

**Evaluation of the Work Based Learning for Adults
Programme since April 2001
Qualitative Interviews with ES Staff, Providers and
Employers**

By

**Mark Winterbotham, Lorna Adams and Alistair Kuechel
IFF Research Limited**

EVALUATION OF THE WORK BASED LEARNING FOR ADULTS PROGRAMME
SINCE APRIL 2001

A report for the Department for Work and Pensions by IFF Research



IFF Research Limited
CHART HOUSE
Chart Street
London
N1 6DD

Tel: 020 7837 6363

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Glossary Of Abbreviations And Acronyms	li
Executive Summary	lii
1 Introduction	1
2 Contracting Issues	9
3 Eligibility	15
4 Referring Clients To WBLA	19
5 Appropriateness And Effectiveness Of Provision	26
6 Contact And Liaison During Provision	40
7 Impacts And Outcomes From WBLA Provision	43
8 Addressing Concerns About WBLA	48
9 Specific Groups And WBLA	50
10 Paperwork, Administration And It	54
11 Recommendations For Improvement	58

LIST OF TABLES AND CHARTS

Table 2.1: Interviews Conducted Per Wave	3
Table 2.2: Profile Of Interviews By Area	3
Table 2.3: Size And Sector Of Employers Interviewed In Each Wave	7

Acknowledgements

The research benefited greatly from the assistance, support and guidance provided by the research team at the Employment Service, in particular Maureen Moroney, Gillian Burgess and Jane Francis, and we thank them for their contribution to the study.

We are also very grateful for the time and effort put in by the regional and district teams in each of the areas participating in the research. Their assistance in selecting staff to take part in the project, and arranging times and locations for these interviews contributed greatly to the smooth running of the survey.

Finally IFF Research wishes to thank all those who gave their time to be interviewed, especially those staff and providers who were interviewed on more than one occasion during the course of the year.

Glossary of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADF	Adviser Discretion Fund
BET	Basic Employability Training
DPQM	District Programme Quality Manager
DPQMT	District Programme Quality Management Team
ES	Employment Service
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FE	Further Education
JSA	Jobseekers Allowance
LMS	Labour Market System
LOT	Longer Occupational Training
ND25 plus	New Deal 25 plus
PWD	Person with disability
SJFT	Short Job-Focussed Training
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
UoD	Unit of Delivery
WBLA	Work Based Learning for Adults

Executive Summary

The Work Based Learning for Adults (WBLA) programme is a voluntary full-time training programme, designed to provide unemployed people aged 25 plus with practical help and opportunities to equip them to re-enter and retain employment. Elements of the programme are available to individuals after they have been unemployed for 6 months continuously, with the full range of provision available at the 12-month point. If individuals fulfil any of the 'early entry' criteria then they can access WBLA provision before reaching the 6-month point.

IFF Research was commissioned to undertake a qualitative research study to assess how well the programme has been operating since April 2001 when ES took over responsibility for running the programme. The study employed a qualitative method and involved discussions with ES staff, providers and employers. These interviews took place across three waves of research, the most recent being in March and April 2002, and covered six ES Units of Delivery.

This report draws on the findings of 64 interviews with staff, 89 interviews with providers and 46 interviews with employers. Employers were interviewed by telephone, staff and providers face-to-face. Discussions with staff and providers involved a mix of one-to-one interviews, paired interviews and mini-group discussions.

Overall Views

Both staff and providers feel that the hand-over of responsibility for WBLA from DfEE/TECs to the ES was untidy and led to a very difficult first few months for the programme. In some areas, contracts for training provision were not in place by April, and training for staff was often seen as insufficient and was often carried out before decisions were finalised about what provision would be offered. However by 2002 the problems arising from the hand-over have largely either been addressed or are being addressed.

Staff feel that the fact that ES is now responsible for WBLA contracts with providers will improve the service that they are able to offer clients. Not only will there be greater direct control over the quality of provision but staff will have increased overall levels of familiarity with what is offered under different elements of the provision. However many also feel that there is some way to go in realising these potential benefits.

Providers are in favour of the fact that they are now dealing directly with ES and not an intermediary (the TECs) and there is general support for the fact they are less tied to NVQs and qualifications with the focus moving to jobs and work outcomes. However, this is tempered by the programme being viewed as more inflexible than pre April 2001, for example the duration of the training available being tied to the length of time a person has been unemployed.

In terms of the overall effectiveness of WBLA, staff feel that the programme can provide useful skills to individuals that are interested/willing to take part, and is helping a reasonable proportion into work. However, the fact that they cannot make participation compulsory does limit its scope to help a large proportion of the clients that they see.

Areas of progress over the year

Staff confidence in the operation of the programme has grown as their familiarity with WBLA provision has developed. This has contributed to an increase in the number of referrals being made. Providers bear witness to this increase, although referrals for some courses, particularly SJFT, remain very low, and generally providers are behind profile for the year.

Providers have also seen a decrease in the proportion of referrals that they would consider to be inappropriate. Problems were encountered in the first half of the year particularly in relation to SJFT clients. Providers felt that there was a significant gulf between their opinions on the level of 'job-readiness' necessary to benefit from an SJFT course and those of ES staff. However, this reduction in 'inappropriate referrals' does seem to mean that in many areas, very little use is being made of SJFT courses.

In the first two waves of the research, staff had suspicions that not all providers were fulfilling their job search obligations and that several did not consider this to be a major part of their remit. Staff are now confident that job search is fully integrated into all WBLA options but staff still have concerns about the quality of job search that is being conducted, and several areas are planning to focus on addressing this in the coming months.

Significant teething problems were encountered in regard to the paperwork involved in administering WBLA, providers complaining of receiving late and/or incorrect forms, and staff often describing providers as being confused about the paperwork required. By wave 3 of the research, this problem had greatly diminished as both parties had developed familiarity with the programme.

Issues that continue to be problematic

As a result of low unemployment, staff find that they are dealing with a hardcore of clients who have deep-rooted or multiple barriers to work. Relatively few are job-ready, hence SJFT provision is rarely being used. Put another way, SJFT would need to be extended beyond six weeks to be of benefit to most clients that they see. They feel that there are many circumstances when they are able to identify a training need at the 6-months stage but cannot act on this because SJFT is unsuitable and the client does not qualify for early entry into LOT. A strong sentiment among staff is that they would like LOT provision to be available at the 6-months point.

Even after one year of operation, staff still often feel they have only sketchy information about the quality and effectiveness of different providers and different provision. Many want more information from providers or senior staff about job outcome levels being achieved, and there is a strong desire for some kind of follow-through to allow staff to get feedback from clients after they have attended provision.

Many staff are able to identify what they see as gaps in provision locally (dedicated soft skills provision for those not qualifying for BET was quite often mentioned) though there is little sign that this information is being passed on to senior staff.

One of the key issues for many providers is the continuing low level of referrals, and some have concerns about the viability of their contract without the underpinning guarantee. There is a degree of frustration that their contract profiles have turned out to be widely different from reality and they are hoping that profiles will be adjusted in such a way that still makes them economically viable.

Employers

There is very little sense among employers of being involved in the programme, indeed a fair number of those interviewed had not heard of WBLA (knowing only of having contact with Jobcentre or a training provider). It was common for employers to desire more information about WBLA and other ES programmes, and also more contact from ES about the clients they had taken on (this generally appeared to be undertaken by providers, not ES, if at all).

Employers views of the programme tended to be shaped very much by the quality of the clients they had employed or provided a work placement for. Most were looking for clients with good motivation and a positive attitude, rather than any occupation-specific skills. Where problems had been encountered these generally related to a lack of motivation and poor attendance (e.g. poor time keeping or their walking out). Even in these cases though, most employers were willing to continue to recruit or take placements via the programme as long as future clients were appropriate for the relevant vacancies.

Looking ahead

After a year focussing on familiarising themselves with the extent of provision and focussing on ensuring that WBLA referrals are being made, staff in several areas are planning to spend the next few months concentrating on evaluating the quality of provision that is being delivered. There are plans to:

- Focus on evaluating the content of courses and to compare the different ways in which providers have elected to deliver the same type of provision
 - To increase (or in some areas to start) provider monitoring visits by WBLA staff
 - To investigate the variation in employment outcomes by provider
-

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises the key findings from a year-long programme of research designed to evaluate the Work Based Learning for Adults (WBLA) programme since coming under control of the Employment Service in April 2001 (previously it had been part of the remit of the Training and Enterprise Councils). The research aims to understand the effectiveness of WBLA and also to see whether the programme is being delivered as intended.

Background

- 1.2 WBLA is a voluntary full-time training programme for unemployed people aged 25 and over. The key objectives of the programme are:

- To help adults without work and with poor employability skills move into sustained employment
- To help long-term unemployed people to gain the occupational skills needed to fill local skills shortage difficulties
- To help long-term unemployed people to make a success of self-employment

1.3 In broad terms, an individual is eligible for WBLA if they satisfy the age requirements, are in receipt of either JSA or another qualifying benefit and are regarded as being disadvantaged in the labour market. Individuals are regarded as being disadvantaged in the labour market if they have been unemployed for the qualifying period (at least 6 months) or are in one of the early entry groups listed below:

- Unemployed People with disabilities aged 18 and over and not claiming Jobseeker's Allowance;
- Unemployed People with Literacy and Numeracy needs;
- Unemployed People for whom English is not their first language;
- Partners of people Continuously Unemployed for 26 weeks;
- Qualifying Participants in New Deal for Lone Parents and New Deal for disabled people;
- Qualifying Ex-offenders;
- Qualifying Ex-regulars in HM Forces;
- Returners to the Labour Market;
- Victims of Large Scale Redundancies (as notified by ES);
- Homeless people;

- People recovering from substance abuse;
 - Refugees;
 - People aged 25 and over who are referred at the discretion of their ONE Personal Adviser.
- 1.4 There are four main elements of WBLA provision;
- Short Job Focussed Training (SJFT) - courses lasting up to 6 weeks
 - Longer Occupational Training (LOT) - courses lasting up to 52 weeks
 - Basic Employability Training (BET) - lasting up to 26 weeks
 - Self-employment preparation
- 1.5 Aside from people with basic skills needs and those undertaking the self-employment programme, individuals who have been unemployed for 6-12 months can receive up to 6 weeks of training and those who have been unemployed for 12 months or more can receive up to 12 months of training. Prior to April 2001, individuals could access training of any length after they had been unemployed for 6 months - there was no upper limit to training.

Methodology

- 1.6 The research was conducted in three waves, the dates for each being as follows:

.1	Wave 1	July/August 2001
Wave 2:	November and December 2001 (interviewing of employers continued until February 2002)	
.2	Wave 3:	March / April 2002 (interviewing of employers continued up to May 2002)

- 1.7 Three different audiences were covered by the research – Employment Service staff, training providers, and employers who had been involved with the WBLA programme (the latter usually either by employing WBLA clients or through providing work placements). Employers were only included in the research programme at waves 2 and 3. Table 2.1 shows the number of interviews conducted with each stakeholder group at each wave. Different groups of employers were interviewed at waves 2 and 3 but just under half of the staff and providers that took part in the research were interviewed at more than one wave. This aided in our analysis of how opinions changed over the course of the year.
-

Table 2.1: Interviews conducted per wave

.3	AUDIENCE	.4	WA	.5	WAVE	.6	WAV	.7	TOT
		VE 1		2		E 3		AL	
.8	ES Staff	.9	16	.10	26	.11	22	.12	64
.13	Training Providers	.14	22	.15	36	.16	31	.17	89
.18	Employers	.19	-	.20	21	.21	25	.22	46

1.8 The research covered six ES units of delivery. Two areas (Areas 4 and 6) were included only in waves 2 and 3, and were added to the research programme in order to boost interview numbers, particularly with providers and WBLA staff. The areas were chosen by ES to achieve a geographic spread across England (covering London, Home Counties, South West, Eastern and the North) and to cover different labour market conditions (including some inner city areas and more rural areas). Locations were also selected to exclude those where recent evaluation work had recently or was currently being undertaken.

1.9 Table 2.2 shows the profile of respondents per area per wave.

Table 2.2: Profile of interviews by area

.23	UoD	.24	Staff	.25	Providers	.26	Employers	.27	Total		
.28	Area 1	.29	Wave 1	.30	3	.31	6	.32	N/A	.33	9
.34		.35	Wave 2	.36	4	.37	4	.38	7	.39	15
.40		.41	Wave 3	.42	4	.43	6	.44	11	.45	22
.46		.47	Total	.48	11	.49	16	.50	18	.51	46
.52	Area 2	.53	Wave 1	.54	5	.55	8	.56	N/A	.57	13
.58		.59	Wave 2	.60	2	.61	6	.62	6	.63	14
.64		.65	Wave 3	.66	3	.67	6	.68	-	.69	9
.70		.71	Total	.72	10	.73	20	.74	6	.75	36
.76	Area 3	.77	Wave 1	.78	4	.79	0	.80	N/A	.81	4
.82		.83	Wave 2	.84	6	.85	4	.86	2	.87	12
.88		.89	Wave 3	.90	3	.91	1	.92	-	.93	4
.94		.95	Total	.96	13	.97	5	.98	2	.99	20
.100	Area 4	.101	Wave 1	.102	N/A	.103	N/A	.104	N/A	.105	-

.106	.107 \ ave 2	.108 4	.109 8	.110 3	.111 1 5
.112	.113 \ ave 3	.114 6	.115 8	.116 12	.117 2 6
.118	.119 7 otal	.120 1 0	.121 16	.122 15	.123 4 1
.124 Area 5	.125 W ave 1	.126 4	.127 8	.128 N/A	.129 1 2
.130	.131 W ave 2	.132 2	.133 3	.134 -	.135 5
.136	.137 W ave 3	.138 2	.139 2	.140 -	.141 4
.142	.143 T otal	.144 8	.145 13	.146 -	.147 2 1
.148 Area 6	.149 \ ave 1	.150 1 /A	.151 N/A	.152 N/A	.153 -
.154	.155 \ ave 2	.156 8	.157 11	.158 3	.159 2 2
.160	.161 \ ave 3	.162 4	.163 8	.164 2	.165 1 4
.166	.167 7 otal	.168 1 2	.169 19	.170 4	.171 3 5
.172 Total	.173	.174 6 4	.175 89	.176 45	.177

- 1.10 At each wave, initial contact was made with the Area Manager for each Unit of Delivery and they identified staff and providers suitable for interview. Where possible, stage 2 and stage 3 interviews were conducted with staff and providers who had participated in previous stages in order to allow us to examine if and how earlier issues had been dealt with.

