



# Shared employer engagement models

## What works

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# The ReAct Partnership

## About Us

The ReAct Partnership is a new, industry-led, active collaboration to support a continuous improvement community in the Restart programme through action research, shared and iterative learning, and the development of applied, evidence-based resources.

The Partnership is co-funded by six of the 'prime providers' for the Restart programme – FedCap Employment, G4S, Ingeus, Maximus, Reed and Serco, and is being managed by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES), working alongside the Institute for Employability Professionals (IEP) and the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA).



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## Introduction

Employment programmes in the UK are designed to work with individuals to address barriers to work and then support people to apply for jobs and transition into sustainable employment. Alongside this focus on individual jobseekers, programmes also seek to work with employers – both to identify and manage vacancies and to broker the right people into the right jobs. This employer facing role is often done through dedicated ‘employer engagement teams’, which for national programmes like Restart, can mean that multiple employer engagement teams are talking to the same employers in different parts of the country, and that within Contract Package Areas there can be different teams from different programmes trying to engage with the same firms.

Therefore, members of the ReAct partnership have commissioned this short project to address two important priorities for the programme:

- To help to develop a *shared employer engagement approach*, so that employers with jobs across Contract Package Areas can be assured of a consistent Restart offer regardless of where they are creating jobs; and
- To help understand and apply the evidence of ‘what works’ in effective employer engagement more generally – so that we can improve the performance of the programme, and the likelihood of participants finding good, sustainable jobs.

This is vitally important to the success of Restart. As one employer told us:

*‘If they don’t [work together] they will lose us. None of us have got time to work out all the contacts. It’s got to be done to help people.’*

This paper presents the research the ReAct partnership have done to support that process:

### 1. **A review of the existing evidence**

There isn’t as much empirical research on ‘what works’ in engaging employers (the demand side) as on other aspects of employment programmes. The evidence base is much stronger on working with participants (the supply side). One of the experts we interviewed said that employers had often been ‘forgotten’ in the analysis of employment programmes. However, the evidence we reviewed was clear that strategies considering both the supply and demand sides tend to generate better outcomes.

### 2. **Interviews with employers**

We spoke to over ten large businesses, employing tens of thousands of people across the UK. They included Lendlease, John Raymond Transport, NIC, OCS Group, Pizza Express, Pret a Manger, Procure and Rubicon. Some of these employers have thousands of vacancies to fill. We asked them about their recruitment practices, and their experience and thoughts about employment programmes.

### 3. **Interviews with operational staff**

We interviewed employer engagement staff and managers in the six Restart prime providers as well as some supply chain providers. We also spoke to people who have left the industry to make sure we captured not only what is working well now, but also what we could learn from previous programmes.

### 4. **Interviews with experts in the field**

We spoke to some of the people who wrote the papers in the literature review as well as academics

working in the field to deepen our understanding of the existing evidence base and find out what they are working on now.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first section provides some **context** and background to the current labour market, and what this means for Restart. The labour market is tight - there are lots of vacancies and employers are keen to recruit. Unemployment is much lower than anticipated, but there are still people finding it hard to move into work.

The second section outlines the key lessons on **what works** with engaging with employers. There were six shared themes across all the evidence:

- building strong relationships;
- job brokerage models;
- embedding change ;
- employers as partners;
- addressing other barriers to work; and
- broadening the conversation.

The third section describes a number of **models and ideas** that are working now or have been used in previous programmes that will be helpful to help design the best approach for Restart. The models presented in this paper are:

- sharing vacancies;
- single point of contact account management;
- shared account managers;
- co-designed routes to work; and
- good work.

The final section suggests some **further questions** thrown up by the research.

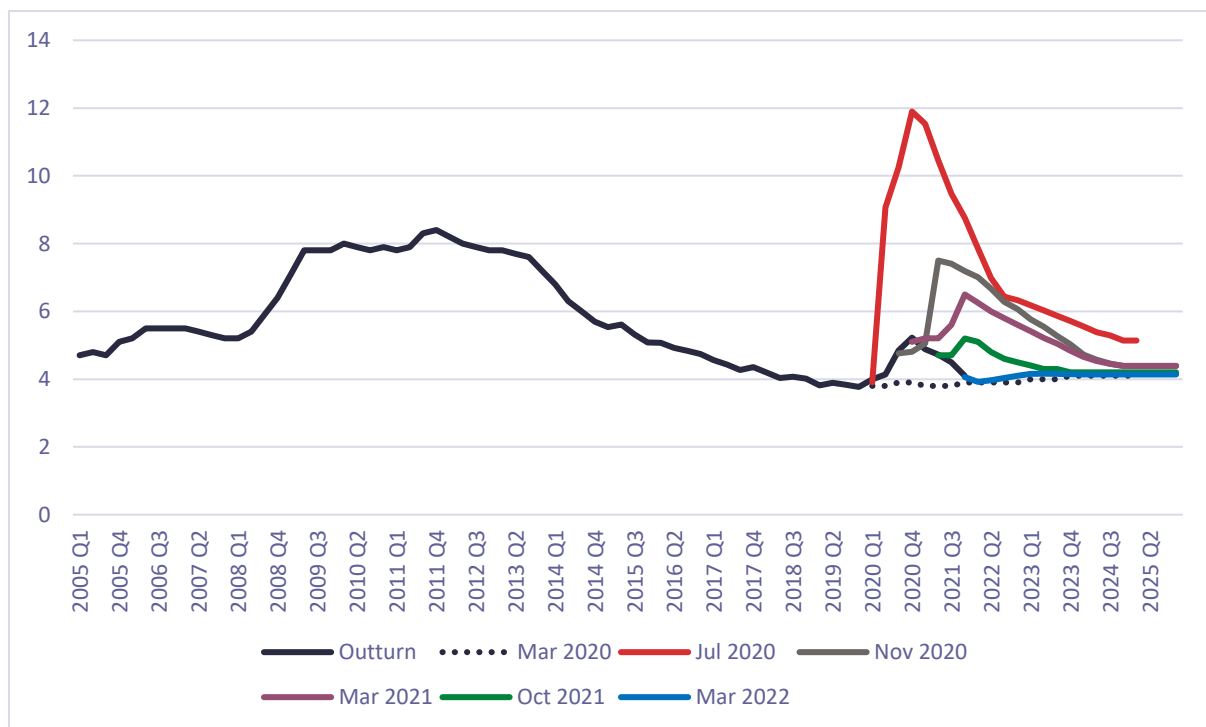
An additional paper, Employer Interviews, which provides a deeper analysis of those interviews is available to ReAct members.

## Context and background

The Restart programme was commissioned at a time when it was forecast that unemployment would exceed four million and remain elevated throughout most of the 2020s. In that context, Restart would have been a programme to deal with a crisis of mass unemployment, helping individuals to compete in a labour market with more ‘supply’ than ‘demand’ and working with employers to try to encourage and support them to take on long-term unemployed people, rather than to fill their vacancies from among those closer to work. This is illustrated in the red line of Figure 1 below, which was the official (Office for Budget Responsibility) forecast for future unemployment at the time that Restart was announced.

