



The Big Lottery's Fulfilling Lives Programme: Supporting
People with Multiple and Complex Needs

connecting people, services and commissioners

West Yorkshire - Finding Independence From benefits to employment- the experience of people with multiple needs

About West Yorkshire Finding Independence (WY-FI)

WY-FI is one of the 12 projects in the Big Lottery Fund Fulfilling Lives Multiple Needs Programme, which aims to improve the lives of people with multiple and complex needs. The work of WY-FI is focussed on people experiencing 3 out of 4 of the following: homelessness, addiction (drugs and alcohol); re-offending and mental ill-health (HARM), and who are currently not accessing support services in respect of some or all of these. WY-FI aims to achieve system change so that people who experience multiple needs are supported more effectively and are able to live fulfilling lives.

Our research indicates that a person centred approach building trust and engagement works best for individuals who are excluded and marginalised, whether by physical or mental health issues, offending behaviour, substance misuse or homelessness. Matched to this a flexible approach by employing organisations in supporting a person work through their own issues, not simply adding to the pressures upon them.

The experience of people currently employed by WY-FI who have lived experience of multiple needs

WY-FI is committed to supporting employment pathways within the project for people with lived experience, which often entails a transition from benefits into paid employment. Those employment pathways, supported by our ETE team have included voluntary peer mentor roles, paid trainee roles and most recently Co-Production Champions. Through supporting the newly recruited Co-Production Champions into employment with us, we identified some significant challenges, which are presented in the case studies below.

While the cases focus on assessment for continued ESA or Universal Credit support during a change in employment circumstances, rather than the initial ESA assessment, the underlying complexities remain similar. At best, people experience inconsistency from case to case and from place to place. At worst, DWP support, or lack thereof, at times of transition has the potential to undermine the positive steps made by people in recovery. The experiences detailed in Appendix 1 include four clear themes:

- Inconsistent and frequently conflicting advice received about Universal Credit.
- A system accessible only online, therefore excluding those with no access to IT or limited IT skills
- JCP workers not being able to offer advice on benefits, but referring to the Helpline, which is frequently: very difficult to get through; 'a voice down a phone line' – an impersonal experience which can exacerbate anxiety; conflicting or inaccurate advice being issued.
- A point of potential crisis is reached when transitioning from having full support (benefits and advice), to having no support at all once employed.

Employers' perspective

The WY-FI Project currently supports staff in a range of skilled roles who have lived experience of multiple needs and are visible within the organisation and for clients, as role models. They have aided practitioners' insight of the needs and challenges of supporting individuals with multiple needs, particularly in respect of gaining and retaining employment.

WY-FI has implemented a tailored flexible pathway programme leading from volunteering opportunities to a select number of trainee roles across the project, which enables people with multiple needs to gain workplace experience, progress into and retain employment. Our Education, Training and Employment (ETE) team supports WY-FI beneficiaries and people with lived experience of multiple needs into training, volunteering and work placements.

Across the partnership, staff who are recent entrants into employment and who, as a consequence of their lived experience of multiple needs, have identified ongoing issues. These include: reduced income in relation to benefits; child support payment cases being re-activated upon entry into work; complex family relationships e.g. dealing with former partners, re-connecting with children from whom they have been separated and requiring absence from the workplace to meet their children's needs; the affordability/ availability of housing; being singled out and stigmatised in the workplace/ feeling vulnerable in relation to performance management; ongoing physical ill-health issues necessitating hospital and doctors' appointments.

Through a tailored, person-centred approach, positive and active risk management, relevant occupational health services and a holistic approach, many WY-FI staff members have been supported to enter and retain employment successfully.

The WY-FI partnership believes that lived experience is an asset within the workforce, especially when organisations foster an inclusive culture and develop flexible and inclusive recruitment and retention practices. The partnership and wider stakeholders developed ten key principles for valuing lived experience in the workplace and have identified four distinct areas:

- Inclusive recruitment
- Support and development
- Organisational culture
- Retention and sustained employment

The principles have been incorporated into organisational pledges to which our partners have committed.

