



# Briefing paper

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## Shared Employer Engagement in Practice: What works

### ReAct: collaborating for employers

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, meeting monthly. 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, as well as providing an effective forum for knowledge sharing. The group is run and supported by the ReAct partnership at IES.<sup>1</sup>

The Get Britain Working ambition to achieve an 80% employment rate will require a whole system approach to tackling labour market participation, with commissioning devolved to regional level. ReAct research has explored the value of collaborative working in employer engagement activities at a national level, both for employment service providers and for

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<sup>1</sup> The findings presented in this briefing were informed by research conducted by the ReAct partnership into the effectiveness of the collaborative approach to employer engagement. Interviews were conducted with the Restart Primes, international experts on employer engagement, employers and recruitment agency representatives, and other key stakeholders.

employers, and insights can be drawn from this collaboration to inform devolved commissioning of employment support.

## **The value in employer engagement networks**

The PPN was valued by employment support providers as a forum to build cross-organisation relationships which facilitates learning and supports collaborative working. Sharing insights into the labour market and participant context and how to best meet employer needs is of primary value for the contributing members. Overall, one of the key values to members and their organisations is the opportunity to build knowledge by meeting employers, to understand their needs, ways of working and sharing best practice. Network members also found value in sharing expertise about participant support needs in different regions, discussing the implications of labour market insight and connecting members with other employment support initiatives beyond Restart.

Working collaboratively enables network members to share vacancies across cross-contract regions, which can strengthen the offer for employers that operate on a broader regional or national basis. Relationships with employers built in one region can be given a warm handover to other providers, saving time spent establishing trust. Employers are often unclear about which employment programme a participant is part of, highlighting how provider collaboration can provide them with a doorway to employment services more broadly. For the employer, working with the network gives them national coverage from a single point of contact, avoids duplication of activity, reduces the number of contacts with employment support providers and opens their recruitment to a wider talent pool of candidates.

## **Challenges to collaboration**

The network has naturally experienced some challenges. For instance, evidencing the value and benefits from the collaboration to wider stakeholders has been difficult, which is partly due to the lack of an effective technological solution to support activity. But other challenges have arisen due to lack of agreements on shared ways of working, which raised concerns about perceived inconsistency in how represented organisations approach employer engagement and support activity, and a perceived uneven contribution of group members. Group members felt that the short-term commissioning model of employment services is also at odds with a long-term relationship building model.

For employers, collaboration challenges include that a single point of contact can risk the loss of a relationship when staff leave, and that the multiplicity of systems used by different

organisations can create challenges in measuring the return on investment from engaging with the network.

Despite the challenges however, there was clear support for the model from the network members and those with which they have engaged.

## **Establishing a network: Key considerations for effective group working**

Research indicated practical considerations that can support the establishment of an effective employment engagement network. These included establishing a shared understanding within the group of the importance of creating an open culture of collaboration to underpin activity. Rotating the Chair among group members to share responsibility contributed to a collaborative spirit. There was also a strong perceived benefit to having an independent and neutral organisation facilitating the group. Providing a blend of face-to-face meetings as well as online meetings was seen to enhance relationship building and facilitate deeper discussion and knowledge sharing.

Creating opportunities to collaborate with others beyond the network was important. Employers attending network meetings allowed all attendees to learn an employer's individual needs and ways of working, and inviting other key stakeholders, such as training or commissioners, to attend sessions was also helpful to build collaboration more broadly.

## **Insights for future commissioning**

The research with the ReAct Prime provider employer engagement network offers key insights to inform future commissioning. These insights could provide the right environment for collaborative employer engagement working at both a national and regional level and underpin a positive employer experience.

**Strategic commissioners** should:

- build a national approach into the commissioning design to support employers that work across the UK;
- view contracted providers as an extension of the commissioning body;
- adapt and apply the collaboration model to suit the regional setting;
- commission a neutral and independent organisation to facilitate and co-ordinate employer engagement activity;
- invest in the technology that supports cross-organisation collaboration;

- ensure that the commissioning criteria for devolved services reflect the partnership building skills needed for effective collaborative employer engagement as well as the employment coach; and
- encourage collaboration between providers to share their knowledge and understanding of how to work with employers on job design and creating good work.

### Measuring success

To measure the success of collaboration, commissioners should:

- clearly articulate what successful collaboration of services looks like and how to measure it, including the value of knowledge sharing between employment service providers. For example, encourage and track the sharing of expertise about diverse participant groups and how best to move them into work;
- devise systems and targets for employment services that acknowledge the contribution that employer engagement can make to creating diverse opportunities for moving into work through activities such as taster days, work placements and temporary work; and
- encourage transparency about sharing outcome and progression data.

Collaboration in employer engagement as part of Restart is contributing tangible benefits in knowledge sharing, understanding and meeting employers' needs. There remains a role for a national network to support employers seeking centralised recruitment activity. A national strategy could be strengthened by setting goals, understanding measurement, and providing an enabling framework and technology for effective collaboration. However, as the employment services landscape evolves, these strategic elements are increasingly applicable to regional models as well. Leveraging them at a devolved level could significantly strengthen employer engagement within the context of Get Britain Working, ensuring alignment between national ambition and local delivery for employers.

### Further Reading

**Shared Employer Engagement in Practice:** Lessons learned from Restart collaboration, Kramers E, Allen A, Gloster R, Litsardopoulos N, Institute for Employment Studies, Jul 2025

Kramers E, Gloster R (2025, July), [Celebrating collaboration: how Restart providers have come together to overcome barriers to employer engagement. \*Institute for Employment Studies\*](#)

**The ReAct and Timewise Change Agent Programme:** Evaluation Report, Allen A, Mansour J, Institute for Employment Studies, Jul 2023