

Taking an assets-based approach to Jobcentre Plus support: Lessons from Wales

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Introduction

Helping people to move into sustainable employment, where they are able to, is a key element of any anti-poverty strategy.ⁱ However, some areas face particularly acute challenges in relation to high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity, especially when compared to the UK overall. This is the case both at a country level (e.g. in Walesⁱⁱ) and at a more local levels (e.g. in Greater Manchesterⁱⁱⁱ). As the UK faces high levels of unemployment as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, uneven patterns of unemployment are being exacerbated.^{iv}

National policymakers have introduced a range of active labour market programmes (ALMPs) which aim to move people into work (for example, the *Work Programme*, now *Work and Health Programme*) against a backdrop of significant welfare reform. An increase in conditionality – often underpinned by sanctions – has been a key feature of reform, as social security claimants are increasingly mandated to undertake work preparation activities. However, concerns have been raised that current approaches to mandatory employment support (offered by Jobcentre Plus and other contracted agencies) do not sufficiently take into consideration people’s individual needs, capabilities and responsibilities outside the paid labour market^v, and that the use of sanctions can have counterproductive consequences^{vi}.

At a local level, and in recognition of this, attempts have been made to improve support for those outside of the paid labour market, including in Greater Manchester where a key worker approach underpins the *Working Well*^{vii} programme. In this essay, we present lessons from Wales - from an innovative partnership between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Oxfam Cymru - called the *DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project* - which involved the delivery of assets-based training for DWP staff in Wales. Whilst these activities pre-dated today’s Covid-19 context, the findings remain relevant as local services develop effective approaches to supporting people within a context of high unemployment.

The DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project: overview

The *DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project* draws on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which has been used in international development settings. It was brought to the UK by Oxfam and other non-governmental organisations. Based on these approaches, Oxfam Cymru developed the *Building Livelihoods and Strengthening Communities in Wales* project^{viii}, moving away from a ‘one size fits all’ model to a person-centred, assets-based approach to tackling poverty. Learning from this, and an earlier *Access to Work and Enterprise* project (2012-14) - which used an assets-based approach to support Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) lone parents - the *DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project* [hereafter ‘the *Project*’].

The overall aim of the *Project* was to embed understandings of poverty within the DWP service across Wales, to enable DWP staff to better understand the needs of those within the social security system, and

consequently be better placed to provide appropriate support and solutions to meet their needs. It was hoped that this more personalised approach would reduce the need for sanctions and improve outcomes for those within the social security system, including supporting movements towards sustainable work (where appropriate).

The SLA has been used in Wales with a wide range of projects and partners. It is a participatory approach that starts by looking at the day-to-day experiences of people's lives in order to move beyond a focus on what is *missing* (the more traditional 'deficits' model, which focuses on the negative aspects such as not having a job) and instead focuses on what is *present* (assets). The idea is that as a person's assets increase, they are better able to respond to 'shocks' and is based on a recognition that people experience poverty in different ways. It focuses on five interlinked categories of assets which make up a person's livelihood: human assets (e.g. skills and knowledge); social assets (i.e. social networks, family relationships); physical assets (e.g. housing, transport, work clothes, basic white goods, a computer); public assets (i.e. availability of and engagement with local public services, facilities and amenities); and financial assets (e.g. income, savings, pensions, credit facilities, social security)^{ix}.

Over an 18-month period (2016-2017), the *Project* delivered training to 608 DWP staff across Wales; representing nearly 40% of DWP Wales Work Services Directorate. The training was delivered by Oxfam Cymru working in collaboration with a small number of community partner organisations. The training involved a one-day interactive workshop, predominantly carried out in Jobcentre Plus office space. It included providing in-depth understandings of poverty, as well as training on a people-centred, holistic, and asset-based SLA toolkit. The 'tools' used within this toolkit included 'Drawing the Household', 'OK/Not OK Timeline', and the 'Assets Pentagon', among others^x. To give an example of their use, 'Drawing the Household' uses a visual prompt to document the household. People are asked to describe who comes in and out of their home each day (including household residents, friends, family, neighbours, services that engage with them, etc). The information can be used to contextualise people's lives moving beyond the surface-level issue that they may present with (including identifying experiences of isolation).