Support should be tapered from care navigation and personal support through to pre-employment support, training and in-employment support. This is a substantial journey and the total length of support necessary to move someone with multiple needs from a long-term dependence on benefits into employment is probably not less than two-three years:

“Someone like myself who was addicted for 18 years, had subsequent mental health issues, and spent years in prison and sleeping rough, was unable to be job ready for nearly 5 years. What works is looking at the person as a person, not as a drain on society. Person centred with the understanding that treatment can take years until recovery is achieved, only then can societal norms be applied- house, work, family.”

Good practice

Examples of good practice of support for people with multiple needs are the JCP Social Justice teams in Leeds and Bradford. However, their capacity has been drastically limited, and the DWP has not commissioned such workers in the other three areas of West Yorkshire.

Another successful model is that Bridge (Bradford), an organisation with extensive knowledge and experience of supporting people with addiction, have a worker co-located within the Job Centre. This enables links to support to maintain abstinence, as well as to increase awareness of multiple needs amongst JCP staff.

Typical practical support that has been effective in supporting people with multiple needs to gain and retain employment may include:

- Personal development and motivation training
- Money management training
- Industry specific cards and certificates
- Short courses and training
- Placements and employability training
- Advice on disclosure for job applications
- Self employment advice
- In-work support

Appendix 1 – case studies and experiences

Case study: A.

A. first signed on to Universal Credit (UC) on July 1st 2016 after completing 10 weeks part time employment. Having previously been on JSA, he had been told by JCP that UC would work better for him if he was to find similar employment again. He lost out initially because wages for June didn't get paid into his account till July 14th. Apparently this wouldn't have been an issue had he been paid in June.

On at least four separate occasions over the next 12 months he had his Housing Benefits element stopped/suspended due to "changes in his circumstances" when in fact there had not been any changes in his circumstances. This has led to bank charges and his rent going in late.

Before starting his current employment on August 14th, he was told he would be receiving £253.32 a month.

He then received 5 letters in succession, with conflicting and contradictory advice, with widely varying figures. This has left him stressed and with no confidence in the system. As someone with a history of mental health issues/illness, he feels fortunate that he has the support of his employer and peers, but 'fears for those without such support.'

Case study: B.

Positives

B. found his transition easy because he had support from the DWP worker who comes to the Bridge project to offer advice. She talked him through the process and eased any anxieties that he had. B. was quite scared about taking the leap in to employment and he found that the worker really helped him.

Negatives

While trying to find information about his benefits himself, he found that the information from workers at the Helpline and on the website was vague and unhelpful.

Opinion on what would help

B. thinks that a document from the DWP defining legislation and what can be claimed would be beneficial for people thinking about employment, as long as it is 'in layman's terms'. . Having DWP workers within specific places of work to offer advice.

Opinion: C.

"Recovery is precarious as is mental health and going from not working at all into a full time job can cause people to relapse, part time work needs to be supported and encouraged if people are going to successfully stay in full time work in the long term

People have struggled to get and keep their benefits and if the job doesn't work or they become ill again, then it will take them months of hardship and struggle to reinstate their benefits and the stress that will cause to an already stressful time.

Misinformation or conflicting info from different departments.

Support, not sanctions is needed to help people get and stay in work and then only if work is right for them. For some people it's not always going to be."

Case study: worker at a drugs service in West Yorkshire

"I had been on JSA for 12 years, due to long-term substance misuse. Looking back, I should really have been on ESA during my illness, but having seen how difficult the process was for others, I couldn't face it and chose to make do with JSA.

Early in my recovery I chose to give back and learn new skills through volunteering for a charitable organisation for one year. In December 2016 I accepted 15 hours per week paid employment with the organisation.

I would be earning £7.33 per hour - £109 per week. My JSA claim remained open and live and I would continue to sign on fortnightly. This meant that even though my JSA payments reduced to zero, I was able to continue to receive subsidised dental care etc.

While my income of £109 per week was £35 more than I had been receiving on JSA, the vast majority of this was absorbed by a reduction in my income-based housing benefit.

Moreover, because I would be paid in arrears, I needed to apply for a four week extended payment of benefits from the local authority to cover the gap.

My application for extended payment was rejected because I had tried a short-term part-time job over Xmas. I was deemed ineligible for the extended payment because I had not received continuous benefit payments for at least six months. I had proof of a live JSA claim lasting 12 years.

