



# Shared Employer Engagement in Practice

Lessons learned from Restart  
collaboration

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# The ReAct Partnership

## About Us

The ReAct Partnership is an 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 eight of the 'prime providers' for the Restart programme — FedCap Employment, AKG, G4S, Ingeus, Maximus, Reed, Seetec 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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## Executive Summary

The Restart employment programme offers tailored support to individuals who are out of work for six months or more and is delivered by eight Prime providers contracted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The Prime Provider Network (PPN) consists of employer engagement representatives from all Prime Restart Providers. It meets monthly in a collaborative model designed to respond to the needs of the employers involved in Restart. The PPN aims to provide effective employer engagement at a national level through vacancy sharing and supporting 'single point of contact' account management for employers that operate across contract boundaries. The group is run and supported by the ReAct partnership at IES.

This research aimed to explore how the PPN has evolved since inception and the value and impact to the Primes and supported employers. Looking to the future, this work aimed to consider how the PPN could continue to collaborate for the remainder of the Restart contract and what has been learned from the PPN to inform the design of any national employer engagement strategy within more devolved delivery models in future.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from eight Restart Primes, three wider stakeholders with international experts on employer engagement, six employers and recruitment agency representatives, and a paired interview was conducted with members of DWP's national employer team. The research team attended three PPN meetings. The recommendations from the research were reviewed and developed during a workshop with members of the PPN.

### Value of the PPN for Primes

The PPN was valued as a forum to build cross-organisation relationships which facilitate learning and supports collaborative working. Sharing insights about the labour market and participant context and how to best meet employer needs was of primary value for the contributing members. Overall, value to members and their organisations includes:

#### Knowledge building

- An opportunity to meet employers and understand their needs and ways of working.
- An opportunity to share best practice and expand knowledge, including expertise about participant support needs in different regions.
- A forum for sharing and discussing the implications of labour market insight.

#### Meeting employer needs

- A mechanism to share vacancies and increase routes to work for Restart participants.
- Smoothing the onboarding of new employers through a warm handover.
- Strengthening the offer for employers.
- Benefits for other employment programme activity (where relevant).

## Key mechanisms for success

This value was enabled by:

- the culture of collaboration underpinning activity;
- rotating the Chair among groups members which shared responsibility;
- the ReAct Partnership providing independent and neutral organisation and facilitation;
- a blend of face-to-face meetings to enhance relationship building and facilitate deeper discussion;
- attendance at meetings by DWP to facilitate shared working relationships; and
- attendance by employers and other key stakeholders to understand and learn from their perspectives.

## Key challenges for primes

The PPN had experienced some challenges:

- Evidencing the value and benefits from the collaboration to wider stakeholders.
- Creating an effective technological solution to support activity.
- Perceived inconsistency of how organisations in the group approached employer engagement and support activity, leading to concerns about reputational risks when sharing employer leads.
- Perceived inequality of contribution and commitment between Primes.
- The short-term commissioning model for Restart being at odds with the long-term relationship building model of the PPN.

## Value for employers from the PPN

Employers were not always aware which programme candidates came from or of the work of the PPN, demonstrating an effective 'hiding of the wiring' of employer engagement by PPN members. The value to employers of the PPN was:

- providing national coverage from a single point of contact;
- avoiding duplication of activity and reducing the number of contacts with employer support providers;
- creating efficiencies in disseminating their preferred ways of working;
- providing a doorway to other employment services where Primes delivered other programmes in addition to Restart; and
- a route to achieving social value commitments.

## Key challenges for employers

Employers noted some challenges when working with the PPN:

- A single point of contact can risk loss of relationship when staff leave.
- Effective hiding the wiring by Primes leads to lack of visibility of impact of activity.
- A lack of data and multiplicity of systems creates challenges in measuring the return on investment from engaging with the PPN.

## What's next for the PPN in Restart?

The Restart contract has a further two years. Stakeholders expressed commitment to building on the work of the PPN to date, and ensuring it continued to share labour market insight and build ways to meet employer needs. Several additional activities were identified through this research that the group may consider adopting. The PPN could:

- revisit the groups terms of reference to re-establish the aims of the group;
- revisit membership and broaden it to include strategic leads;
- establish a minimum offer for employers that still allows for flexibility of approach;
- explore the potential for a collaborative approach as a group under the ReAct brand to proactively approach business development, establishing a value proposition;
- engage with Local and Combined/Mayoral Authorities in advance of increased devolution, for example, inviting them to a meeting to build knowledge and understanding and share learnings from the collaborative model;
- explore how to deepen relationships with employers and extend support to topics such as job design and job carving, and the benefits of inclusive recruitment; and
- work together with DWP to inform the next stage of commissioning from the national employer perspective.

## Exploring the legacy of the PPN for a future national strategy

The following were identified as key insights to inform a future national strategy for collaborative employer engagement:

- An independent and neutral support framework is important for effective collaboration.
- Collaboration contributes tangible benefits in terms of knowledge sharing, understanding employers and meeting their needs.
- The collaboration model could be used regionally to facilitate employer engagement at a devolved level and prevent duplication of activity within regions.



- There remains a role for a national network to support employers seeking centralised recruitment activity.
- The PPN could share expertise about diverse participant groups and how best to move them into work.
- A national strategy would be strengthened by setting goals, understanding measurement and providing an enabling framework and technology.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for PPN

#### Working together

- Revisit terms of reference for the PPN and articulate aims.
- Establish measures of success and to capture of full range of benefits.
- Maintain a focus on capturing meaningful LMI to support understanding.

#### Supporting employers

- Promote a unified message to employers about the value of inclusive recruitment.
- Ensure no duplication of effort on creating employer engagement forums.
- Capture expertise within the group on engaging with a range of different participant groups and help employers prepare for the participants of the future.
- Support employers through transitional phase to a more devolved landscape.

#### Influencing others

- Advocate for the national approach in the new commissioning landscape.
- Ensure the collaborative model filters down into supply chain partners.
- Engage now with Local Authorities, Combined/Mayoral Authorities and other key commissioners and their representative bodies as a group.

#### Further options for consideration

- Establish an agreed minimum employer offer whilst maintaining flexibility of approach.
- Consider the business development opportunities of a collective approach under a unified ReAct brand.
- Develop a more integrated service for employers, positioning the PPN as trusted expert. For example, educating employers about the value of flexibility in hiring and job design or working with employers to address other business problems.

## Learning to inform future commissioning

For the remainder of the Restart contract there was support for the PPN to gather data to more effectively measure their impact. Looking forward to the next stage of commissioning, stakeholders wanted to discuss the future of employer engagement and its role in the future of work in the changing landscape during this transitional period and beyond. Key learning from the PPN for future commissioning included:

### National co-ordination of employer support

- Building in a strategic and national approach to employer engagement in employment support contracts to help employers engage.
- Consider maintaining a neutral and independent organisation at the centre to facilitate and drive the best interests of an overarching employer engagement group serving cross-programme employer engagement activities.
- Provide and invest in a technological solution to underpin effective collaboration about large employers with centralised recruitment practices so that they are not inundated with multiple points of contact under a more devolved system.
- Promote contracted providers as an extension of the commissioning body.
- Allow transparency and greater data sharing to enable providers to be transparent with employers and local stakeholders.

### Key points of learning to meet employer needs

- Acknowledge the value of a full range of options in a participant's journey from an employer's perspective, including taster days, work placements and temporary work.
- To meet employer needs, commissioners need to ensure that the commissioning criteria reflect the skills required to lead effective employer engagement.