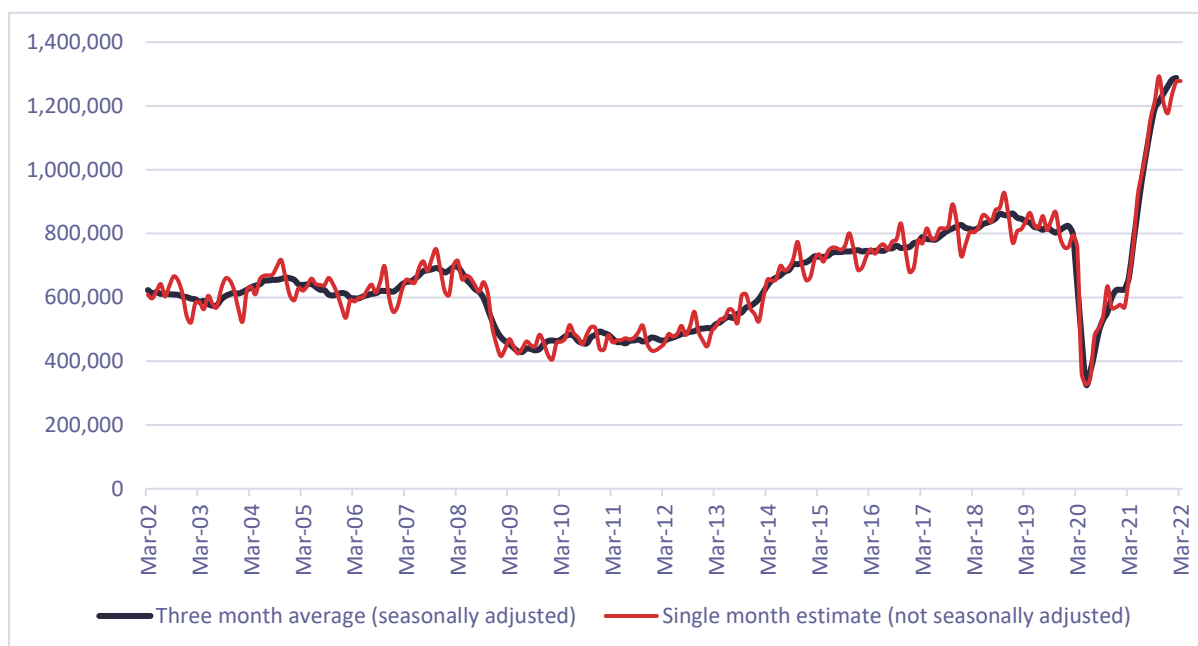
By the time Restart was being commissioned, estimates had been revised down and were forecasting a peak just below that of the Great Recession but with unemployment remaining high through to 2025 (grey line). However, unemployment has now already returned to around four per cent and on the latest forecasts (from March 2022, in blue) it is expected to stay at around that level for the rest of the forecast period.

**Figure 1: Forecast and actual unemployment rates, March 2020 onwards**



Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for Budget Responsibility

The labour market context that Restart is now being delivered in is fundamentally different to that of eighteen months ago in other ways too. As Figure 2 below shows, lower unemployment has been accompanied by record increases in vacancies – which are now around 50 per cent higher than pre-crisis levels (which were already the highest levels of vacancies on record).

**Figure 2: Vacancies – quarterly and single-month estimates**

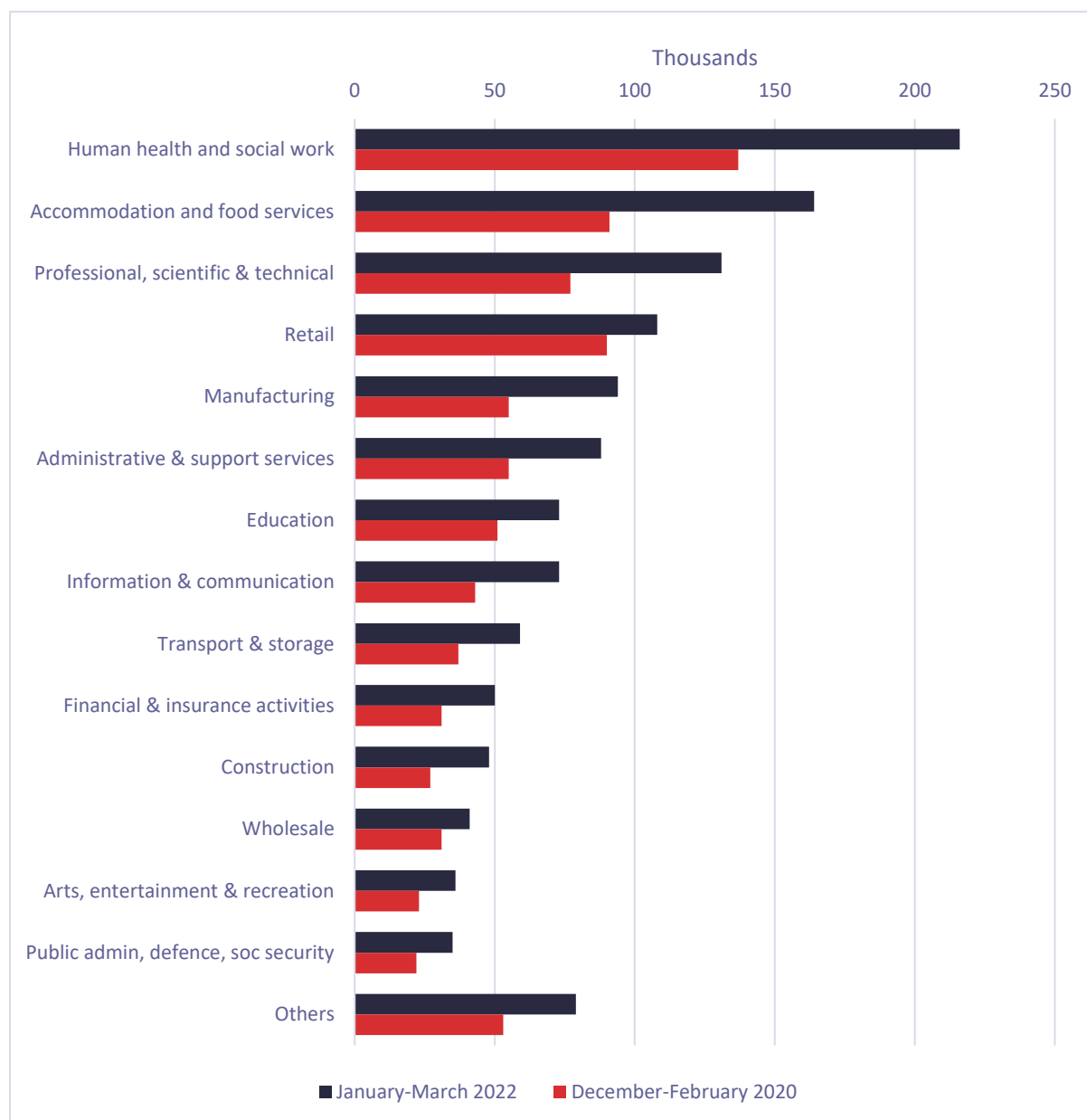
Source: ONS Vacancy Survey

Figure 4 (overleaf) illustrates that this growth in vacancies has happened across all industries and does not simply reflect ‘teething troubles’ as people leave, move and start jobs following the disruptive impacts of lockdowns and reopening. Hospitality (‘accommodation and food services’) has undoubtedly been affected by this disruption, alongside the impacts of lower migration, and with vacancies running at around double their pre-crisis levels in early 2022. But other industries are seeing strong growth, in part because of pandemic pressures (for example in health, social care and some professions – particularly in public services) while others are simply seeing an increase in demand as economic conditions improve.

Across all industries though, a key driver of higher vacancies is a significant contraction in the labour market since the onset of the pandemic. In all, the labour market now has 1.1 million fewer people in it than would have been expected based on pre-crisis trends, with around three fifths of this gap explained by fewer older people in work (many of whom will have left the labour market permanently), around one-third explained by a smaller population (mainly due to lower migration) and a small amount due to more young people entering or staying in education.

Taken together, this picture of very high vacancies and low unemployment means that we are now facing the tightest labour market in at least fifty years. Figure 4 below illustrates this, using the ‘unemployment to vacancy ratio’, which is the key measure of the level of tightness or slack in the labour market, and which shows that this ratio is now at its lowest since at least the 1960s – with now virtually as many vacancies as there are unemployed people, compared with more than four unemployed per vacancy during the crisis, and typically at least twice as many unemployed as vacancies for most of the last two decades.

**Figure 3: Vacancies by industry, pre-crisis and latest data**



Source: ONS Vacancy Survey



**Figure 4: Unemployed people per vacancy (exc. Agriculture, forestry and fishing)**

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey, Vacancy Survey and historic Bank of England data

In short, the biggest labour market challenge that we are facing coming out of the crisis is a shortage of labour, rather than a shortage of jobs. Employers we interviewed spoke about these ‘keen recruitment difficulties’ due to a combination of the impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on the recruitment pool and (for some) increased customer demand due to the strong bounce back. Some had thousands of vacancies to fill. Even those with smaller numbers of vacancies felt the situation was urgent.