ES staff

- 1.11 Interviews with Employment Service staff were carried out face-to-face by the research team at IFF using a combination of one-to-one interviews, paired interviews and occasionally small groups of three or four staff depending on staff availability and the preferences of senior staff. In a small number of cases (usually where a member of staff had been unable to attend the initially arranged interview) a telephone interview was conducted. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Nearly all staff interviewed about WBLA were Restart Advisers¹.

¹ Restart Advisers are members of staff who are responsible for holding individual meetings with clients after every 6 months of a continuous JSA claim (unless they are on a New Deal programme). For those clients who do not satisfy any of the early entry criteria, the 6-month point will be the first time that they become eligible for WBLA and hence it is often at these meetings that WBLA options are considered for the first time.

- 1.12 The questionnaire used for interviewing ES staff changed only slightly between waves with only a few questions focussing on specific areas of interest to the project team being added. At Stage 2, more questions about the level/type of contact with clients on WBLA, the extent that tailoring of WBLA provision was possible and views on how WBLA was operating from a provider and employer perspective were added. At Stage 3 additional questions were included on whether staff felt enough was being done to take advantage of early-entry opportunities, use of Employed Status training, the types of courses offered under SJFT, the quality of work experience provided under SJFT and LOT, basic skills provision under WBLA, use of the one-off fund to buy in provision and the effectiveness of WBLA for disabled clients.

Training providers

- 1.13 Interviews with training providers were conducted face-to-face by the IFF research team, and typically lasted for 50 to 60 minutes. It is worth noting that this WBLA research programme was run in parallel with a research exercise evaluating the re-engineered New Deal 25 plus programme. Where providers were involved in the delivery of both WBLA and New Deal 25 plus, interviews covered both programmes. It is important to bear in mind that on many issues providers did not differentiate between the two programmes. This applied to such aspects as the contracting process, job outcome levels being achieved, the job search they were undertaking and relationships with ES.

Employers

- 1.14 Interviews with employers involved in the programme were conducted by telephone from IFF's telephone centre, and undertaken by experienced business-to-business interviewers.
- 1.15 Obtaining a sample of employers involved in the programme was relatively problematic. ES keep no central database of such employers, nor are such records kept at a regional or district level. Hence we attempted to obtain a sample of employers via ES staff direct and from providers (either by contacting providers directly or through ES staff contacting providers on our behalf). These approaches met with limited success for a number of reasons:
- Many providers were only able to give a very limited number of names (we asked each for half a dozen to a dozen), suggesting that their network of employers with which they have close links was limited
-

- Providers were often unwilling to disclose names of employers that they had a relationship with for fear of that relationship being 'damaged' by requests for interview. Some providers chose to 'pre-screen' their lists of employers themselves and responded that no or few employers were willing to participate, though it is difficult to know how many were contacted and how exactly it was 'sold' to them
- Record keeping for WBLA appears to be less complete than perhaps is the case for New Deal. Several offices did not appear to have any records of the employment destinations of WBLA clients.

1.16 Added to the difficulties of obtaining names of employers, it was not uncommon when we then called employers for them to be unaware that they were involved with the WBLA programme. These employers often spoke simply of having a relationship with their local Jobcentre. While we still attempted to obtain interviews by explaining the programme and briefly describing what it might have entailed for them, many felt unable or unwilling to provide comment on the programme.

1.17 As a note the programme was described to these employers as follows *'you may just be aware of this as having taken someone on from the Jobcentre who was aged 25+ (they can be younger) and who had been unemployed for 6 months or more; or you may have provided work experience for someone on the WBLA programme with a training provider; or you may just have been consulted by ES / training provider about the type of skill needs you have.'*

1.18

The profile of employers interviewed by size and sector is shown in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Size and sector of employers interviewed in each wave

.178		.179	WAVE	.180	WAV	.181	TOT
		2		E 3		AL	
.182	Size	.183		.184		.185	
.186	10 employees or fewer	.187	6	.188	8	.189	14
.190	11-24 employees	.191	6	.192	8	.193	14
.194	25-49 employees	.195	5	.196	5	.197	10
.198	50-99 employees	.199	1	.200	1	.201	2
.202	100+ employees	.203	3	.204	3	.205	6
.206		.207		.208		.209	
.210	Sector	.211		.212		.213	
.214	Manufacturing	.215	6	.216	3	.217	9
.218	Training providers	.219	5	.220	0	.221	5
.222	Voluntary / public sector organisations	.223	4	.224	3	.225	7
.226	Restaurants / hotels	.227	2	.228	1	.229	3
.230	Warehouses / distribution	.231	2	.232	0	.233	2
.234	Offices	.235	2	.236	3	.237	5
.238	Care	.239	0	.240	9	.241	9
.242	Retail	.243	0	.244	2	.245	2
.246	Construction	.247	0	.248	2	.249	2
.250	Transport	.251	0	.252	2	.253	2

Analysis

- 1.19 Interviews with staff and providers were tape recorded. These tapes were used to write up detailed notes from each interview. Prior to detailed written analysis of these interview notes being made, different members of the research team read through scripts independently, and then as a group discussed the key themes that were emerging. Interviews notes were then re-read with particular attention to these key themes, but also under the generic areas of the topic guides (the range of provision available, views on the quality of provision etc). Relevant responses and quotes under these headings were then extracted from the individual interviews and typed into a single document. Notes and quotes were referenced by individual respondent to make it easy in subsequent waves to see the changes in the experiences and attitudes of those people interviewed across more than one wave.

Report structure

1.20 The research findings are organised into nine broad thematic sections. First we look at issues surrounding the setting up of provider contracts. We then go on to examine findings in an order that broadly reflect the process of utilising WBLA provision, from access to WBLA, the content and structure of provision to the outcomes. We also look at issues that have affected particular client groups and then summarise the overall improvements that stakeholders would like to see made to the programme. The report sections are as follows:

- Contracting Issues
- Eligibility for WBLA
- Referring clients to WBLA
- Usefulness/appropriateness of provision
- Contact during provision
- Outcomes resulting from WBLA
- Measures taken to address concerns about WBLA
- Specific groups and WBLA
- Overall effectiveness and suggested improvements

1.21 Within each chapter we compare the views of staff and providers. Employer views are incorporated into the 'Usefulness/appropriateness of provision' and 'Outcomes' sections. We also highlight areas where stakeholder opinions have changed over time as their familiarity with the programme has grown.

1.22 While we discuss findings from all three waves of interviewing in this report, we have concentrated very much on the most recent wave undertaken in March and April 2002 since this clearly gives the clearest picture of how the WBLA programme is currently working.

2 Contracting Issues

- 2.1 This chapter examines experiences and views on the process by which WBLA contracts were set up. It also looks at (predominantly provider) views on how these contracts have run since April 2001 covering issues such as referral numbers and how these compare to those profiled for and experiences of amending (or seeking to amend) profile numbers.

The tendering / contracting process

- 2.2 Overall there is a feeling among providers that the hand over from TECs to ES was far from smooth, and this meant that the programme got off to a poor start. The contracting process was felt to have been complicated and the contracts required within a short time frame. Added to this there was felt to have been little assistance available from any ES staff during this time. These factors led to a sense of frustration that having managed to get their contracts delivered on time, there was then (in their opinion) an unreasonably long delay in awarding contracts. In most areas, at least some contracts were not in place by April 2001².

'There was a lack of information from submitting the tender in January 2001 to being awarded the contract (May 2001). We got no information at all and it led to very low staff morale. We were about to issue redundancy notices when the contract came in. tendering process was flawed. There was poor identification of what was needed locally.'
[provider wave 2]

- 2.3 Many providers also had the impression that there was very little communication between TEC and ES staff before contract requirements were specified to providers. As a result insufficient use was made of the wealth of information that providers and the TECs had acquired about the local labour market and the types of provision that are most likely to lead to job outcomes. Others gained this impression of a lack of dialogue between ES and the TECs as a result of the profile numbers they were asked to tender for being very different from those that they had under the TECs (*'the numbers just seemed to have been plucked out of thin air'*).

'The tendering process was flawed. There was poor identification of what was needed locally. Districts didn't talk to TECs about provision -

² Delays in awarding contracts meant that in several areas staff training on the new arrangements for WBLA was conducted without (full) knowledge of which providers would be offering which types of provision. Staff felt that this impacted negatively on the usefulness of the training that they received and left them poorly-prepared for the start of the new programme.

which aspects were successful in getting job outcomes etc. A lot of good providers went under. They also brought in national providers from outside the area with no local offices and no local knowledge.'
[provider wave 3]

- 2.4 The other common impression gained as a result of the initial tendering/contracting process was that the programme as operated by the ES was less flexible than when operated by the TECs. Some, for example, felt they were asked to tender for what they saw as very prescriptive contracts in terms of what they would be providing and the duration of this provision. For others the inflexibility was described as resulting from the fact they were now dealing with a national organisation, not one, as before, with local autonomy. Others felt it resulted from the fact that ES are a public sector organisation and not as familiar as the TECs with setting up of commercial contracts.
- 2.5 One consequence of these factors was that the contracting process was felt to be much more formal than under the TECs, with less opportunity to discuss contract issues with ES staff or other providers. One even described the process as being quite '*cloak and dagger*'. This theme of providers being more competitive with each other than they had been under the TECs was evident during all three waves of the research. By wave 3 some of the mechanisms for encouraging information sharing between providers (such as provider forums), which had lapsed under ES in some areas, were starting to function again.
- 2.6 Staff in some UoDs expressed frustration that their views had not been sought prior to the tendering and awarding of contracts. In particular they felt that they could have provided valuable input into areas of provision that they felt were needed locally, or on the quality of various local providers. Frustration resulted when provision that they had found to be useful and effective were no longer available, or where providers were being used who they felt had a poor reputation.

Views on formula funding

- 2.7 Providers were generally positive about the logic behind formula funding. They appreciated that they now had a regular income stream rather than having to wait until the end of the year for payment. They stated that this had allowed them to make the investment in the staff and resources necessary to run courses as the year progressed without incurring debts that they would have had to wait until the end of the year to pay (or indeed waiting until receipt of payment to make the necessary investment).
-

- 2.8 However, at the time of the wave 1 interviews when referrals to WBLA provision were low for most providers, there was widespread nervousness about the extent to which this funding mechanism would lead to 'claw back' at the end of the year. Some of the smaller providers in particular were concerned about the level of cashflow management that would be necessary to ensure that this did not lead to financial difficulties at the end of the year.
- 2.9 Later in the year, one criticism of the funding process raised by a number of providers was that where they were actually ahead of their profile there should be some form of procedure in place for spreading payments for these 'extra' places across the year as well.

*“Formula funding is great if you are on profile or behind. If you are ahead it’s not great as you don’t get the extra until the end of the year.”
[provider wave 2]*

Referral numbers

- 2.10 Most areas experienced delays in establishing at least some of their WBLA contracts and many were not operational by April 2001. This meant that in many cases, any staff training that did take place for ES staff on the new WBLA programme was conducted without a full briefing on the full range of options available in their area. This partly contributed to many providers receiving very low numbers of referrals in the early part of the year (so that even when Wave 1 interviews were conducted in July/August 2001 some providers had still not received any WBLA clients).
- 2.11 Even by the time of wave 2 interviewing (November/December 2001), referral numbers were still very low with the following examples not being untypical:
- 16 SJFT starts against 138 planned for the year
 - 12 SJFT starts compared with 57 expected by this point
 - 10 starts by the end of October compared with 100 expected by this stage
 - 1 SJFT start compared with 30 expected by this stage
- 2.12 The number of referrals for WBLA had generally picked up significantly in the early months of 2002, often to levels that if they had been achieved throughout the year providers would have been on profile or ahead. Although some providers ended the year ahead of profile, by far and away the most common situation was for the number of referrals to be some way behind the profile detailed in their contract. The extent of this shortfall varied widely by provider, and within provider often varied quite widely by the different areas of provision they had contracted for. It was not untypical for the actual number of starts to be about 50% of the numbers expected.
-

2.13 It is worth noting that where providers were ahead of profile this was more often than not a result of their having been given what they saw as low profile numbers in the first instance. At wave 2 for example, one indicated they were ahead of profile but that *'these [numbers] were fictitious, ridiculously low, it would have been financial suicide. We knew we would get more.'*

Impact of low numbers

2.14 Where low referral numbers had been encountered the seriousness of the consequences varied. For some there were real concerns about the financial viability of their contract with ES:

"If we were a private organisation we would have pulled out by now." [provider wave 3 who was offering childcare and care and customer service on WBLA and ND25plus and for whom referral numbers had been 10% of the expected figures]

2.15 Many of these providers indicated that the 85% underpinning guarantee was what had got them going. A few had been on the verge of serving staff redundancy notices when they received notification of the guarantee.