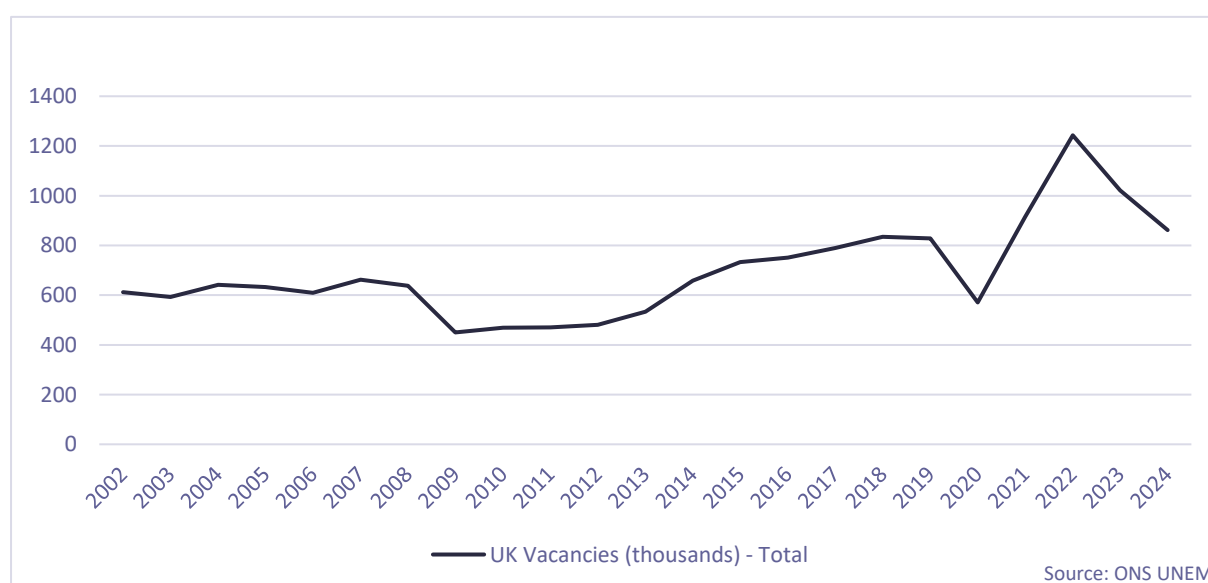
# 1. Introduction

Restart was introduced in response to rising unemployment at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and designed to offer tailored support to individuals who had been out of work continuously for between 12 and 18 months (later reduced to nine months in 2022 and again to six months in 2024). This chapter sets out the labour market context Restart has operated in and the background to the Prime Provider Network (PPN), the forum for employer engagement teams, which is the focus of this research. This chapter also outlines the project's aims and methodology.

## 1.1 Restart's Labour market context

The fast-changing labour market context during and immediately after the pandemic offer some context to the environment in which Restart has been operating. In 2021 providers were faced with lower numbers of participant referrals than planned, many of whom had more complex needs than anticipated, combined with high vacancy numbers. Figure 1 highlights the volatility in the number of job vacancies during the Restart contract, with a dramatic post-pandemic increase to a record high of nearly 1.2 million vacancies in 2022, followed by a downward correction.

**Figure 1: UK Vacancies (thousands) total**



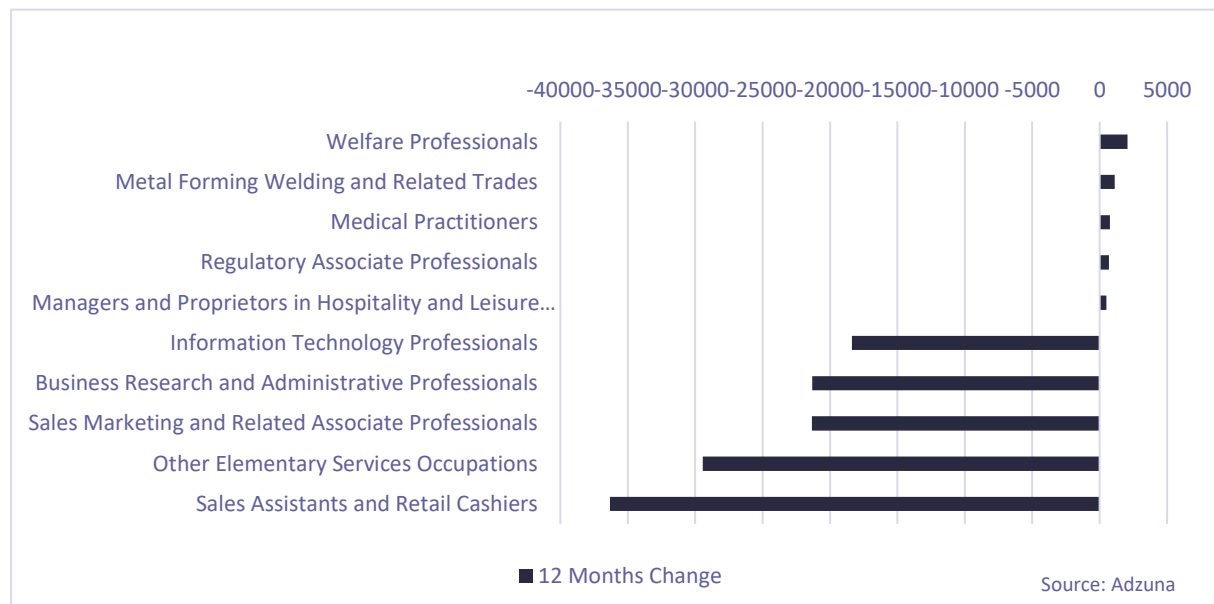
By Spring 2025, the unemployment rate reached the highest level since May-July 2021. The employment rate remains below its pre-pandemic level, though there are signs of a recent improvement in the overall number of people in work. The employment and economic inactivity rates both modestly improved on the quarter for the 16 to 64 age group, while unemployment has worsened. This indicates that while more people are joining the

workforce, finding work is becoming increasingly difficult.<sup>i1</sup> The latest figures show the 35<sup>th</sup> consecutive quarterly decline in job vacancies.

June's labour market data was the first since the rise in National Insurance contributions (NICs) and the National Living Wage (NLW). The combined figures indicate that employers adjusted to rising costs by reducing their workforce size and future workforce planning. The sectors with the largest decreases in workforce and vacancies were hospitality, professional services and construction. Overall, recent data suggest a cooling labour market in the UK, with employers hesitant to invest in workforce expansion.<sup>2</sup>

The job roles and skills that employers are recruiting for has also changed (Figure 2). These shifts indicate a transition toward public service and skilled trades, with retail and administrative roles contracting.

**Figure 2 Top 10 Jobs SOC 2020 minor-groups – 12 Months Change to June 2025**



These changes signal changing employer recruitment requirements, alongside the fast-changing impact of AI which is also driving change. AI is the subject of much debate about how it will affect the supply of roles to Restart and the skills needed for the future. Whilst the future remains uncertain, according to a [2023 World Economic Forum \(WEF\) report](#)<sup>3</sup> the 10 top skills for 2027 are projected to be:

1. analytical thinking;
2. creative thinking;
3. AI and Big Data;
4. leadership and social influence;
5. resilience, flexibility, and agility;

<sup>1</sup>Ghosh, S. (2025, June 10). Labour Market Statistics; *Institute for Employment Studies (IES)*.

<sup>2</sup> Ghosh, S. (2025, June 10). Labour Market Statistics; *Institute for Employment Studies (IES)*.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum (2023, May). Future of Jobs Report.

6. curiosity and lifelong learning;
7. technological literacy;
8. design and user experience;
9. motivation and self-awareness; and
10. empathy and active listening.

This shows the future value of ‘human’ skills. However, given the pace of change, flexibility and adaptability will need to be key attributes for both employees and employers.

