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Social work support for employment of people with learning disabilities: findings from the English Jobs First demonstration sites

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Abstract

Summary

This article brings together two key themes in recent public policy in England affecting social work practice: the value of having a paid job for social inclusion and increasing self-worth, and the personalisation of public services. The article draws on a mixed method evaluation of Jobs First, which was a government funded demonstration site project that aimed to show how personal budgets (a key mechanism for personalisation) could be used by people with learning disabilities, often with their families, to purchase employment support. The evaluation involved secondary analysis of case record data and 142 semi-structured interviews with a wide range of participants (we mainly draw on 79 interviews with professionals for this article). Jobs First is placed within the frame of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP).

Findings

The attitudes of social workers to Jobs First were broadly positive, which was an important factor supporting employment outcomes. However, social workers' involvement was often

limited to a coordinating role, undertaking basic assessments linked to resource allocation and ensuring that support plans, which had often been developed by non-social work practitioners, were 'signed off' or agreed by the local authority.

Applications

The study points to important elements of the role of social workers in this new field of practice and explores potential tensions that might emerge. It highlights a continuing theme that social workers are playing more of a coordinating, managing role, rather than working directly with individuals to support their choices.

Introduction

Having a job has increasingly become identified as a qualifying condition for citizenship, according to the policy documents and political rhetoric of the UK and other governments across the developed world (Rauch and Dornette, 2010; Patrick, 2012). This potentially increases problems for people with learning disabilities, who face particular difficulties in gaining and keeping employment, and potentially could increase marginalisation (Baldwin, 2006). Several initiatives by the English Department of Health (DH) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have been put in place to promote employment of people with learning disabilities. A demonstration site project called Jobs First was one of these initiatives. This article reports on part of the evaluation of Jobs First, (Stevens and Harris, 2013).

The project termed Jobs First aimed to increase the numbers of people with moderate to severe learning disabilities, who were all eligible for publicly funded social care, in employment.

This was to be achieved by setting employment as the primary goal of social care intervention in five participating local authority sites. The project was announced in *Valuing Employment Now*, (DH, 2009) and supported by the DH team responsible for this policy, suggesting a high level of government enthusiasm for this goal at that time. Jobs First also chimes with personalisation of adult social care and other public services, a dominating theme of policy and practice over many years (Stevens et al, 2011). Personal budgets are key means of delivering personalisation in adult social care. This approach may replace care services with a cash budget managed by the person or their family. Personal budgets can also be managed by social workers, who work with people and their families to make decisions about how to use the resources available. One main aim of the project was to demonstrate whether and how people with learning disabilities could use their personal budgets to pay for help to find a job, get to it, do the work and help with any other practical or support needs, a process sometimes known as job coaching.

Jobs First can be seen as a particular kind of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP). This is a term applied to policies implemented across many countries that aim to increase participation in paid employment and reduce reliance on welfare benefits (the degree of emphasis on these twin aims varies from country to country). These policies tend to involve a mix of support and compulsion (Newman, 2007). In the UK ALMP has been noted as having taken a more 'work first' approach, with lower levels of welfare benefits, tighter conditions on their receipt and less emphasis on support. While a wide range of support is available for disabled people, increasingly strict criteria are being placed on eligibility for disability related welfare benefits.

Social workers in England have typically focused on supporting decision-making and finding ways to assist people to achieve goals, or to identify suitable sources of support to maintain quality of life. For people with learning disabilities, social work practice and services have traditionally been concerned with empowerment and increasing 'inclusion' in society, using methods such as person-centred-planning (Cambridge, 2008), often drawing upon different anti-oppressive frameworks (Baldwin, 2006). Since the closure of long-stay mental handicap hospitals in the 1960s - 1980s, many studies have illustrated different approaches to improving social inclusion in leisure and social activities (Forrester-Jones et al, 2006). A critique has been developed about the roles of social work in overcoming exclusion, through creating special community based services, and focussing too much on meeting individual needs (Zaviršek, 2009) at the expense of addressing structural elements. This echoes the debate between a micro individual approach and a focus on challenging structural factors that create and reproduce poverty and social problems (Hugman, 2009). While there have been efforts to encourage people with learning disabilities to gain employment for many years (Beyer and Kilsby, 1996), Jobs First represented a change in the priority given to employment. However, an interpretation of ALMP that emphasises support towards employability might be seen as a logical development, enabling social workers to think about working with people to support them in operating as full citizens, through employment where possible.

