

Developing strong working relationships with Jobcentre Plus

A lot of work has gone into developing borough and Jobcentre Plus (JCP) relationships which has resulted in some mature and effective partnerships. However, not all have reached that state and against a backdrop of up-coming challenges, such as the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) and a further reduction to the benefit cap, some relationships will need to develop further.

In response, JCP provided a secondee to London Councils to undertake a review of services. The review aims to increase the level of and improve the nature of partnership working between the boroughs and JCP in London. Its objective was to ensure that working between JCP and the boroughs is systematic, reduces duplication and results in better employment outcomes for Londoners. London Councils is now considering an action plan with JCP to take the relevant recommendations forward.

The findings included in this report are the results of discussions with JCP London District Managers, Senior Operations managers, Partnership and Relations Managers, JCP London and the Home Counties Group leads on Troubled Families, Universal Support and Partnership team. A borough survey was issued, and completed through Heads of Regeneration and visits undertaken to boroughs job brokerage services and where co-located “hubs” are in place with JCP. Finally, input was gathered from sub-regional partnerships and providers of employment services.

The following activities were reviewed as part of the programme:

- **Flexible Support Fund Grant Funding**
- **Troubled Families employment provision**
- **Partnership working – relationships, forums and boards**
- **Benefit cap**
- **Universal Support – delivering locally (US-dl)**
- **Partnership working and agreements**

The review found that there are examples of very good and close working relationships; equally there are examples where joint working is not the norm and relationships are poor. The review set out a series of recommendations aimed at improving joint working.

Summary of recommendations

Flexible Support Fund and cross borough working	There needs to be a clearer understanding of provision that JCP procures through the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) to ensure local provision adds value.
	Systematic feedback should be given on all unsuccessful FSF bids.
	There should be more focus on filling the right provision not pushing what is available.
	Boroughs and JCP should work together to identify gaps in local provision that FSF should fill.
	JCP should involve boroughs in co-commissioning of FSF, where appropriate.
	FSF should also be used flexibly across borough/JCP boundaries and in future should be used across groups of boroughs.
Troubled Families	JCP should consider relevant managers having a ‘Leadership Key Work

Employment Advisers	Objective', which supports greater TFEA/ borough relationships and understanding at the operational level.
	Establish a sub-regional meeting between CLG/JCP/boroughs to discuss joint funding opportunities/ funding alignment to support Troubled Families and the social justice agenda.
	Establish a Senior Leaders Quarterly Networking Meeting which would be attended by borough Directors, JCP District Managers, Work Services Director, to discuss areas of good practise/hotspots.
Partnership working – relationships, forum and boards	JCP to consider and review current borough and district based partnership forums, such as Customer Relations Groups. Existing forums will not always meet the requirement going forward.
	JCP to identify ways to communicate changes in key JCP personnel clearly and quickly to boroughs.
	Boroughs prioritise the meetings they need JCP representatives to attend, as the numerous and varied forums and boards are demanding on JCP resource and hinders consistency of membership on both sides.
	More cross-borough/district networking is needed to improve communications and provide consistent attendance at meetings at a strategic level. Use of the current borough sub-regional groups would provide a helpful vehicle for JCP.
Benefit cap	Improved data share, on scans/assessments and review. Until clear guidance is in place, the use of secondments/co-location/outreach will assist by being able to hold regular case conferencing.
	More co-location is needed, in the right place, with people with the right skills, such as an overview of benefit knowledge. These JCP staff should receive up skilling on welfare reform and an overview on benefits to enable advice to be given, prior to co-location with boroughs.
	Give co-located advisers the ability to close Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claims which would reduce footfall and telephony traffic at the Jobcentres and hubs. At present the advisers do not have access to the system to action and rely on contacting benefit delivery centres to action, increasing time delays and resulting in "another hand-off"
Partnership agreements	JCP to consider its approach towards developing partnership agreements with boroughs in the future. This should be consistent across London with specific actions plans, review and evaluation. They need to include key stakeholders, such as Work Programme providers, colleges and voluntary sector organisations, building the good practice identified here.
	The future partnership agreements with boroughs should encompass the social justice agenda, in particular with Troubled Families as a high priority in terms of working practises, alongside collaboration on Section 106 vacancies etc.

