work Service

The OoWS is a Welsh Government and European Social Fund (ESF) funded programme which began in August 2016. The programme received £17.3 million in funding and at the time of

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[1] ICF Consulting Services and Arad Research (2019). Evaluation of the Out of Work Service: Interim Report. Welsh Government.

writing was funded to the end of August 2020[2]. The service employs peer mentors to provide holistic employment support to two target groups: 16-24 year olds Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs); and those aged 25 and over (who are long-term unemployed or economically inactive); who have substance misuse, mental health issues or dual disorders (defined as co-occurring substance misuse and mental health issues).

The service is delivered across seven 'Lots' within the ESF East Wales and West Wales and the Valleys programme areas, each of which covers a specific geographical area aligned to the then Local Health Board Areas. Two consortiums of providers are responsible for service delivery: **Cyfle Cymru** manage delivery in North Wales, Gwent, Dyfed, Western Bay and Powys; and **Platfform** (in partnership with NewLink Wales) in Cardiff and Vale and Cwm Taf.

The main feature of the service is the **use of peer mentors** who draw upon their own lived experience to provide judgement-free support, guidance and advocacy to participants, whilst covering many aspects of 'traditional' employment support. The overall model remained largely unchanged across the evaluation period, with changes in staffing including: the recruitment of new or additional peer mentors, in particular assistant and voluntary peer mentors to provide greater capacity; changes in responsibilities, such as Dyfed peer mentors delivering employment support following the departure of their employment specialist; and restructure in contracts, such as splitting a full-time peer mentor role into two part-time roles to increase accessibility.

A key improvement over the last year has been the increase in project support for administrative tasks, which may explain why caseloads (roughly between 20-50 across the service) vary between areas. However, there also continues to be a high level of turnover of peer mentors, and some reflected that the pressure to meet targets has increased as they move towards the end of the contract, and caseloads were affected by external factors making it difficult to maintain a consistent caseload.

The **delivery model** for the service is described in detail in the Interim Report. This model features five stages mapped to a participant's journey through the service: identification and referral; recruitment; assessment and action planning; provision of support; and exiting the programme. The final round of data collection focused changes to this model.

In respect to when a participant first joins the service:

- Though there have been no major changes to the referral pathways, national policy changes (e.g. to Universal Credit and Probation Services) have created some challenges. This, and the 'saturation' of similar services accessing traditional referral pathways in some areas, may explain why peer mentors appear to be more proactively trying to obtain referrals from health care services and community settings.

- Peer mentors remain responsible for participant recruitment across the service. The only change relates to the introduction of an area-based model by Platfform for the over 25 contract; peer mentors now only work in designated areas to improve efficiency.

- The service as a whole continues to use the same initial assessment procedures and action planning processes.

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[2] Prior to publication, the programme was extended by another two years.

Provision remains tailored, flexible and responsive, and delivered at the pace of the participant – with a 'customer journey' combining standard and tailored components. The main changes to the support offered relate to achieving the remaining programme targets:

- Cyfle Cymru continue to use employment specialists to deliver **employment support** in all areas apart from in Dyfed, where this responsibility has devolved to the peer mentors. The only change to Platfform's employment support model has been the move of an employment-focused peer mentor from Cwm Taf to Cardiff and Vale in January 2019.

- Most areas have made very few changes made to the **training package** offered to participants, as these have proven to be effective and well-received by participants.

- Participants are meant to have access to 16-hour **work placements,** but providers have struggled to source sufficient suitable opportunities, primarily as there is no clear incentive for employers to pay participants. Additionally, for participants, work can feel quite overwhelming, and some are fearful their benefits will be affected.

- Most areas are focusing on increasing the number of **volunteering opportunities** available to participants. Across the service, volunteering placements continue to be organised in the same way and a huge range of choice is available.

- The service also continues to provide **additional support** to help participants remove barriers to their progression, including those relating to their living circumstances or financial issues. However, peer mentors remain mindful about the nature and level of support they can actually offer and when to signpost elsewhere.

The same **exit policies** remain in place across the service so if a participant disengages their file will be suspended or closed to help peer mentors better manage their caseloads. Cases can always be reopened should a participant's circumstances change, or they are ready to re-engage with the service.

The service also offers **in-work support** – this offer varies between the areas, and is informed by previous interactions with participants; it can be passive (participants come to peer mentors if they need support) or more practical and hands-on. In general, however, only a few participants reported accessing in-work support, although most knew their peer mentor would continue to support them if needed.

Service Performance – Participation

At the end of October 2019, **total registration** equalled 11,438 participants, equalling 81 per cent of the overall target set at the outset (14,134). With only three quarters of service delivery left of the current contract, the service as a whole appears to be on track to achieve its participation target – which can be seen as a considerable achievement given the staff turnover and recruitment challenges faced in all areas. The continuation of existing, and development of new, relationships with referral agencies (particularly jobcentres) has been integral to maintaining registrations.