"Numbers have been nothing like what we planned for. Probably 50% of profile [on WBLA and ND25 plus]...We would close it down but the 85% payment means we keep it open." [provider wave 3]

2.16 At the other extreme, there were some providers for whom lower than expected numbers on WBLA had no serious implications at all. These providers tended to be either those for whom the WBLA contract (or indeed work for ES generally) is a small proportion of their provision, or those who had experienced high numbers on other ES provision (for example New Deal programmes). Large FE colleges, for example, often commented that it was easy for them to transfer staff that would have been ascribed to WBLA provision to other college activities.

2.17 Low referral numbers have also impacted on the ability of providers to provide roll-on roll-off provision, with some simply not prepared to start provisions until sufficient numbers of interested clients have 'accumulated'. Both staff and providers in these situations were concerned that these prolonged waiting periods have led to a higher numbers of clients not actually starting provision because their interest and enthusiasm wanes during this delay.

2.18 Where providers are running courses with low numbers, some feel that this has impacted on the quality of the provision because:

- There is a loss of group dynamics and interaction with other trainees that larger numbers would generate and which is felt to be beneficial
 - There are lower than expected job outcomes because the programme had lacked buoyancy. Some indicated that relationships with employers had suffered because they had not been able to supply individuals for work placements.
- 2.19 To combat these issues, many providers are running WBLA provision jointly with other programmes, usually the various New Deal programmes. Though not a major difficulty in itself (indeed some providers state that they prefer not to separate clients by programme, instead *'throwing them all into the same melting pot'*), the differing entitlements for clients on the programmes has on occasion been a bone of contention. Examples were given, for example, of WBLA clients being annoyed that other people on the programme had received additional support such as tools or a suit (purchased through the ADF³ for those on New Deal 25 plus) which was not available to them.
- 2.20 Other providers also felt that low numbers meant that there was a dispiriting effect on the morale of their staff from always being behind target (*'you always feel you are playing catch up'* as one put it).

Profiles and reconciliation

- 2.21 In addition to the problems of low referral numbers, there was confusion and annoyance voiced at the second wave of research concerning the lack of information over the reconciliation process for agreeing changes in profile numbers. Providers wanted to know if they could go over profile in one area of provision to compensate for other areas where they had low referrals. Similarly others wanted to know if it was possible to compensate for low referrals in a particular time period by taking 'additional' referrals in the next time period.

"Can you substitute one bit of provision for another? Can profiles be backdated and substituted? For example, if we are low in Health and Beauty between March and June, then can this capacity be carried forwards for June onwards, or is it dead once the quarter is over?"
[provider wave 2]

³ The Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) is an ad hoc fund available under the New Deal 25+ programme that advisers can use to help clients purchase equipment that will aid them in their search for employment. Up to £300 can be made available from this fund to an individual client.

- 2.22 Many of these providers had raised the issue with ES management locally but felt there had been excessive delays in coming back with a response. To many this was part of WBLA being a more inflexible programme under ES than it had been under the TECs, a number expressing the sentiment that in the old days you could sort the matter out with a single phone call to the TEC.
- 2.23 Other providers who had been informed that they could not adjust their profiles were annoyed at the lack of flexibility:
- “We have very little take up on the hospitality / catering side, and excess on the transport side, but we’ve not been allowed to have these numbers adjusted.” [provider wave 2]*
- 2.24 Another cause of irritation was the situation that some providers found themselves in where, despite having been told by region / district that they could take no more starts in some area of provision, they were still receiving referrals from Jobcentres. The general reaction was to start these people on provision and trust it would be sorted out retrospectively.
- 2.25 By wave 3 the reconciliation process was much less of an issue for providers, something resulting from decisions having been made on changes to profiles, and also the general increase in referrals that most providers had experienced over the previous three months or so. However many were still concerned (and frustrated at the lack of information about) the profiles that they will be given next year when they anticipate that there will not be any underpinning.
-

3 Eligibility

- 3.1 This chapter looks at staff and provider familiarity with the eligibility criteria for accessing WBLA provision (both 'standard' and 'early entry' criteria), the extent of early entry to WBLA and views on the appropriateness of the current eligibility criteria.
- 3.2 For the interviewing conducted for wave 3 in March / April 2002, most staff generally felt comfortable in their understanding of the WBLA early entry criteria and understood there to be a broad split between the short courses that clients are eligible for after they have been unemployed for 6 months and the longer courses that they can qualify for after 12 months continuous unemployment. In both the early waves of the research, we encountered staff who had misunderstood the entry criteria for some courses – believing for example that clients were eligible for LOT courses at the 6-months stage or for BET only at the 12-months stage. This confusion appeared to have been cleared up by wave 3.
- 3.3 Providers confirm this view: instances of people sent for provision they were not eligible for have, which happened in the early days of the programme, was now a rare occurrence. An example cited by a number of providers was different eligibility criteria for BET between clients on New Deal 25 plus and clients on WBLA causing both ES staff and providers some confusion at first.

Early Entry

- 3.4 Most of the ES staff that we spoke to knew the range of criteria for early entry to WBLA. However, this is not always the case with other frontline staff at the Jobcentre who are often being used to identify potential early entrants. This had improved over time: initially many frontline staff, not fully aware of the criteria for early entry, were often simply referring to advisers anyone expressing some interest in training.
- 3.5
-

Staff were generally positive about the range of early entry criteria available and few thought there was the need to extend the criteria. (This contrasts with the situation for the New Deal 25 plus programme, where many NDPAs felt the criteria were too narrow and should be broadened to match those for WBLA.). However, few clients appear to be entering the programme via early entry. This is for two main reasons:

- Staff encounter relatively few clients who meet the criteria who are keen to go on some sort of provision and who they feel would benefit. In a few areas, the exception to this is clients who have English as a second language who are able and keen to access ESOL provision.
- Very few areas seemed to have developed any systematic processes for identifying potential early entrants for WBLA, instead this was often simply left to frontline staff.

3.6 On the second of these themes, early entry criteria seem largely to be used as something to try to fit interested applicants into rather than being used to help actively seek potential clients. Hence, several Restart Advisers talked about '*desperately trying to uncover some sort of illness or health problem that they might have had*' so that they can allow a client to access WBLA as an early-entrant.

'I find it really difficult with the early entry. I find it embarrassing sometimes when you've got a keen person that wants a certain type of training but hasn't been unemployed long enough. You have to say to them 'Do you take drugs? Is your reading and writing OK? Are you an ex-offender?'. Basically you have to say to them that because they don't take drugs and don't have a health problem then they can't come on the programme.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

Views on Eligibility Criteria

3.7 There is a general consensus among staff that the divide between Short Job-Focused Training (SJFT) eligible for those with six months unemployment, and Longer Occupational Training (LOT) for those with 12 months unemployment is artificial. Most would prefer either that all provision was available from day 1, or that LOT was available at the six months point.

3.8 The main issue is that many of the clients that Restart Advisers are seeing at the six months point they feel would benefit from LOT. SJFT is seen by both staff (and providers) as aimed at the job-ready who require a 'nudge' back into employment, for example a refresher course or the acquisition of some certificate. However, staff are seeing relatively few at the six months point who they feel are job-ready enough to benefit from SJFT. This is for two main reasons:

- Because the barriers to finding employment that their clients tend to be facing at this point go beyond the job-specific 'hard' skills that they consider these courses tackle
- And/or because the vast majority of their clients lack the confidence that is necessary to enable them to absorb information over the short time periods involved.

'Sometimes we see somebody at 6 months with a LOT need and they can't get in because they are not eligible so we basically have to wait another 6 months before we can retrain them. It would be nice to bring the eligibility back to 6 months because it's really tricky if the client wants something and you have to say 'no, that's only for people who have been unemployed for longer'. They just don't understand that.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

'I can see what they are doing, they are basically just trying to brush up on skills at the 6 months stage and if a person is pretty much trained then we can do that. But sometimes you see just ordinary people who have worked and been made redundant and haven't been able to get a job and might need to look at something new and you can't really offer them anything.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

- 3.9 Ultimately, staff would like the qualifying period of unemployment for SJFT reduced, though even then many feel that the nature of the client group that they are dealing with means that it would still not be heavily utilised. More significant would be reducing the length of unemployment necessary for LOT from 12 months.
- 3.10 Another issue raised by staff was that changes in the eligibility criteria for BET have prevented clients who would greatly benefit from this provision being able to access it. They feel that in the past they have made extensive (and productive) use of BET for clients who they would categorise as 'currently unemployable' but who do not necessarily have *serious* basic skills difficulties. Among other things these courses have provided such clients with life skills, an opportunity for social interaction and enabled them to establish a routine.

'I see people that go on an assessment and are assessed as being at an OK level but they need life skills, motivational skills, attitude skills. They just about scrape through the assessment and then there is nothing that a mainstream adviser can do with these people. They are not quite job ready but they are not deemed to be at the stage where they need help. Basically they have to wait until they can go through New Deal.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

- 3.11 Since clients are now only able to access BET provision if they score below entry level on at least one measure many staff feel that they currently have no provision available that can provide 'employability skills' to those who actually pass a basic skills assessment. Some feel that it is a very fine line between 'below entry level' and 'entry level' in basic skills, and that a fair proportion of those at entry level would benefit from a BET course. None of the staff raising this issue felt that they had any other provision available to provide these 'soft skills' (until clients qualify for New Deal).
- 3.12 Some members of staff also felt that clients should not have to wait until they have been unemployed for 12 months before being able to access stage three of the self-employment option when they can access stages 1 and 2 at the six-month point. They argue that if stages 1 and 2 have been completed satisfactorily then the client should be allowed to progress to stage 3 without having to wait as otherwise they are simply claiming JSA and the adviser is left with the feeling that there is nothing that they can usefully do for these clients during this interim period.
-

4 Referring Clients to WBLA

- 4.1 This chapter looks at the process by which clients come to access WBLA opportunities. We look at how and when WBLA provision is 'sold' to clients, the considerations in determining the type of provision that is accessed, and provider views on the appropriateness of provision that is decided upon. We also look at efforts that have been made by Jobcentre staff and providers to increase numbers of referrals.

How WBLA provision is raised with clients

- 4.2 With little early entry taking place, the six month restart interview is the first occasion at which WBLA opportunities would be discussed with most clients. Most staff stress that they only raise the issue of WBLA provision with those clients that they believe it could help, this based on their interest in some form of training, their job goals and their employment and training history.
- 4.3 Generally staff say they will suggest a particular course that they feel might be appropriate, rather than presenting the client with a broad range of options (in other words staff are not operating along the lines of 'you are now eligible for WBLA, here are the range of courses we can offer you'). In a few cases, where clients appear very unfocused about what type of training they are interested in then staff may suggest a range of possible training options and ask the client to go away and consider which would be of most interest to them.
- 4.4 In terms of training that is *not* basic skills related, staff rarely appear to attempt to persuade clients to participate – their expressing some kind of interest in training in the first place is the initial impetus for WBLA provision to be raised. Hence most of those referred for SJFT or LOT are keen to take part and have often raised the issue of training themselves. While there is thus an element of such training being wants-led, staff emphasise that accessing of provision is based on such training being seen as improving that person's chances of employment.
- 4.5 The situation for basic skills courses (i.e. BET or SIBS courses) appears somewhat different in that here staff will often try and persuade clients who they feel have a need to attend such provision. This is felt to be quite challenging, since such clients are often reluctant to admit that they have any basic skills difficulties, or they do not appreciate the need for basic skills in the workplace or they often feel they are too old to start learning such skills. Some staff mentioned that they felt that these problems could be alleviated by 'rebranding' BET: clients who have actually worked in the past often find it difficult to understand why they would need basic employability skills.
-

- 4.6 This fact that the process of determining provision is more 'wants-led' than 'needs-led' may well reflect the fact that staff still have some uncertainties about what individual courses entail. They still feel that the information that is available to them on LMS is limited and often insufficient to enable them to be able to 'sell' courses to clients (this is covered in more detail in Chapter 11).

Use of Jobseeker's Directions

- 4.7 Some use is made of Jobseeker's Directions in the case of basic skills training. However, they are rarely used for SJFT or LOT, mainly because staff feel these courses will only be of benefit if the client is motivated. Added to this, though, is that staff generally feel Jobseeker's Directions are of limited effectiveness. This is because they can only make the first interview mandatory, hence the use of a Jobseeker's Directions does not ensure that the client attends or completes the course. Some clients had simply turned up for the first interview and then not attended after that, something which staff felt could jeopardise their relationships with training providers, and added to their reluctance to make use of Jobseeker's Directions.
- 4.8 Another issue surrounding the use of Jobseeker's Directions was that if a client failed to turn up at a first interview with a provider after having been issued with a Jobseeker's Direction, then staff are not able to issue another Direction until the paperwork issues surrounding the initial non-attendance have been cleared up. Staff felt frustrated that this prevents them from being able to 'pile on pressure' for particular clients to attend WBLA courses.
- 4.9 Because of the limited success that staff had had in using Jobseeker's Directions many seemed to have formed the opinion that it is easier to let 'difficult' clients 'wait for New Deal' rather than invest time in trying to persuade them to make use of WBLA provision.
- 4.10 On the theme of compulsion, some staff stated that they had occasionally knowingly given clients the impression that WBLA courses were mandatory (a situation similar to that found for staff dealing with clients aged 50 plus participating on the New Deal 25 plus programme):

'If I think that there is a chance that they might not go, sometimes when I'm filling in their details on screen I just wave the mouse over the mandatory box while they are watching so that they think that they have to turn up.' [Restart adviser wave 2]

Suitability of referrals (provider perspective)

- 4.11 Although low number of referrals was the key concern for providers at waves 1 and 2, another concern expressed at both waves was the number of 'inappropriate' or 'unsuitable' referrals that they were receiving from ES. In nearly all cases this related to SJFT courses. The complaints raised by providers in this context nearly all related to the fact that clients were not sufficiently job-ready to gain anything from these short courses. Put another way, providers often feel that what ES mean by job-ready is radically different to what they mean by it.