### What does this mean for Restart?

There are three consequences for Restart from this radically changed economic picture:

- The programme will support somewhat fewer people overall than was originally anticipated, as unemployment overall is lower.
- Those people may well have more significant or complex needs than would have been expected, as a far stronger labour market means in turn that those closer to work would be more likely to get a job before reaching Restart eligibility.
- More positively, employers are likely to be in far greater need of help with filling vacancies and addressing recruitment needs.

As one interviewee (a national employer in logistics) put it:

*‘It’s a critical situation and we have a massive recruitment need... never as much as this.’*

While another employer told us,

*'If you want a job, this is the time.'*

This also means that there is arguably more potential now, and more benefits for employers, from being able to develop effective relationships with employers and to being able to offer a consistent approach across contract areas. There is also more potential now to work with employers not just on gathering vacancies but on helping to broker people into jobs – which in turn means looking at wider factors that can improve recruitment and retention like work flexibility, workplace adjustments, job design and support at work. Employers we interviewed were all positive about the Restart model and were keen to engage with providers.

We heard in interviews that the way programmes are commissioned can sometimes make employer engagement difficult, but the structure of Restart, with the single prime lead in each geographic area lends itself to sharing employer relationships. There was a lot of enthusiasm from employers and providers for such a shared approach. Working together will enable all providers to benefit.

## What does good look like?

Employer engagement is key to employment programme performance. Strategies that consider both supply and demand side strategies tend to generate better outcomes; for instance through localised, personalised, and intensive support aligned with employer demand.<sup>1</sup> *And for successful job matching to take place at scale, investment in employer engagement is critical.*<sup>2</sup>

The evidence we reviewed was varied, covering programme delivery over the last ten years in the UK, Australia, mainland Europe and the US. The employers we interviewed were based throughout England and Wales, covered a range of sectors, and had different levels of knowledge and experience of employment programmes. In our analysis we focused on identifying examples and areas of success to help us better understand what works in employer engagement. This process identified six themes that recurred in different settings, conversations and case studies. These are critical to maximising the effectiveness of employer engagement investment.

- Building strong relationships.
- Job brokerage models.
- Embedding change.
- Employers as partners.
- Addressing other barriers to work.
- Broadening the conversation.

In this section of the paper, we take each of these themes in turn and provide a summary and analysis of the evidence to support it.

### Building strong relationships

*‘Networks are important.’ National employer, logistics*

*Relationships* with employers are key to effective employer engagement. Dr Jo Ingold told us, ‘Employers want a personal contact,’ and her most recent research found that repeated and sustained relationships with providers can last for years, crossing multiple programme iterations.<sup>3</sup> When we asked employers about their positive experiences of employment programmes, they tended to talk about their relationships with individuals rather than programmes as a whole:

*‘It’s all to do with the consultants who we work with.’*

In interview, Tony Carr, consultant, and co-chair of the ERSA Employer Engagement Network told us:

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<sup>1</sup> Adam et al, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Adam et al, 2017, Ingold & Valizade, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Ingold, 2021 Insights from research with employers. Presentation of recent findings 07/12/21. Presentation available on [restartreact.co.uk](https://restartreact.co.uk)

*'The key is communication, consistency and quality of service...part of the problem is we frame the question as 'how do we sell Restart to employers?', whereas instead we should switch the focus to 'how can we best support your business?' More often than not, [employment programmes take] a product-led approach as opposed to a needs-led one. By asking the employer questions, they can help to create the offer. Restart can then be a business support service as far as employers are concerned.'*

Indeed, the employers we spoke to, while universally positive about a shared national employer engagement approach, had different expectations and requirements around things like pre-employment support, work experience programmes and the need for Service Level Agreements to codify commitments.

Interviews with employer engagement leads in operations also focused on the importance of listening to employers:

*'Employer needs should dictate the recruitment practices.'* Prime provider

*'Employers are also a customer on the programme, but we don't ask them what they want often enough.'* Supply chain provider

As did the literature:

*'Find out what the business needs and get to know the business.'*<sup>4</sup>

A critical part of communication is listening, and then understanding where the needs are to be able to respond to them. A 2015 regional study on the engagement of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Work Programme indicated low business confidence: only four per cent of participating SMEs believed that Work Programme providers understood their needs.<sup>5</sup>

*Communication* needs to be simple and clear. Employers' attitudes and commitment is determined by their perception of the relevance to their business needs. The system appears complex, and employers are discouraged by the large number of programmes.<sup>6</sup> When given too much information about the way programmes are designed, or the participants that access them, one employer told us, 'I glaze over'. Another explained:

*'It's a minefield for an employer to understand on a national scale that 'sorry we didn't get that, [provider] got that, or whoever got this bit of the overall*

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<sup>4</sup> Van Kooy et al, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Ingold and Carr

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jo Ingold

*employment stuff, but we didn't get that little bit' and no one understands it properly.' National employer, logistics*

The literature shows that the viability of employment programmes as a sustainable recruitment channel is still questioned by some employers, most likely owing to their negative perceptions regarding the productivity, employability, and psychological stability of participants.<sup>7</sup> This lack of **trust** hampers the success of programmes.<sup>8</sup> Improving relationships with employers involves directly addressing this lack of trust. Employers told us that they were sent candidates for interview who clearly do not want the jobs they are applying for, or just didn't turn up for interview, and this made them hesitant about further involvement with programmes. A programme in the Netherlands set up informal meetings between jobseekers and employers to address negative perceptions of the client group. Eighty per cent of employers said they found the experience valuable and that it helped to alter their preconceived notions.<sup>9</sup>

### Case Study: Building networks with employers in the Netherlands

Traditionally, public employment services (PES) in the Netherlands have used supply-side strategies, such as mandating jobseekers' attendance in training interventions and imposing financial sanctions against jobseeker non-compliance, to facilitate disadvantaged groups' access to the labour market. However, recent experiments in employment programme design have explored demand-side approaches that focus on building networks with employers.

One of these experiments included a recruitment initiative that started with an informal, face-to-face meeting with a group of jobseekers accessing PES services. At the outset, participating employers were willing to explore alternatives to their existing recruitment process, which was primarily comprised of posting job advertisements and then selecting from a roster of curricula vitae. Eighty per cent of the employers found this initial contact with jobseekers valuable. PES advisors noted that, following this informal contact, employers became more flexible and were more willing to relax their job requirements to accommodate PES recruits. In addition, most employers were satisfied with the quality of PES recruits. Jobseekers in this experimental group also reported positive impressions, reporting how they felt like employers were taking them seriously – compared to the control group, who were more likely to report feeling dissatisfied.

One provider we interviewed noted that a number of the big employers they work with recruit over half their vacancies through **agencies**, and that there was a need to 'understand that relationship and be part

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<sup>7</sup> See Ingold and Stuart, 2015, Ingold et al 2017, van Berkel, 2021 for example

<sup>8</sup> Ingold et al, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Van Gestel, N., Oomens, S., Buwalda, E (2019)

of it.’ We interviewed the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) and they are keen to support providers to work with agencies. They identified four elements to a good employer relationship, and which would benefit from further exploration within employment programmes:

- speed;
- transparency;
- good communication that keeps everyone updated; and
- clarity and specificity regarding roles.

One of the weaknesses inherent in the importance placed on personal relationships is that links with employers, and even programmes, can be threatened if key personnel move on.