Participation rates vary across the service, with North Wales being closest to meeting its total participation target at the end of October 2019 (91 per cent) and good progress being made by other areas. Profiled quarterly targets for participation at the end of October 2019 were exceeded for both contracts in East Wales (104 per cent and 103 per cent for the 16-24 and over 25 contracts respectively), and were close to being met for West Wales and the Valleys (90 and 96 per cent respectively).

At the end of October 2019, 41 per cent of those **leaving the service** (3,462 participants) had done so on a planned basis (on achievement of an outcome such as employment or entering education), whilst 59 per cent (4,914 participants) left on an unplanned basis (commonly due to disengagement or relapse).

In respect to **participant characteristics**, the gender split aligns closely to expectation, and the share from Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds closely reflects the Welsh demographic. Throughout this evaluation, it has also been evident that participants face complex, unique and interacting barriers which pose particular challenges to entering the labour market. Over a third of participants have no previous qualifications (37 per cent), and where qualifications were held, they were often low level. Two thirds of participants were from a jobless household, and five per cent reported being homeless/housing excluded. Eight per cent reported a disability – although as this is based on self-reporting, actual shares may be higher.

In respect to the **duration of support,** there is no standard limit for how long participants can stay with the service. The overall average (mean) duration of participation is around 7.5 months, though higher in Dyfed and Powys at 10 months. However, participants can stay with the service for far longer – for example, for more than 2.5 years for 36 participants, and several had been with the service for three years or more. Participants with substance misuse histories had a slightly higher mean duration of support (9 months) than those with mental health (7 months) and dual diagnosis (8 months) issues.

Performance to date

The following results were identified from programme MI to end October 2019:

- **Qualifications/work-relevant certifications** – performance is positive with 1,942 participants achieving a qualification/certification against a target of 2,338 (83 per cent).

- **Work experience and volunteering** – this outcome remains below target, with 684 participants recording accessing a work or volunteering experience on exit against a target of 2,471 (28 per cent of target).

- **Jobsearch on leaving** – performance against target has been strong, with 1,089 former participants actively jobsearching against a target of 1,101 (99 per cent of target).

- **Employment (including self-employment) on leaving** – this target is set at 15 per cent. Currently 805 individuals were in work on exit (7 per cent of all those recruited and 9 per cent of all leavers).

- **Education or training on leaving (16-24 year olds only)** – just 89 participants entered education or training against a target of 334 (27 per cent of target), reflecting the finding that many participants in this group are more interested in work than education or training, and those with higher level qualifications do not prioritise further study.

All stakeholders interviewed understood the rationale for the targets, and based on progress to date were optimistic that the service could meet or even exceed its job search, work-related certifications and qualifications targets. This suggests that the general employability support being delivered in all areas is working well. The number of volunteering outcomes being secured every month is also increasing, and many areas were optimistic about maintaining or improving on this in the next six months. However, the real challenge for the service continues to be securing work placements and employment opportunities.

In addition to questioning the appropriateness of criteria for recognising work placements, many stakeholders felt the targets for entry into work and sustained employment felt unrealistic and inappropriate for this participant group. Additionally, several stakeholders also commented that participants tend to move on, or their contact details change, which makes it difficult to evidence a high target of sustained employment.

Additional **'soft' outcomes** were identified based on data collected by the service and the participant interviews. These were felt to be particularly important by programme stakeholders as they often represent the main benefits for (and possible first achievements by) participants. While the service does not formally report on soft outcomes achieved, data provided for a sample of participants suggested that many benefited from perceived improvements in confidence, self-esteem and social skills, and in some cases health and wellbeing – all with positive implications for their continued recovery.

The available soft outcome data showed that just under half the participants felt their confidence was better/much better whilst with the service, and just one that their confidence worsened, likely due to difficulties maintaining their recovery and deteriorating mental wellbeing. Participants and other stakeholders often stated that improvements in confidence and self-esteem were the key, if not main, benefits of the service. This was often linked to the confidence to socially interact with others; a number of participants felt that the service had encouraged them to 'get out of their house and meet people'.

Participants also felt more 'work-ready' (in terms of the shares feeling that their position in the labour market and likelihood of finding work had improved), and that they were more able to access other sources of support. Several participants commented that the programme had improved their motivation to find a job. Most were also not aware of any alternative provision which could support them into employment in a similar way.

In addition, participants improved their expectations for their own continued recovery and ability to manage their conditions (including drug and alcohol use). Wider stakeholders also commonly reflected that participants' resilience and resistance to setbacks had improved.