The DWP & Oxfam Livelihoods Training Project: impact

An evaluation of the *Project*^{xi} highlighted a number of significant impacts. Responses to the training were overwhelmingly positive. The training increased DWP staff understandings of poverty and provided them with a greater insight into the circumstances of those they were supporting. Staff reported that the training 'opened their eyes' to the reality of some people's lives. With reference to embedding the training into working practices, there were concrete examples of positive outcomes. Indeed, some DWP Work Coaches referred to being able to 'make progress' in supporting particular people where they had previously experienced difficulties. For many new DWP staff the training was incorporated into their induction training package as Work Coaches. For longer serving staff, there were many who saw the value of having these additional tools to enhance their existing approaches. JCP service users reported a positive shift in how the DWP were interacting with them during appointments – they felt that staff were more 'approachable'. In terms of its economic impact, the evaluation showed a social return on investment of £5.31 for every £1 spent, which is a considerable return.

Lessons for Greater Manchester

This unique project was made possible by the 'openness' of the DWP in Wales to exploring new ways of working with people across their services and by the commitment of Oxfam Cymru and various community partners to supporting those experiencing poverty.

Findings from this project could inform the development of Jobcentre Plus services in GM, and as GM develops its own active labour market programmes (e.g. through *Working Well*). Exploring and building upon asset-based approaches may lead to better outcomes for those wanting to move into work. Having a greater understanding of people’s circumstances and additional tools to better support people will clearly enhance the experience of those who are within our social security system.

About the authors

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About the *Devolved approaches to social security in the UK – lessons for Greater Manchester essays series*

SHUSU

Sustainable Housing &
Urban Studies Unit

Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) and the Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford invited academics to set out what lessons Greater Manchester can learn from approaches to social security in devolved settings across the UK. Three essays in this series look at aspects of social security policy and practice in Northern Ireland (*Reflections on Northern Ireland’s mirror image approach to devolved social security*), Scotland (*Social security in Scotland*) and Wales (*Taking an assets-based approach to Jobcentre Plus support: Lessons from Wales*). A fourth essay (*What can local responses to COVID-19 tell us about the potential and challenges for devolved ‘welfare’?*) looks at the role of local actors (from within both the public and VCSE sectors) in supporting people to access and understand welfare provision in the context of COVID-19 and consider the implications for future devolution of the social security system to Greater Manchester.

The essays series is a joint project between GMPA and SHUSU to help inform the development of social security policy in Greater Manchester. Any views expressed in the essays do not necessarily reflect the views of GMPA or SHUSU. The essays series contributes to two of GMPA’s core aims to:

- Equip stakeholders from across public, private and VCSE sectors across Greater Manchester with the skills, knowledge and expertise they need to tackle poverty.
- Promote innovative policy and practice-based responses to poverty that draw on good practice, that are evidence based, collaborative and scalable.

The University of Salford is a Principal Partner of GMPA.

ⁱ Ray, K., Sissons, P, Jones, K. and Vegeris, S. (2014) *Employment, pay and poverty: An evidence review* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ⁱⁱ Op cit.

ⁱⁱⁱ GMCA (2016) *Refreshing the Greater Manchester Strategy and Consultation Proposals*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2yMenOM>

^{iv} <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/The-Geography-of-the-COVID19-crisis-in-England-final.pdf>

^v See: http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/40475_Welfare-Conditionality_Report_complete-v3.pdf

^{vi} See: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/2018/10/new-video-problems-with-universal-credit/>

^{vii} <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/work-and-skills/working-well/>

^{viii} For further details and full evaluation of this project see: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/final-evaluation-building-livelihoods-and-strengthening-communities-in-wales-pr-615933>

^{ix} Oxfam Cymru/Oxfam GB (2013). *Sustainable Livelihood Approach Toolkit for Wales*, available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-sustainable-livelihoods-approach-toolkit-for-wales-297233>

^x Ibid.

^{xi} For full evaluation of this project see: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/dwp-oxfam-livelihoods-training-project-evaluation-620306>