In many European countries social workers are implementing ALMP through agencies such as the Belgian *Public Centre for Social Welfare* or German *Jobcenters* (Künzel, 2012; Raeymaekers

and Dierkx, 2012). These organisations are the equivalent of Jobcentre Plus in the UK.

Raeymaekers and Dierkx (2012) describe how approaches taken by social workers in these agencies vary between a narrow focus on applying pressure on people to take any job and stop claiming welfare benefits and a broader objective, in which 'their goal is to promote the (re)integration of the client into society' (p2). In the UK, Jobcentre Plus workers are not social workers. Their approaches appear to focus more on getting someone to take any job, with other kinds of support being reduced (Etherington and Ingold, 2012). While these authors note that Danish policy has also introduced more workfare like elements, the UK has developed much more coercive measures than most other European countries (Daguerre and Etherington, 2009). As a result of this conceptual, organisational and occupational difference in ALMP, UK social workers might be expected to find the idea of refocusing social work and social care intervention on employment to be potentially oppressive of disabled people. This article explores the responses of social workers and their role in supporting people with learning disabilities to get paid employment, in the Jobs First sites. The Discussion section makes some suggestions on how this understanding may improve employment outcomes. It concludes with a consideration of implications for social workers in the light of the emphasis on employment as a goal of public policy and as a route to full citizenship.

Jobs First Evaluation

Jobs First ran from April 2010 to October 2011 (the project had been extended to allow for a slow start), six months after the *Valuing Employment Now* policy team had been disbanded.

Five local authorities volunteered to take part in Jobs First. In each site, a cohort of 20 people

with learning disabilities was to be selected, for whom social work and social care interventions, particularly in support planning for the use of personal budgets, were to be refocused on employment. Participating sites appointed a 'Jobs First Lead', a senior manager (usually a service manager or head of service) to lead the project locally. The numbers of social workers directly involved varied from site to site. One site allocated this work to a small number of interested social workers who undertook the majority of the work, although others were involved in selecting potential Jobs First candidates. In others, larger numbers of social workers worked on the project, identifying candidates, undertaking initial reviews and support planning. Social workers' roles were focused on working through the process, and then supporting the purchase of employment support from the independent sector, or referral to in-house employment services. In still other sites, initial reviews and some elements of support planning were delegated to social care workers (e.g. day service staff).

In January 2010, the Department of Health commissioned the Social Care Workforce Research Unit to undertake an independent evaluation of Jobs First. The evaluation design involved a comparison and an implementation strand. The first strand compared the employment outcomes and support needs of people with learning disabilities using Jobs First with a group of people in the same sites who received standard services, matched for key characteristics. Case record information on employment outcomes and services received was requested from participating sites at the point of entry into the project and again near the end of the evaluation and any changes over time examined. This article draws on the second strand of the evaluation, which explored the implementation of Jobs First. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken

with 109 participants, including 27 social workers. We interviewed the Jobs First Leads (n=9) and people with learning disabilities (n=25) twice, making 142 interviews. This articles draws mainly on the interviews with professionals (n=79), to provide their perspectives on the social work role in employment focused personalised support (table 1).

Table 1: Interviews by role

Role of participant	Totals	
	Number of Interviews (Number of Participants)	
Jobs First Lead Round 1*	9	(10)
Jobs First Lead Round 2*	9	
Social workers	11	
Unqualified care managers	6	
Senior Manager*	6	
Job coach	12	
Employment Service Manager	8	
DH Lead Round 1	1	(1)
DH Lead Round 2	1	
Paid care worker/support worker	14	
National Adviser	2	
Total professional interviews	79	
People with learning disabilities Round 1	26	(26)
People with learning disabilities Round 2	24	
Family Carer	13	
Total People with learning disabilities and carer interviews	63	
Total Interviews (no. people interviewed)	142	(109)

Interviews were mainly undertaken face to face, with a small number by telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, with permission. Thematic analysis was undertaken. Transcripts were entered into N-Vivo. The initial stage of the analysis included a mixture of open and theoretical coding. Two members of the research team read a small

number of transcripts, and developed a coding frame that was structured initially around the interview guides, which followed a relatively regular pattern. Data were coded by the researchers, during which time the coding frame developed, through a mutual checking and discussion. Resources and difficulties accessing participants prevented substantial participant validation, although several participants commented on and amended some of the quotes used. Text coded at each node was read and re-coded into overarching themes, which were then related to the main themes of the evaluation.

