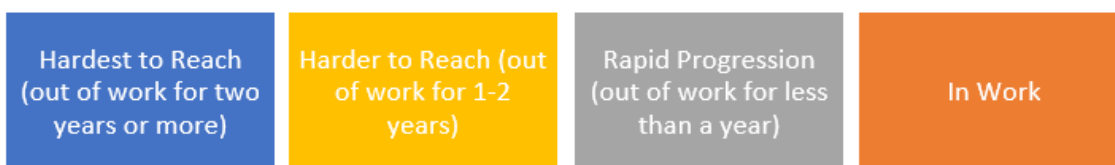# Connecting Communities: WMCA Pilot

The evaluand (policy or project being evaluated)

As part of its devolution deal, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) commissioned the innovative *Connecting Communities* employment programme. The Connecting Communities pilot programme was one of six innovative employment schemes led by Mayoral Combined Authorities and funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). It started in 2018 and was due complete in May 2021 before being extended to March 2022 because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is delivered by nine providers, across nine electoral wards and uses a payment by results model. It is inspired by the Jobs Plus Model developed in the United States and has the aims of tackling unemployment and low pay. This is to be achieved by providing additional support to those living or working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including raising aspirations and improving awareness of job opportunities within the local community. All individuals of working age[1] within a neighbourhood who are unemployed or in low paid work are eligible for support, regardless of any other individual characteristics. There is no requirement for them to be in receipt of benefits. Participation is voluntary and the number of places available is limited. Potential programme participants fall into one of four groups:

- the **hardest to reach**. This group included individuals who have been out of work for at least two years when starting on the pilot.
- the **harder to reach**, defined as those out of work for between one and two years at the time of starting on the pilot
- **rapid progression**, consisting of those out of work for less than one year.
- **in work**, but with an income of less than £13,900 a year or less than the current minimum wage.

The programme aimed to strengthen communities by increasing their income from work and improving residents' health and wellbeing. It was implemented in nine geographically pre-defined areas (known as 'communities') across the WMCA region by providers selected via a competitive bidding process. The programme spend was around £4 million and contract values for individual pilots ranged from £173,300 to £1,053,000. The programme uses a payment by results funding model, with different amounts attached to milestones for four customer groups:

Hardest to Reach (out of work for two years or more)	Harder to Reach (out of work for 1-2 years)	Rapid Progression (out of work for less than a year)	In Work

The payment amounts are differentiated to recognise the more intensive and complex support needs of participants that have been out of work for more than two years, ensuring providers have a financial incentive to support them effectively.

All working age residents in the nine areas, as well as working age people with other connections to the locality, such as those that work, worship, have family links or whose children attend school in

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[1] They must be aged 16 or more.

the area, were eligible for support. There were no other eligibility criteria; both people in and out of work were eligible for support, as are those of all ages and qualification levels. The support for participants was designed to be flexible and responsive over the lifetime of the pilots, both to the needs of participants and the locality.

Evaluation focus

The success of the programme, evaluated by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and City-REDI was measured by the engagement of residents, and for those in work, the number progressing in work, and for participants out of work the number of job starts, and job sustainment (at 13, 26 and 52 weeks).

The Evaluation had four key aims:

1. Support WMCA, providers and partners to understand and maximise the effectiveness of the pilot
2. Assess the impact of Connecting Communities on its participants, neighbourhoods, and local economy
3. Understand how, why, where and for whom it has achieved these impacts
4. Identify key lessons for future policy and practice

The evaluation approach (methodology)

The evaluation adopted a critical realist approach and used a Theory of Change (ToC) to map and describe the connections between the activities and outcomes. The ToC was co-produced at programme level with providers, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the WMCA drawing on relevant documentation and a workshop in March 2019 which recognised that each provider will be working with beneficiaries taking account of local circumstances and drew on community resources provided by their partners. The TOC provided a shared understanding of how the programme would work in practice and provided the basis of selecting metrics and lines of enquiry in the evaluation. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to data collection and was structured into three phases:

A. Formative Process Evaluation
B. Interim process evaluation
C. Full evaluation and assessment of the pilot's effectiveness, impacts and implications for the future

Data collection methods included:

In depth interviews with:	A	B	C
• key programme stakeholders	◉	◉	
pilot sites (known as 'lots')	◉	◉	◉
• residents, purposively sampled against the framework agreed in the first wave (i.e., by pilot site, stage of support, payment group and demographic characteristics)	◉	◉	◉
• Employers		◉	
Top up participant interviews		◉	◉
In-depth action research visits to pilot sites	◉		
Supporting pilot sites in undertaking self-evaluation of their projects	◉	◉	◉
Bi-monthly management information analysis	◉	◉	◉
Findings Workshop	◉	◉	
Programme stakeholder workshop		◉	◉

Key Findings (Methodological)

Beneficiaries were interviewed in every stage of the evaluation, but our approach had to evolve to reflect circumstances. Interviews were initially conducted in person on site. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual interviews using Teams and Zoom were conducted with stakeholders or more traditionally by phone which was preferred by beneficiaries. Interviews were conducted at a variety of times (both during the day and the evening) to respond to participant availability.

The use of immersive visits in year one provided powerful insights and opportunities to provide feedback to individual pilot areas. These visits involved holding a focus group with programme participants to discuss the strengths and potential improvements of the model; and observing everyday interventions between advisers and participants and then asking the participant and adviser for their reflections.

The importance of co-development of processes to securely transfer the management information from pilot sites required developing a mechanism in partnership with the programme commissioner that involved workshops with providers to develop a common data tool, data dictionary and format across the nine sites. Beyond systems, it was necessary that once the data was received, including IES running validation checks and resolving any issues with sites, it was integrated into a single database.

The effectiveness of relatively simple PowerPoint based dashboard analysis for the WMCA that set out key findings and trends across sites and for different groups (payment groups, cohorts and demographics). This provided the basis for feedback and discussion with pilots which resulted in additional insights around programme performance and acted as a catalyst for sharing good practices and experiences during the formative stages of the programme and its evaluation.

The benefits of using a dedicated statistical package (we used SPSS) for the MI analysis to produce descriptive and comparative statistics. Our evaluation partner, IES, were able to provide timely and accurate analysis across pilot areas to achieve an aggregate of performance and outcomes, and sub-group analysis by site, payment group and demographic group.

The value of a range of qualitative data sources which when triangulated helped contextualise, explain, and evidence evaluation findings.

It is worth investing the time in developing information notes that used accessible language for beneficiaries to explain complex issues around data governance, GDPR and consent.

A framework approach was an effective way of organising and analysing interviews. This involves researchers summarising the interview data in a matrix arranged by case (row) and topic/theme (column), mapped on to the key stages identified through the ToC. We developed separate matrices for each type of interview (i.e. provider, partner, participant) given the different areas of questioning. Using this format, the team identify cross-cutting themes and issues both within and between pilot areas and compare and contrast the views of respondents with differing characteristics to identify divergent experiences and perspectives.

We have also produced PowerPoint presentations to share interim findings with decision makers and delivery providers.

Key Findings (Project)

The Evaluation has provided societal impacts through enabling insights into:

- Effective ways to engage the individuals in work who are struggling to progress

- Effective support for participants
- Effective employer engagement and job brokerage
- Aspects of the Theory of Change more/ less resilient to changing circumstances
- Innovative / new ways of working in response to pandemic
- Place-based initiatives
- Future commissioning (size of Lot, qualities of providers)

Pilots had to modify their approach following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and delivery partners switching from physical to virtual delivery modes. This was challenging when staff at some providers and partner organisations were furloughed during lockdown and participants also faced a range of challenges including mental health issues, isolation, home schooling, etc.

The evaluation will inform future employment support programmes in the WMCA area – including the Mayor's Job Plan. As of November 2021, there is a particular interest in:

- Place-based policies – what works and why
- Older workers – those aged 50 years and over
- The lessons for future commissioning – including the size of contracts
- The benefits and limits of virtual working

References and further information

The final evaluation report will be published on the IES website.

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