'The biggest difference between us and the Employment Service is in the idea of who is job-ready.' [provider wave 2]

'One of the problems that we did have was that people for SJFT are supposed to be job-ready. We were getting people referred who weren't job ready - there were people with all sorts of problems and it took us a while to convince the advisers that actually they have got to be the sort of clients who could start (a job) on Monday. I think the message has got back now but at first we were getting the situations where people were coming in and there was absolutely no way on earth that they were job-ready.' (Provider, Wave 3)

- 4.12 For a number of providers this difference boiled down to the following: given the employment situation in their area (that there is an excess of demand for jobs over supply) if the clients are as job-ready as ES are saying why are they not employed?

'Unemployment is falling in West London and we are dealing with hard to help people. ES are suggesting they are job-ready. The opposite is the reality. The programme is doomed to failure unless this changes. If they are as job-ready as ES are suggesting why haven't they got jobs. For example, I had an adviser calling me up asking why I hadn't started SJFT IT for a client. We said because the client didn't want a job. The adviser said if I say 'education' they should get education. But we say we're about jobs. If people don't want jobs then there's no point them going on these courses.' [provider wave 2]

- 4.13 The previous quote illustrates another issue that was raised by a number of providers regarding inappropriate referrals to SJFT, namely that ES staff were putting clients forward for this provision without apparently considering whether it would lead to a job outcome or improve their employability. This 'training for training's sake' contrasted with what providers feel they had contract for, a programme aimed specifically at achieving job outcomes.
-

'We've had some cases of training for training's sake. We have had some down for fork lift truck who have said they have no intention of working in a warehouse. There are people who just think I may as well get another string to my bow, and that's not right.' [provider wave 2]

- 4.14 One final factor contributing to the difference between providers and ES in views on whether a client is job-ready or not is the situation that providers often encounter that client's 'real' length of unemployment is sometimes disguised on ES records if they have taken part in any previous training activity.

'Initially we found that the number of referrals was reasonable but the number of inappropriate referrals was high. We had to work with advisers and the Jobcentres to ensure they were aware how the programme was supposed to be working...The situation is resolved to some degree now. An example was people referred on SJFT and it turns out they have been unemployed for three years not six months, disguised by being on some other training programmes.' [provider wave 2]

- 4.15 By wave 3 this same provider indicated that inappropriate referrals had become a negligible problem as a result of briefings of staff and generally improved communication between the provider and ES staff.
- 4.16 Another complaint was that clients are sometimes sent on WBLA training programmes with unrealistic expectations of what they will have achieved at the end. Providers feel that ES staff are not always aware of the limitations of the standardised course lengths, and they lead clients to believe that they can obtain higher levels of qualifications than is in fact possible. From the other side, staff often admit that they are not always fully aware of what takes place on certain courses because the information that they have available, on LMS or generally, is quite sketchy (which may or may not be a result of the level of detail that the provider has supplied them with).
- 4.17 Comments were also made that some clients sent for courses that do not have a high basic skills content have levels of basic skills difficulties that makes it difficult for them to keep up. In part, providers feel this can be because clients are good at 'hiding' basic skills problems, but they also feel it can be the result of the fact that basic skills assessments are not always carried out before accessing WBLA provision.
- 4.18 By wave 3 of the research it was evident that the problem of inappropriate referrals was becoming much less of an issue. This was explained by providers as being the result of improved adviser knowledge and understanding of the programme, in part because of the work they had put into 'educating' advisers, and, more generally, improved staff communication between staff and providers.
-

The role of providers in determining provision

- 4.19 A tension that was evident in the early waves of the research was concerning the role of the provider in determining provision. Several members of staff, for example, felt that providers were undermining their authority by occasionally recommending to the client that they pursue a different course of activity to that suggested by the adviser. Some expressed this in terms of providers not fully understanding or appreciating the 'balance of power' between ES staff and themselves. From the providers' perspective the need to change the recommended provision reflected the level of unsuitable referrals that has been discussed in the previous section, and resulted from poor adviser understanding of the provision and who it was intended for.
- 4.20 These concerns had largely abated by the time of wave 3 interviewing. Staff commented that providers were now more readily accepting of their recommendations on the most suitable provision for clients, and providers indicated that far fewer clients were being referred for inappropriate opportunities. Both reflect increased knowledge of the programme and improved communication between both parties that have developed since April 2001. Provider involvement seems now to more commonly involve advising on the individual tailoring that might be possible/suitable for clients within the particular type of provision that they had been referred for (often a matter of deciding the aspects of the provision on which most emphasis should be placed).
- 4.21 However a minority of staff do feel that providers are sometimes too willing to suggest a 'chain of training' to clients so that, for example, SJFT clients are informed about further types of training that they will be able to access once they have been unemployed for 12 months (and some are encouraged to wait for this point).

'I sent someone for Fork Lift Truck driving training and then when they came back I found out that the provider had said to them that if they hung on for another 6 months then they could come back for the full LOT warehousing course' (Restart Adviser, Wave 2)

Approaches to increasing the number of referrals / starts (staff)

- 4.22 Concerns about the low number of referrals that are being made to WBLA provision and/or complaints from clients or providers about inappropriate referrals have prompted some Jobcentres to re-organise the way in which they handle referrals to WBLA.
-

- 4.23 One Jobcentre has created the new position of a WBLA specialist. This post was created to combat a low number of WBLA referrals generally but also the fact that the office was finding that a comparatively small proportion of referred clients were actually starting provision. These problems were felt to derive from the fact that staff lacked the specialist knowledge of the WBLA provision available that is necessary to 'sell' the programme effectively. In this Jobcentre, all clients expressing an interest in training and who are eligible are channelled through the WBLA specialist who is able to draw on her full knowledge of the range of provision available to recommend the most appropriate opportunities. Creating this post has seen the number of referred clients who actually start provision increase from one in three to one in two.
- 4.24 Another office has appointed a Training Liaison Officer. This individual acts as a single point of contact for training providers so that a clear overall picture is maintained of the types of opportunities that each provider is able to offer and the type of clients that they are suited to. Prior to this, feedback on inappropriate referrals or under-used provision was coming in to various different points within the Jobcentre and there was no centralised picture of the situation.
- 4.25 Another comparatively small Jobcentre has allocated WBLA caseloads to Restart Advisers so that at the 6-month and 12-month points, clients will have a series of 6 weekly interviews *with the same adviser*. Staff at this office felt that this approach should enable advisers to obtain a clearer picture of the needs of clients and also to build trust so that clients are more likely to accept any recommendations that they make about suitable WBLA opportunities. In turn, this was hoped to lead to a decrease in the proportion of inappropriate referrals and also an increase in client 'buy in'.

Approaches to increasing referrals (providers)

- 4.26 Some providers had made efforts to increase the number of starts on WBLA provision by generating self-referrals. These attempts mostly involved posters and/or leaflets distributed to local community organisations or occasionally adverts in the local press. However, providers had found that these approaches had either generated very little interest or that nearly all the individuals who responded were not eligible for the programme. Most providers who had undertaken some marketing activity of this sort talked of having had a handful of starts generated in this way.
- 4.27
-

Most providers had channelled the bulk of their 'marketing' effort into increasing the awareness of ES staff about the types of provision that they are able to offer. Many providers had given presentations to Jobcentre staff, or held informal coffee mornings and the like, to inform staff about the range and content of their provision. This was considered a much more important priority for providers than marketing to the public (important in terms of increasing the number of referrals) though by wave 3 many providers were starting to turn their attention to generating self-referrals.

- 4.28 Clearly this provider activity has been welcomed by ES staff. In the early days many ES staff complained that they lacked knowledge about local providers and details of their provision. Few had had the opportunity to visit any providers and many expressed surprise that it was not part of the providers' contracts to come and present to them about their organisation. While things had improved since then, still it was common for staff to feel that provider-staff contact should be more formalised, with some suggesting the need for monthly meetings with each individual provider.
- 4.29 Some providers are also maintaining a regular presence in the Jobcentre enabling them to conduct initial interviews with clients or offer more detailed explanations of what the provision would entail as soon as a client expresses interest in accessing WBLA. Staff welcome this approach as they feel that the quicker that the client is 'enrolled' the less likely they are to lose interest. It also addresses frustrations that some staff have felt when they have been unable to set up an initial interview during the time that they have the client with them because some (usually smaller) providers may simply have an answerphone taking messages or may not have a centralised diary system that an interview can immediately be booked into. However, a few smaller Jobcentres stated that although a few providers had experimented with maintaining a regular presence, this had been discontinued because of the low numbers of clients that they were seeing while at the Jobcentre.
-

5 Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Provision

- 5.1 This chapter examines staff and provider views on SJFT, LOT, BET provision and the self-employment option, in particular who they are seen as appropriate for and their relative effectiveness. We then go on to look at views on the job search and work-based elements of WBLA provision. The views of employers who have provided work placements are incorporated into this last section.

Short Job-Focussed Training (SJFT)

- 5.2 There is a general understanding among both staff and providers that SJFT courses are only appropriate for those who are job-ready or nearly job-ready. This is often described in such terms as their being short refresher courses aimed at people who have worked in that sector in the recent past, but whose skills have become rusty. While there is agreement that these courses are only suitable for the job-ready, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, differences in opinion of who is job-ready or not were initially the cause of some tension between providers and staff. By wave 3 these tensions had eased.
- 5.3 Staff generally consider that they see relatively few clients at the six months point who are job-ready, and hence they are making limited use of these courses. This is confirmed by providers, many of whom had found that the number of referrals they had received for their SJFT provision were well below their profiles. The only SJFT courses that appear to be being used with much regularity are basic IT courses and fork-lift truck licence courses. Both of these are viewed positively by staff.
- 5.4 The SJFT courses that are provided focus very much on 'hard' skills (e.g. use of specific IT programmes, fork lift truck driving licenses, provision of Health & Hygiene certificates). None of the staff interviewed knew of any SJFT courses in their area that were designed to address 'soft' skills issues such as motivational, confidence-building or general 'lifeskills'. These softer skills courses are not what most staff actually expect to be provided under SJFT – they tend to view this area of provision as a 'quick-fix' providing certificates or concrete hard skills to people who are very nearly ready to start work. Staff do not necessarily think that such courses are required under SJFT as they feel the time periods allowed are too short to allow much progress in these areas.
-

- 5.5 Most SJFT provision appears to be at the 6-week end of the duration scale rather than 2 weeks. In fact two areas that had been running two and four week SJFT courses are increasing these to six weeks in the hope that this will enable them to refer more clients to this provision. Within the context that most staff see SJFT as too short per se, 2-week courses are seen to be particularly limited in terms of what they can deliver to the types of clients that staff are dealing with.
- 5.6 Nearly all providers share the view of staff that SJFT courses are too short to be of much help to most clients, or put another way they can only be of benefit if clients are truly job-ready and motivated. Six week provision was nearly always preferred though in some cases shorter provision was felt to be suitable, for example fork lift truck training and some IT provision. Here two or four weeks can be enough to provide someone with a certificate which can be all that is required to get them work.

"Two weeks SJFT [for hospitality] is ridiculous. If they are job-ready they would have found work." [provider wave 2]

"SJFT is a waste of time. It would be better if all training was 26 weeks." [provider wave 2]

"SJFT can be too short. They should be more flexible. Six weeks generally okay but this is a bit tight for ECDL together with job search commitments." [provider wave 2]

SJFT is only suitable for a very small number, namely those whose barrier is skill-based. If they have other challenges such as motivation then these can't be tackled within the timeframe." [provider wave 2]

"We'd really like longer with clients (on SJFT) - I think that one of the downsides of having only 6 weeks is that if you feel they are really good and they go to a company and the company is prepared to offer a placement for a bit longer than the 2 weeks that you could fit in to the SJFT course then you can't take it because we are only contracted to run the course for 6 weeks." (Provider, Wave 3)

- 5.7 One particular difficulty with SJFT, particularly those of two or four weeks, is the difficulty persuading employers that they will get anything out of such short work placement. In the retail sector, for example, it was common for providers to say that employers were very reluctant to take placements of less than two weeks.
- 5.8 Some providers express frustration at the fact that they are still receiving referrals for SJFT programmes for clients that the adviser knows are not sufficiently job-ready to benefit. Providers feel that this happens because clients are not eligible for LOT and staff are unsure 'what else to do with them'.
-

Longer Occupational Training (LOT)

- 5.9 LOT provision tends to be viewed in a much more favourable light than SJFT. Both staff and providers feel that these courses are long enough to make a real difference to the employment chances of clients. Some providers do temper this with commenting that LOT provision is rarely long enough to achieve an NVQ or equivalent qualification. While a qualification per se may not be the aim of the training (for example, it may not be necessary to achieve an employment outcome in some sectors), getting close to achieving an NVQ without being able to extend provision to achieve it, was still seen as having a potentially detrimental effect on clients' motivations.
- 5.10 A large proportion of LOT courses run for 13 weeks – thus enabling providers to run courses that take both WBLA LOT clients and New Deal 25 plus clients on their Intensive Activity Period (IAP). Provider experiences differed in terms of the likelihood for ES to extend LOT provision beyond the 'standard' 13 weeks. In some areas, where requested it was almost always permitted while elsewhere some providers had found staff reluctant to do so.