Ethical permissions and considerations

The Social Care Research Ethics Committee approved the study (Ref: 10/IEC08/20) and the five sites granted permissions for the research to take place locally. All interview participants were given information sheets and asked to sign consent forms. 'Easy read' materials were developed for people with learning disabilities. Sites identified people with learning disabilities and their family carers, and permission was sought to pass on their details to the research team. At this point, a sessional researcher we employed to undertake the interviews with people with learning disabilities and their families contacted potential participants and secured informed consent. This process was repeated for the second round interviews. Interviews were recorded, with specific permission, and transcribed (the transcriber had signed a confidentiality agreement). Transcripts were anonymised by removing names of interviewees, places and references to other people. Lists of interviewee details and the evaluation codes were kept securely on passworded files.

The sessional researcher, a very experienced social worker, has worked with people with learning disabilities for several decades. The people interviewed were all judged by the local authority and by the interviewer to have capacity to consent to take part in the study. Some of the interviews were undertaken with family carers present, which created a potential issue of confidentiality, but as this was the choice of the person with learning disabilities, we deemed this was acceptable.

In the following sections, we explore the attitudes and approaches taken by social workers as reported in the Jobs First evaluation, to illustrate the response to the move towards an ALMP applied to people with learning disabilities. A mixture of job titles was used by social workers in the five sites, with many being termed care managers, but most of these were social workers. In addition, the managers leading the project in each site (the 'Jobs First Leads'), were all social workers: they were key informants for the study, being interviewed twice. For simplicity of expression and to aid confidentiality we refer to social workers or Jobs First Leads throughout the findings section. In referring to social care workers, we mean people employed as support workers or similar, most of whom were not professionally qualified.

Jobs First outcomes

At baseline, five people in the Jobs First cohort (out of 52 for whom we had this data) were in paid jobs or self-employment. At follow-up, 15 people in the Jobs First cohort (25% of the 60 for whom we had this data) were working or self-employed. However, this represents 18% of the total number of people we had data for at some point (n=83) which represents only 7.5% of the original planned cohort. No one in the Comparison Group was working or self-employed at

baseline or follow-up. Certainly, within the people included in our study, even accounting for those for whom we did not have data at baseline, there was a higher rate of employment. However given the lack of data at both time points, it is hard to interpret whether this actually represents a higher overall employment rate for the Jobs First cohort. The median weekly personal budget for the Jobs First cohort was £325 compared with £385 for the comparison group. There was no statistically significant difference between the costs for the two groups, nor between those in work or not in work.

Themes emerging from the interview data

Two overarching themes were most important in the analysis of interview data. First was the importance of attitudes towards the idea of supporting people with learning disabilities into work. Within this were themes relating to a balance of focus on employment in the light of other social care needs and the legitimacy of using social care funding for employment support. Second, was the change in practice orientation required in supporting employment. Themes emerged relating to eligibility, initial discussions, support planning and brokerage.

Social workers' and care workers' attitudes towards social work and social care support for employment of people with learning disabilities

Attitudes of social workers were identified by managers in both rounds of interviews as being pivotal to getting more people with learning disabilities into paid jobs. Where social workers were enthusiastic, this was very influential and where enthusiasm was low, it was thought to form a serious impediment to supporting people with learning disabilities to get paid jobs, as

illustrated by a Jobs First Lead, in the second round, and by a social care worker from another site:

The three social workers we've got that have been really influential, and I think they have managed to influence their teams as well, and we are getting some positive outcomes and feedback from this.

Jobs First Lead MS02 R2

Care management used to turn up to meetings, but it was about, 'I'm listening to what you are saying, but I'm not really going to do anything to support it' ...It was always just an extra something else to do on top of the day job.

Social Care worker MS19

Many social workers expressed positive attitudes about the benefits of employment for people with learning disabilities, extolling the value of work as creating an 'ordinary life' (Social Worker MS30), increasing confidence, self-worth and community presence and economic benefits:

We put people in 'boxes' in day centres and then leisure activity. But that doesn't necessarily give the long term benefits of having a job, for instance, which can have a lot of social components and economic components and internal self-worth and all the rest.

