



Recro Evidence

Alan Milburn NEET Review

Young People and Work Report

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Introduction

In 2013, Alan Milburn launched the report outlining the findings of the Social Mobility APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group).

The headline conclusions were “The system is the issue” and that character and resilience were the main determinants in social mobility.

What Is The System?

In 2017, I gave evidence to Good Work, The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices, commissioned by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May.

Rather than just stand and speak, I used a presentation. Matthew Taylor said I was the only person around the country who had done so.

Afterwards, a civil servant who was writing the review spoke to me and said, “That was brilliant and you’re absolutely right”.

I said, “Thanks, I know that is what is happening, but I bet you don’t put it in the report”.

“No chance” he said.

So how and why does that happen?

The system does not want solutions and is built to resist them. We need to ask, is that intentional or otherwise?

It’s not just one thing but an accumulation over the long term and is causing huge problems across the UK, NEETs being just one of them.

I have long highlighted how solving this will act as the blueprint and catalyst for public sector reform, which is essential to get growth.

In 2011, Charlie Mayfield said to me “Do not underestimate how strong the resistance is to change”. This was after I’d spoken to Chris Grayling, then minister for employment, and explained how the government’s flagship back to work scheme, The Work Programme, would only get 30% back into work, and what improvements would make a significant difference.

The minister was not interested at all!

Business leaders will say this stuff is on the too difficult box and if that is their view, often formed from experience, something has to change to get their engagement and support.

The system needs to meet their needs, not the other way round.

Our evidence gives a topline overview of a number of long-standing issues which are often privately acknowledged but never addressed.

And even if there was the appetite to address them and make the necessary changes, nobody seems to know who is responsible for doing that, let alone if they have the expertise and capability.

The Flow Of Information And How Do You Know Who Is telling The Truth?

It's no secret that civil servants sanitise what information gets to ministers. Visits are staged managed and truth is not spoken, with staff often told to tone down what they would like to say or not say it all.

The art of the eloquent brush off is highly prized in private office and despite Labour saying they want change and that growth is their number one priority when they came into government, nothing has changed, which is why nothing can change.

DWP

DWP have no mechanism to learn, replicate and scale from successful programmes which job centres have bought.

In 2012/13 we were working with NEETs in North London, getting 50% into work with a further 25% progressing into training or education.

Job centre teams said they had never seen a programme anywhere nearly as effective. Local authorities wanted it at scale, including as part of their major regeneration programmes but it didn't happen.

The line from DWP teams was "Commercials (procurement) get nervous" (about repeating a programme, regardless of success).

They thought or were told that they could not repeat. This then developed into a line which has constrained job centres across the country for over a decade with Commercials telling them that they cannot know whether a programme has performed or not, as it would be against fair and open competition. DPS (Dynamic Purchasing System) did and DPS2 does operate on this basis.

Despite this being raised at the top of government for over a decade, with the National Audit Office and Work and Pensions Select Committee calling for greater transparency in the performance of employment support programmes, DWP have refused.

What do we expect?

How can you encourage innovation and high-quality provision when there is no correlation between successful performance and winning work?

DWP have the performance data, although they denied this for years, but they have just not used it.

This then impedes partner organisations including local authorities and combined authorities who rely on DWP to perform and have to pick up the pieces if they don't.

There is not a genuine mechanism across the public sector to seek solutions. They are limited by the (flawed) parameters set by DWP and DfE amongst others, but nobody challenges, questions or seems to understand or care about the opportunity cost.

Early Intervention

In 2010, Graham Allen's Early Intervention Review highlighted how £1 spent before the age of three equated to £20 that would need to be spent on the adult.

The cover of that report has an MRI scan of a normally developed three-year old's brain and an underdeveloped three-year old's brain.

There is an obvious and significant difference.

When programmes such as Trouble Families fail, which it predictably did, albeit this was avoidable, the issues haven't gone away.

Children born into such environments are highly likely to become NEET.

Deprived Areas

Deprived areas are often known as opportunity deserts. There is no hope so people, including children, can default to "what's the point"?

Hire For Attitude - Train For Skill

Most employers hire for attitude and train for skill.

Where does the help come from for attitude?