"13 weeks is fine. One week in the classroom and the rest on placement. It was 26 weeks under the TEC. 13 weeks is fine given the job focus of it all. If they are going to get a job they will get it in 13 weeks or not at all. They won't get an NVQ2 in 13 weeks, but we start them all anyway. ES is not that bothered about qualifications, it's all about job outcomes. 13 weeks for the average person is long enough to get them into work. We do sometimes ask for an extension if the work placement company says they need an extra week or two to decide if they should give them a job." [provider wave 3 providing LOT in chauffeuring].

"The six week SJFT is ideal. It keeps the momentum up. Can move them along a lot. 13 week LOT can actually be too long – there is a danger that the client becomes institutionalised" [provider wave 2]

"SJFT is too short. You don't get to know the clients, they don't get to know you. 26 weeks LOT is the best." [provider wave 2]

- 5.11 A number of providers had LOT provision of 26 weeks, this usually because of a perceived need in that occupational area. One provider serving two districts for childcare LOT had one contract for 26 weeks and the other for 13 weeks with an automatic 13 week extension if required. The provider commented that he preferred the second approach, as 26 weeks could seem too daunting a time period to many clients.

"SJFT is too short. You don't get to know the clients, they don't get to know you. 26 weeks LOT is the best." [provider wave 3]

- 5.12 LOT courses that run for the full 52 weeks tend to be offered through FE colleges whereby clients will be accessing courses that are also open to other students through a range of different funding streams. These are rarely roll-on, roll-off: courses commonly start in September and are often difficult to access after the first couple of months.
- 5.13 The LOT options that seem to be used most frequently are warehousing, retail, construction and business administration courses.
- 5.14 Some providers express concern that 'over-use' is being made of the business administration courses (this is one of the areas where providers seem to be least likely to be experiencing low numbers). They feel that some staff are using this as a 'fall back' option for clients that do not have a clear idea of the type of employment that they are looking for. Providers consider that a proportion of these clients would not be prepared to take a job in business administration and that staff need to stress that these courses are designed to equip trainees with the skills needed to work in 'office junior type positions' rather than general skills for an office-based job. Confusion on this issue has led to some providers experiencing difficulties with clients who are disappointed with the extent of the IT content of the course.

'We do sometimes have problems with business administration. Sometimes the client has mentioned to the adviser a fleeting interest in computers and then they say 'Oh in that case go on a business admin. course.' But Business admin isn't purely computer work and they come here and they are not happy with what they are getting. Then they complain 'I was told I was going to do computers and I'm just stuck in an office filing.' (Provider, Wave 3)

Basic Employability Training

- 5.15 BET courses are popular with and widely accessed by staff, something resulting from the fact that low unemployment rates mean that those who are unemployed have deep-rooted and often multiple barriers to work.
- 5.16 Aside from the issues that staff have with the entry criteria for BET covered earlier (Chapter 3), staff are reasonably happy with the content and structure of this provision. They feel that 26 weeks is long enough for them to notice improvements in clients' motivation, confidence, attitudes and ability to interact with others. However, they find it more difficult to recognise any major strides that have been made in terms of literacy or numeracy. One or two staff mentioned that they would find it useful if there were some way of evaluating progress that clients had made in these areas. The fact that they tend to notice more improvements on the 'soft'/'life' skills side rather than basic skills progress adds to staff frustrations that some of their clients who need these soft skills but have less serious basic skills problems can no longer access BET provision under WBLA.
-

5.17 Several staff mentioned that they felt that local providers have made particular efforts to be innovative with the content of BET provision in order to maintain client interest. These efforts include such activities as:

- Price comparison exercises – where individuals would spend time analysing the costs of particular items in different shops around the town
- Treasure hunts
- Cooking for a ‘lunch party’ – including the purchase of ingredients and the preparation from written instructions.

5.18 However one or two members of staff did state that they felt that some providers (and particularly those also providing training under the New Deal 18-24 or the Prince’s Trust programmes) needed to tailor their BET provision more for some of the older clients who found some of the more physical activities either too strenuous or unappealing.

Self-employment training

5.19 Most areas have now established a good working relationship with a single provider for delivering the self-employment option under WBLA.

5.20 Most staff feel that the staged approach to the self-employment training works well with the exception of the occasional difficulties in ‘waiting’ to begin stage three mentioned in Chapter 3). In particular the staged approach is felt to be effective in ‘weeding out’ those who are not really interested in or capable of sustaining self-employment. Staff find it useful to be able to refer any clients who express interest to stage 1 of the provision and allowing those who are not seriously considering self-employment to decide for themselves that this is not an appropriate route to them when they are told what it will entail. This is seen to be better than the adviser denying some clients access to the provision and hence appearing ‘negative’ and jeopardising their future relationship with these clients.

‘I had this girl who said that she wanted to open up her own kennels. I knew that she wasn’t really up to it but I didn’t want to discourage her so I let her go on to Stage 1 so that she could see all that it would involve – all the liability insurance and all that. She came back saying that she didn’t think she wanted to do it any more and then we can go on to look at other options.’ [Restart Adviser, wave 3]

5.21 The main criticism of the three stage approach for self-employment is the fact that paperwork has to be issued separately for each stage. There was also some confusion as to whether stage 3 could commence before the 12-month point or not.

5.22 Some staff commented that because of the staged structure to the self-employment training, they found it particularly beneficial for these providers to conduct interviews within the Jobcentre itself. This enables them to liaise easily with the provider after the initial interview to determine how likely the client is to achieve self-employment and also means that they can keep track on how clients progress through the different stages of the process.

'Our self-employment person comes to the Jobcentre now and that's really handy because while she's here she can discuss what's going on with us. She can say this is what I've asked them to do, and then if they come and see us in the meantime then we know where things stand.' [Restart Advisor, wave 2]

'It's really good that she (the self-employment training provider) is always here. The clients know where she sits, she always comes with the paperwork so we've got no problems with that. She'll come up and fill you in with what's been happening - she'll say 'I said to Mr X that he needs to get a business plan and I won't see him again until he does that' and then I can say to Mr X 'well you've seen (NAME OF PROVIDER), you want to be self-employed but you need to get a business plan, why aren't you doing that'' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

Views on the range of provision available (staff perspective)

5.23 In several UoDs, staff felt that there is a narrower range of provision than was the case prior to April 2001 - they feel that WBLA provision is now limited to a few key areas. The staff making these observations tend to be unsure why this is the case but feel that it is probably the result of some labour market analysis that has taken place.

"There is less than there was pre April 2001. All providers seem to offer pretty much the same thing, business administration, IT, retail and security." [Restart Adviser wave 2].

5.24 Elsewhere the range of provision was felt to be reasonable, and often little altered from the days when the TECs ran the programme. However, there was seen to be a change in mentality from having places on courses to fill to an emphasis on job outcomes.

"A change in ethos after April away from filling courses. The official message came that we are designing courses that people need. It changed the emphasis if not the provision. I don't think provision has changed that much." [Restart Adviser wave 2].

5.25

Gaps in provision that were mentioned in several different areas included:

- Basic employability skills courses for those who do not qualify for BET (mentioned earlier)
- Courses for clients with mental health barriers
- Courses for clients needing intermediate/advanced level training
- Training in any areas of construction
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (felt to be useful for management level clients) and ESOL

5.26 Another issue affecting some of the larger areas, for example Hertfordshire, was that 'local level' gaps existed where provision was available within the UoD but was not available sufficiently *locally* to persuade clients to access it. This meant that while in theory there was a range of provision that could be accessed, the range was more limited than it appeared.

Job search

5.27 All WBLA providers are obliged to incorporate an element of job search activity into their provision. The guidelines indicate that this should be a minimum of half a day per week.

5.28 In the early stages of the research programme, the most common concerns that staff had about job search were either that it was not taking place at all or that it was being used to too great an extent to 'fill out' courses to the required length.

5.29 All providers interviewed at wave three stated that they were meeting their job search obligations. Most appear to treat the half a day a week as set, though some were treating it very much as a minimum and were regularly conducting more than this.

"At least half a day a week. In practice it's nearly always more. Probably a day a week in practice." [provider wave 3]

5.30 By wave 3, staff were confident that at least some element of job search is incorporated into all their WBLA programmes. However attention was increasingly focussed on the quality of what is being delivered. Several expressed concern that job search is delivered in a relatively unstructured way with clients being left to search through newspapers and/or the internet for suitable vacancies. They worry that these sessions are often only minimally supervised and there are few staff available to offer assistance. A few staff questioned whether it was the correct approach to ask all training providers to deliver job search when this may not be their field of expertise.

'Are people that are selected on the basis of their training programmes best equipped to run job search or should we be looking elsewhere?' [Restart Adviser wave 3]

5.31 It does seem that providers have interpreted their job search obligations very literally and nearly all are running their job search time as the prescribed half a day (or longer) 'block' spent looking for suitable vacancies through various media. Relatively few of the providers interviewed mentioned using their job search time to deliver the skills related to looking for work (such as interview technique etc.) rather than simply vacancy searches.

5.32 Because of this interpretation several providers questioned the value of providing job search particularly in the early stages of training programmes.

'They've obviously been sent to us because they have a gap in their repertoire – surely there is no point looking for work until that gap has been addressed.' [Provider wave 3]

5.33 This observation was made particularly in connection to ESOL and care/childcare courses. Job search was seen to have virtually no use for ESOL clients until a certain level of English had been attained. With care/childcare courses, the qualifications being studied for are a legal requirement for work in the field and hence clients would be extremely unlikely to find work until they have completed their course.

5.34 Further Education colleges were particularly likely to raise objections to the requirement to conduct job search before the course is completed. They feel that to encourage clients to look for work before finishing (and hence to look to leave the course before it is completed) runs contrary to their 'learning ethos' and the message that they are sending out to other students about the potential rewards of completing courses and even of continuing to study further.

'It just isn't the message that we normally give out. Generally speaking we here to convey the values of learning and to encourage a greater staying-on level on courses.' (provider, wave 2)

5.35 In one area, staff and providers are looking to restructure the job search within WBLA provision to take account of these issues. They are planning to impose a system of 'back-loaded' job search where by job search will be very limited in the first few weeks but will increase in intensity as the course progresses (possibly with the last week being entirely job search) – this is hoped to also impress on clients that the point of the training exercise was to help find employment.

5.36 Other areas are looking at increasing overall job search obligations. In one area a provider noted that District had increased job search to nine hours a week. In another job search was being increased to one day a week from April 2002.

Work-based elements

5.37 Staff generally feel that provider links with employers prepared to offer work placements have grown more extensive as the year has progressed, though in many instances providers were seen as being ill-prepared in this area. A few commented that they are still experiencing problems when providers will not take a client until a placement has been set up and clients are left 'hanging on' (and often losing interest). However they do appreciate that they would have a similar problem if the client were to complete the 'training' element of the provision before a work placement could be set up.

5.38 Most providers feel that they have good links with local employers, and that they have a reasonable network willing to take work placements. This is particularly the case for providers long established in an area. Some providers who won contracts in localities they had never operated in before admitted that developing links with employers had been a struggle, and for some it was clear that the process of finding suitable employers had been a somewhat ad hoc process. One example of this was an employer relying on other businesses in the same building to take business administration placements. Another commented:

"It has taken a long time to build our credibility with employers. We have put a lot of effort in to building links with the Chamber of Commerce, local authorities and Information and Advice Networks."
[provider wave 3]

5.39 While initially a somewhat piecemeal process for building links with employers, it was evident that by wave 2 and wave 3 a more systematic approach was being adopted. In particular several providers had created roles for dedicated staff to manage their relationships with employers (typically titled Placement Officers, Marketing Officers, Employer Liaison Officers or Job search Officers). By wave 3, these providers were reporting much greater success in finding work placements, and some were even finding employers were starting to call in with vacancies.

5.40 One or two areas mentioned that they were having particular difficulty in setting up work placements for clients on construction courses (at least beyond general labouring placements). This was put down to a range of factors; the strict Health & Safety requirements of the industry, the large extent of self-employment and contract working within the sector and the fact that a placement client would need such extensive supervision that there would be *'little in it for the employer'*. One large FE college provider had combated this situation by setting up a scheme with a local housing association where by the housing association would purchase run-down properties and then allow the college to run them as a 'working site' and conduct the necessary renovations.

5.41 In addition, several providers also admitted that they have had difficulties in incorporating a work-based element into their SJFT courses because these courses are so short. While it has been possible to arrange 6-week placements for those who require a purely work-experience SJFT, few employers (and certainly very few commercial employers) are interested in taking clients on a 2-week placement.

5.42 Most providers will also caveat statements about the extent of their links with employers by explaining that there are certain ES clients (those with motivational or behavioural challenges) that they can not place in a commercial environment for fear of damaging the relationships that they have with employers. Where necessary, providers tend to offer these clients placements in-house.

5.43 Staff in a number of areas confirmed that they were starting to move from a situation where providers were seeking placements on a reactive, case by case basis to having placements already set up and ready to fill. While this was generally seen as a positive development that reduced the chance of an individual having to 'wait on JSA' until a placement could be organised, a few members of staff did express concerns that some providers had a stock of placements that did provide useful work experience but were extremely unlikely to turn into full-time employment.