Flexible Support Fund (FSF) and cross borough working:

The large majority of boroughs use FSF, although few have co-commissioned with JCP. The feedback suggests many are interested and planning to do so across borough/JCP boundaries. However, almost 80% of boroughs stated they had no input to the specification before JCP advertised. When input was gathered from boroughs, it was in the main through JCP borough Partnership Managers/Relationship Managers. FSF is utilised to address gaps in provision. However, these are not always shared across borough and JCP boundaries. The FSF submission feedback also was found to be inadequate and in many cases informal and not specific.

The FSF process operates within JCP boundaries and consequently does not always match growth areas across boroughs. In one example in West London, JCP District boundaries resulted

in claimants not always receiving the same level of service or access to provision as those in South London, as access to FSF was dependant on where the benefits were being claimed. It was also evident, in some cases, that ownership of opportunities by a JCP district impacted on access to referrals for residents who were claiming benefits at a Jobcentre outside their borough.

Sub-regional partnerships were shown to be key players in leading on cross-borough issues, such as Central London Forward's employment training programmes which covered eight boroughs over three JCP districts.

Recommendations

1. There needs to be a clearer understanding of provision that JCP procures through FSF to ensure local provision adds value; this will avoid duplication and fill the current gaps. This can be achieved by:
 - Boroughs and JCP should work together to identify gaps in local provision that FSF should fill.
 - JCP to involve boroughs in co-commissioning of FSF, where appropriate.
 - FSF should be used flexibly across borough/JCP boundaries and in future should be used across groups of boroughs, building on the two Growth Deal pilot projects in the Growth Boroughs and West London Alliance. This would ensure Londoners living in a borough yet claiming benefits at a Jobcentre outside their borough receive the same opportunities and treatment.
2. Focussed provision: There should be more focus on filling the right provision not pushing what is available. Feedback from the boroughs suggested that specific opportunities were being pushed as available, yet this support perhaps did not always meet the customers' needs. Co-commissioning between boroughs and JCP on FSF could mitigate this.
3. Feedback should be systematically given on all unsuccessful FSF bids.

Supporting Troubled Families:

The review looked at how boroughs were working with JCP in providing employment support to the Troubled Families programme. The government, via CLG, has committed to a new Troubled Families Programme over the next five years. DWP has committed to provide Troubled Families Employment Advisers (TFEA) in each London borough.

There is a need for improved collaboration within boroughs, so their teams are not working in silos. Examples were found where Troubled Families Employment Advisers (TFEAs) were embedded in a family intervention team with youth offending and family services, yet social services were not aware of the employment services delivered via the TFEA. There is no clear guidance on data sharing arrangements; therefore JCP/DWP staff and boroughs are wary of breaching data security guidelines. No evidence was found of joint networking meetings with JCP/CLG/boroughs on a regular basis, different meetings are held without relevant stakeholders attending which means information is diluted once cascaded.

Recommendations

1. JCP should consider relevant managers having a 'Leadership Key Work Objective', which supports greater TFEA/ borough relationships and understanding at the operational level.
2. Establish a sub-regional meeting between CLG/JCP/boroughs to discuss joint funding opportunities/ funding alignment to support Troubled Families and the social justice agenda.
3. Establish a Senior Leaders Quarterly Networking Meeting which would be attended by borough Directors, JCP District Managers, Work Services Director, to discuss areas of good practise/hotspots.

Partnership working – relationships, forum and boards

The review looked at collaborative working/co-location between the boroughs, JCP and other stakeholders. The review additionally looked at where boroughs/JCP relations could be improved. The review looked at what forums or boards were in place and whether at operational or strategic level.

The responses received showed numerous examples of close working, especially at operational level with JCP Partnership Managers. Partnership Managers are in general experienced and have been working with the same boroughs for a considerable time. However, at a strategic level the boroughs are hindered with the numerous senior management changes at that level within JCP, with only five of eighteen JCP operational managers covering the same boroughs in the last 6 months. This results in a lack of consistency at boards and forums and the changes in approach by JCP that causes concern. The high level of turnover has made it difficult to build effective working relationships between boroughs and JCP.

Recommendations

1. JCP to consider and review current borough and district based partnership forums, such as Customer Relations Groups. Existing forums will not always meet the requirement going forward.
2. JCP to identify ways to communicate changes in key JCP personnel clearly and quickly to boroughs.
3. Boroughs prioritise the meetings they need JCP representatives to attend as often the numerous and varied forums and boards are demanding on JCP resource and hinders consistency of membership on both sides.
4. More cross-borough/district networking is needed to improve communications and provide consistent attendance at meetings at a strategic level. Use of the current borough sub-regional groups would provide a helpful vehicle for JCP.