Perceived impacts

Although the share of participants securing and sustaining job outcomes remains low overall, the number gaining qualifications and work-related certifications, and receiving support with job searching, shows that most participants are being given the opportunity to change their circumstances. Many of the perceived impacts reported by participants are apparent, such as becoming more work-ready and gaining exposure to the workplace, and increased socialisation. The service's ability to respond flexibly was consistently highlighted as a key enabler for this. The ability for participants to develop within the service, through various peer mentor roles, is also a particular area of success.

Several stakeholders reflected on the perceived impact of the service for the peer mentors. Commonly motivated by 'making a difference to other peoples' lives', most peer mentors felt the job had given them the required skills, experience and confidence to work independently, and some commented how this experience will provide a springboard to other career opportunities. However, therein lies a key challenge for the service – delivery of the service has often been affected by the turnover in good peer mentors who progress and leave the service to better jobs.

Other benefits resulting for the wider system included the uniqueness of the service, and that it represented the only option tailored to the specific needs of its target groups. Some referral partners (especially jobcentres) felt that if the service ended it would be very difficult to place their clients in provision of a similar quality. Additional system-level impacts included improved collaboration and best practice exchange between providers; and improved links and working relationships with both statutory and employment support services.

Interviews with project leads, key staff and stakeholders, highlighted several ways that the service is contributing to the ESF cross-cutting themes. All stakeholders reported that tackling poverty and social exclusion were central to the programme objectives, and most commented on the fact that accessibility was a key strength of the service – both in terms of equal opportunities and ensuring those in rural communities are able to access the service. Finally, project leads described measures taken to contribute to the environmental sustainability and sustainable development theme.

3.   Looking forward – legacy and contract extension

Stakeholders believed a key legacy of the programme was a greater understanding of how to operate a peer mentoring model at scale. Many of the project leads and peer mentors reflected on key learning from this project, such as the importance of: being sufficiently adaptable and responsive to cater for a range of participants; building effective partnerships early on; early training on administrative processes; and effective line management for staff.

All stakeholders interviewed expressed a desire for the programme to continue, with a general feeling that the service was unique in offering this type of support. When asked what changes should be made to the service if an extension was granted, suggestions included updating the WEFO guidelines, with the complex barriers faced by participants being better reflected in the targets. Stakeholders expressed the most frustration for work placements and employment targets, arguing for them to be updated with consideration of the wider political and economic climate (e.g. Brexit). Many stakeholders argued that Welsh Government should take a more proactive role, utilising 'strong political leadership' to increase potential placement and employment opportunities.

4.   Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Both the interim and final fieldwork confirmed that the service is unique in Wales, filling an important gap in provision for some of those furthest from the labour market. Though most of the employment and training support offer is fairly similar to that offered elsewhere, the ability for the service to respond quickly and tailor support to a participant's needs or goals has been commended by many external stakeholders. Additionally, unlike other employability provision, the OoWS is led by peer mentors who draw on their own lived experience to inspire participants and provide tailored support for them to achieve their goals.

Where there have been challenges to service delivery and meeting targets, providers have mostly dealt with these effectively, for example by increasing the number/range of voluntary placements to provide work experience in response to problems organising work placements.

Participants reported being highly satisfied with their experiences and the benefits resulting, particularly in terms of how responsive and tailored the support offer was and the quality of the peer mentoring. Participants highlighted a range of perceived outcomes and impacts achieved,

with many citing how different their life would be without the service. While the limited number of interviews with participants did not allow insights into the consistency of provision in each area, discussions with referral and delivery partners confirmed that participants have a very positive experience with the OoWS.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the remainder of the current contract were provided, with a focus on achieving the programme targets in the remainder of the programme period:

- Providers should support peer mentors to move into other roles if the contract is not extended. To prevent service disruption, aim to retain experienced peer mentors to the end of the contract (or during the transition period if contracts are extended).

- Maximise opportunities for participants to obtain paid work experience by drawing on best practice across the service. At a national level, Welsh Government should be investing in a strategic approach to employer engagement.

- If the current contract is not extended, ensure there is a balance between meeting participation targets and securing outcomes and signpost participants to other services on exit. If the programme is extended, consider updating/re-defining the existing metrics.

- Providers should ensure there is sufficient resource to collect WEFO performance data, particularly six-month follow-up data and also continue to capture 'soft outcomes'.

Recommendations for future peer mentoring programmes for similar target groups included:

- Promotion of the service from the outset to raise the awareness in the local community.

- Consider increasing the number of peer mentors for complex programmes of this scale.

- Explicitly define a role for employment specialists.

- Ensure employer engagement is built in from the outset at both local and national levels.

- Ensure there are minimum standards or comparable approaches to peer mentor training and support to ensure consistency.

- Reflect on the appropriateness, fit and alignment of targets, ensuring they are realistic, achievable and align to participant needs and preferences.

- Review the approach to in-work support, given challenges identified with participants not wanting to reveal their situation to an employer.

- Commission evaluation and learning partners as part of early service development to allow formative learning.

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.