5.44 Another concern that staff continue to have is that too many placements are with voluntary sector organisations or the provider themselves⁴. To some extent this may reflect the fear that providers have about the more difficult ES clients 'damaging' their relationship with employers. Several providers gave examples of when good relations had being damaged and employers had consequently declined to take further placements in the short term such as one client failing to make a delivery and 'borrowing' the delivery car for a weekend and another pulling a knife out in front of a customer.

⁴ The details of employers provided for the employer stages of interviewing showed a roughly even mix of public/voluntary sector employers and commercial organisations but we can not be confident that this is representative.

Providing work placements (employers)

5.45 Those employers involved in offering work placements split into two broad groups – those who state that they do so for altruistic reasons (as a service to the community) and those who do so for more commercial reasons (because it can be a screening process to recruit full-time employees, as a means of acquiring extra help during busy periods or because it means that they do not incur the salary costs of a new employee during their ‘training period’). Voluntary/public sector employers are more likely to fall into the former category and private sector employers into the latter.

5.46 For commercial organisations, the key ‘selling point’ of providing work placements is the chance that it offers to screen potential employees with less ‘risk’ than is the case if they rely solely on an interviewing process.

5.47 Only around half of employers stated that they have actually been given a choice in which WBLA clients they take on for work placements but those who have not had a choice do not seem to be dissatisfied with this situation. They generally seem to consider that this is acceptable because they will obviously have a choice in who they decide to employ and trust that if they were to have a very problematic client on placement then this would be ‘sorted out’.

5.48 In most cases, work placements last for around six weeks. Employers feel that this is a long enough period for them to establish whether or not they would be prepared to take an individual on a full-time basis (or it would be if a full-time vacancy existed). However, one or two did comment that they were not sure that this is long enough for WBLA clients to pick up skills that would be marketable to another employer. Nearly all those who had had clients on placement for periods of less than three weeks felt this to be the case.

*‘The 3-week period isn’t long enough – they know they aren’t going to get much out of it so they are demotivated from the start’
[employer wave 3]*

5.49 On the whole, employers consider that providing WBLA work placements has been a success. Where employers had more mixed views this tended to be the result of the clients that they had had lacking ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’ skills. Employers mentioned a lack of motivation and poor time-keeping/attendance leading to unsuccessful placements.

5.50 All employers have provided references for clients that they have had on placement when asked.

5.51 Nearly all employers interviewed intended to continue to offer work placements but a few made suggestions about ways in which the process of offering placements for WBLA clients could be made to run more smoothly for them. These included:

- Better financial incentives for clients to encourage attendance
- The possibility of ensuring a 'cross-over' period for employers who take WBLA clients on a regular basis so that they have a more experienced placement client for a short period while the new client is 'brought up to speed'
- Either providing or extending the basic employability training that is given to clients prior to them starting on work placements.
- Encouraging clients to view work placements as an employment possibility rather than just as training

5.52 Very few employers (even those who had provided placements for several clients) had any real sense of being part of the programme. Most were just aware that they had had some contact with either ES staff or a training provider and a good number had not even heard of WBLA.

'We just approached the Employment Service because it was an opportunity to attract a wider audience. We would like to know what the programme is – they didn't tell us that they were sending WBLA clients.'

5.53 Most expressed a desire for more information, not only about WBLA but also about other ES programmes, and some employers gave the impression that this would reassure them that there is support available if they run into difficulties with placements.

Employed-status training

5.54 It is possible for clients to participate in WBLA provision at the same time that they have been recruited by an employer (known as Employed Status training). None of the advisers interviewed for this research had made any recent use of this type of provision - indeed several did not seem to be aware of the option. Those who were aware of Employed Status training but had not used it for a long while felt that there was little employer interest. They attributed this to the fact that, if employers are looking to recruit someone who needs significant training then they prefer to take on a young person under schemes such as Modern Apprenticeships.

- 5.55 One office had been trying to set up a two-week 'induction-type' course for a large local employer as an SJFT for 'employed-status' clients. However, they had run into difficulties in working out the appropriate forms to use (particularly with regards to how the provider was paid) and in the end had decided to run this course as a straightforward SJFT option.

'There are a lot of issues that need to be cleared up around Employed Status training - whose responsibility it is, where the paperwork goes and who sells it. If someone is on employed status training then they don't get any allowances from us because they are classed as employed. Yet the training provider will still try to claim back money for the employed status people.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

'I don't really think there's much use made of it (Employed Status training). I don't particularly understand it myself.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

6 Contact and Liaison during Provision

- 6.1 In this chapter we look at the extent and nature of contact between different stakeholder groups while clients are accessing WBLA provision.

Contact between staff and providers

- 6.2 The extent of contact and communication between staff and providers while a client is on provision appears to be very limited, and systematic, formal procedures for regular two-way communication appeared not to exist. For staff, time pressures meant the opportunity to visit providers or even to call providers about a client's progress were rare. Hence there is an assumption that things are going okay unless they hear otherwise from the provider. The exception to this is with providers who conduct interviews at or make regular visits to the Jobcentre – this enables staff to catch up on the progress of their clients in an informal fashion.

- 6.3 For providers the situation with WBLA is often contrasted with that for New Deal 25 plus (and other New Deals) where an adviser will often call to check progress, and then undertake monitoring visits.

“Telephone contact for New Deal 25 plus. For WBLA little or no contact, except if there are problems.” [provider wave 2]

“New Deal 25 plus come to see us and we send weekly updates. WBLA no contact from ES.” [provider wave 2]

- 6.4 Given that they have not been contracted to provide feedback on WBLA clients, and given they have rarely been asked for such feedback, then there is an assumption that it is not required, except of course where some problem arises. Some providers commented on a lack of ownership when they had called ES about a WBLA client, for example the adviser named on ES paperwork saying the client was not really theirs, they just happened to see the client and make the referral on the day the client came in.

'The providers are keen on letting us know if there are problems or any major successes but we don't really hear much on the day to day progress and it can be weeks and weeks before someone's suddenly finished and appears at our desk again' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

- 6.5 Very few staff involved with WBLA had actually made visits to providers. All were keen to make these visits in the future, feeling that it would improve their understanding of what was provided under the different types of provision and would reassure them that clients were receiving a good service. They also appreciated that making these visits would help to show clients that they were genuinely interested in the progress that was being made and give them an opportunity to voice any concerns.

"We should pay the providers a visit and see how the training is being delivered. We used to do that but it's not happening at all now. We need to know if they are doing what they say they are doing. This will help us sell the provision if it's good" [Restart adviser wave 2]

- 6.6 In the few cases when staff had been able to make visits to providers they felt that they had obtained useful information – in one case finding out that provision for BET and SIBS clients was being run together.

Contact between advisers and clients

- 6.7 Contact between advisers and clients tend to be similarly ad hoc while they are on WBLA provision. Many advisers admit that they rarely see WBLA clients during the course of their provision. Again, the only exception to this is when clients proactively contact their adviser, which usually tends to be when they want to register a complaint.

'We don't really tend to get much feedback. Once we refer them for a course and they are on the course we don't really have much involvement.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

- 6.8 Not only do they not hear from clients during provision (unless there is a problem) but also there is no systematic means for seeing clients after provision. Most say they only see clients after provision if they 'bump into them' in the Jobcentre. This is a source of frustration for staff as they often do not feel confident in commenting on the quality of local providers / specific elements of provision because they have had no thorough feedback from clients. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

Contact with employers

- 6.9 Staff dealings with employers involved in WBLA provision appeared to be minimal and very few appeared to have relationships with employers that went beyond the ad hoc. Liaison with these employers seems largely to be left to providers to manage – very few staff had actually visited providers' premises and even fewer had actually visited employers where clients were on placements. Because of this very few staff felt that they had a good idea of how WBLA is working from an employer perspective.
-

- 6.10 It also does not appear that many providers visit employers while their WBLA clients are on work placements. While providers do all have regular contact with clients during this period, meetings tend to take place during the time clients spend at providers' premises (for job search etc.).

7 Impacts and Outcomes from WBLA Provision

7.1 This chapter looks at views on the impact and outcomes of training provided under the WBLA programme both in terms of the proportion of clients finding job outcomes and in terms of other less tangible changes to clients' job prospects.

Job outcomes (staff and provider perspective)

7.2 Many Restart Advisers stated that they did not know the proportion of job outcomes that their WBLA providers were achieving. The general view was that this information is probably held somewhere in the office but it was not something that advisers were generally aware of. Several expressed a desire for a wider distribution of these figures to allow them to compare provider performance and make informed decisions about which provision to access for their clients.

'I don't think I'd really know about the differences (in job outcomes) between providers. I would quite like to know actually - I know roughly what I think they are but I don't think we have anything on paper. It would be quite interesting to see the figures.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

7.3 The overall feeling among staff was that probably the overall proportion of job outcomes from WBLA was below target. They felt this to be for a number of reasons:

- The fact that a high proportion of clients are accessing BET provision which tends to have less success in leading to job outcomes because basic skills are often seen as just a 'hygiene factor'
 - The particularly hard-to-help client group that advisers are now dealing with
 - The quality of provider-led job search (discussed in Chapter 5)
 - A lack of follow-up conducted post training at the Jobcentre (discussed later in this chapter)
-

7.4 Nearly all providers indicate that their job outcome targets were 40% for all provision other than BET, and 20% for BET provision. By wave 3 there appeared to be a clear divide developing between providers. On the one hand are those who had met their target for job outcomes (usually they had just managed to exceed their target). On the other are those who were some way short of their target. Many simply described their achieved level as being low and gave no exact figure, but where figures were given it was often in the 20%-25% range (for non-BET provision).

7.5 As a note this is one area where providers delivering provision on both WBLA and New Deal 25 plus programmes did not feel there were strong differences between the two programmes. In other words it was rare for providers to say they were achieving well on outcomes for New Deal 25 plus but poorly on WBLA, or vice versa.

7.6 Those who have achieved their job outcome target tend to put this down to such factors as the quality of their provision and their staff, the good links they have with local employers, their knowledge of the local labour market (for example knowing when large employers are planning to recruit) and in some cases simply their hard work. Generally, those providers who were established and well-known locally tended to be faring better than those providers new to a geographic area.

7.7 Those who have not achieved their target point to a range of inhibiting factors. These include;

- The client group being a harder to help group than anticipated (and a view that hence the targets have turned out to be unrealistic):
“We are at below 40%. This was over optimistic. It’s more like 22%, I think this is good considering the client group” [provider, wave 3]
 - Clients not being realistic in their employment goals
“I feel that 40% was asking a lot. We are not near that. Some internal issues on that that we are sorting out now. The difficulty is getting clients realistic about what they should be earning.” [provider, wave 3]
 - Initial teething problems with new contracts meaning that the focus of attention has been on other issues. Some felt this has been as much the case with ES as with themselves – some held the view that ES has been focussing on the number of referrals and less on the outcomes achieved.
-

“We’ve been doing very badly on this. We are nowhere near 40%. ES are starting to get a bit concerned by this, though up to now they’ve been finding their feet. We’ve had difficulty turning motivation around. Many are not really looking for work.” [provider, wave 3]

- The slow start meaning that programmes lacked buoyancy and momentum in the early days. For some the direct implication of this was that there were not sufficient referrals early on to employ staff with specific responsibility to find work placements and to build links with local employers. Certainly those that had taken on people in such a role mid way through the year indicated that this had helped but that this would take some time to filter through into job outcomes.

7.8 Those who have failed to achieve the targets that have been set seem to split into two camps: those who believe the targets were optimistic (and that all things considered they have done quite well), and then those who see it as a priority that they improve their outcome levels.

7.9 In one area in particular, ES staff and providers are working to improve job outcomes through setting up courses aimed towards employment with specific large local employers (rather than just particular sectors). These courses had been developed with a high level of employer involvement and were designed to equip clients with the types of skills that employees would normally pick up over their first few weeks.

7.10 One of the courses was simply a 2-week 'gateway' (open to WBLA clients) that delivered information and skills that would normally be part of an induction but, since the employer operates a shift system, the course is run on 'shift hours' helping clients to get used to the time-keeping routine. The other is a 13-week course for a company that manufactures mobile phone components.

Follow up with clients after provision

7.11 If a client finds work within 13 weeks of leaving provision then this counts towards the provider's job outcome targets. A few providers felt that a barrier to achieving better job outcome levels was a lack of effectiveness in the job search activity carried out by ES staff.

7.12 Staff admit that the amount of contact that they have with clients after WBLA provision is very limited and many state that they never see clients afterwards. Any feedback that is obtained is gathered on a very ad-hoc basis eg. if they happen to bump into clients in the Jobcentre. They acknowledge that this makes it difficult for them to assess the outcomes of WBLA training and to obtain an impression of which providers seem to 'move clients on' more than others. They are less likely to state spontaneously that this lack of feedback/follow-up impacts on the likelihood of clients achieving a job outcome but one or two did mention that they thought this was the case. Many staff would like to see more formal 'follow-up' of clients who have been on WBLA training.

7.13 Several offices have started to address this lack of follow-up and have put in place procedures for a more structured 'follow-through' period in line with that offered under the New Deal programmes. One office for example is encouraging advisers to have 3-4 fortnightly meetings with clients after they have been on WBLA provision. They are hoping that this will allow them to assess the outcomes of training and apply pressure on clients to find work.

Recruiting to permanent positions (employers)

7.14 The experiences of employers who have recruited WBLA clients are crucial to the future success of the programme in finding job outcomes both because they will impact on the willingness of these employers to take on further clients and potentially because stories of unsuccessful experiences are likely to spread and discourage other employers from recruiting from WBLA programmes.