Social Worker MS16

However, enthusiasm in relation to the value and possibility of employment for people with learning disabilities varied between sites. Given that local authorities have more direct control over social workers than over independent sector social care workers, it had been possible for the local authority to issue directions that the social workers were to refocus their approach on employment. Nonetheless, it was reported by Jobs First Leads that some were doing this without a great deal of enthusiasm:

A lot of people still think it's token. It's partly because they are not seeing enough results for people. I think a lot of social workers do it because it's now an expectation as opposed to a belief. I hear reports that a lot of our day service staff think it's an unreasonable expectation of people.

Jobs First Lead JH01 R2

In addition to social workers, the enthusiasm (or otherwise) of social care workers (e.g support workers) was felt to be a very important factor affecting employment outcomes. These workers were identified as being crucial in creating a positive (or negative) climate, supporting individuals to get and keep jobs. Practical support with ensuring someone was up in the morning and appropriately dressed, ready to leave home at the right time for work every day, was felt to be critical to success:

It is really important that if someone is needing to get to work for 9 am that they have the required support to organise travel arrangements / bus routes and general support to prepare for the working day.

Jobs First Lead MS06 R2

However, some social care workers were identified as lacking a belief in the employability of people with learning disabilities, partly as a result of the belief that a person would not be able to achieve expressed goals:

When the person started to talk about wanting to run their own business and have their own kind of aspiration. I think for the care staff they find that very hard to appreciate that, and feel that was a real option for him and felt that it was a bit pie in the sky. They felt it was just so overly ambitious that it was never going to happen.

Jobs First Lead MS06

How far to prioritise employment

Social workers in the study did not argue for any kind of coercion to be applied to people with learning disabilities to get jobs. However, there was a sense that some kind of expectation on people with learning disabilities to get a job was appropriate. One social worker's statement (below) summarised this tentative flirting with the idea of a more pressured response to people with learning disabilities working. In our view, the phrase 'everyone should work' implies a

moral imperative, which might start to permit a more sanction based approach. However the qualification added by the social worker 'have the opportunity to work', suggests a commitment to the value of work as a positive development in individuals' lives:

... I believe everyone should work, really. Have the opportunity to work at least.

Social Worker JH17

Safeguarding vulnerable people from abuse and the sheer pressure of completing reviews and meeting basic hygiene and personal care were identified as dominating social workers' attention, making it harder to encourage thinking about supporting people with learning disabilities into paid jobs:

.. I think it's not that the willingness is not there, it's just 'How do we do this?' We are just so bogged down with day to day reviews, with safeguarding, etc., that we don't even have time to think about what you are asking us to think about.

Jobs First Lead JH02 R1

Furthermore there was a strong theme from the professionals we interviewed throughout the pilot that those wanting to get jobs would need to sacrifice previous aspects of support, particularly leisure activities, for example, going bowling with a paid support worker. Such a sacrifice or replacement was perceived as positive and appropriate within the Jobs First approach, because of the shifting expectations about a focus on paid work, not leisure, and reductions in day services being made by local authorities. Interestingly, none of the people

with learning disabilities identified the replacement as a problem. One Jobs First Lead predicted, in a second round interview, that for young people moving into adulthood there would now be less money to pay for leisure activities, but more for employment, which would start to become an expectation among this new cohort:

... young people coming through to transition (to adult services) with it being much clearer that there isn't the level of funding for leisure services and leisure activities that there once was. And that there will be an expectation that their support would be limited, but employment support I'd hope would be (there).

Jobs First Lead JH01 R2

This illustrates another hint of pressure to engage in employment seeking, as the alternative sources of support were being reduced.

Legitimacy of using social care budgets to fund employment support

There was a general view amongst Jobs First Leads in the second round interviews, also expressed by a small number of other professional participants, that supported employment services for people with learning disabilities should be provided by the DWP through the Work Programme and Work Choice. However, many of these professionals considered that these DWP programmes were not meeting the needs of people with moderate to severe learning disabilities because of time restrictions and insufficient intensive support:

We got the individual on a Work Choice programme. But when it's explained enough from the Jobcentre Plus end we found that they don't seem to have the intensive support that is needed like [Local supported employment provider] would.