Attitude comes from confidence, motivation, aspiration and self-esteem, or lack thereof. This is the foundation of the programmes we run. It should be core to programmes helping NEETs (amongst others) but often isn't.

Just because a provider uses those words in a bid, it doesn't mean that they have the expertise to deliver the paradigm shifts required.

Careers Advice

If you take careers advice out of schools, what do you expect to happen?

Where do young people go to get it?

Neurodiversity / SEN

If children do not get the diagnosis and support at school that they need, what do we expect to happen?

Many schools, often encouraged by their council, do everything possible to avoid an assessment, with cost being a key driver.

Why do some children in some schools get it and some in other schools not?

Is it a cost or investment?

Motivation

What do you want to do and why?

Motives and drivers are often key considerations when employers hire but what happens when the young person has no idea? What happens when they just drift aimlessly through the system?

Classrooms are not for everyone.

Whilst some young people may find life and opportunities easy, many do not. They are going to need some serious determination to make it and if they don't know what they are aiming for or why they should, it's unlikely to happen.

Practical Training v Theory

Few would argue that training is anywhere nearly as good as it was 20 years ago or more. Colleges and providers have to follow the money and if the people who set the essay question (policy) can't answer it, this will reflect in the market.

I met a tailor who hired a young person who had spent three years on a tailoring course at college but had not once seen a needle!

I've met a college (this is common practice) who run open days for bricklayer courses. The young people come along and enjoy having a go with the bricks and cement. They sign up for the course and do not get to touch a brick for the first three months and are stuck in a classroom.

Is it any wonder people drop out and give up?

Too many courses are about what you can load on rather than what is needed.

A CSCS card (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) could take one day to complete, two days, three days and I've seen courses lasting up to six weeks.

It is done for the college or provider to draw down more money.

This is a waste of everyone's time and money.

Funding

Colleges and training providers are a business, first and foremost.

They often have to find (attract) the pupils but say that they already have them to win the contract in the first place.

This leads to a bums on seats approach. Many children are being sent to a classroom in college utterly disinterested and unmotivated.

Unless staff can inspire them, that just gets worse.

Staff don't necessarily have that expertise and skill set and given the recruitment, retention and other challenges faced, it's an obvious point of failure which is often ignored.

Networks

Networking is the biggest source of jobs. Some schools, areas and families are great at this. They can open doors, make introductions, give access, inspiration, challenge, broaden expectations.

Others, including in deprived areas, less so.

Employers And Government Schemes

Research shows that dependant on geography, between 1/3 and 2/3s of employers will not use a government training or employment scheme including apprenticeships.

Government departments rarely understand employers or have the ability to do so. They create a policy and expect everyone to be happy. Occasionally they may get support from a handful of employers but that does not mean it is suitable for the majority of employers.

Departments can't course correct and don't want to. They don't want to be told, don't know what they don't know but don't want to either.

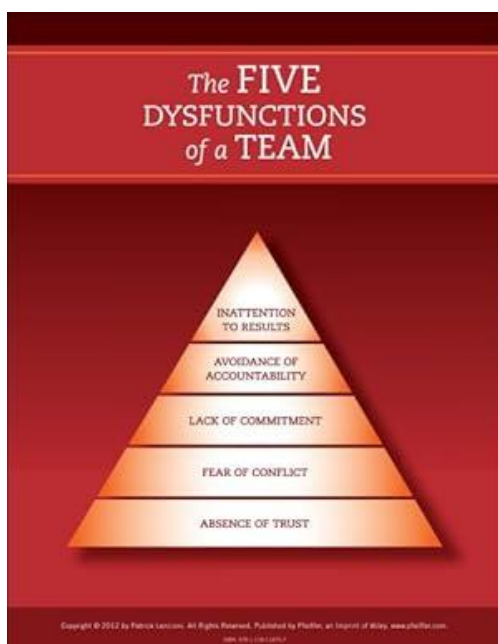
Partnerships

The education, employability and skills landscape is complex. There are significant interdependencies, but most organisations won't challenge each other.

In 2021, not one local authority in the UK wanted to hold DWP to account when offered the chance to join a campaign for greater transparency in the performance of employment support programmes which John Penrose, the then MP for Weston-super-Mare led.

DWP refused this: [Tory MP urges DWP transparency](#)

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team model by Patrick Lencioni gives an accurate snapshot of this widespread problem.



