Whose job is worklessness?

Welfare to work programmes remain frustratingly unsuccessful when it comes to placing unemployed in suitable jobs. **John McDonough** says local authorities, which often have to pick up the pieces anyway in terms of problematic service users, need to be more involved

Worklessness has been on the agenda for some time and will be again with the launch of The Work Programme, not to mention any changes in policy and responsibility post CSR in October. Employment and skills is the number one priority for many aspiring LEP's (Local Enterprise Partnerships). For an industry that has been going for nearly twenty years, it could be argued it hasn't really made that much progress. The same issues keep arising, the same frustrations with the system and successive initiatives which may have a limited benefit at best, but by and large the problem is still there and being passed around.

Local government has taken its share of attempts over the years and is often left "holding the baby" with many workless being the highest and most problematic service users and costing a significant amount of resource. Issues around children at risk, educational attainment, anti social behaviour, child poverty, lack of aspiration and so on very often arise from worklessness. Programmes have ranged from regeneration schemes under the old SRB (Single Regeneration Budget), work placements, to a push for apprenticeships and placements under FJF (Future Jobs Fund). These are not always met with massive enthusiasm and can often miss the point.

The problem is the elephant in the room! The uncomfortable truth, which is avoided by many in this sector, is that 70-80% of people on employability schemes fail to gain sustainable employment. The tax take in the UK is now less than the welfare bill. Whilst billions is spent in the welfare to work industry every year, with a whole multitude of schemes, initiatives and incentives, we are still left with a huge number of workless.

Many of these people are seen as damaged goods and too risky. Anyone who has ever recruited staff can tell you this. Walk into a room at the beginning of an employability course and see how many you would choose to interview. Very few if any is often the case. A new suit, a pep talk and a standardised CV is not going to make much difference. Their issues are still there, along with employers' reservations. And often, nothing has been done about either. So then, the employer is persuaded to hire and all too often,

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it ends in tears. They'll not do that again and why should they? That is not to take away from the fantastic work, efforts and success of some.

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There is often talk of the revolving door and managers and leaders who don't do anything different. Content that they have allocated and spent funding with little regard to how effective it is or what return on investment they, their council, residents and economy are getting. Unfortunately, all too many can point the finger at another organisation and blame them, DWP, CLG, RDA's etc. Surely this cannot be acceptable any longer? It must be imperative for councils to ensure that any money spent in their borough yields maximum value.

We all realise that we will not get this money again so surely it is incumbent upon us all to get it right. If local government doesn't then who will? The DWP expect innovation from prime contractors who won't do anything unless directed to by DWP. The situation has become almost a Mexican stand off! This presents a real chance for local government to raise its game, raise the bar and show genuine leadership.

Localism needs real leadership and that needs to start now. It is no longer good enough to rely on other organisations who are playing the system. It might be an idea to do something drastically different sooner rather than later.

So what's the answer? Well, it's complex but must at least, in part, lie in an example of work we did with Haringey recently.

We worked with their Families into Work programme, which aims to tackle fundamental issues including long term unemployment in one of the most deprived wards of the country. Having worked with a group of residents we delivered "The Life You Want", a personal breakthrough, motivation and employment programme.

The need to increase self confidence and self esteem is widely accepted but in many cases, not really possible without addressing some serious barriers and personal issues. All too often, the tools and techniques required to do this are the preserve of executives.

As part of the programme, participants developed a career goal and a plan as to how to achieve it. Bespoke training was then designed and delivered with specific employers in mind. We have found an increasing number of employers are very keen to support this model as they understand and appreciate the work and preparation that will have been done prior to interview and assessment. Whilst not fully complete, many of the participants are now successfully in employment which seemed unachievable for many prior to the course. ■

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