Social Worker MS31

The process and practicalities of employment-related support

The main role played by frontline social workers in the Jobs First sites where there was an increasing focus on employment for people with learning disabilities covered mainstream tasks such as establishing eligibility; assessing need; developing support plans; arranging personal budgets, ensuring plans were agreed by managers (referred to as being 'signed off'); but also new tasks such as brokering or arranging and finding employment support (help to look for and obtain paid employment, learn the job and manage the social relationships required). Social workers in some sites were involved in all of these tasks, although in others, they were undertaken by other professionals. In one site, a specialist support planning and brokerage team was staffed by social workers and care managers, whereas in other areas these tasks were incorporated into the routine tasks of social work teams.

Employment affecting eligibility

It is important to note that the original criteria for participation in Jobs First was that the person with learning disabilities had to have been assessed as eligible for publicly funded social care services and eligible for a personal budget. Thus the assessment processes under section 47 of the National Health Service (NHS) and Community Care Act 1990 had already been undertaken

for the cohort. However, while all participants were eligible, some did not have a personal budget. Eligibility criteria are becoming more restricted (Hall and McGarroll, 2012) as a consequence of public spending cuts and increased demand. Consequently, in this context, one Jobs First Lead speculated whether someone who was considered able to undertake paid work may therefore be assessed as not eligible for publicly funded social care, which social workers are usually charged with establishing. This may have been a factor leading to some reluctance on social workers' part to engage fully with Jobs First:

One of the issues is that there is perhaps a view that if you can work, you are not that disabled. So maybe you don't have eligible needs at all.

Jobs First Lead MS04 R1

Providing information

Access to unambiguous, intelligible and comprehensive information for people with learning disabilities was identified by many professional participants as important in encouraging involvement in Jobs First. Unsurprisingly, lack of accurate information was identified as a barrier to considering the possibility of paid employment for people with learning disabilities and their family carers by several professional participants from different groups. For example, one social worker described how insufficient clarity about the local authority's charging policy, which applied to employment support in the same way as any other social care support, had led to some people feeling they had been misled, after being told about the possible support available:

You still have got to pay towards it [social care] and people feel a bit walked up the garden path with that, really. It's just important about being honest and up front from the beginning.

Social Worker MS15

Social workers' commitment to the goal of employment seemed to affect the extent of and the manner in which they passed on information to people with learning disabilities and their family carers.

Jobs Focused reviews

The initial work with people with learning disabilities in this project took a strengths based approach (Manthey, Knowles, Asher and Wahab, 2011), aiming to identify strengths and interests, and exploring possible and desirable jobs. The particular importance of working with young people quickly as they move into the remit of adult services, in order to capitalise on their enthusiasm about work, was identified by one senior manager, who felt that this could be lost quite easily:

...by the time we are meeting young people and families, they may already be quite switched off to the idea of employment, so there is a lot of undoing to turn round, which is why we've got the very targeted work around transition.

JF4 Senior Manager ZM01

This view about the need to work with young adults was reinforced by accounts of the difficulty some social workers found in raising the idea of employment with people with learning disabilities and their families where people had been using traditional services (e.g. a day service) for several years. One Jobs First Lead, in a first round interview typified comments about this from a small number of other participants:

They [social workers and social care workers] feel a bit nervous, because they are going to have to go to talk to families about employment, and it might be the first time they have ever talked about employment with the families and the person themselves. It is quite a big thing to talk about.

JF2 Jobs First Lead MS06 R1

However, many social workers and Jobs First Leads interviewed later in the project described how Jobs First made it easier to talk about employment with people with learning disabilities, their families and social care providers. For example, this social worker felt that Jobs First had built up general expectations of having a conversation about work with one member of the Jobs First cohort:

It would have been really difficult if he hadn't been in Jobs First, because we didn't have that employment agency. We wouldn't have all those things fitted together and we wouldn't have the event for the family, so that she [the carer] could be

reassured that ... it's quite an ordinary thing for him to do to be looking at work. It made it all, 'Oh, right'.

Social worker MS30

By the second round of interviews with Jobs First Leads, many participants described how employment was now being raised routinely in reviews as a serious possibility for many more people with learning disabilities. Furthermore, in some sites Jobs First had raised the expectations of people with learning disabilities and their families, both within and beyond the cohort, about the possibility of work and made for a more structured approach:

I think, I mean beyond Jobs First, yes. I think that the fact that we now have a changed expectation for people around employment and which is important. I think families also have changed expectations around employment.