*‘I’m a real fan of building partnerships with organisations. Unfortunately, what we have found when we do work with partnerships, is that it starts off with great intentions and you know, we have such encouraging conversations, but then people move on and somebody else replaces them.’ National employer, hospitality.*

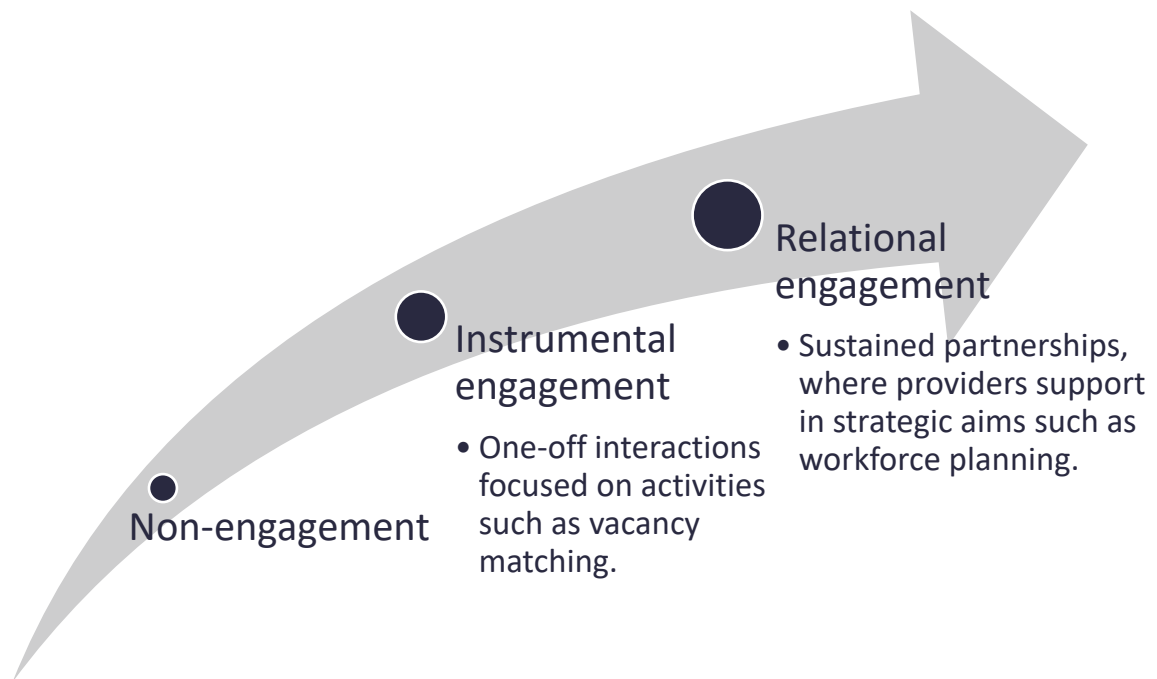
An Australian paper which synthesises a range of research to create a set of principles for providers to consider when designing and implementing employment programmes includes the guidance to, where possible, mitigate the ‘key person’ risk created by having a single point of contact in an organisation. As we set out later in the paper, a single point of contact is a popular and effective model for delivering employer engagement, however, there is benefit in ensuring that the provider can continue and enhance relationships with employers, even if specific personnel leave.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Crabb, S (2019)

## Job brokerage

Relationships between employers and employment service providers are often described in terms of a range to indicate the level of commitment. In their 2017 paper Ingold et al outline three categories:



Employer engagement in the UK tends to most closely resemble *instrumental engagement*, with providers primarily focused on ‘selling’ the programme to employers, identifying employer needs, and matching potential candidates.<sup>11</sup> This means employers function as ‘reactive gatekeepers’ of jobs and work experience, responding to provider-initiated activities.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between providers and employers is thereby restricted to information provision<sup>13</sup>; that is, employers informing providers of their recruitment needs and preferences and providers finding candidates who fit these.<sup>14</sup>

In our interviews with employers we explored whether there was interest in working more closely with providers to continue to develop routes into work beyond existing vacancies. While employers differed in what they would want this ‘brokered’ relationship to look like, there was a keenness from many of them to explore different and more integrated ways of working. For example, one employer told us:

*‘I would be very interested in maybe having some Restart brokers onsite. If any of the Restart advisers wanted to be onsite to support direct recruitment, we would support that.’ National employer, construction*

<sup>11</sup> Ingold, 2018

<sup>12</sup> Orton et al, 2019

<sup>13</sup> Ingold and Valizade, 2017

<sup>14</sup> Ingold, 2018

In the interviews some providers noted that to work effectively with employers beyond one-off interactions, they need to manage employers' expectations about the flow of referrals and the level of support that people need. Employers were open to seeing applicants with minimal job-specific skills or experience, but there was a lot of emphasis on the importance of attitude and being 'ready to work':

*'The challenge that we have is that our managers always want to have someone who is 'work ready'' National employer, hospitality*

A job brokerage approach builds on provider experience of building routeways to work that include: insight materials or events, support with applications, in some cases visits and work experience programmes, and wider discussions about employer support.

We found evidence of sustained employer-provider relationships in our interviews, and employers spoke warmly of providers they had worked with in programmes before Restart. Employers returned to providers particularly when the scaffolds around job placements worked effectively to support the transition to work.

The shift to *relational engagement* is considered later in the paper.

## Embedding change

Some of the good practice case studies we found in the literature were bespoke programmes which had been set up to support specific client groups into work. These approaches were typically difficult to scale, because even when effective, they were run as 'special projects' and tended not to impact on wider recruitment practices.

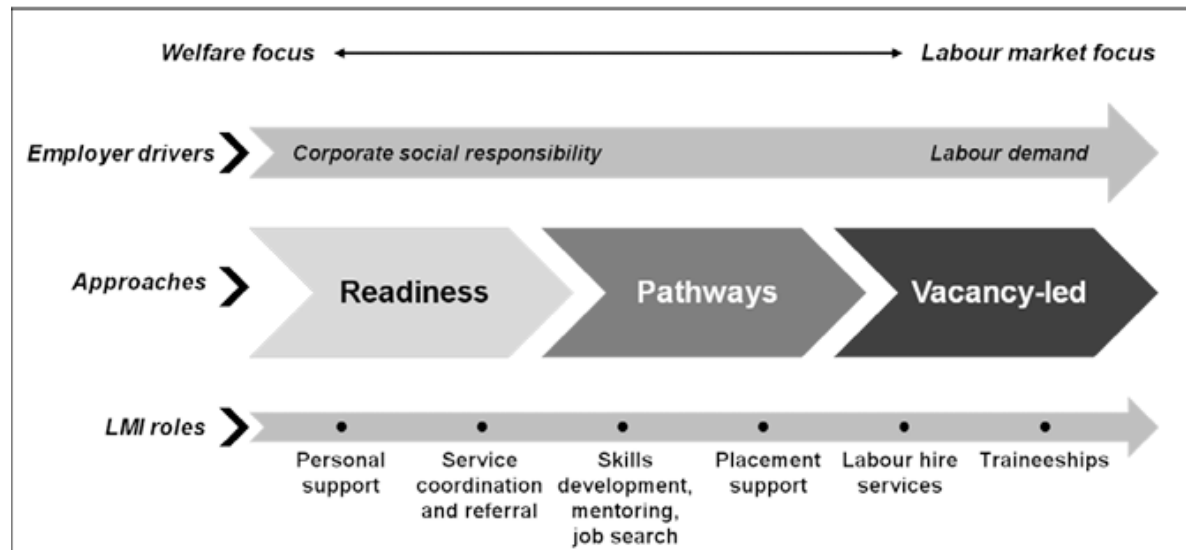
An approach to an employer that is focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) is likely to differ from one which focuses on HR benefits. Dr Ingold described this to us as the need to 'clearly communicate the value proposition to employers – in terms of CSR benefits or HR benefits.' She noted that while there were undoubted successes from CSR approaches, they could be tokenistic and that there was a danger that they could be siloed with no budget. Therefore, effecting sustainable change may require a broader discussion about how to improve recruitment and what that could do for the employer as a whole; for example, the benefits of diverse hiring and local workforces.

Figure 5 (overleaf) describes the focus of employer engagement as a continuum, with a focus on welfare programmes (supply) at one end and a focus on the labour market (demand) at the other. The more focus on the supply side, the more likely the programme is to use drivers such as CSR to engage employers. As interventions become more focused on demand, so the conversations shift to workforce need. Building workforce diversity is a key motivation for employers. Employers we interviewed described wanting more access to diverse candidates, and to build social value through inclusion and diversity. A supply chain provider told us that their most successful work involved supporting employers to increase diversity in their workforces, and to help them increase recruitment from their local areas:



*‘We had an employer that was based in a disadvantaged area, but all their staff were travelling in from miles away, so they ring-fenced the £18-19k a year jobs for local residents and we helped them recruit for 4500 positions over ten years.’<sup>15</sup>*

**Figure 5: Continuum of employer engagement approaches**



Source: Van Kooy et al, 2014

Employers’ existing Social Value commitments provide a vehicle for these discussions. As one employer noted, ‘we have this contractually built into our supply chains.’ Another told us they were really interested in doing more about ‘supporting social mobility’ but didn’t know where to go or how to get more involved. The current labour market situation provides the opportunity to talk to employers about broader recruitment practices.