## 1.2 Research background and context

Employer support programmes seek to work with employers to identify and manage vacancies and to broker the right people into the right jobs. The employer facing role is often done by dedicated ‘employer engagement teams’. For national programmes like Restart this can risk employer teams engaging the same employer in different Contract Package Areas (CPAs), as well as teams from different programmes seeking to engage with the same employers within CPAs.

The way in which the Restart contract has been configured across competing organisations and the idea of competitive companies and organisations acting collaboratively has been referred to as cooptition. Interviews with experts in the field identified that this model is not unique to the UK and other jurisdictions have similar fragmentation within employment support with competing contracts and complex commissioning, including overlapping regional and national commissioning. The purpose of the PPN is one that is reflected in other forums that perform similar functions. One example was the 3Ps, which was set up for the Work and Health Programme. ERSA, the Employment Related Services Association, run an Employer Engagement Forum and there is some similar activity in other organisations such as the IEP.

Evaluations of other areas of employer engagement activity, such as that performed by the LSIPs in the skills area, identified similar themes and needs emerging in relation to how employers were engaged.

The LSIPs reported that employers often encounter challenges in navigating the skills system due to various factors such as complexity, lack of responsiveness from providers, provider competition and limited employer awareness of local opportunities. Some Chambers, such as the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, identified that providers should collaborate to offer a more cohesive offer and eliminate duplication and confusion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chambers of Commerce and Local Skills Improvement Plans (2024, February). Bridging The Skills Gap A new dynamic for business, education and skills. Linking local action with national strategy.

The key challenges to the employer engagement function and the need for collaboration is not unique within the Restart contract. Lessons can be learned from elsewhere. Therefore, to support Primes work most effectively, in 2021 the ReAct partnership commissioned its first research project - *Shared employer engagement models: What works*<sup>5</sup>. This project had two priorities: to help to develop a shared employer engagement approach, so that employers with jobs across CPAs could be assured of a consistent Restart offer; and to help understand and apply the evidence of ‘what works’ in effective employer engagement more generally.

The project demonstrated that employers wanted providers to take a shared approach to employer engagement to make the employer experience simpler and avoid duplication of effort, and for Primes to share employer relationships across CPA boundaries.

Six themes were identified, which recurred in different settings, conversations and case studies, for 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 |

Five models for sharing employer engagement were identified that could be used or adapted by Restart providers. These were:

- **Sharing vacancies:** When a prime provider has a relationship with an employer with vacancies in another area of the country, the provider ensures those vacancies are passed to the prime provider(s) for other CPAs.
- **Single point of contact account managers:** Employers have a one stop shop account management model with a central point of contact – a single front door into the programme.
- **Shared account management:** This model offers even closer partnership by appointing a specific account manager to represent activity across providers to support the work of a specific employer or group of employers. This 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 several employers that require significant management.
- **Co-designed route to work:** A model of employer involvement from an early stage to work on pathways into work at a deeper level.

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<sup>5</sup> Mansour et al. (2022) *Shared employer engagement models: What works*. Institute for Employment Studies, ReAct.

- **Good work:** Supporting employers with job design and job-shaping with a focus on good work.

These models were assessed for transferability to Restart. This assessment was underpinned by four delivery principles informed by interviews with employers: clarity, co-design, coordination and candidate focus. It was concluded that, combined with ongoing work within the ReAct partnership, Restart would support the implementation of deeper support for employers.

The PPN was referenced in the original paper as it had been established at an early stage of Restart to bring together employer engagement leads from across the Primes. At the time, the intentions of the PPN were included in the original paper as:

- vacancy sharing;
- approaching ‘aspirational employers’ as Restart rather than as individual organisations;
- creating a vacancy sharing tracker to enable analysis;
- shared account management strategies, underpinned by an employer charter and agreed minimum offer;
- employer spotlight sessions; and
- development of a more integrated service for employers.

The PPN is run and supported by the Director of the ReAct partnership, ensuring a neutral and independent presence. Each Prime is represented, and the size of the group has remained relatively constant with one or two key members from each Prime who are employer engagement leads for national accounts. Meetings are chaired on a rotating basis by each organisation. In 2022 the group stated its objectives in a shared Statement of Principle / Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Primes:

- All Primes to equally commit to sourcing national opportunities to share within the group.
- Open and collaboration communication, including feedback.
- Co-ordinated approach to national employer engagement will yield higher results longer term but will take time and commitment.
- Respectful of boundaries and existing relationships.
- Share freely – both in terms of opportunities and recruitment processes, consistency with the recruitment process will build employer trust.

The PPN has met monthly since 2022, providing an ongoing basis for vacancy sharing and supporting ‘single point of contact’ account management for employers that operate across contract boundaries. Meetings are conducted online in the main and allow an opportunity for members of the group to discuss issues, share best practice, introduce employers to the group and discuss upcoming activity, among other things. In January 2025 online meeting

were replaced at quarterly intervals with longer in-person meetings to allow for more discussion, employer presentations alongside the usual business.

To coordinate employer engagement activity, the group has shared access to activity trackers documenting the sharing of contacts and information as well as other key documents. The group has collated data to demonstrate to employers with large scale recruitment the volume of job entries achieved for them across the programme. The PPN gathered job entry data for Restart participants for five large national employers they work with over the course of their involvement with Restart. This data (see below) gives an indication of the scale of difference to employers. It is large employers that predominantly benefit from and engage with the work of the PPN.

| Organisation | Job Entries – Total |
|--------------|---------------------|
| 1            | 877                 |
| 2            | 351                 |
| 3            | 200                 |
| 4            | 2221                |
| 5            | 851                 |

### 1.3 Project aims and objectives

The DWP evaluation of Restart (2024)<sup>6</sup> noted successful examples of engaging with national employers, or employers with high recruitment needs, as well as local tailoring through activities such as sector routeways. While the report highlighted positive practice, it also recommended that *‘further consideration was needed on how providers engage with employers’*. With the Restart contract extension in place, it is timely to reflect what can be learned from experience to inform the rest of Restart, and what can be learned for future commissions.

This research therefore aims to explore how the PPN has evolved and the value and impact for the Primes and the employers the PPN works with. This project explores the mechanisms behind shared relationships and collaborations and looks to identify what works. Finally, the project aims to consider how well-equipped this type of forum may be, to enable collaboration through the remaining Restart contract and learnings for the design of a national employer engagement strategy, within more devolved delivery models.

The following research aims were explored:

1. Engage with members of the Prime Provider Network to understand the experiences and value of the group to the Primes’ activity.

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<sup>6</sup> Elmore et al. (2024) *Restart Scheme: Evaluation summary*, Learning & Work, Ipsos.



2. Engage with employers to understand the value to them of connections with Restart employer engagement groups/leads and gather examples of best practice and recommendations for these relationships.
3. Engage with international experts to explore how other countries may be flexing their models of employer engagement to fit changes in labour market landscapes.
4. Bring the learnings together from across the PPN and stakeholders to collate ideas for how to maximise the effectiveness of the group for the next stage of Restart, considering: shifts in employment programme landscape, changing labour market conditions, and the changing profile of participants.
5. Consider the effectiveness of the current collaboration model, explore how it has adapted, and whether and how it could adapt in future.
6. Translate learning into an understanding/model of how a national employer strategy could operate within a more devolved delivery system in general.