7.15 Nearly all of the employers interviewed who have taken on WBLA clients on a permanent basis consider that the clients met the needs of their organisation well (indeed otherwise they would not have been prepared to employ them/keep them). Where problems were mentioned these were nearly always 'soft' skills rather than any job-specific 'hard' skills, and included:

- A lack of 'work awareness'
- A lack of customer service or communication skills
- Minor literacy or numeracy problems
- A lack of communication skills / problems interacting with other staff

7.16 A few employers had been disappointed with the lack of contact that they had had with the ES after having recruited a WBLA client. This perceived lack of interest and support may impact on the inclinations of these employers to recruit WBLA staff in the future.

'He is mentally-disabled and we are quite concerned that ES have not followed up to see how he is doing.' [employer wave 3]

'I think that the ES should be more hands-on. After we took him on they didn't seem to care about liaising with their client any more.' [employer wave 3]

'It was all very good to start with but after I took him on there was no contact from the Employment Service' [employer wave 3]

- 7.17 That said, nearly all who had taken WBLA clients for permanent positions indicated that they would be happy to recruit WBLA clients again, assuming of course that they had a suitable vacancy and a suitable client was found.
- 7.18 Some employers indicated that they would be more likely to take on further WBLA clients if more information could be provided about the programme, for example the types of training that potential employees could have been engaged with prior to applying for a position. Some suggested that if regular updates were produced listing the candidates available and their work and training history, then this would increase their likelihood of recruiting more WBLA clients.

Converting work placements

- 7.19 Half of those employers interviewed who had had individuals on work placements stated that they would have offered full-time positions to all those that they had had on placement if they had had positions available. The other half stated that they would have offered positions to at least some.
- 7.20 In the event, two-thirds of those who have had WBLA clients on placement have offered permanent employment to at least one client. Although it is difficult to be confident that the employers interviewed were representative, this does seem to counter staff concerns that there is a widespread practice of sending clients on work placements that will never convert to full-time employment.
- 7.21 Recruitment to permanent positions has mostly worked out well. A couple of employers have had attendance problems and another couple had their offers of employment declined (which they found frustrating) because the individuals were not happy with either the hours or wages offered.
-

8 Addressing Concerns about WBLA

8.1 We have already commented on the fact many staff were critical of aspects of the performance of some of their providers and in some cases about the range of provision that is available. It is clearly important if the programme is to improve that this information is fed up to senior staff and then back to the providers. In this chapter we look at the extent to which information of this nature has been passed up to senior staff.

Concerns about quality of provision

8.2 Staff appear to be aware that issues around provider performance can and should be raised with the District Programme Quality Management Team (DPQMT)⁵ and/or the contracts team, and most have raised issues logs. However it was clear that many staff had not actually registered the concerns that they have had about the quality of WBLA provision.

8.3 In part it seems as if there is a reluctance to register a complaint about a particular provider because staff feel that they are not 'training experts'. Sometimes they simply have a suspicion that a particular type of provision does not seem to be 'moving clients on very far' but worry that they are not fully equipped to assess where clients should be after attending such provision. Related to this, because they are not getting formal feedback from clients, or at least they are only tending to hear from those with some complaint, they feel the picture is impressionistic rather than based on fact.

8.4 It also appears that some staff who have registered concerns about particular providers had had little or no feedback when they had raised issues with senior staff, or have yet to see an indication that the matter had been dealt with.

8.5 Some staff mentioned that they feel that they should receive some form of regular communication from their DPQMT to inform them of the issues that had been raised, how they had been dealt with and any response from the providers concerned. It was felt that this would stop staff using providers with whom there were still outstanding issues but also would prevent staff from avoiding a particular provider if particular 'rumours' turned out to be unfounded.

⁵ Each District has a DPQMT responsible for awarding and managing contracts. They take responsibility for ensuring that providers are meeting their contractual obligations and that quality of provision remains high.

- 8.6 Some staff appeared to believe it was best if the complaint came from the client, hence if clients are unhappy with some aspect of their provision they have attempted to get clients to put the complaint in writing so that this could be passed on to senior staff. It was admitted that many clients were reluctant to do this, and therefore in many cases this information was not being passed up the chain.

'The feedback on the whole isn't that great but obviously all we can do is advise them to put it in writing and then we can pass it on to our district office. But a lot of the clients are reluctant to do that - they don't want to put their name or whatever to it because a lot of them are worried that it may affect their benefits. Even when we tell them that nothing can be done unless they put it in black and white, they won't do it.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

Concerns about range of provision

- 8.7 Very few of the staff who believed there to be gaps in provision seemed to have taken any steps to get these addressed. The general view was that if something was not currently being provided then it was probably because they were not deemed to be relevant to employers in the area. One or two mentioned that they were aware of a process for adding to provision provided that enough clients were felt to need a type of 'extra' provision, but they were unsure as to how this process operated. In any case they felt that by the time they had found enough interested clients some of those initially interested would have 'dropped out'.
- 8.8 In one area the DPQMT had sent out a short questionnaire to all members of staff involved with WBLA to encourage feedback about any perceived gaps in provision. This had resulted in a few 'tweaks' being made to existing provision and some additional courses being contracted for in 2002/2003.
- 8.9 It seems as though there is room to both encourage feedback about provision to a greater degree and for formalising and improving the system by which information is passed from advisers to senior staff (and back again).
-

9 Specific Groups and WBLA

9.1 This chapter of the report looks at individual client groups that staff felt were not served as well as others by their current WBLA provision. We look in turn at:

- Those lacking 'soft skills' but not necessarily basic skills
- ESOL clients
- People with disabilities
- Those with intermediate or advanced-level skills needs
- Older clients

Those needing 'soft skills'

9.2 As mentioned earlier in this report (Chapter 3), many staff feel that changing the entry requirement for BET provision so that only those who score below entry level in at least one basic skills area can access it means that they are left with a 'gap' in provision for those who require soft skills but not necessarily basic skills.

9.3 They state that whereby they had previously used BET courses to good effect to help those requiring assistance in terms of motivation, confidence, time-keeping and more general 'life-skills' they now have little to offer these clients (unless they have basic skills difficulties). None of the staff interviewed felt that there was any such provision currently offered under either LOT or SJFT.

9.4 Generally they felt that these clients require a course of similar length to the BET provision (26 weeks) since a lot of the skills that are required such as getting used to a routine and interacting with others in a 'work-context' can only be built up over a reasonable length of time.

ESOL clients

9.5 In some areas where the numbers of ESOL clients have been quite high, staff have found that ESOL provision has often been over-subscribed. This has meant that they have had clients waiting for long periods to access provision and/or the providers have been dealing with 'class sizes' so large as to make staff question their likely effectiveness. Other areas (where numbers of ESOL clients are generally very low) have had difficulties finding local providers capable of delivering ESOL courses.

9.6 Some staff also mentioned that they only had one 'type' of ESOL provision when what they felt was needed was a range of different courses catering to clients with different levels of English. This 'one size fits all' approach was felt to be failing those who, for example, had a reasonable grasp of spoken English but no written English.

9.7 Due to a combination of the above difficulties, one or two staff mentioned that they had seen clients who were already enrolled themselves on ESOL courses but whom they then had to recommend to other (from the member of staff's perspective – lower quality) ES provision. These clients had previously been claiming JSA and attending the ESOL course that they had selected themselves. However, staff feel that they have to recommend that these clients attend the WBLA ESOL provision so that they can drop the obligation to be 'available for work' and allow them to concentrate on their studies. Staff are worried that, by referring these clients to ESOL provision that they feel is of a lower standard, they are effectively prolonging the amount of time taken for these clients to achieve a standard of English that enables them to achieve sustained work.

9.8 On top of concerns about the quality of ESOL provision that is being delivered, several staff also had concerns about the length of the provision, feeling that the allotted 26 weeks are often insufficient to enable some clients to reach the level of English required to successfully find work, particularly if they are starting from a point of speaking no English at all.

9.9 One other point raised by staff was that they felt that conducting Basic Skills Assessments with ESOL clients was often unnecessary and (particularly in areas that already had 'waiting lists' for BSAs) was simply causing delays in these clients accessing the provision that they need.

People with disabilities

9.10 Generally most areas felt that their current WBLA provision meets the needs of their PWD clients well and several had specialist provision available. Where staff made specific comments about areas where they felt that there were gaps in the provision that could be utilised by PWD clients, these were:

- In one area, no specialist provision available exclusively for disabled clients
 - In one area, very little part-time provision had been contracted for and concerns had been raised that some of the full-time provision was too exhausting for some PWD clients.
-

- 9.11 Several staff mentioned that they had had some difficulties with providers 'sending back' some PWD clients during the early stages of new WBLA clients due to misunderstandings over the 'breadth' of the ES PWD definition. Staff felt that some providers had only been expecting clients with physical disabilities and were not initially equipped to cope with those with behavioural or mental health difficulties that they had been sent. For the most part, staff felt that these teething problems had largely been ironed out.
- 9.12 However, on a more general note, several staff stated that they felt that an on-going problem with WBLA was a gap in provision for those with severe mental health difficulties. Staff feel that often JSA is not the most appropriate benefit for these clients but experience frustration that there is little that they can do to change the benefit that a client registers for if they personally do not acknowledge or realise that they have mental health difficulties. One or two suggested that what was required was some form of counselling that enabled these clients to comprehend fully the barriers to work that they face and to persuade them to visit a specialist to start the process for changing their benefit. However, staff also accepted that it would be very difficult to persuade such clients that they had a need for this provision.
- 9.13 Only one member of staff mentioned that they had made use of the one-off fund available for PWD clients under WBLA – he had organised a sign-language interpreter to allow a deaf client to access a particular piece of provision. Some other Restart Advisers did not seem to be aware that this fund was available but mentioned that such issues would be most likely to be dealt with by a Disability Employment Adviser.

Those with intermediate or advanced skill needs

- 9.14 Another key group identified by staff as not being well served currently by the WBLA programme is those needing provision above the basic level. Typically here staff were referring to clients who had been made redundant from well-paid positions and who could not afford to take low paid positions because of mortgage considerations.
- 9.15 The general view was that while the range of provision is good for those needing relatively basic training, provision was lacking for this higher level group. IT was a common example cited. Most areas had numerous providers available who could deliver basic courses in typing and the standard Microsoft Office packages, but were finding it hard to find providers to deliver training on packages such as CAD or SAGE. A number of staff expressed the desire for job search courses aimed particularly at this type of client.
-

'Sometimes we do get people who are quite high-tech, quite experienced in IT say and you can't really offer them a great deal, so they are having to find their own training independently and finance it themselves.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

Older clients

- 9.16 Several staff mentioned that they were finding it difficult to use WBLA provision to meet the needs of their older clients. This tended to be either because these clients need intermediate/advanced skills training and provision of such courses is limited, or because the most appropriate provision was often BET and this was particularly difficult to persuade older clients to access.
- 9.17 Older clients are likely either to feel that it is too late in their life to learn basic skills that they have managed to survive without for so long, or, if they have worked before, that they do not need a course that offers *basic* employability skills.

10 Paperwork, Administration and IT

- 10.1 This chapter looks at some of the more routine elements of managing the WBLA programme covering staff and providers' views of the paperwork and administration surrounding the programme.

Staff views

- 10.2 It is a common sentiment among staff that ES programmes are unnecessarily bureaucratic, and that many of the processes could and should be simplified. Some felt that the amount of time spent having to complete paperwork was reducing the effectiveness of the programme since it is reducing the time they can spend with clients. They felt that there was a considerable degree of duplication – particularly surrounding the information supplied on the REF2 and SL2 forms.
- 10.3 There is also a desire for the IT systems supporting WBLA to be improved, in particular LMS. In the early days it appeared as if LMS was often not up to date (something confirmed by providers, some indicating at wave 2 that they were still getting calls from advisers asking about things that they were not contracted to deliver). By wave 3 issues surrounding LMS not being up to date were less commonly mentioned with improvements having been made during the course of the year.
- 10.4 Some staff desires concerning LMS and IT include the following:
- More details to be provided on LMS about specific aspects of training provision (for example, how much of it will be classroom based and how much of it will be employer based? What specific skills will be developed?)
 - The ability to easily set up on LMS office-specific training opportunities to save trawling through lists of District-wide provision (one office noted that this could be set up on LMS, and other local offices had been allowed to do this, but district had not allowed this to be done for their office)
 - The ability to highlight key text on LMS (important information can be missed since information is currently stored chronologically)
 - Access to the internet – staff felt that not having internet access is a barrier to assisting clients with job search particularly when they have become used to using vacancy websites at provider sites
-

- Access to e-mail – it is felt that having this means of communication available would help staff to build a closer relationship with providers enabling them to register any queries about particular types of provision and about the progress of their clients.

Provider views

- 10.5 Reflecting the views of many staff, there is a widespread feeling among providers that the WBLA programme is bureaucratic and more complicated than it needs to be. These views cover such issues as the length and complexity of guidance issued to providers, the rules on issues such as attendance, the number of forms for the programme, the fact that the programme is almost entirely paper-based and the records that need to be kept for audit purposes.

“It’s a real problem. Far in excess of what is needed. It’s so complicated it’s a nightmare.” [provider wave 2]

“The processes and paperwork over the last 8 months have been a cause of confusion and conflict” [provider wave 2]

“There are so many forms. It’s very silly.” [provider wave 3]

- 10.6 At the second wave of research, a major cause of irritation among a very large number of providers was late and / or incorrect paperwork (the issue was hardly raised at wave 1 but this reflected the low number of referrals at this point). This was most acute with the SL2⁶ forms.
- 10.7 A client’s SL2 not arriving on the day the client turns up at the provider was common (*‘if six start on a Monday there will usually be one without an SL2.’*). Providers then faced a dilemma as to whether or not to turn clients away. Strictly speaking provision should not start without an SL2, and providers were aware that they could be ‘pulled up’ on the issue when audited. In practice nearly all providers would start provision (a common sentiment was that they see their mission as about training, they are not in the business of turning people away). However, one adviser cited an example of a provider turning one client away three different times (this after a journey of over forty minutes on each occasion).