The numbers employers need to recruit is leading them to think more widely about their future workforce and how to attract different applicants. There is an opportunity for providers to work with employers to support this search:

*‘We’ve been reaching out to a broad demographic, getting different people into the business, people who otherwise wouldn’t [think about these types of jobs].’*

*‘The skills and experience part doesn’t matter to us ... what we need is the attitude more than anything else ... as long as they’ve got a desire to work and they’re there we will work with them and we can absolutely teach them.’*

<sup>15</sup> The figure of 4500 was given by the provider

The second employer went on to describe how current Directors started as hourly-paid staff with no previous experience but had worked their way up through the organisation.

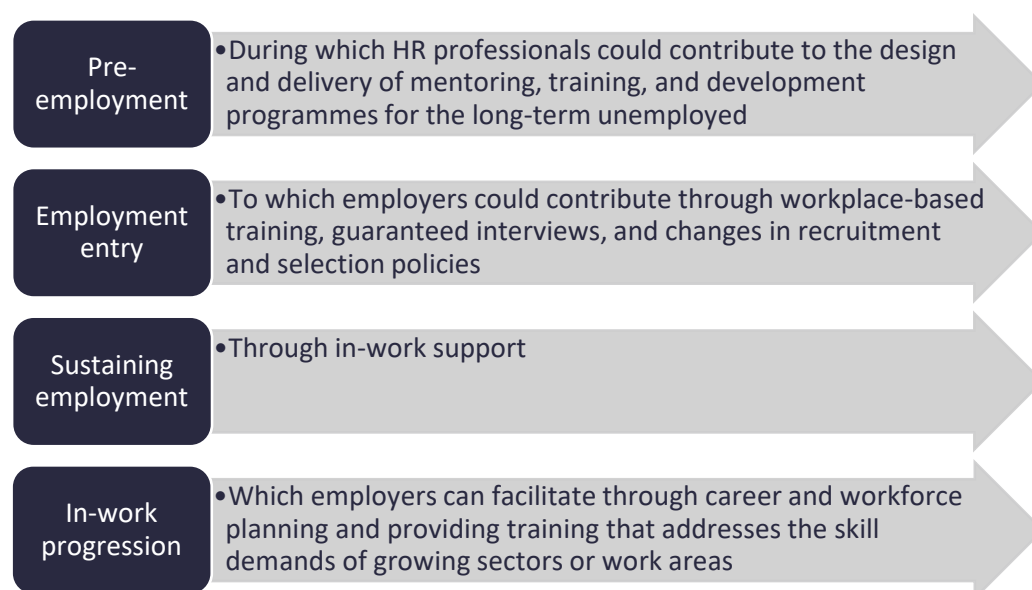
## Employers as partners

*‘Employers are not a stakeholder [in employment programmes], they are not at the table. Too often they are an afterthought, and things are done to them, they are not engaged in thinking about how to make it a useful relationship.’*

*Tony Carr*

Green et al (2015) synthesised the evidence on employability programmes in the UK and abroad and developed a four-step pathway to employment framework<sup>16</sup>, which incorporates the critical roles played by employers at each phase. Their research found that effective job brokerage needs to extend from pre-employment to in-work progression, and that there are opportunities for employers to be involved as partners in every one of these stages:

**Figure 6: Employer engagement in the pathway to employment**



In our interview with the REC, they noted that recruitment agents had the potential to offer more guidance and support with coaching participants pre-interview.

Research undertaken in the US concluded that while engaging employers is a lengthy process, there was significant value in bringing them into the design process at an early stage. This enables employers to

<sup>16</sup> Green, A., Sissons, P., Broughton, K., de Hoyos, M., Warhurst, C., & Barnes, S.-A. (2015)

contribute to the shape and structure of activities and participants to be engaged in the design of training materials.<sup>17</sup>

One prime provider noted that employers may not realise how many of their employees come through programmes like Restart and that understanding this might make them more willing to invest in being involved with the development of programme models. Indeed, as a result of links built through the Prime Provider Network, Marks and Spencer have added 'Restart' as an option in their drop-down list when the application asks where the candidate heard about the vacancy. This will enable the retailer to measure the proportion of applicants that come from the programme, and, should this number prove significant, provides a platform for providers to work more closely with the retailer.

### Case Study – Talent Match

Talent Match<sup>18</sup> targeted young people who have not been in education, employment, or training for an extended period. It ran for five years, with a total investment of £108 million. Devolved governance meant that Talent Match partnerships were more able to iterate quickly: testing various approaches, abandoning ones that did not work, and implementing alternatives. This devolution also allowed Talent Match partnerships to customise their approach based on the local landscape, with some partnerships choosing to engage employers individually and others opting to engage employers through Chambers of Commerce or other established employer networks.

Employers participated in Talent Match partnerships in four ways:

- \* Firstly, employers were involved in strategic planning and decision-making regarding the approach and direction taken by their local Talent Match partnership.
- \* Secondly, some employers joined employer forums or sub-groups, which allowed them to provide strategic insight regarding specific thematic areas.
- \* Thirdly, employers also directly delivered activities in their local hubs.
- \* Finally, employers offered insight on critical employer concerns and gave advice on how Talent Match partnerships could best engage employers.

The employers retained the role of gatekeeper - selecting individuals who would fit their business needs, but their close involvement at different levels of the programme led to greater trust and support.

### Addressing other barriers to work

Effective employer engagement strategies address the issues that participants face in moving into work, because often they carry these issues with them once they are working. This might mean addressing lack

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<sup>17</sup> Crabb, S (2019)

<sup>18</sup> Further information can be found at The Talent Match evaluation [website](#)

of transport access, especially in rural areas; being aware of limited digital connectivity; or thinking about occupational health support that might be required in post.

Working hours are a factor for participants for several reasons, predominantly health and caring responsibilities. Some employers told us they were finding it difficult to meet the need for flexibility, this was particularly true in the Care sector where employers felt they had less flexibility over the hours of work set. Timewise have worked with care employers, looking at job design and scheduling to make the sector more friendly to worker flexibility needs.<sup>19</sup>

Other employers identified that they had changed their approach to flexibility in the light of their own recruitment needs:

*‘We’ve always tried to be (wherever we can) flexible, but now we’re actually forced to do it. So I think the way of the world has changed and we’ve had to go along with it. Even on our more traditional sites, where shift patterns have always been the norm.’ National employer, logistics*

*‘Yes, I think so. I’m trying to figure out the trend of what’s changing. More and more people are opting to work from home. I’m trying to figure out the best way to get round that.’*

*‘All of us are going to have to make this sector more attractive to work in that other sectors.’ Greggs CEO Roger Whiteside<sup>20</sup>*

Indeed, we heard from a supply chain provider who had worked with a hotel who was struggling to recruit housekeepers. They suggested that by pushing the start time back to 9.30am, instead of 9am, parents would be more likely to apply. This has been a success and resulted in work placements.

## Broadening the conversation

Moving to **relational** engagement with employers reflects a shift to wider, more strategic conversations that focus on future workforce needs and HR support. We found the response from employers to this suggestion to be mixed. Some welcomed the idea, but others were more ambivalent about moving away from a vacancy/job placement model or couldn’t really see how it would work. This came from a perception that this was not an area of expertise that providers had, and so wouldn’t be able to engage in this way. This indicates that should providers want to develop their offering, there is some work to do to challenge some employer’s perceptions of a wider role.