Jobs First Lead MS06 R2

Support planning and brokerage for supported employment

Support planning is the point at which many of the important decisions are made about the kinds of support needed under the personal budget system and how employment can fit with a person's life. This part of the process involved analysing the support required in order to get a job, including help from family members as well as professional employment support. As noted above, different practitioners could be responsible for support planning. In one site, support planning was undertaken through a person-centred planning approach that constituted another social work role:

Then we explored who would he need to help him? Did he have anybody in his family that could help him to get into work? Did he know anybody who had a farm or whatever? It came down to well, actually, he needed some support to actually look for work. Then we said, you could be part of this pilot. Using [Local Supported Employment Provider], would you actually like to have the support service employment service to come and talk to you about what they offer? Then we arranged for them to come and see the family and talk to the individual. They explained what they did. Explained what it would look like and then we'd obviously need the social worker to get the funding, so then we do that bit.

Social Worker MS30

In another site a specialist support planning and brokerage team was staffed by a mix of social workers, support workers and other social care workers. This team undertook time-limited work with individuals solely to produce a support plan, before handing the case back to a social worker to secure funding:

Our role is solely to do with support planning brokerage. We meet up with the service user and we explore what's available and what it is they want to do and making sure that's what's being assessed, the outcome has been assessed or the outcome of Support Planning Brokerage aims to help them to meet. Once we've done the Support Plan, the Support Plan then has to go back to the allocated worker and their team manager to agree that. Because they have to agree the funding.

Support planning and brokerage team member MS17

Being able to focus more on employment in support plans was identified as a key aspect of Job First's success, where this had occurred. For example, this Jobs First Lead, in a second round interview described how being employment-focused, not trying to be 'generic' in terms of promoting a range of outcomes, had made a difference. However, there appeared to be a potential tension here between a desire to be holistic or person-centred and the need to focus on employment:

I do think why and where we've made progress is because we have been employment focused. Rather than having that broad pitch we've homed in on a specific outcome, if you like. I think that's what's been different... While we stay rather generic in our support planning approach, we still have that problem.

Jobs First Lead MS02 R2

Experiences of agreeing support plans

Once support plans were agreed with a person with learning disabilities, and often their families, the Adult Services Department had to authorise or 'sign off' the use of the money set out in the plan. This process involved decisions by some managers to fund more expensive support plans. It was only after plans had been agreed that the amount of money available was confirmed. For the Jobs First cohorts, this tended to increase the time between the initial discussion about employment and the point at which someone could begin using their money to pay for working with a job coach, especially where there was no in-house employment

service that they could access without paying at the point of use. Social workers were key figures in this process, as they presented the plans to team managers or decision making panels. There was mixed practice about signing off plans. In some sites there was a belief that Jobs First was making a difference in terms of the ease of getting plans signed off:

I think the managers were fine about signing off 16 hours a week one to one support. Whereas, in an ordinary situation, especially with someone perhaps with a mild learning disability, I don't think we, personally, I don't think we'd get allocated 16 hours with one to one support with somebody.

Social Worker MS25

As the pilot progressed, it emerged that very few support plans had been rejected, although many were delayed, sometimes simply because the support plan required more money than the indicative budget identified by the local Resource Allocation System. This made implementing support plans difficult, especially when more than one funding stream was involved.

Managers and practitioners identified further reasons for delays in signing off plans as being caused by social workers' concerns about a lack of local supported employment provision. This may have been one downside of different practitioners assessing and doing support planning: in effect the plan had to be approved by the social worker after it had been produced and then by the panel or team manager:

Within this one organisation, because there are different parts to it that work slightly in isolation, and not necessarily intentionally but just as day to day practice...They [the staff leading on the implementation of Jobs First] were the people supporting their customers who were part of the day services world, and then the care managers were over here.

Jobs First Lead MS04 R2

Unsurprisingly, delays were thought to reduce the enthusiasm of families as well as that of people with learning disabilities themselves. There were stories of individuals who had been keen to get a paid job then dropping out or changing their minds if there was too long a wait between these early conversations and identifying a Job Coach to try to find them a job:

People just become disheartened. The longer it takes the more confused people become about the purpose of the support plan, because they are having to make do with half the information.

