

The ESF project in numbers

230

participants

62

customers found work

53

are still in work

0.6%

Oxford's JSA rate

£197,699

DHP awarded

500

DHP applications

447

DHP awards made

3

job fairs organised

2,000+

people attended job fairs

288

referrals made to partners

£728,856

Projected NHS savings and increased earnings by customers

Executive Summary

The aims of the project were to support unemployed and underemployed local people to find work or to increase their working hours, and to develop a comprehensive network of local delivery partners. In doing this, the project also aimed to establish an operational and sustainable Local Support Services Framework (LSSF, now called **Universal Support – delivered locally**), as envisaged by the government's programme of welfare reforms and in preparation for the introduction of Universal Credit.

The project was managed and delivered by the council's Welfare Reform Team ("the team"), building on the learning of the successful Universal Credit LA Led pilot run in 2013-14. We are now using the learning from the project to inform service planning and to help us make improvements to the service we deliver to our customers.

Results and key lessons

Results

A total of 230 residents participated in the project. 62 of the participants found work or materially increased their hours of work during the project.

27% of project customers found sustainable work, against a project target of 20%. The overwhelming majority (85%) of these were still in work at the end of the project. The project supported the team's wider aims, as 81 project customers who were benefit capped had the cap removed – with 49% of these because working tax credit was awarded.

The **Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)** estimates that savings to the NHS and increased individual earnings mean that the total public value added by customers moving into work was £728,856.

Data analysis by the **University of Oxford** showed that customers who had been unemployed for between six months and a year were six times more likely to find work as a result of support provided. It also showed that the higher a customer's weekly housing benefit shortfall, the less likely they were to find a job. Both these findings contradict conventional wisdom.

Customer feedback

We sent final evaluation surveys to project customers and delivery partners. 86% of customers who responded said the support we provided was useful or very useful. Customers were mostly very appreciative of our support, and identified ongoing payment of discretionary housing payment (DHP) as the major way we could improve our service.

The loss of fixed-term staff and changes to DHP eligibility criteria meant that we stopped paying DHP and providing support to many customers as the project ended. We now recognise that this represented a cliff edge to these customers that they

found very difficult to cope with, and that we should have made better project exit plans for them.

Partnerships

It would not have been possible to deliver the project or achieve the range of outcomes we did without our partners. This project involved a significant expansion of our partnership network and this is an important legacy of **European Social Fund (ESF)** funding. 288 customer referrals were made to our partners during the project.

Existing key partnerships supported project delivery through the network of job clubs run by **Aspire** and debt advice provided by a dedicated money adviser at **Oxford Citizens Advice Bureau**. During the project, we identified the need for better mental health support as a key need for our customers and negotiated a six month contract for a **Restore** employment coach to work with the team. We also commissioned the **Workers Educational Association** to deliver bespoke training for our customers.

In particular, the project provided a step change in our relationship with **Jobcentre Plus (JCP)**. This was largely due to having a member of **JCP** staff seconded into the team for most of the project, which allowed for a better mutual understanding of our roles, better information sharing and an improved support offer to customers. We continue to work with **JCP** to organise job fairs and in wider partnership with the **DWP** as Universal Credit is rolled out.

93% of partners described their working relationship with us as good or excellent. Partners reported that our referrals were usually appropriate and communications were effective. Issues around the effectiveness of some referrals or patchy relations with a few partners could have been resolved with better two-way communication and a renewed commitment to joint working.

Job fairs

The development of job fairs was a major service initiative during the project. We worked in partnership with **JCP** to organise two job fairs in Oxford Town Hall. We shared the learning from these events with **Aspire** and **Renaissance Coaching**, who then took the lead with **JCP** in putting on community job fairs in Barton and Blackbird Leys¹. We continue to provide logistical and marketing support to our partners, and to attend job fairs to promote the work of the team.

We have learned from the job fair experience, and improvements to the way they are organised include commissioning pre-job fair workshops to prepare customers to apply for jobs at events, briefings to employers to promote engagement with customers, providing digital access and support at events so that customers can apply for jobs online and on the day, and better social media marketing.