Benefit cap

The review looked at the effectiveness of borough and JCP joint working around the benefit cap.

JCP/borough working in partnership was critical to the success in providing employment support to people affected by the benefit cap. Partnership working provided a seamless service and excellent joint targeting of households. Boroughs felt though that software and skills needed to be improved for outreach/co-located staff from JCP. Evidence shows that lack of knowledge of family circumstances and/or network support and intervention can lead to inaccurate assessment of needs by JCP advisors (and others across the network), which in turn led to inaccurate support packages and at times unnecessary use of sanctions. This is leading to the perception from families that visiting JCP is a disempowering / punitive experience. Silo working was also identified as the cause of this problem, and where effective local joint working was implemented with JCP this led to a bespoke response for specific complex family's cases, and resulted in improved outcomes for the individuals concerned.

Recommendations

1. Improved data share guidance on scans/assessments and review. Until clear guidance is in place the use of secondments/co-location/outreach will assist by being able to hold regular case conferencing.
2. More co-location is needed, in the right place, with people with the right skills, such as an overview of benefit knowledge. Co-located JCP staff should receive up skilling on welfare reform and an overview on benefits to enable advice to be given, prior to co-location with boroughs.
3. Give co-located advisers the ability to close JSA claims which would reduce footfall and telephony traffic at the Jobcentres and hubs. At present the advisers do not have access to the system to action and rely on contacting benefit delivery centres to action, increasing time delays and resulting in "another hand-off" for clients.

Universal Support – Delivering Locally:

The review looked at whether there was joint development of the Universal Support – Delivering Locally (USDL) pilots.

The approach by JCP and boroughs on the lead up to UC varies considerably. There was some strong evidence of cross-borough working with JCP, such as in Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark where they have carried out extensive mapping of pre-Work Programme provision. In several other locations the approach was more a watching brief with no mapping being undertaken, or carried out independently. It was also evident that the leads within the boroughs are held in different places. London has three of the eleven national pilots.

Partnership agreements

The review looked to identify good practice from both boroughs and JCP on developing partnership agreements and to apply this to their future development. These agreements were only introduced in London and the Home Counties JCP Group. The aim of the agreements was to focus on specific claimant cohorts and look at how joint action could be taken to reduce unemployment, such as 18-24 year olds or in specific deprived wards.

JCP/borough agreements are, in the majority, in place. They were initially introduced and driven by JCP Operations and Partnership Managers. However, there has been turnover in those JCP staff that were originally responsible for the agreements. The agreements assisted both boroughs and JCP in focusing on specific claimant cohorts, i.e. 18-24 year olds or people living in deprived wards. The quality of the agreements varied – for some, objectives were not always reviewed or action planned, and they contained few or no measures. Some were not strategic, measurable and with no buy-in from other key stakeholders, such as colleges and Work Programme providers. There were some good agreements. These were used to build on US-dl mapping and then looking forward to FSF co-commissioning and included more tangible and visible measurements.

Recommendations

1. JCP to consider its approach towards developing partnership agreements with boroughs in the future. This best practice should be consistent across London with specific actions plans, review and evaluation. They need to include key stakeholders, such as Work Programme providers, colleges and voluntary sector organisations, building the good practice identified here.
2. The future partnership agreements with boroughs should encompass the social justice agenda, in particular with Troubled Families as a high priority in terms of working practices, alongside collaboration on Section 106 vacancies etc.

Conclusion

The review on the partnership working clearly shows it is improving although still patchy for all reasons provided. Relationships at a strategic level are hindered by the churn within the organisations, mainly in JCP, and could be improved with better handling in communications as often change happens at pace. The implementation of partnership agreements has been a significant factor on improving the way in which gaps in provision are being addressed. Relationships at operational level are in the main excellent with JCP Partnership Managers playing a key role in all aspects of this reports remit. Co-location, initially on the benefit cap, now with secondments focusing on the wider welfare reform agenda are key with the anticipated introduction of Universal Support – delivering locally for UC.

The next step is London Councils to consider developing an action plan with JCP to take the relevant recommendations forward