## 1.4 Methodology

The research conducted involved the following aspects:

1. Interviews were conducted with representatives of all eight Primes with Restart contracts. Interviews were with employer engagement team members and leads in single or paired interviews across spring 2025, exploring both operational aspects and the strategic purpose of the PPN.
2. Attendance at three PPN meetings by research team members to understand first-hand the activity of the group. This allowed PPN members to be aware of the research and contribute to the understanding of the research team. PPN members were involved in a workshop to explore the key findings and recommendations coming out of the research.
3. Interviews were conducted with four wider stakeholders, including international experts on employer engagement, to understand how the current model of the PPN relates to the international landscape of employer engagement forums.
4. Interviews were conducted with a selection of six key employers and recruitment agency representatives, as suggested by Primes, covering key sectors. The employers interviewed were generally operating UK wide and represented a range of sectors, such as facilities management and hospitality. These sought to explore how well the employers understood the work of the PPN and the value to them of such activity.
5. DWP's national employer team took part in a paired interview to explore their experience of working with the PPN and to understand DWP national employer models.

6. A review of the employer engagement tracker data collated by the group, to record instances of their sharing activity and associated outcomes. This was reviewed to understand scope and breadth of activity. However, this element of the research revealed limitations in the tracking data around consistency of input and robustness of data which led to the conclusion to refrain from quantitative analysis and focus the project on predominantly qualitative methodologies.

## 2. Experience of and value created by the PPN

All stakeholders were clear that the principle of collaboration had value both for the Primes and employers they work with. There was universal support for the work of the PPN. This chapter explores the experiences of the members of the PPN, what is working for them and why, and the challenges the group has faced. The PPN was felt to work because it created a culture of collaboration and facilitated engagement with employers to understand their requirements. Spillover benefits from the groups work to other programmes were noted.

### 2.1 Creating a culture of collaboration

Interviews with experts in employer engagement for employment services revealed that the range of products and services available can be confusing for employers. Fragmentation of services and multiple siloed caseloads, even within a contained labour market, can lead to employers having to engage with multiple providers. This view was confirmed by a recent report which found that there were broad frustrations about the UK's fragmented employment and skills support landscape, underscoring the need for joined up policymaking and strong partnership working.<sup>7</sup> The report also noted a tendency for employment support providers to be competitive about their employers. Therefore, collaboration that reduces burden upon employers to negotiate with multiple contacts is a key component for success.

The competitive element inherent in contract commissioning was seen to create a tension with the ambition to collaborate. Whilst interviewees felt that the PPN has made great strides in building collaboration, it was noted that there remain limits to this. Members of the PPN were willing to share but perhaps do not want to share everything and overall were more inclined to share evidence of success.

*I do think it faces challenges in so much as we are in a league table against each other which creates one sort of approach and the ReAct Partnership is trying to do something different. Perhaps there is something around that that can be considered for future contracts.*

Prime Provider

However, stakeholders both inside and outside the PPN felt that it has been predominately effective in overcoming this tension and building collaboration. Interviewees noted they expected there would be considerable competition between Primes working on employer engagement and expressed surprise at the level of collaboration apparent within the PPN.

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<sup>7</sup> Jones, K and Carson, C (2023) *Universal Credit and Employers: Exploring the Demand Side of UK Active Labour Market Policy. Final Report. Manchester Metropolitan University.*

*[The PPN] facilitates the possibility of collaboration that perhaps without it would be more difficult to achieve, not impossible, but more difficult to achieve. . . . It has created that environment for collaboration to happen.*

Prime Provider

Group members recognised that relationships take time to build. Interviews with prime providers referred to the willingness to share, the sense of the group being a collaborative space and the overall good working culture. Respondents reflected that collaboration had evolved and grown over time.

*I think gone are the days where employers will work with just one provider or you know they'll limit their options. We're in a really tricky labour market at the moment, I mean employers will go to multiple sources, so we have to show that we can work together...So I think the culture of the PPN is really, important.*

Prime provider

During attendance at PPN meetings the research team observed the collaborative nature in action. It was clear that the group had developed firm relationships with obvious shared understanding and willingness to collaborate. One group member described the group culture as a strong community with shared goals, with another describing that the solidarity it has created, going on to say:

*It creates an 'us and us' feeling rather than 'us and them' . . . I feel like I'm part of the bigger team now.*

Prime provider

With trust and community in place, the potential for that to further develop with the introduction of face-to-face meetings was mentioned by PPN members and there was a strong support for this development.

Changes to membership of the group can mean that trusted relationships need to be rebuilt and that the original ways of working that were agreed in 2022 were not necessarily visible to new members so that those overall goals and aims were not clear.

While members of the PPN had created a culture of collaboration, it was felt that the collaboration could be better extended into supply chain partners, for example sharing information across supply chain networks to avoid duplication of activity within CPAs. This was also acknowledged in the 2024 Restart evaluation where evidence was seen of a need for collaboration to be fostered within supply chains.

There was evidence of employers benefiting from the coordinated approach taken by the PPN, leading to reduced duplication of contact which increased efficiency. One employer observed the shift stating:

*I think the way that it works where there's - not like as previously I guess when there's been like funding and government contracts, people have been quite restrictive and like they want to look after their own funding and use their own funding themselves and not share it about. But I think the way that is set up where they are able to work lots of different partners. It definitely helps us as a as a larger employer.*

#### Employer

One challenge to the collaborative model is that stakeholders perceived there had been uneven contribution from Primes, with some more committed than others. This can also include imbalances in areas depending on whether an organisation is acting as Prime or supply chain. However, it should be noted that this had been pointed out to illustrate the potential risk to goodwill within the group and also the potential for more and deeper relationships to be built to fully realise the potential of the group.

Primes referenced the challenges of trying to create a national collaborative approach against a backdrop of short-term contracting and the potential for conflicting employer engagement activity between Jobcentre Plus and commissioned employment support teams. There is potential for this to be more streamlined in future contract models.

Stakeholders had genuine admiration for the level of collaboration in what is essentially a competitive environment. However, interviews with employers and wider stakeholders revealed a very low awareness of the PPN, the role it plays and the value it brings. Even supply chain members knew little about the PPN, providing an opportunity for greater influence among wider stakeholders about the groups' achievements.

## 2.2 Sharing vacancies and accounts

The activities of the PPN focus on sharing employer contacts, ensuring that employers have a single point of contact but that this information is shared, with introductions made across regions. One provider described how previously a provider might keep employer contacts 'close to their chest' but that now they are more willing to pass contacts on or act as a main contact because they are part of a community with the same goals. They reported there is mutual benefit to this, with employers more likely to stay with them if they can support recruitment nationally and deliver efficiencies of scale. Experts referred to the business benefit of handing a warm relationship to a trusted contact for both parties. This can save time and deliver performance for another Prime that they have not had to spend time and money to achieve.

The scale of Restart has helped employers, with one employer commenting that Restart provided the largest pool of applicants of any employment support programme. That speaks to a strength in numbers to support employer relationships.

This feature of the collaboration gives employers access to all Primes via a streamlined process and also smoothes onboarding processes through increased understanding of the employer's needs. Most primes had examples of where sharing vacancies had directly led to outcomes for their participants. As one provider described it, the key benefit to employers is that they do not have multiple people from Restart knocking on their door for the same purpose.

*I think it's been very valuable because what I think employers want is, is just someone to help them for the vacancy. I think if it means that they can just go to a sort of single point of contact who can then refer them to another organisation that can help them with that recruitment. Then I think that's really benefit to them.*

Prime provider

This value was seen across CPA borders. As was pointed out during stakeholder interviews, employers do not work to the same geographic boundaries as the CPAs and therefore the value is in the national access on offer. One Prime observed that many recruitment teams are becoming smaller and more centralised and therefore a national Restart offer supports this efficiency drive.

#### **Using the PPN to move from CPA level recruitment to national**

A Prime had worked with an employer on a pilot delivering their service in one area. When it went well, the prime discussed rolling out the model across all their UK sites (over 20) using the PPN as the model of distribution.