⁶ The SL2 is a form used by ES and providers to record training provision due to be undertaken by clients. There are three sections to the document. Part 1 lists participant details, part 2 lists provision details and part 3 the start details. Parts 1 and 2 are completed by ES, part 3 by the provider and participant, with the participant signing that they have started the provision.

- 10.8 Late SL2s have implications for both the provider and the client. A common consequence for providers was an increased administrative burden, for example having to send staff to Jobcentres to collect copies. Late SL2s can also affect clients' benefit payments which it then falls to the provider to try and sort out. This can cause client resentment and can mean the training with the provider starts off on the wrong foot.
- 10.9 Providers also regularly complained of SL2s being filled in incorrectly. Some simply indicated there were too many mistakes. More specific examples included contract numbers being incorrect (one provider cited Bolton codes being used for Bury referrals), a serious issue given that payments are triggered on the basis of the contract number, and signatures missed off.
- 10.10 Compounding this issue, the SL2 form was criticised for being badly designed since it has no space for the client's address.
- 10.11 By wave 3 these problems had eased slightly, particularly incorrect SL2s, but were far from sorted out. In some cases improvements arose through local procedures being developed with District approval, one example being the faxing of SL2s. In another case, a provider had raised the matter with District and they had agreed that all incorrect forms would be faxed to District for them to sort out rather than the provider re-contacting the individual advisers. Another provider said improvements had happened since the previous wave but this was only by threatening not to start clients on provision if the forms did not arrive on time.

'We were told by the auditors that the paperwork had to come in a sequence. What tended to happen was that advisers were sending out the SL2s and the REF2s at the same time. I think it's pretty much been rectified now though.' (Provider, Wave 3)

- 10.12 Providers would like to see greater use made of electronic forms for referring ES clients feeling that such methods are faster and often more reliable than paper-based ones.
- 10.13 Some providers have found the ES procedures for logging attendance on provision to be time-consuming. This is less a problem for those providers who are running courses that are only accessed by ES clients who are able to tailor the way in which this provision is run to ES requirements relatively easily. Other providers (for example FE colleges) who have clients from a range of different funding-streams accessing their provision express frustration that their own procedures/documentation for recording attendance can not be accepted by ES.
-

- 10.14 More generally, providers would like to see a merging of all ES programmes so that the same paperwork was common to each. This would more clearly reflect the way in which they tend to view clients. Low numbers mean that generally speaking both WBLA and New Deal clients are accessing the same provision and it is often only the individual dealing with the administration within the provider's organisation who is aware which programme an individual has been referred through.
- 10.15 One other administrative issue mentioned by providers was the volume of inspections and audits that they are subjected to. This was particularly the case where providers were running courses on behalf of a range of different public sector bodies. Providers questioned whether any of these different inspections could be combined and also whether it would be possible for bodies such as the ES and Local Learning & Skills Councils (LLSCs) to share information so that only one visit on behalf of the two organisations would be necessary.

'I get so many people coming round and I'm giving them the same information - I mean my quality assurance and compliance - how we run our equal opportunities programme, how we run health and safety - are the same for all the programmes we run, exactly the same.'
(provider, wave 3)

11 Improvements desired for the programme

11.1 In this final section of the report we look at overall impressions of how the WBLA programme is operating now that it is managed by ES before looking at suggestions for improvements to the operation of the programme.

Overall views of WBLA post April 2001

- 11.2 Most staff and providers feel that the hand-over of responsibility for WBLA from the TECs to the Employment Service was far from seamless, something that led to a difficult first few months of the programme after April 2001. Problems included contracts with providers often not being set up in time for April 2001 and staff feeling inadequately prepared to deliver the programme. However these structural and organisational difficulties have largely either been addressed or are starting to be addressed.
- 11.3 Staff generally feel that the fact that ES is now responsible for WBLA means an improved service can be delivered to clients. This is simply because ES now handle the contracts with providers and hence staff have greater knowledge of the providers and what is offered and can give better advice to clients. There is also greater control over the quality of provision. As yet, however, many staff feel there is some way to go in realising these potential benefits. This is because much of the first 12 months has been taken up with familiarising themselves with the programme generally and with local providers and what they provide, and also building links with these providers.
- 11.4 In terms of the overall effectiveness of WBLA, staff feel that the programme provides useful skills to individuals that are interested/willing to take part. However the fact that they cannot make participation compulsory does limit its scope to help a large proportion of the clients that they see.
- 11.5 Providers also talk in terms of the fact that ES has taken over responsibility for WBLA from the TECs as having a number of potential advantages. These are that:
- They are now dealing with ES directly not an intermediary (*'the middle man has been cut out'* as one put it). One implication of this is that the referrals process is more seamless, and all referrals are now / should now be eligible.
-

- There is much less emphasis on NVQs and qualifications, something that means they have more flexibility in the content of the training. At the same time the emphasis has shifted from qualifications to job outcomes.

11.6 At the same time, providers also point to a number of changes since ES took over responsibility for delivery of WBLA that have had a negative impact, something that informs their desired improvements for the programme:

- There is seen to be less flexibility in the programme now, with '*rigid course lengths*' and the length of provision determined in a fixed manner by the client's length of unemployment.
- WBLA under ES is seen as more bureaucratic. Just one example of this is that it has become more complicated to change the original profiles set out in the contract.
- At an operational level, TEC staff had become very proficient at running the programme. It has taken ES staff some time to 'get up to speed'.

Improvements desired

11.7 The improvements suggested in the following section are made on the basis of issues raised by staff, providers and employers. These are a 'wish list' without any reference to costs and the budgetary constraints within which WBLA operates. We split our suggestions into those surrounding the type and range of WBLA provision and then those covering processes.

A. Improvements to provision

11.8 The consensus among staff is that LOT provision should be made available to clients once they have been unemployed for 6-months. They feel that they are often able to identify a need at this stage but then have to 'wait' for a further six months until the provision can be utilised.

11.9 The provision available at the six-month point, SJFT courses, are felt to be appropriate only for a small proportion of the clients that they see, and staff feel there would be advantages in this provision being accessible from Day 1 of unemployment. Some staff even suggest that there is scope for provision to be almost entirely ad-hoc beyond a few key courses (such as warehousing, retail, security and business administration). This would perhaps free-up funds for the purchasing of intermediate-level courses that many feel are currently lacking.

11.10 Staff and providers are nearly all in agreement that SJFT courses should be four or preferably six weeks long; two-week courses are only rarely felt to be of any benefit.

11.11 Staff in all areas could identify gaps in provision but very few seemed to have made any use of the ad-hoc fund to fill these gaps. It could be worthwhile to encourage more use of this fund although it may need some form of 'business-case' style application to limit over-use of expensive courses.

11.12 One area where it was common for staff to want some provision available was for equipping clients with soft skills such as motivation, confidence-building and life-skills. This would be aimed at those who do not have serious basic skills difficulties (i.e. it would be aimed at those who do not qualify for BET). Evidence from employers certainly suggests that the primary thing they are looking for from potential applicants for jobs that would be suitable for unemployed clients are attributes such as motivation and a willingness to learn.

11.13 Staff would like to be able to make BET provision mandatory. At the moment they feel that many of those who could potentially benefit are not accessing the provision either because they do not think that it is relevant or simply because they do not want to go. Some staff suggested BET needs re-branding, as the term 'basic employability' can be off-putting to those that have worked previously.

'I had about 4 people start BET and then they just came off it because they didn't fancy doing it or they had a 'health problem' or they went away for the week. I can re-refer them but at the end of the day it's an entirely voluntary course.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

'I wish there was some sort of mandatory element. You see people time and time again who aren't particularly looking for work and are quite prepared to sit there and not do much and don't want to take advantage of the help that we have on offer.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

'I think that the name Basic Employability is awful. We were talking about this the other week and thought maybe it could be called a Link programme or something - making it sound more work focussed'

(with just reading and writing on top). It just sounds more positive than Basic Employability.' (Restart Adviser, Wave 3)

11.14 There is a general feeling that in areas that provision is not always serving ESOL clients well. Suggestions included contracting separately for clients with different levels of English needs, reducing 'class sizes' and extending the duration of this provision so that it can enable ESOL clients to reach a level of English that enables them to find sustained employment.

11.15 Staff feel the quality of job search being undertaken by providers is very varied, and in some cases is confined to looking at vacancies either on the Internet or in newspapers rather than a broader range of activities such as mock interviews, guidance in making applications and so on). Generally there is a feeling that greater monitoring and/or more specific specifications for job search are required. It would perhaps be possible to structure courses so that clients can access some form of 'central' job search provision regardless of who is their 'lead' provider.

11.16 Similarly, if some providers are more successful at establishing useful work placements than others, it may be possible to set up a contracts for one or two providers to organise all work placements regardless of who is delivering the 'training element' of the provision.

B. Improvements to processes

11.17 Many of the improvements staff want in relation to processes relate to a lack information about key aspects of the programme. In particular many would like:

- **More detailed information about provision**

LMS was often felt to provide information which was too limited (i.e just the course title and length), and this made it difficult to 'sell' the courses to clients. Some staff used brochures or information provided by the providers, or had put together their own information sheets.

- **Regular meetings between staff and providers**

While most staff had received presentations from or attended events with some or all of their providers, there was felt to be the need for regular (e.g. monthly) communication, especially in those areas using one or very few providers.

- **The opportunity to visit providers**

Very few staff had had the opportunity to do this, but felt this would be invaluable. Staff are not looking to undertake monitoring visits on a client by client basis along the lines of New Deal 25 plus, rather they simply want to see the training and the provider 'in action'.

- **More information about job outcomes being achieved by different providers / different provision.**

This will help staff build a picture of what provision is working well and which is not.

- **Some systematic means for seeing clients after completing their provision**

This would again enable staff to build up a picture of the extent to which clients have progressed and hence of the provision that appears to be working. It would also enable them to conduct focussed job search with their clients.

- **More information about issues raised by senior ES staff with providers and action resulting**

Often staff are not raising possible quality issues concerning providers since the information they have is often impressionistic or based on hear say. However, it will encourage information to be passed up to senior staff if more is done to encourage this, and also if feedback is given about action taken as a result.

11.18 One Jobcentre covered by the research had appointed a WBLA specialist who was responsible for making all WBLA referrals. This had led to success in increasing the proportion of referrals actually starting provision – a factor attributed to the deeper knowledge that this specialist had been able to acquire about the provision available thus enabling more effective ‘selling’ of the provision. This may be a feasible model for other Jobcentres to adopt.

11.19 We have seen that there is a sentiment among providers that WBLA is somewhat bureaucratic and less flexible than it was under the TECs. Some appreciate that this is partly inevitable in that they are now dealing with a national (and public sector) organisation rather than one which is local (and private sector). However, there is a general desire for the paperwork to be simplified and minimised, and some wanted forms to be electronic rather than hard copy. Others specifically complain about receiving late and incorrect paperwork from advisers, hence simplified paperwork is seen as something that would help staff as well as providers.

11.20 Providers would also like their profiles to be constructed in a more flexible manner allowing them easier means of substituting aspects of provision where they are ‘over-subscribed’ for those where numbers of referrals have been lower than expected.

11.21 Providers involved in delivering provision to clients on New Deal 25 plus as well as WBLA often wish for the two programmes to be brought closer into line. Different early entry criteria, different qualifying criteria for BET, the fact that the ADF is available for clients on one programme but not the other, different hours and different allowances for each cause complications.

11.22 A common complaint among providers is the high turnover of ES staff. This is felt to be a barrier to the programme working as well as it could simply because it takes new staff some time to become fully acquainted with the programme.

11.23 Improvements that could increase employer satisfaction with the programme, and potentially encourage more employers to participate include:

- More follow-up from ES where employers have taken clients on as permanent employees to check that everything is working out well for both parties. At least if any problems have arisen, this gives staff the opportunity to resolve these and prevent losing an employer from the programme
 - Contacting employers who take clients on a work placement but decide not to take them on a permanent basis. This would allow staff to understand the issues from an employer perspective, and may help reduce the occasions on which placements are not taken on. It may also be worth ensuring that references are taken from these employers both to provide staff with feedback and because they may prove useful when applying for other jobs.
 - Encouraging or at least informing employers that they can ask for extensions to a work placement if they need longer to decide whether or not to take a client on permanently
 - Fostering more of a feeling of being part of a programme among those offering work placements on a regular basis. Most employers have very little sense of participation in the programme though most want to know more about ES and its programmes. Some form of regular communication about developments in the programme and the range of provision that is available under WBLA (so that employers can express interest in clients who have been through particular types of provision) might be appropriate
 - Employers often ask for better incentives for clients to take employment instead of staying on benefit (some have offered jobs to those on placement and been turned down).
-

11.24 Those looking to fill a vacancy often ask for more screening of clients by ES to ensure that those they get to see actually want to work and are suitable for the job which is available. This is simply to cut down the amount of time they have to spend selecting suitable individuals. Allied to this, employers want more information than they currently receive about the client prior to first seeing them – for example their work history and recent training experiences. For some this is desired before they first see the client to enable them to filter out those they consider unsuitable.