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<sup>19</sup> Timewise (2017)

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in British Baker: <https://bakeryinfo.co.uk/people/how-can-retail-bakery-conquer-staff-shortages/661803.article>

Sustainable outcomes require ongoing support for participants, and there is much to be gained from engaging employers in wider discussions about **progression** and retention. There is a lot of evidence on these approaches and support available to employers. For example, the Institute for Employment Studies have produced a good practice toolkit and case study collection for employers around what works in supporting progression in low paying industries.

The IES Progression in Employment Employer Toolkit has been designed to stimulate awareness amongst employers about the steps they can take to support their low paid workers to progress, and to provide HR professionals, senior managers and line managers with practical tools to support progression. It is available as a resource on [www.restartreact.com](http://www.restartreact.com) and the progression readiness model is shown in Figure 7.

Access to, and alignment with **skills** funding, is an area of interest to employers. Restart providers, and their supply chains' skills delivery can be leveraged to create routes to work. Supply chain providers told us they were able to do this in areas where they had AEB contracts, but that there was no shared structure that enabled them to create a national or universal offer.

The providers we interviewed were motivated to support their participants into good quality, sustainable work. There are some labour market factors which may make that more difficult. For example, there has been a rise in atypical contracts (often zero-hours contracts), and in the numbers of workers dissatisfied with them, since the pandemic.

#### Atypical contracts:

	2011	2019	2021
England	9%	8%	9.5%
Wales	8.5%	10%	12.5%
London	9.5%	7.5%	10.5%

Source: Learning & Work, Better Work Summit, September 2021

The numbers of employers offering development activities for staff has been falling over the last decade, and this investment is often key to progression from entry-level jobs.

#### Proportion of employers offering development activities to staff:

	2011	2019
England	75%	62%
Wales	74%	60%

Source: Learning & Work, Better Work Summit, September 2021

Job insecurity was highlighted in interviews with providers who noted a higher proportion of Restart participants moving into temporary jobs compared with previous programmes. The REC told us that a high number of temporary contracts reflects employer nervousness in some sectors about the continuing strength of the economy.

**Figure 7: The IES ‘Progression Readiness Model’**

The progression readiness model is an evidence-based model that provides a holistic view of what organisations can do to support progression at work. The model is comprised of eight dimensions and is supported by a progression readiness index (PRI). The PRI provides a means for organisations to self-assess the extent to which their current practice supports and enables progression at work, as well as to pinpoint areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.



Source: *Progression in Employment: Employer Toolkit (IES)*

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*‘How do we mobilise something on a national scale, or find a partner that could work on a national scale and then move it to that level? What we need to find is a national solution, someone who works on a national level that can see that kind of overarching picture, have a holistic view, that would make a massive difference.’<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> National employer, hospitality



## In practice – models of shared employer engagement

We identified five models for sharing employer engagement that can be used or adapted by Restart providers. Our assessment of whether models were appropriate was underpinned by four delivery principles which arose from interviews with employers: [clarity](#), [co-design](#), [coordination](#) and [candidate focus](#).

### Delivery principles

#### Clarity

When considering how to engage large employers on Restart, most employers spoke about having a simple structure, good relationships and regular communication. Having a single point of contact emerged as a critical success factor.

Two employers commented on the need for greater promotion of the scheme, saying that there was plenty of employer demand but not a lot of awareness:

*'I mean it's wonderful, but where are you advertising this and how are you reaching out to employers would be my question, because no one's reached out to me yet.'*

Another suggested that there was also a need for greater clarity on Restart's offer to employers.

Employers also commented on the need for clarity for candidates about the types of roles that they were offering, so that potential recruits could select (and deselect) themselves for the jobs on offer.

#### Co-design

One employer suggested that providers should visit their businesses to develop a better understanding of the jobs on offer. This employer suggested a reciprocal arrangement, so that staff from the employer are able to gain a better understanding of how the provider operates. Another employer commented on the need to support candidates to develop a basic understanding of work commitments, such as punctuality and professionalism.

Two employers commented on the need to co-design the training and one highlighted the need to attract candidates with the right aptitude:

*'The skills and experience part doesn't matter to us ... what we need is the attitude more than anything else ... as long as they've got a desire to work and they're there, we will work with them and we can absolutely teach them.'*

Some, however, had sector specific skills needs for the roles available.

Commonly, employers wanted to avoid inappropriate referrals that do not deliver benefit for either the employer or the potential recruit.

## Coordination

All the employers were clear that coordination and consistency were prerequisites for successful engagement. One commented:

*'Having so many different providers. It would be adding value if they were all in one place.'*

One suggested a no wrong door approach, where national employers can approach any of the providers:

*'Whoever, your original relationship is with, they'll make sure that, if you're a national organisation, that they're all working together and there is a consistent approach to it. That's what I would say, you know, because there will be loads of organisations out there, like us, who are desperate for staff.'*

A few of the employers felt that they already had access to a coordinated approach through their providers. One commented:

*'The reason why I like [prime provider] is because they have so many ends under one umbrella, because I'm forever working in so many different areas and [prime provider] having everybody under them does work well for us.'*

However different employers suggested different ways of achieving this co-ordination. Notably their coordination preferences differed depending on their own organisational set ups. Some would prefer for prime providers to work on a national, centralised basis, but others would prefer prime providers to devolve responsibility to regional sites or specific locations where intensive recruitment was required.

It will be important to work on a case-by-case basis, to co-design approaches that work for specific employers.

## Candidate focus

It is notable that some of the employers we spoke with gave real thought to the experience of programme participants. One employer commented that it was important to consider the candidate journey through the process. They suggested that potential recruits need an emotionally appealing reason to join an organisation and a safe work experience opportunity. It was noted that, whatever their

exit point from the process, the participant should feel that they have benefitted from the experience and the employer should feel that they have helped. One said:

*'We want to put people into positions for success.'*

Another made the point that an individually tailored approach may be needed for each candidate:

*'I don't think you can have a blanket approach, if you're doing it from the real social responsibility ... you will tailor it to meet the individual's needs, whatever they may look like – because they are so wide and so varied.'*

## Delivery Models

### Sharing vacancies

The most straightforward way to ensure that employment engagement is simplified for employers is to ensure that vacancies are shared. This means that when a prime provider has a relationship with an employer who has vacancies in another area of the country, the provider does the work of ensuring those vacancies are passed to the prime provider(s) for other CPAs. Employers were very clear in interviews that they welcomed this approach, allowing them to pass all their vacancies to one contact:

*'Having so many different providers. It would be adding value if they were all in one place.'* National employer, logistics

### Case Study: Prime Provider Network

The Prime Provider Network, builds on the experience of the Prime Provider Partnership and meets fortnightly to discuss ways in which employer engagement teams can work more closely together to improve performance across the Restart Scheme. It is attended by a representative from each Contract Package Area (CPA) and is designed to improve co-ordination and transparency between prime providers, through regular meetings and sharing of information, relationships and vacancies.

Although relatively new there have already been vacancy sharing successes with participants placed into jobs where both the connection and job opportunities have come from another prime provider.

The network started with an employer mapping exercise. This was undertaken to understand existing relationships with employers, and what they entailed. This exercise has allowed the group to see where there is duplication and potential for employer confusion, and also where there are gaps which would benefit from proactive approaches. The

network has also started to discuss ‘aspirational employers’ they can approach as ‘Restart’ rather than as individual organisations.

The second phase has been the creation of a vacancy sharing tracker. This enables each member of the Network to record the passing of vacancies between each other. Capturing this information will enable analysis of the pattern of sharing geographically, by industry and by prime provider. Information and tracking of outcomes then occurs within each prime provider’s own system. ReAct are also leading a group to identify ways to share data between providers, so there is potential for deeper analysis.

The next stage for the Prime Provider Network is to develop shared account management strategies, underpinned by an employer charter with an agreed minimum offer. This will enable any one of the prime providers to approach an employer on behalf of all of them, to form a single point of contact, and then to distribute vacancies throughout the Network. ‘Employer Spotlight’ sessions are also planned, where employers come and speak to the network as a group about their recruitment needs, and how they can be met by the prime providers as a whole. Work is also underway to link the Prime Provider Network and the Prime Provider Partnership to develop a more integrated service for employers.

Employers we interviewed responded positively to the idea of a similar model. One national employer, from the logistics industry said ‘There needs to be a one stop shop that you can go to.’