Had it not been for my family helping with the first months' rent and my employer subsidising my first month's travel, I would have been unable to afford to start work, let alone feel like the huge step I was taking was valued by the state. I was very close to having to reject the opportunity, an opportunity that has since led to a permanent full-time job."

Case study: Volunteer at a third sector organisation in West Yorkshire

The volunteer had been on work-related ESA, which mandated her to attend regular appointments, including the Work Programme.

Halfway through her Work Programme, a paid work opportunity funded by the local authority came up in the organisation, aimed specifically at people who had been out of work for over 12 months. She told her Work Programme advisor of this opportunity and was told she could not be released from the Work Programme without relinquishing her benefits. Since her ESA payments were quite low due to her partner's income, she chose to forgo her benefits and leave the Work Programme in pursuit of the job, which she was ultimately offered by the organisation.

It transpired subsequently that terms of the local authority funding for the role excluded people who had accessed the Work Programme in the last 12 months and the job offer was withdrawn. She attempted to restart her ESA claim, which was refused on grounds that she had demonstrated capability for work by applying for the job.

Case study: D.

"This is a brief story of my experience of working towards being in full time employment and trying to move away from being on long term ESA sickness benefits. While explaining some of the difficulties I've personally experienced while trying to combat the current benefit barriers in place, after a lifetime of being socially institutionalized after many years of addiction and mental health issues. Sharing a bit of background of my history to help better explain my personal circumstances and the difficulties I've had.

I'm ex-service user with years of entrenchment in addiction problems, with a history of severe clinical depression a condition from a young age. I really started to get a grip on my addiction issues when I was lucky enough to get a bed at a residential rehab. The ethos of the house is to work a 12 step NA addiction program in my life, in a very family oriented proactive way, working always towards being more independent.

While I was in rehab I had no problems with my benefits and I have received ESA (support group) while also claiming housing benefit to live there. Through the week days I accessed a day care program for therapy and support to help detox from opiates. As my life became more stable and were more experienced I began to train and work part-time as a volunteer for the daycare center, helping support other people with similar issues I've being through. My personal care plan while at rehab was designed to restructure my life in a more productive way, with an end goal of moving into my own accommodation and working towards being in full-time employment (doing something that I love doing). Hopefully using my past experiences of substance misuse etc. to better help to support people with similar issues.

Moving from rehab into my own property with a local housing association I was learning to become even more independent from services. I was supported by a housing worker for extra outreach support (if needed) while learning to budget my bills and maintain my property to become full tenancy ready to move on to the next housing stage.

I have recently in 2017 been relocated to a Leeds postcode area in my own rented property which is closer to my place of work in my new part-time job role.

At this stage in my recovery from mental health issues I feel very close to achieving the confidence to be able to work in a full time role and being able to pay my taxes.

After volunteering for approximately 2 years there became an opportunity for me to work part-time alongside my benefits. Within two weeks of me making the benefits aware of my new 15.5 hours job I was asked to attend a work related interview.

My new employer has being very supportive in allowing me to slowly increase my work responsibilities and the experience needed for a job is this field.

After making ESA aware of my new part-time job role by sending a bank statement and wage slip in with a permitted work form. Two weeks later, I was then sent a letter asking me to come in for a new work-related medical assessment interview. On attending the assessment with my housing support worker to better explain my circumstances. I was told by the lady after the interview (after some investigation), she stated that she was going to recommend to managers that they make the decisions to put me onto the work-related group of ESA. Which seemed fine and actually more appropriate as I would then receive support from a work advisor on a regular basis, from what I could tell.

But approximately 10 days after the assessment I received a letter stating that ESA will no longer pay me any ESA from the 14 Oct 2017. My tenancy is now in jeopardy I could potentially lose my flat and be made homeless. I am currently trying to appeal these decisions. But this looks to be a long drawn out affair which is really worrying at such a crucial stage in my development to become a more independent person. It works out that I am now £500 a month worse off financially and I'm currently struggling to manage my bills and balance my new job.

This has made the whole process of moving into work a lot more difficult and complex than it needs to be I believe. After speaking to different people with similar circumstances, I have found that the benefit system seems to create a lot of fear for people around trying to move into employment. This really does seem to put people on benefits off from even attempting to try to move away from being on benefits. As it may of taken years of attending medical assessments interviews for people to get the benefits set up in the first place. Why would somebody wish to rock the boat and take a risk of trying some sort of employment?