Having a single point of contact to represent a wider group has advantages and disadvantages. As discussed in expert interviews, this can come with risks when there is staff turnover. This is where good record keeping and data capture feature to support the building of new relationships and giving a clear understanding of the benefit. It can also involve an overinvestment in a personal relationship and identifying with the person and not the programme or the organisation, a point also raised by employers. Illustrating this, one employer discussed that they had planned to have a relationship with one provider acting as a single point of contact, but that this had not transpired in practice and they had taken the lead themselves. The employer noted that Restart providers have different ways of working and therefore they did not feel working with a lead Prime would work well. This suggests that the value from streamlining processes will be dependent on consistent ways of working across Primes.

Whilst trust is clearly high within the PPN, there was some concern that a lack of control over how another Prime might manage an employer account could lead to reputational risk. Businesses can benefit from engaging with a network that provides them with a trusted and consistent level of support that can help them to train others in the models appropriate to

that employer. This led to calls for a revisiting of the MoU and terms of reference for the group, and potentially an extension of those agreed ways of working. This has also been raised with respect to the levels of due diligence that are undertaken with new employers. However, elsewhere it has been established that flexibility in how to work with employers can be important as employers have individual ways of working.

Overall, one of the main challenges is due to the success of the PPN in 'hiding the wiring' for national employers. In general, employers were not aware of the PPN activity and efforts made to join up the system for employers. Whilst this has benefits for the employers there is a balance to be found, so that they understand the value of investing in those relationships.

*But they don't care how it happens, so long as they get people in and working.  
they don't see the wiring.*

Prime provider

A key issue mentioned by employers was the challenges they faced in capturing the value of the interaction with Restart providers. This was attributed to the difference in client relationship management (CRM) systems across different Primes. These systems can also differ from internal organisational systems, making it difficult to track progress and understand the number of Restart placements successfully made. This made return on investment (ROI) difficult to assess.

## 2.3 Meeting employers to understand their requirements

Most PPN meetings involve an employer presentation to give members an understanding of their systems and aims for engaging with Restart. Understanding how a particular employer operates and what they need from Restart is a key benefit of both sharing best practice and the employer engagement. Even in cases where the presenting employer does not have vacancies within their area at that time, members recognised that this activity can help forge relationships for when they do and more generally help providers understand employer's needs and how best to prepare their candidates for roles. Working together the PPN can ensure that all providers and supply chains working in an area can have that understanding of what works for an employer.

*Having an employer coming to board talking about their offer is always the most impactful...Having them coming on board and talk about what they have, what they need from us and then us going away and transact that to our teams to navigate locally. For me that's the best value we get from that because of that's what we want to try and achieve.*

Prime provider

The PPN has helped build a consistency of provision for employers. For example, one employer that attended the PPN and shared their processes with the group, noted that because of the PPN members disseminating this within their organisations, the employer saved time and resources in having to educate multiple teams.

At least two employers interviewed had presented to the PPN. This led to them developing better relationships across the Restart providers. One employer, who understood how the Restart providers collaborate, had high praise for the joined-up approach, commenting on how valuable it was for a large employer.

### **Ensuring social value is driving employer engagement with Restart**

Employers reflected on a need to meet internal reporting requirements on social value and demonstrate social value for public procurement processes, demonstrating inclusivity and steps to tackle workforce inequality. The diversity of Restart participants make this group of specific interest for employers seeking to demonstrate social value. More specifically, recruitment via Restart enables organisations to demonstrate social value using the National Themes, Outcomes and Measures (TOMS) framework (used to measure and report the social impact of activities, projects, or initiatives) and underpin their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). Employer engagement activities are often centred on interactions with social value teams and yet interviewees and employer engagement experts noted a potential disconnect between social impact teams and hiring managers within organisations. As Ingold and Stuart argued, this is an area in which employment support providers can support employers ([Ingold and Stuart, 2014](#)).<sup>8</sup> It was suggested that one way to counteract any potential disconnect between these groups is to focus on communicating the business benefits of inclusive recruitment.

#### **Supporting candidates in changing times**

A provider gave an example of an employer that had presented a lunch and learn session to the group which covered the use of AI for filtering candidates and what that might mean for candidates applying using their online portal. With many large employers now using these systems, this is a way that the group can support the employer by cascading this understanding down through their organisations and therefore helping candidates understand the systems and develop effective approaches.

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<sup>8</sup> Ingold, J., Stuart, M. (2014). *Employer engagement in the Work Programme*. (CERIC Policy Report 5). Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change.



## 2.4 Sharing best practice: preparing candidates

Members of the PPN used the forum to share best practice, both on working with employers, but also sharing the broader experience of participants and how it might affect their readiness for vacancies. Membership of the group encourages this exchange of expertise across Primes which was described as bringing benefits in terms of outcomes.

*I found it really valuable because sometimes we'll find trends of things that might be popping up in different areas. For example, one of them might have been to do with ESOL or housing needs. And it's really good to have that network to see if they're seeing the same issues in different regions, maybe how they've dealt with them.*

Prime provider

Employers discussed how Restart had helped to prepare suitable candidates. They noted that they wanted employment support providers to:

- **pre-screen:** 'pre-screen' potential candidates to ensure their suitability for the role. Best practice reported by interviewed employers included pre-employment screening and support;
- **implement guaranteed interviews and automatic shortlisting:** Supporting candidates to gain a better understanding of the role and train, leading to a guaranteed interview. This might also include amending systems so that recruiting managers can identify where a role suitable for diverse candidates is available;
- **identify adjustments:** Provide support to look at any adjustments needed for interview;
- **DBS clearance:** Where Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance is required, ensuring potential candidates can obtain this; and
- **wrap around support:** Providing new recruits with support as they move into work to ensure sustainability.

Employers identified some inconsistency of experience. They provided examples of applicants applying for roles that they were not interested in or ready for, resulting in interview 'no shows' or applicants who appeared disinterested in role at interview. Employers also described instances where providers were unresponsive, taking several days to respond or several weeks to provide candidates for vacancies.

## 2.5 A neutral, independent facilitator

Feedback on having a rotating chair was very positive, as was the idea of having a neutral and independent organisation at the heart of the group. This ensured information was shared promptly and that actions were recorded and completed and therefore helped to

create collaboration. It also helped Primes override the inherent competitive structure of the commissioning process and challenged members to be effective collaborators.

*Having the partnership and having someone in the middle who is neutral - is good to help shape those conversations.*

Prime provider

## 2.6 Quarterly in-person meetings

The PPN has changed its meeting model to include an in person meeting quarterly. These allow for longer discussion sessions, relationship building opportunities and presentations in person from employers. The move to in person meetings was widely welcomed, with positive comments about the creation of opportunities for more in-depth conversations and one provider saying it made an 'exponential' difference.

*So we had a face-to-face session and a few months ago and that was really, really beneficial. And I feel like the relationships have really taken a different level after that. People are definitely feeling more comfortable with each other and sharing more and we're definitely talking more outside of the group.*

Prime provider

On the flip side, these meetings are time and resource heavy so at least one provider called for greater understanding of the value of these sessions, which is particularly important to understand the scalability of the model.

## 2.7 Engaging with DWP and wider stakeholders

Since January 2025, DWP has been a regular attendee at PPN meetings. This has been widely welcomed and echoes previous research that stakeholders was DWP to be a proactive partner in linking employment and skills strategies across national and regional levels.<sup>9</sup> The PPN enables members to present themselves as a collective voice to DWP and that this has broad benefits in developing the relationships and shared understanding, as well as prompting sharing of contacts and information.