### Single Point of Contact Account Managers

*‘Employers want the right and appropriate candidates at the right and appropriate time for the employer.’ Dr Jo Ingold*

*‘It’s a minefield for an employer to understand on a national scale that ‘sorry we didn’t get that, [provider] got that, or whoever got this bit of the overall employment stuff, but we didn’t get that little bit’ and no one understands it properly.’ National employer, logistics*

Employers told us they wanted a one stop shop account management model with a central point of contact – a single front door into the programme:

*'It is, sadly, impossible for me to create relationships locally. We just don't have the time to be having the same conversation several times. What we have not been able to access, and what we would really need and would absolutely love, is a central point of contact (a central account manager, account director, however you want to term it).'* National employer, hospitality

Some were positive about formalising this through a Service Level Agreement, but others felt it wasn't necessary. Prime providers are also keen to develop a universal offer for employers:

*'Just sharing vacancies isn't enough, it is about being able to do more than one organisation can do on their own.'*

*'Primes are currently responding to the same employers, but with different priorities, we need to be more streamlined.'*

This model can work, even with decentralised recruitment functions. For example, the Marks and Start programme developed by Marks and Spencer and Remploy was a national agreement that was delivered through local branch decision making. Employers told us that even with devolved recruitment they could support/coordinate UK-wide approaches if such a system was in place by providers.

### **Case Study: Prime Provider Partnership (the 3Ps)**

In April 2019, five prime providers decided to deliver joined up employer engagement for the Work and Health Programme – the aims were national coverage and a coordinated approach.

Each prime was represented by a director of employer engagement.

The following conditions were described as key to the success of the partnership:

- Trust
- Sharing
- Contribution

#### *Governance of the 3Ps*

1. Whoever took on an employer became the account holder – no approaches would then be made to that employer except through the account holder: 'Relationships were with people not programmes.'
2. Consistency - 'We were very clear with each other about the recruitment processes.' This meant that all participants were prepared and pre-screened to the same level.
3. Routeways into work would be shared, and would be consistent. These were used to engage employers, who would produce slide decks, bring staff to providers offices to talk to candidates to demonstrate what the organisation and job roles were like.

4. The nominated Account Manager negotiated a 'package' with (often very big) employers (including M&S, Amazon, Nando's and Tesco), and then all five prime providers delivered participants that had been through the agreed process.

The leadership of the 3Ps say they have delivered almost 4000 job placements in two years. Prior to the 3Ps, the approach was described as 'scattergun'.

Areas for improvement of note to Restart prime providers are ensuring that communication between prime providers and their supply chains is effective and ensures that all employer approaches occur through the account manager.

### The 3Ps in practice – working with Nando's

In 2020, Nando's had a significant staffing shortfall, following the return of staff to Europe, and when the opportunity arose to reopen restaurants following the Covid-19 lockdown, they needed to recruit across the country.

The company wanted to recruit inclusively, and so the 3Ps account manager worked with them to create a route to work that could be adopted and replicated exactly by all the prime providers. A sector based work academy was customised for Nando's. It has two strands, an introduction to Nando's covering the different roles in the company, the environment, culture, and career development opportunities. The second strand is an accredited customer service course.

Nando's staff were also involved in webinars and events introducing the company to potential applicants.

The 3Ps provided Nando's with a single point of contact an account manager. The account manager ensured that every applicant had completed the courses and met the minimum application criteria before uploading them onto a database. This database was then used by Nando's managers to find staff for interview.

The process was inclusive, supporting those with disabilities and additional needs, and up to 40per cent of Nando's vacancies were filled by participants coming through the 3Ps account manager.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Figure provided by 3Ps leadership

### Case Study: Central London Forward Employer Services Sub-group

This group is comprised of four prime providers and facilitated by Central London Forward. As a group they drew up a terms of reference, and a steering group meets monthly. The steering group is made up of the prime providers and local authorities.

The group is described as driven by employer needs rather than provider needs.

Each employer has one point of contact from within the prime providers – this may be because of an existing relationship, or if it is a new employer, the point of contact is chosen from the group. That account manager then co-ordinates everything for the employer across the prime providers. This might include pre-screening, where to look for candidates, and pre-employment training. The latter might be designed specifically for the employer, or the group may use existing provision and course material. 120 participants went through the Level 2 Pret Supervisory course and into work.<sup>23</sup>

The sub-group are interested in meeting unemployed Londoners wider needs and so are also creating AEB packages. They are in the process of recruiting an integration manager to ensure that other support services (including skills and health) are part of the sub-groups offer to employers.

### Shared Account Management

This model offers even closer partnership and can be particularly useful for large employers with regular, ongoing vacancies, or when there are recruitment pushes for large infrastructure projects where there are vacancies across a number of employers that require significant management.

### Case study: Transport for London (TfL)

The Work Programme in London consisted of two CPAs, each with three prime providers, so there were six prime providers in the city in total. TfL is a big and attractive employer in the city and has a history of involvement in employment programmes. They were explicit in saying they were not interested in building relationships with all six providers and wanted a single deal that they could all work with.

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<sup>23</sup> Figure provided by Central London Forward

Each provider agreed to joint-fund an account manager who would be located in the TfL HR department and line managed by TfL. Their role was to identify and channel vacancies through to the Work Programme providers. This was done on an allocation basis, so if there were 30 vacancies, each provider would be given five to fill, if they couldn't fill them, then they would be opened up to all the prime providers. The founder of the approach told us, *'as primes we were no longer competing to get the vacancies, instead the performance league showed us who was best at getting people back to work.'*

This route to work had more stages than other, similar jobs, and this necessitated good communications with the adviser teams in each of the prime providers, to explain the value of the length of the process, which some resisted. The thoroughness at the pre-employment stage impacted positively on the quality of the placements, with one prime provider noting that the sustainability of TfL job starts was routinely 30 per cent higher than that for other jobs.

The steering group was comprised of decision makers from all six prime providers, and the TfL account manager had responsibility for implementation. This included developing pre-employment support which covered the application process, the initial interview, training and awareness days and then final interviews. Sector-based training routeways run out of the London Transport Museum were also put in place.

The steering group also led on integrating pre-employment support with other services, including from mental health organisations and skills providers who relished being able to create partnerships with all six prime providers at once. Awareness sessions for support services were delivered to groups of staff from all providers. In addition to making it easier for those organisations to engage with the Work Programme, the steering group's greater geographical oversight made them able to speak to commissioners about gaps in skills funding.

The lessons from this model for future similar approaches include: ensuring that the account manager has a clear understanding of the volumes and jobs required to make the investment worthwhile, and using the steering group to analyse the performance data. The data sharing between the six prime providers enabled the group to identify specific client groups that were failing at certain stages in the interview process and put in place mechanisms to support them.



## Co-designed route to work

As noted in the previous section, employer involvement from an early stage can be beneficial, and deepens the employer/provider relationship.

### Case Study: The Co-op and the Work Programme

This partnership led to the development of a structured recruitment process that created a pipeline into the Co-op's retail business for Work Programme participants.

The Co-op set up a Community Resourcing Programme (CRP) to support recruitment from local communities. The CRP Director wanted to work with a supply chain that could support the Co-op to recruit a diverse candidate pool and hire locally.

Representatives from five providers met with the Co-op to design a single recruitment process framework, built around a number of guiding principles, that would run identically across the five providers. The process included the following elements:

- \* Employment advisers were asked to visit stores to understand the demands of the job. Co-op senior management wanted to ensure that the physical, numeracy and social requirements were fully comprehended before candidates were submitted.
- \* Co-op branch managers presented in providers' offices every quarter to ensure that all staff and participants understood the job roles.
- \* Managers of every (provider) office that wanted to place people with the Co-op attended a presentation from the CRP Director.
- \* A structured framework for participants to transition to work was developed. This included presentations, shop tours, and two weeks of work experience before a job start. This framework encouraged participants to deselect themselves if they felt the job wasn't right for them.
- \* For participants, completion of the structured work experience programme would result in either moving into a vacancy, or being listed for new roles as they came up. Each attendee on the work experience programme was given a basic job performance evaluation, which they could carry through to other job applications if they wanted. This identified what participants had achieved in the two weeks, including retail-specific skills as well as areas for improvement.