There seems to be a huge lack of support and understanding from the DWP around these issues generally.

It also seems from my experience that the benefit criteria system rather than providing support just finds people fit to work or not. It does not provide enough support for people who are in between, trying to work towards being in full time employment (potentially paying their taxes for the rest of their lives).

It just seems very strange to me that when a person is so close to achieving full time employment that the benefits system would not only “not support somebody” but would actually hinder and possibly risk this positive outcome.

I will say that this whole process is very disheartening and distressing for me and the more I speak to people I find out I’m not alone with my experiences.”

Case study: E.

“Moving from benefits to paid work was a big step for me. The reason I had been on ESA is because I had become very ill and the road back to recovery has been a difficult one. Working with the Experts by Experience (now the WY-FI network), really helped my recovery and gave me structure, routine and purpose as well as connecting me with others.

When the chance of applying for a paid position came about I discussed it with my JobCentre worker, who has been very supportive. I decided to give it a shot and applied for the job. Things then became confusing, the job was originally advertised at 20hrs but taking advice I was warned that this could affect my benefits badly. Trying to get the correct advice was hard. I of course rang the ESA line but as they are not benefit advisors the information they gave was confusing. I then spoke to my DWP worker who was also unclear about how much housing benefit I would lose and whether I would be worse off.

Luckily DISC, who had advertised for the positions, spoke to a benefit expert who was able to give a clearer picture on seeking individual advice and indeed I would be significantly worse off if I took a 20hr post. Again luckily, DISC were able to offer a 15.5 hr alternative to the advertised post. My DWP worker thought that this was a better option for me anyway as she felt that as well as working, I had to take care of my recovery and she didn’t want me to fall back into illness and have no safety net. So I started work.

I work with 4 other people who also like myself have lived experience and it was interesting and worrying to hear of their experiences. The most unnerving came from one of my colleagues who like me is on ESA and is working 15.5hrs as permitted work. Having started work, he was re-assessed by the ESA DWP workers and has been told he is to come off ESA now he is working. I was told the whole point of the permitted work is to allow someone the chance to begin stepping back into working life whilst still getting support from the DWP. This man, like myself, has tried to do everything right, from client to voluntary work to permitted work with the goal of full time employment in the future. Selfishly I have now become worried about my own position. Taking this job was a big decision and to find myself cut off from ESA support, having to go through an appeals procedure is a real worry. It also contradicts everything my DWP worker has told me about the point of permitted work which should recognise that a person has been ill and is trying to get back on their feet and return to work.

I know only too well that being put under pressure during the early stages of recovery can lead to relapse. It is so important to understand that people with lived experience have often been through the mill. The lived experience they have is real and traumatic, it can be a real asset but at the same time the risk of relapse is also real. In my own case, relapse or the descent towards relapse can be life threatening. I know this sounds dramatic but as an older man I’ve unfortunately and fortunately experienced a great deal. My own particular

conditions have led to relapse on occasions and looking back if the support had been there I might not have had to endure relapse in its full severity. I must admit to being slightly on edge having witnessed my colleague's experience but at least I know that my actual employer is supportive should my situation change. All five of us, my colleagues and I have experienced difficulties in the process of starting work and trying to claim some benefit and the difficulties in our case have not been from the employer who has been more than understanding but from the DWP and as the DWPs main goal is to help people get back to work this is more than a little surprising."

Case study: F.

"When it comes to the transition from receiving benefits and then going into paid employment, a lot of people find that there are issues and stresses that surround their decisions.

I (fortunately) did not have the same problems as many people face when transitioning as I believe I was one of the lucky ones. Because of the fact that I still live at home with my parents, it meant I didn't have to worry about paying rent and council tax as well as other bills, paying for my travel to work and also having to pay for my own lunches now that I would be in paid employment. The transition was smooth for me, but the same can't be said for others.

I don't want to sound as if it was easy for me to get back into employment because it wasn't all plain sailing, but I was lucky enough to not have to go through the stress of working out if I could afford to work or whether it was going to put me in financial hardship.

This is what so many are going through right now and I believe something needs to change to allow everyone going through these issues, the smoothest transition possible."