*"I think there's a much more harmonious relationship now " (with national partnership team at DWP)*

Prime provider

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, K and Carson, C (2023) *Universal Credit and Employers: Exploring the Demand Side of UK Active Labour Market Policy. Final Report. Manchester Metropolitan University.*

The value of other key stakeholders attending PPN meeting was reiterated in relation to other organisations as well as DWP, such as IEP, but this came with a call to all these organisations to work effectively together and avoid duplication.

*I think what we need to do is minimise the duplication that's happening with employer engagement. The more people we can get around a single table because we're all working to the same good.*

Prime provider

## 2.8 Benefits for other employment programmes

Many Primes have employer engagement teams that are not Restart specific but work with employers across multiple employment programmes, although Restart is commonly the largest. The concept of the employer engagement team being a shop window for employability services was seen as potentially benefiting the Prime as it opens the talent pool of candidates that they can draw on to meet employer need. As a result, the work of the PPN benefits other programmes.

*Employers don't always really care where the participant comes from. They just want the best candidate. And actually when we're in a position where we've got multiple contracts, it's our responsibility to get them the best candidate for that job and it's irrelevant to them, really which programme it came from.*

Prime provider

Employers interviewed did not differentiate between employment support programmes. Their focus was on candidates' suitability, support requirements and the support offered by the provider. Therefore, part of the value from the PPN for employers was the coordination not just in relation to Restart, but in relation to a wider range of employment programmes delivered by providers.

## 2.9 Data capture and evidencing success

The group track sharing activity that has led to employer relationships as a result from their activity and this reveals a solid and consistent identifiable benefit to collaboration. However, the tracker does not fully represent the work of and benefit from the collaboration. With an increasingly devolved landscape of employment support on the horizon, looking more closely at capturing the value of the group's activity is something that Prime representatives are keen to do to understand the transferability of this model beyond Restart.

The topic of data capture and evidencing success was discussed with all stakeholders. Whilst the group has engaged in some tracking of sharing activities, capturing the value of the group has been problematic. Firstly, activity tracking has not been consistently inputted into the shared spreadsheet and updated, and the data collection tools does not extend to fully understanding the impact of the group on outcomes.

*I think ultimately that's what we're all here to do. We want to be able to see and quantify how many people's lives we've changed. So, yeah, at the moment, there's no accurate way of seeing the impact that the PPN has had in terms of job starts and job outcomes.*

Prime provider

The shared spreadsheet used to capture data is problematic. There have been access issues for some organisations as not all Primes use the same technology for their communication and shared working and there is incompatibility between Google and Microsoft based systems. One provider called for a more in-depth period of tracking the data to be able to analyse the results in a robust manner, which would give an evidence base for reflection on the value.

The full value of the group is seen to go beyond the sharing of contacts. Capturing outputs in the form of collaborative introductions and shared leads is not adequate. One member of the group talked about the softer benefits to the collaboration being just as important to its value as job outcomes. Therefore, there was a wide call for a more sophisticated measure of the value of collaboration to be developed. For instance, the nature of the trusted relationships built within the group mean that a lot of the sharing goes on outside the group, which is often not recorded. As a provider commented, they suspect that the group is more impactful than it looks and that this failure to articulate that value is doing them a disservice. As things currently stand:

*We will never be able to measure that impact because there's no system that has been fed into.*

Prime provider

The importance of finding a way to measure the impact of the group can be looked at through several lenses. Firstly, it would enable the group to better demonstrate the value to employers, and this is something that the data tracking is currently looking to achieve. However, the need to demonstrate the positive impact of this collaborative model was also felt to be key for the relationship with DWP and demonstrating an effective approach to employer engagement at a national level. Articulating the impact would also help demonstrate that Primes are getting a return on their investment in collaborative activity. Finally, there is an employer perspective, as they also need data about the numbers and quality of applicants to assess their own return on investment.

Perhaps the key is to define more fully the difference the PPN expects to have. As one provider commented, if the aim is to get all the primes in a room, talking about employers and sharing informally then this has been achieved. There may be a next level of collaboration to come but what success would look like needs to be more fully articulated.

### 3. Maximising the effectiveness of the PPN for the remainder of Restart

The contract extension for Restart lasts into 2027 and therefore this research looked at how the PPN can be best utilised over this remaining period. With changing labour market conditions and a changing participant profile, this chapter will examine some of the potential ways in which the group could develop in this transitional time and how the group can work with stakeholders including employers, DWP and future commissioning bodies, such as local and Combined authorities.

#### 3.1 Responding to changing labour market conditions

The labour market conditions have changed over the course of the Restart contract and will continue to do so. There was some concern expressed that fewer vacancies might lead to less open sharing of information and accounts between organisations.

**Skills development** was one aspect of responding to changing labour market conditions that the PPN could focus on during the remainder of Restart. There was concern around longer courses being introduced, but a recognition that participants would need training support to compete for vacancies.

*When there are fewer vacancies [we] need to work with skills providers to upskill the customers otherwise we won't be prepared and we won't be able to give our customers the best chance of finding that sustainable employment. Skills providers often go then to longer courses - that delays job starts and job outcomes. But we'll have to move into that space of skills.*

Prime provider

#### Upskilling for the hospitality sector – an example

Ingeus introduced an organisation that delivers hospitality training to the PPN at a meeting and facilitated a presentation and discussion on how they work and the intentions of their project. The organisation had been introduced through their Local Integration Leads. Ingeus brought in their Performance Fund to see what they could contribute towards the cost of the training offer through their upskilling participant Budget. A relationship was brokered with a hotel group in London who plan to open a new site and Ingeus provided a pool of candidates to go through the training programme with guaranteed interviews at the end of the process.

**Candidate pooling**, where people are screened for different sectors so that providers have people ready when vacancies arise, was suggested as a potential future focus for PPN collaboration in response to changing conditions. For example, approaching employers together for specific areas markets such as retail.

The PPN has a strong existing approach to **sharing labour market information** to keep up to date with the latest developments and trends. This insight sharing in a collaborative setting will continue to be important.

## 3.2 Changing profile of participants

The profile of Restart participants has changed throughout the programme and will continue to change as the wider context of employment support commissions and labour market change. The PPN can continue to share experiences and best practice and learn about different client groups and how to support employers to recruit them. For example, one provider commented that the increase in the need for ESOL training is an example of the opportunity to help the employers adapt to future needs of participants and help employers to support those participants into work. Providers reflected that employers are requiring more help onboarding the different customer base.

*'The people that are in this particular group that we're talking about today, there's a lot of experience amongst us. We've all seen changes. So I think it's about being proactive rather than reactive to change'*

Prime provider

## 3.3 How could the PPN Develop?

Stakeholders wanted the PPN to build on the collaborative efforts and success of the last four years and continue to integrate and develop. Potential approaches are grouped below.

### 3.3.1 Working collaboratively

#### Revisit the aims of the group

The MoU described in the previous chapter came at an early stage of the PPN. These principles and actions fed into the production of shared recruitment materials, which were not widely used in practice. In addition, the MoU was not on the shared platform or routinely shared with new members of the group, so the agreed approach was not fully embedded with new members. Ensuring new members are inducted into the overall principles and ways of working as a group should be ensured in future. Related to inconsistent engagement with the MoU, providers want to revisit the goals of the group and re-establish expectations and revitalise and reshare the terms of reference.

#### Attendance

Recent attendance from DWP has been welcomed and Primes were hopeful that this should become a regular commitment. This enthusiasm was echoed by members of the DWP team.

It was also noted that the group's attendance should include those able to look ahead at future strategy as well as those who are involved in direct employer engagement and that the group could be enhanced by having attendance from members who can give it a stronger strategic voice.