Jobs First Lead JH01 R2

Discussion

The overall evaluation of Jobs First was equivocal in relation to success in employment outcomes, although there appeared to be substantial learning about the processes required in order to support people with learning disabilities into work. For example, reviewing practice appeared to have successfully focused more on employment, despite initial fears. While, in

principle, social workers seem supportive of employment for people with learning disabilities, they lacked confidence that paid employment is actually possible for more people with learning disabilities. It may be that positive stories and the contribution of 'champions' would be helpful in promoting different approaches and in fostering enthusiasm, and thereby improve employment outcomes. Further research could also explore if there are ways in which other professionals with whom people with learning disabilities and their families are in contact with and whom they trust (e.g. community nurses) may have supportive roles in considering employment options.

While Jobs First has not been implemented nationally, employment and personalisation, which are main aims of Jobs First are important themes in the Care Act (2014). For example, the Care Act creates a duty on local authorities to:

*... promote that individual's well-being' including **participation in work,**
education, training or recreation; (Care Act 2014: ch23-Pt1 – Para1 – emphasis
added)*

Consequently, social workers may be expected both to work through the various stages of offering and supporting personal budgets, which will increasingly be offered as direct payments, and to consider employment as a legitimate goal. This study also suggests that social workers will need to liaise with Jobcentre Plus staff and to become expert at securing a range of funding sources, if they are to support people with learning disabilities into employment.

However, it may be that less effort will be made to focus on 'Jobs First' and employment will be seen only as one of a range of possible options.

The organisational contexts within which social workers currently operate mean that time and support from senior management may be required before social workers can be effective in supporting employment as a goal. As the data suggest, one important factor was an acceptance of employment as a legitimate use of social care funding by senior adult services managers. Further research could also be undertaken to explore in more depth the attitudes of adult social care senior managers towards employment support being funded from their departmental budgets.

Overall the Jobs First process parallels social work activity around processes of direct payments, self-directed support or personal budgets. The main difference is that after the initial steps of eligibility and assessment have been undertaken, the approach refocuses attention on employment at each stage. In Jobs First social workers were less involved with support planning, but they were always central to the process of securing funding. This appears to typify current roles for local authority social workers as administrating and organising the 'business' side of support services rather than directly supporting people (Ferguson and Lavelette, 2006). Within learning disability practice this shift has been occurring since the advent of care management over 20 years ago (Cambridge, 2008). However, social workers can play a very important facilitative role in initial discussions and in championing support plans that involve employment as an outcome. Given the importance placed on support workers' and other social

care workers' attitudes, social workers could also play a valuable role in promoting the idea of employment with these crucial practitioners.

As we note in the Introduction, employment has increasingly been cast in policy statements as one of the defining qualifications for citizenship and its associated rights (Newman, 2007).

Jobs First can be seen as a particular kind of Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP), as we describe in the Introduction. The project typified ALMP in three ways. First, was the positive presentation of employment and encouragement for people with learning disabilities to adopt it as a goal. Second, was the focus on personalised approaches to individuals and the emphasis on the use of independent sector employment support. Finally, a requirement was placed on the different agencies to work across organisational boundaries and remits. However, many ALMPs involve an element of compulsion, which was almost entirely lacking in Jobs First. As reported above, there was evidence of a view that there should be some kind of expectation that people with learning disabilities should work. Furthermore, there was a suggestion that money formerly allocated to 'leisure' would only be available for employment related expenditure, thus creating pressure on people with learning disabilities to seek work, as the alternative became less attractive. If there was pressure for the Jobs First cohort it was in a very indirect form: social workers therefore were not expected to compel this group of people to seek work. Furthermore, as the target group were eligible for adult social care and had no conditions on their welfare benefits in relation to seeking work, Jobcentre Plus staff did not apply any of the coercion that was then being applied to other unemployed people.