The Work Programme providers produced information, including regular success stories, that the Co-op could promote through their internal communications to engage more store managers in the process.

The Co-op recruited over 5000 people through the Work Programme process.<sup>24</sup> The Co-op told us that delivering the programme ‘captured the hearts and minds of the Co-op managers’, and they became increasingly interested in supporting unemployed people in their communities. The Co-op provides all staff with time to volunteer, and in many branches this was spent coaching unemployed people in job search and work skills.

We were told that previous experiences of employment programmes had not been as positive, and that simply transactional matching of people to vacancies had led to inappropriate referrals. ‘This model worked better for participants and shops.’

The Co-op CRP Director identified several lessons that contributed to the success of the approach:

- \* Keep the design team small – just one decision-maker from the employer and each provider. The six people involved in designing and implementing this relationship met up to create the programme and had strong personal relationships which enabled them to adapt as the programme went on. This team met monthly.
- \* Co-design a framework that provides a simple structure for everyone to work from and that you can all deliver.
- \* Have a set of agreed guiding principles that you can use for decision making as the programme evolves.
- \*The journey back to work needs to be incremental for many participants if it is going to be successful – don’t skimp on things like work experience as they provide a safe opportunity for people to re-enter work.
- \*Show people the emotional appeal of joining a company as well as the tasks a role entails.
- \* Whatever stage the candidate gets to (ie even if they do not end up in work), make sure the process has been positive and they take something from it. This was a tangible report at the end of work experience, but the process also praised deselection by participants themselves, particularly when it helped firm up job goals.

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<sup>24</sup> These figures are from the Co-op Community Resourcing Programme, and were provided during the interview undertaken for this research

## Good work

The last decade has seen increasing levels of interest in the *quality of work*, with reports such as that led by Matthew Taylor, as well as a focus on wider work factors including job security, predictability and flexibility. The [Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices](#) focused on the way work was changing as a result of new employment models, including the rise of the gig economy. A ‘Good Work Plan’ was published, which found that there were five foundational principles of good work: fair pay; satisfaction; participation and progression; well-being, safety and security; and voice and autonomy.

Some of the employers we spoke to identified the conditions of the jobs they had as contributors to current vacancies, particularly zero hour contracts. Some spoke about improving areas such as flexibility, although one noted that they were ‘being forced to do it’ by the labour market conditions.

Definitions of what constitutes ‘good work’ are multi-dimensional – and many have been created through research with workers. It is notable that intrinsic aspects of jobs are more strongly predictive of wellbeing than extrinsic aspects. Pay rises alone are unlikely to solve staff shortages.<sup>25</sup>

Employers we interviewed were aware of making work appealing to employees:

*‘It’s not just about money, it’s about drivers feeling valued for what they do, where they fit in society, roadside facilities. Yes, we have close to 150 drivers here, but I know them all on a first name basis ... I think it’s important that you take people on a journey with you and that they’re not just a number and that they don’t feel that they’re just a number, and I think it’s important that they feel valued and they feel part of something bigger.’*

Interestingly in research carried out by IES, young people are feeling pessimistic about the types of jobs available to them, seeing job quality as a ‘privilege’.<sup>26</sup>

Programmes such as Skills for Londoners are offering support for employers beyond recruitment, including job design, support in work and workforce development advice. Employers such as John Lewis are also engaging in programmes that look at the working conditions and job satisfaction of their supply chains.<sup>27</sup>

The tight labour market and high numbers of vacancies means that participants may be being asked to consider working in jobs and sectors that may be new to them. There has been investment by providers

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Williams, QMU, Mapping Good Work

<sup>26</sup> Cristiana

<sup>27</sup> John Lewis Better Jobs Programme

in events such as Fedcap's 'Sector Scanners' which are myth busting workshops that focus on certain industries. These help to promote *flexible mindsets* for participants. There is more work to be done on supporting participants to consider changing job roles and developing career routeways that go beyond initial jobs.

The current labour market and recruitment pressures offers a real opportunity to support employers with *job design and job-shaping* so that the jobs that are available are accessible by Restart participants. Employment programmes used to be described as work first, the question now is how to move to work better. This may be through supporting employers to transition to more flexible work models. IES research on retention and progression showed that often quite small changes could have a significant impact. And as more people with health conditions and disabilities receive support through Restart, there is the opportunity to support employers with the lessons learned from occupational health.

### Case Study: Ingeus and Good work

Ingeus record and track whether jobs participants move into jobs that pay the Real Living Wage. They have done this for the Work and Health Programme and for Jets and continue to do so for the Restart Scheme. Ingeus employment advisers actively promote the benefits of the Real Living Wage to employers, particularly in terms of retention and reducing staff turnover. 'Our employer services team are great at having conversations to encourage employers to pay the Real Living Wage'. Promoting the real living wage has now become a part of their standard approach to employers.

Ingeus also track Work and Health participants' opinions on their new jobs, which gives an insight into their perception of job quality. There has been little change pre and post pandemic.

*Client views on jobs have not changed, however, with very similar proportions viewing their new job as a step towards a better future (pre: 70%, post: 69%), their ideal job (pre: 12%, post: 12%) and just a job (pre: 19%, post: 20%)<sup>28</sup>*

Ingeus has member status of the [Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter](#), as do one of their supply chain partners, the Growth Company. To sign up to be a supporter of the charter, employers must commit to seven characteristics which include: secure work, Real Living Wage, recruitment, health and wellbeing, flexible work, engagement and voice, and people management. Ingeus actively promote the Charter with all their networks, including providers of community services to the participants of their employment programmes.

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<sup>28</sup> Working Well report

The Community Referral Platform is a secure, online, referral platform developed by Ingeus, with more than 200 services, providing more than 600 available interventions for participants, ranging from charity services, skills providers and health interventions. All those listed on the platform are encouraged to sign up to the Charter through regular reviews.

## Next steps

This paper is just one output from the ReAct Partnership's work on employer engagement. We are now taking this forward in a number of ways.

### The Prime Providers Network

Employment engagement leads from all eight Restart providers meet regularly to share leads, information and to meet and present to employers together. The Prime Providers Network have developed a shared vacancy tracker and an account management universal service offer, which is maintained and supported through the ReAct Partnership. This Network will provide an ongoing basis for vacancy sharing and supporting 'single point of contact' account management for employers that operate across contract boundaries.

### Action Learning

A series of *Action Learning Sets* between staff delivering Restart employer engagement activity, funded through the ReAct Partnership, are already happening and will continue. These action learning sets provide the opportunity for frontline staff to develop their employer engagement skills, to invest in professional development, and to problem solve across provider and geographical boundaries.

### Workshops and events

Further interactive, online workshops are being run through early 2022 to share findings from the project and encourage collaboration. A key theme that comes through the case studies is the importance of *local integration*, both between prime providers and their supply chains, and also between prime providers and other services including skills and health. The real win from shared employer engagement will come when it is matched by localised integration that supports delivery in each CPA. As one provider told us:

*'We need to think about internal alignment. Skills, employment and health functions are often separate but the offer can be broader.'*

The workshops therefore include a focus on local integration and partnership working specifically. They are recorded, and the resources are available to ReAct Partnership members on the ReAct website.

### Moving towards 'relational engagement'

This paper sets out a number of case studies and potential models for moving beyond transactional engagement and towards more relational engagement with employers. It is our expectation that the resources here and our ongoing work through the partnership will help to support more trialling and implementation of deeper, co-designed and co-ordinated support for employers across recruitment and people management. ReAct members will be taking this forward through 2022, including working with Timewise on a Change Agent programme.

## **Making a difference to delivery**

This is the first report from the first project funded through the ReAct Partnership. It is really important that the research we are doing through the partnership is useful to those designing and delivering employment services, and so we would welcome feedback on this project, its findings and ways that we can support you and colleagues to take this work forward. If you would like to get in touch, then you can email us at: [jane.mansour@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:jane.mansour@employment-studies.co.uk) or use the contact form on the website [www.restartreact.co.uk](http://www.restartreact.co.uk).

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