### **Establishing an agreed minimum offer for employers**

In the initial *Shared Employer Engagement* project the PPN intended to work towards shared account management strategies with agreed minimum offer presented to employers to ensure a consistent experience. This was raised again as a way forward, whilst maintaining a balance to ensure flexibility to adapt to the unique circumstances of employers. For example, one provider described how they have implemented a charter for engagement model through their supply chain, something that could be replicated within the PPN. This should enable a more consistent employer experience, an improvement that emerged from the employer interviews.

### **Collective proactive business development**

There is a potential role for the group to focus on proactive collective business development by defining the value proposition and more clearly articulating the value of their work to employers. The value could be expressed in terms of access to candidates or social value as well as savings in recruitment time and resources. The PPN can draw on a range of expertise within the group on engaging with employers to place a range of different participant groups (for example disabled participants, migrants, refugees, those with health inactivates). This type of collective activity might involve producing case studies, testimonials, videos and other marketing materials.

*We should be approaching employers more as a group. People that don't work with us. Let's go and knock on some doors. What can we do? Moving in that direction. We are stronger together.*

Prime provider

It was also emphasis in the expert interviews that building a value proposition to employers from a known entity beyond individuals would help to overcome the risk of an overreliance on individual personal relationship.

Proactive employer engagement would need to overcome any perception barriers among employers, such as poor perceptions about the quality of service or suitability of participants.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, K and Carson, C (2023) *Universal Credit and Employers: Exploring the Demand Side of UK Active Labour Market Policy. Final Report. Manchester Metropolitan University.*

This research did not explore in detail the options for a more involved approach to engaging employers. However, some potential options for developing a deeper relationship with employers are explored below.

### 3.3.2 Working with Local and Combined Authorities

Given the plan for increased devolution, future commissioning of employment support will be more led by Local and Combined/Mayoral Authority authorities. Stakeholders suggested that the PPN should be building these relationships at a local level now with appropriate local groups and umbrella groups such as the Local Government Association. It was suggested that there are learnings from the PPN model that could inform the development of local frameworks and that there could be a role for the PPN to advise and guide that process. It was suggested future commissioning groups should be invited to attend the PPN as a way of exploring the future beyond Restart.

*If they can see the national employers as their clients and how we can fit around their need and do that as a network, in a professional and co-ordinated way, then it will be beneficial and hopefully that way of working will outlast whatever employment support terrain comes after Restart.*

Prime provider

### 3.3.3 Working with employers

. The PPN should continue to promote and build collaboration between Primes at employer facing local events and job fairs, particularly in cross border areas. Interviewees reported examples where these had been successful and were a good example of cross Prime collaboration in employer's interest.

Developing a collective identity for the PPN and promoting a unified business development message on topics such as the value of inclusive recruitment could be explored.

The PPN continues to be well placed to help employers navigate the landscape of employment support and help them interpret the best routes to placing candidates. There is an opportunity to work with and prepare employers for future commissions that may involve a more complex participant base.

#### **Creating deeper engagement: co-designing inclusive employment opportunities**

There is an opportunity to design an integrated offer for employers. Employers expressed a mix of appetite for both the level and format of this, meaning that should this be progressed it will be important to maintain flexibility and adaptability to employer needs.

The models outlined in the introduction, explored in 2021, included developing deeper relationships with employers such as via shared account management and seeking to move beyond sharing vacancies to towards job design, job carving and working with employers as trusted experts, talent acquisition specialist and HR advisers. This has the potential to



contribute towards **co-designing good work opportunities**. In interviews, providers explored the potential for this type of engagement, to ensure strong buy-in from employers. As one provider said,

*A lot of employability things don't work because we bring the participant 90% of the way and then we bring the employer 10%. And then we wonder why it falls apart like this. It needs to be co-created like it the employer needs to be so embedded within how things are built that when somebody is unsuccessful, they feel responsible for that as well.*

Helping employers understand the principles of good work could be discussed via the PPN. Existing frameworks such as the CIPD good work framework could be useful to explore guidance and expectations.<sup>11</sup>

The knowledge and expertise in the group was seen by industry experts to have the potential to work as trusted experts. It was suggested that the PPN could promote a unified message to employers about the value and business benefits of inclusive and recruitment.

*We could work collectively together to educate employers on things like disability confident, flexible working, etc. I don't think we've done enough of that as part of Restart, I think it's been all about sharing vacancies and opportunities. But I actually think we've got a responsibility to educate employers about the changing landscapes about the support that's available.*

There is a potential role for the PPN to educate employers around topics such as the value of part time work, the value of flexible shift patterns or exploring job shares. One interviewee noted a reluctance to place Restart applicants into temporary roles, which they felt provided a valuable stepping stone for individuals who had been out of work for some time, with temporary work being described as a potential 'critical pathway' back into work for some participants.

There could also potentially be a role for the PPN to work with skills providers helping employers to identify training and skills needs, which is something that members of the PPN are aware of and including in discussion.

These types of initiatives are seen as particularly important for the next wave of participants to come and therefore the PPN can help employers change their mindsets and working practices in preparation.

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<sup>11</sup> Young, J. and Tong, D. (2025) CIPD Good Work Index 2025. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Employer receptiveness to this agenda will need to be tested and explored. There is likely to be varying levels of interest for these types of activity and a flexible and adaptable approach will be needed.

The potential development options reflect the experiences of employer engagement teams in other jurisdictions where more involved models have been explored and trialled, such as with the Employer Innovation Lab in Australia.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the ReAct partnership has worked with the Prime provides to explore some of these themes such as in the project with flexible working experts Timewise. The evaluation of that project can be seen here: The ReAct and Timewise Change Agent Programme: Evaluation Report.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3.4 Working with DWP

There was an appetite for a deeper relationship between DWP and the PPN. Several providers called for more open sharing between DWP and the PPN of vacancies and insight, calling for the work of the PPN to be seen as and utilised as an extension of DWP.

*We need to be promoted as such by the DWP. Just more collaboration, more access to their vacancies, more sharing of opportunities both ways. You know the message I go to Jobcentre is our participants are your participants and if we all work together then ultimately ...we must help people into work. And the only way to do that is by working together rather than working apart.*

Prime provider

Employers also noted that an improved relationship between Restart providers and DWP would be beneficial for them. Working more closely in the final phases of Restart will enable shared learning to inform the development of the Jobs and Careers service and future commissioning, and support sustainability of the PPN and it's learning beyond May 2027.

*So they need to tell us as our Commissioner what they want us to do to make sure that all that good practise, all that collaboration continues apace.*

Prime provider

### 3.3.5 A development plan for the PPN

This research comes at a time of development for the PPN, which recognises the depth of the collaboration that has been achieved. As was noted by an industry expert, this is not the first time such collaboration has been attempted with employer engagement but perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> Employer Innovation Lab - Social Ventures

<sup>13</sup> Allen, A., Mansour, J., (2023). *The ReAct and Timewise Change Agent Programme: Evaluation Report*. Institute for Employment Studies, ReAct.

this is the deepest such collaboration has gone and should be valued and retained for the success of future programmes.

To build on the PPN success, recent meetings have focused on the exploration of the potential business benefits and value for employer and participants from presenting a more collective voice to employers under a unified brand, underpinned by shared understanding of purpose. This would allow for proactive approaches to employers to exploit a group identity as a trusted expert. The reasons for this are explored above and recent meetings have shown an appetite for moving towards this end by producing shared marketing materials, establishing a shared social media profile and working to gather case studies, document employer journeys and find ways to articulate value.

As an extension of the drive to create a unified identity is the opportunity for the group to act as advocates for the industry. As one stakeholder described the position:

*Let's advocate for the industry, for the sector. If this isn't the forum then what is?*

Sector expert

To move forward, the PPN should review the recommendations of this research, and document prioritised actions in a development plan to guide their activity over the coming year.