Social work has been closely linked to the principles of the welfare state, which makes activating people for the employment market difficult, particularly if a narrow approach is taken that focuses purely on 'facilitating or forcing the transition towards the labour market' (Raeymaeckers and Dierckx, 2013: 1172). Although social work has long been associated with activation in continental Europe, in England it is far more attuned to a broad approach in which the social worker is involved in 'guiding or counselling their clients towards (re)integration into society' (Raeymaeckers and Dierckx, 2013: 1172). Jobs First illustrates such a broad approach. The emphasis in Jobs First was on empowering people with learning disabilities, supporting them to find work and on providing training and direct assistance to keep their jobs as necessary. Seen in this way it is unsurprising that social workers were generally positive about the initiative, given the long association of social work with supporting traditionally excluded groups of people to access citizenship status. The barriers social workers perceived in terms of the levels of supported employment provision and the difficulty of prioritising employment over other needs were more practical than theoretical. However, the debate over who funds employment support for people with learning disabilities remains.

Further, as Daguerre and Etherington (2009) described, while many countries have adopted a narrow, 'work first' approach to ALMP, the UK is 'clearly in the top league of countries to place increased pressure on benefit claimants' (Daguerre and Etherington, 2009: 1). If the approach to people with learning disabilities were to become more pressured, this may affect the enthusiasm of social work involvement (Raeymaeckers and Dierckx, 2013) particularly in the UK context, in which ALMP is mainly the responsibility of Jobcentre Plus staff, who are not social

workers. Indeed, the DH appears to have limited its interest in promoting employment, disbanding the Valuing Employment Now team in 2011. There appeared to be no sign that social workers in England were being drawn into implementing the more coercive elements of ALMP, in terms of applying sanctions to those failing to engage sufficiently in employment, unlike their colleagues in other countries' welfare regimes (Raeymaekers and Dierkx, 2012), in which social workers are the main professionals implementing all aspects of ALMP.

While many of the Jobs First cohort were referred to Jobcentre Plus as part of support plans, doubts were raised over the accessibility of this agency and attitudes of its staff towards people with learning disabilities. This suggests that more interdisciplinary work between social workers and Jobcentre Plus workers would be valuable in improving access to experienced and effective employment advice and support. Research exploring different understandings and barriers to this kind of joint working would be valuable. Furthermore, it will be important to increase the skills of Jobcentre Plus staff in working with people with learning disabilities, if DWP (and therefore Jobcentre Plus) is to take the lead in supporting people with learning disabilities into paid employment.

Limitations of the study

This study was limited to the five sites that took part in Jobs First, all of which had been selected as having a positive orientation towards employment for people with learning disabilities. The impact of this site selection may well have been to overestimate positive attitudes and outcomes, and thus further research is warranted to explore the impact of using personal budgets to purchase employment support . However the messages about social work

role were gleaned from interviews with a wide range of social work practitioners and managers and are less likely to have been influenced by this site selection.

Conclusion

This evaluation has highlighted the key role played by social work in supporting people with learning disabilities to get jobs. First, the importance of social work attitude and support for the idea of employment was stressed, suggesting that social workers are still very influential figures in the lives of the people they work with. This is an encouraging sign of the significance of social work in adult social care. The attitudes displayed by some social workers in the evaluation (both that work was good for people with learning disabilities and that it was something of a moral duty) supports the notion that social work, as a profession charged with implementing state policy, plays an 'educational, if not a downright moral role' (Lorenz, 2001: 596). Second, the practical role they played was often limited to initial assessment, aimed at working out a resource allocation and ensuring that support plans were accepted by local authorities for funding, although this is a necessary role. As suggested above, this continues a trend for social work with adults to be much more a coordinating, managing role, rather than working directly with individuals to support choices. Further research could usefully explore the value of different professionals taking on the various aspects of the process.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this project was given by the Social Care Research Ethics Committee, London, [Ref: 10/IEC08/20].

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Disclaimer

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Table 1: Interviews by role

Role of participant	Totals	
	Number of Interviews (Number of Participants)	
Jobs First Lead Round 1*	9	(10)
Jobs First Lead Round 2*	9	
Social workers	11	
Unqualified care managers	6	
Senior Manager*	6	
Job coach	12	
Employment Service Manager	8	
DH Lead Round 1	1	(1)
DH Lead Round 2	1	
Paid care worker/support worker	14	
National Adviser	2	
Total professional interviews	79	
People with learning disabilities Round 1	26	(26)
People with learning disabilities Round 2	24	
Family Carer	13	
Total People with learning disabilities and carer interviews	63	

Total Interviews (no. people interviewed)	14 (109)
	2

*These managers were qualified social workers