Does Quality Matter Or Not?

Quality has to be measurable which means transparency, but DWP have resisted transparency for years.

They don't say how many jobs were achieved and at what cost which leads to this:

[Government Back-To-Work Programme Costs £40,000 Per Success](#)

This reduces organisations involved including commissioners to often not much more than tick box exercises.

Which leads to what's the point?

It's akin to one big Ponzi scheme where everyone is pretending everything is fine, but the whole system would collapse if they told the truth.

Youth Employment Schemes

In 2010, I identified what was missing from **FJF** (Flexible Jobs Fund). As well intentioned as many organisations were I discovered that many were what is known as "creaming and parking".

One highly respected organisation told me that for every 19 hard to reach young people they looked at, only two were accepted for their FJF programmes. That's almost 90% being left behind.

What was missing, which many organisations acknowledged, was a programme such as our flagship, The Life You Want ©, which would deliver the paradigm shift in confidence, motivation, aspiration and self-esteem required, as well as recruitment knowledge and practical recruitment techniques. They all said that working with us would revolutionise what they do. None ever did.

In 2012, I met with the CBI lead who told me that they had been talking to government about youth unemployment and government was going to spend £500m on the **Youth Contract**.

There was concern that details would just be cobbled together and there was no real understanding of what was required. I agreed to meet with DWP to help them but that meeting never happened. (This is a pattern).

The Youth Contract struggled and was quietly brushed under the carpet.

At the first online meeting about Kickstart, I highlighted obvious areas where it would struggle and again, offered help which was ignored.

Despite a lot of hard work from many people, Kickstart ran into the predictable pitfalls and only hit 2/3 of its target, giving £1bn back to Treasury.

The narrative was peddled unchallenged that the reason DWP had missed target was because it had been so successful at getting young people into work.

This was categorically not true.

Many young people were not eligible for Kickstart as they were on ESA, mental health being the largest reason.

I heard of examples where only 5% of youth work coaches caseloads were eligible for Kickstart.

The inability to address this permeates the problem.

Private Office

Private Office act as gatekeepers and whilst there is an obvious need for this, how do they differentiate between really important and innovative solutions which would help solve major challenges and time wasters?

They don't.

The default, which has been the case for certainly over a decade is; have a look at this website and we'll tell you when we want something.

You can't specify that you want a particular solution if you don't know that it exists.

That means solutions need to appear in a vision or dream for a department to have a chance at going to procurement.

All of this evidences what the government is still struggling with and as we have highlighted; the need for public sector reform to get growth,

Generalist versus specialist has been a long-running debate in the civil service but too often there is little, if any genuine expertise and understanding.

Civil servants blagging it, trying to reverse engineer success, ministers are in the dark and dependant on said civil servants and everybody has put up with this and not challenged it for years.

Job Centres

Job centres now have a DNA (do not attend) ratio of 66% for NEETs.

That means that for a programme for say 15 NEETs, work coaches will need to refer at least 45. That is a huge amount of time and effort for what? Especially if it is a poor quality programme.

Work coaches are told to prioritise national provision first, then "free" provision which is often skills funded. Many job centres refused to refer to ESF (European Social Fund) funded provision and its successors as they promised the earth and didn't deliver.

The NAO found last year that job centres don't even have targets to get people back into work.

Many job centres are short of staff and cutting time with clients. Referring to a programme successfully, with the numbers required is often inconvenient and can meet resistance. There is a risk that job centres will be called out and shown up. In a culture where poor performance isn't always addressed and where there are no obvious answers, it's easier to pretend it didn't happen or don't do it again.

We have had work coaches do a brilliant job referring unemployed clients whilst their colleague, who may be sat alongside them does nothing. This has gone unaddressed with fear of the unions being cited as the excuse.

Think Tanks

These sectors are very incestuous; everyone rubs along nicely and there is no incentive to genuinely challenge or rock the boat.

Conclusion

I've long highlighted the need for public sector reform to get growth and how employment support in DWP is the place to start, followed by running How To Get The Life And Career You Want © in schools, colleges and universities where appropriate.

We have proven solutions, so what's in the way?

The system, so we're back to who owns it, who is responsible for it and how do they change it?

In my 17 years in this sector, it is nobody's job and that's the problem!