## 4. Beyond Restart

The next phase of the delivery of employment support services will be more devolved. This chapter looks at the opportunities and challenges to greater devolution, the legacy of the PPN and how it can contribute to success in the employer engagement sector under a more devolved model.

Interviews with Primes and experts identified various opportunities and challenges of an increasingly devolved employment services landscape.

### 4.1 The challenges of a devolved landscape

It was raised by both Prime providers and sector experts that adviser skills are not the same as employer engagement skills so ensuring that those localised employer engagement teams are effective will require significant upskilling. Whilst there is considerable commonality of skills of engaging candidates and employers, particularly with the role of building trust, there are significant differences between these roles. ReAct research into the skillset of Restart advisers outlines the range and depth of skills needed for that position and can be reviewed [here](#).<sup>14</sup> It was also raised that, with the merging of adviser and employer engagement role, there is a risk that some of the relationships that have been built will be lost, with current demand led initiatives that lend themselves to meeting employer requirements being replaced with candidate-led activity that focuses on the individual caseload. This can have repercussions for larger or national employers.

One provider was concerned that new service commissioners may not have sufficient capability to adequately judge tenders. Therefore, there is a need to talk to the commissioners and build those relationships. It was also pointed out that commissioners will be seeking evidence of local relationships but that evidencing national outlooks may not be given as much weighting and may not be a priority for contractors.

As the PPN is focused on large UK wide employers and much of the new commissioning is local, the national employers that the PPN supports with will have to engage across more boundaries, and will potentially need support through that process.

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<sup>14</sup> Krishnan et al. (2024); Maximising Adviser Impact: Supporting workforce development; Institute for Employment Studies.

*I think the current devolution landscape is a risk for employers. Because rather than having a single point of contact, there's going to be multiple people operating in very similar geographies. And I think that poses a risk.*

Another challenge raised is that, with everyone pulling in different directions and chasing new contracts, they are therefore not thinking about the bigger picture.

*I think the challenges are that which are the same as the challenges that we face now, which is everyone is pulling in, you know, different directions or looking after their little patch and not thinking about the bigger picture and with more people in the mix, more in more parties in the mix, there is you know it's that fragmentation. There's less there can be less impactful on a on a larger scale. That's the risk I think.*

The lack of long-term commitment to the Restart Scheme makes it hard for employers to invest in the programme and this should be a consideration for future programmes.

## 4.2 The opportunities of devolving employment services

Primes also saw opportunities in the new landscape. With greater devolution there is a pivotal role for an organisation that can be the single door for employers. One prime talked of the spirit of the PPN and the learning it has supported could be cascaded through a devolved system.

There is the opportunity for new commissioners to consider how it can be made easier for businesses to hire. The PPN was designed to retrofit to an existing commissioning environment. Therefore, it is important for the current commissioning round to consider from the outset both labour supply and demand and engaging and consulting with the business communities to help them succeed.

There is an opportunity to engage local hiring managers and build relationships on the ground to work alongside national teams engaging with HR and social value teams. Local Authorities also have other ways to engage employers on a local level, though section 106 for example.

Another advantage of more localised decisions rather than national provisions is the support that may bring to strategic planning upskilling and reskilling, which is something that the Get Britain Working paper has aimed to address.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [Get Britain Working White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

## 5. Exploring the legacy of the PPN model for a future national strategy

The next phase of employer engagement will take place in a different context. There are several key elements of the PPN identified as legacy points for the future.

Several providers commented that any national approach needs to continue to be led by an independent and neutral organisation.

*Everyone feels like they're on this race to crack this national approach to employers. But you can't do it without technology. And you can't do it without an independent body, in my opinion.*

Prime Provider

Also, there needs to be an investment in appropriate technology to support sharing activities and to capture the benefits of that sharing. As has also been explored in the previous chapters, there is a role for a PPN-type organisation to educate employers as trusted experts on topics such as job design and the value of inclusive recruitment.

It was recognised that employers will need support through the transitional phase and that the PPN is well placed to do that and to work with employers to navigate the landscape of employment support. The PPN model will still provide value by providing a forum to share best practice and knowledge and to advocate for the value of the collaborative model for national employers working in a devolved landscape.

There is also a legacy from the PPN collaboration model which can be captured and cascaded to local and regional organisations within a localised framework which could contribute actively to the next stage of employment support programmes.

Overall, whilst providers and employers expressed concern about the new developments, there was wide acknowledgement that the PPN still has a place in that landscape and that there are new opportunities to work in new and innovative ways that may be impactful. As some employers pointed out, whatever the next stage looks like, national coordination would still be required and there is a lot to be learned from what has already developed. Therefore, rather than reinventing the wheel, the recommendation is that employer engagement teams as well as employers should be viewed as partners in future policy development and programme design that incorporates the learnings from the experiences of the PPN.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

The PPN was established in 2022 by the ReAct partnership of Prime providers. Since then, the ways of working and the sharing of information has evolved, developed and gained in strength and purpose. There is clear support for this group and its work to continue and for the learnings and expertise to flow over into the next stage of employment support; but there is nervousness that without action being taken now to feed these learnings into the design of future models, both the learnings and the relationships that have been built may be lost, with impact on the experience of employers and the participants.

These recommendations are intended to help the PPN capture the learnings and value of their collaboration and to help commissioners and they design the next phase of employment support. They have been drawn from the research and created in collaboration with the members of the PPN.

### Recommendations

#### Recommendations for PPN

##### Working together

- Revisit terms of reference for the PPN and articulate aims.
- Establish measures of success and to capture of full range of benefits.
- Maintain a focus on capturing meaningful LMI to support understanding.

##### Supporting employers

- Promote a unified message to employers about the value of inclusive recruitment.
- Ensure no duplication of effort on creating employer engagement forums.
- Capture expertise within the group on engaging with a range of different participant groups and help employers prepare for the participants of the future.
- Support employers through transitional phase to a more devolved landscape.

##### Influencing others

- Advocate for the national approach in the new commissioning landscape.
- Ensure the collaborative model filters down into supply chain partners.
- Engage now with Local Authorities, Combined/Mayoral Authorities and other key commissioners and their representative bodies as a group.

**Further options for consideration**

- Establish an agreed minimum employer offer whilst maintaining flexibility of approach.
- Consider the business development opportunities of a collective approach under a unified ReAct brand.
- Develop a more integrated service for employers, positioning the PPN as trusted expert. For example, educating employers about the value of flexibility in hiring and job design or working with employers to address other business problems.

**Learning to inform future commissioning**

For the remainder of the Restart contract there was support for the PPN to gather data to more effectively measure their impact. Looking forward to the next stage of commissioning, stakeholders wanted to discuss the future of employer engagement and its role in the future of work in the changing landscape during this transitional period and beyond. Key learning from the PPN for future commissioning included:

**National co-ordination of employer support**

- Building in a strategic and national approach to employer engagement in employment support contracts to help employers engage.
- Consider maintaining a neutral and independent organisation at the centre to facilitate and drive the best interests of an overarching employer engagement group serving cross-programme employer engagement activities.
- Provide and invest in a technological solution to underpin effective collaboration about large employers with centralised recruitment practices so that they are not inundated with multiple points of contact under a more devolved system. Promote contracted providers as an extension of the commissioning body. Allow transparency and greater data sharing to enable providers to be transparent with employers and local stakeholders.

**Key points of learning to meet employer needs**

- Acknowledge the value of a full range of options in a participant's journey from an employer's perspective, including taster days, work placements and temporary work. To meet employer needs, commissioners need to ensure that the commissioning criteria reflect the skills required to lead effective employer engagement.



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