More than 2,000 people have now attended job fairs. Feedback given by attendees highlights the continued need for **JCP** to attract employers whose vacancies are relevant to customer needs and skills, and to invite support services which can help customers to develop the right skills to fill these jobs.

¹ The Blackbird Leys job fair was organised after the end of the project.

Other key lessons

We did not achieve the target of supporting 120 customers into work although the proportion of project customers supported into work (27%) was significantly higher than the project bid (20%). We made assumptions about future project customers based on the limited experience of working with private sector tenants affected by the benefit cap and on an incomplete understanding of Oxford's labour market.

A significant fall in Oxford's Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimant count also meant that there were far fewer potential participants than originally envisaged.

Many new housing benefit claimants were able to move from job to job without support, and customers in the project often had multiple barriers to work which meant we couldn't deliver high volume results in short timescales. Customers told us that the lack of suitable childcare was their most significant barrier to finding work.

In many cases, support services we wanted to refer customers to were already funded by the **ESF**. Rules on double funding meant that we couldn't include them in the project or that we had to negotiate with the other service about which of us would own those customers for **ESF** purposes.

Several changes were made to the scope of the project to try and reach the initial target, and this posed a number of risks. It risked diluting the key message of support for private rented sector tenants, and the temptation to chase the target meant that the quality of service sometimes suffered – for instance, when we were temporarily forced to pause new referrals into the project because we could not cope with the volume of new referrals.

Changes to the project also meant that it would come into conflict with the DHP policy when the project ended in June 2015. A 44% cut in the **DWP** DHP grant in 2015/16 meant that we had to restrict DHP eligibility, and were no longer able to support most customers without children or with the unsustainable benefit shortfalls typically found in Oxford's private rented sector.

Context

Whereas the LA Led pilot had focused mainly on customers affected by the introduction of the bedroom tax and the benefit cap, the project also identified people affected by a shortfall in their housing benefit attributable to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate - a particularly severe problem in Oxford, a city with extremely high private sector rental costs.

With housing benefit rates falling behind increasing private sector rents there is a growing need to find sustainable methods of paying rising rents and maintaining tenancies. Reducing reliance on housing benefit through finding work, improving personal budgeting and financial management skills, addressing barriers to work, and claiming other benefits or tax credits are just some of the potential outcomes that can materially improve customers' situations.

The key areas covered by the evaluation document are as follows:

Partnerships

This section outlines how we identified participants' support and training needs and how we then expanded our existing network of delivery partners to reflect the demands of our customers.

The support and services provided by key partners in the project are detailed and we describe how the adjustments that were made as we identified shifts in the needs of a growing group of participants.

The Customer Journey

A detailed outline of how customers interacted with the team, the pathways available within the project to participants, and on referrals to training and support partners.

This section includes an aggregated profile of the project group of participants' including barriers to work, length of unemployment, skills needed, level of formal qualifications, and confidence in finding employment within three months.

The utilisation of DHPs and organising city wide job fairs were key service initiatives developed and delivered in the project to participants and other team customers.

Finally, there are a series of customer stories setting out customers' circumstances, their journey through the project and activities undertaken, and their outcomes.

Marketing and Communications

This section outlines the range of communications tools and activities undertaken at the start and continuing across the length of the project, including physical (flyers, posters, and banners), traditional, digital, and social media.

Project Performance and Documentation

Measuring and reporting activities and participant outcomes was a requirement of the original project submission, evidencing the project, submitting management information, progress reports, and making quarterly claims. This section outlines how the project was documented, and how project performance was reported.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

How we used a range of quantitative and qualitative data collected during and after the project for this evaluation. This section explains some of the quantitative results of the results and the wider outcomes and lessons learned during and on completion of the project.

This is an evaluation of Oxford City Council's LSSF pilot project. The project was funded by the ESF Department of the DWP under Priority 1 of the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective 2007-2013 and co-funded by Oxford City Council.

The project commenced in May 2014 and ran until the end of June 2015.