Evidence from Remploy Cymru – EOP 04

Remploy Cymru's Submission to the National Assembly for Wales' Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into employment opportunities for older people

1. Introduction

1.1. Remploy Cymru is one of Wales' largest providers of specialist employment support for people with disabilities, health conditions and complex barriers to work. Our mission is to transform lives through providing sustainable employment opportunities. We operate a network of 16 branches and offices in Wales in: Cardiff, Newport, Wrexham, Swansea, Bridgend, Neath, Port Talbot, Merthyr Tydfil, Abergavenny, Chepstow, Cwmbran, Ebbw Vale, Llandrindod, Ystradgnylais and Caerphilly and have supported more than 12,000 disabled and disadvantaged people into work in Wales over the last five years.

1.2. We deliver a number of major UK Government welfare to work programmes in Wales, including Work Choice and the Work Programme. We also operate a range of Welsh and local Government Programmes.

1.3. Over the last two years, Remploy has provided employment support to more than 2200 disabled and disadvantaged people older people in Wales. Of these people, we have successfully supported more than 850 people into sustainable employment.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. According to the latest ONS data, levels of economic activity and employment in Wales remain lower than the UK average, with the unemployment rate being marginally higher at 7.1%[1]. Whilst the number of JSA claimants aged 50 to 64 is 1.5% in Wales, as in the rest of the UK, the total number of ESA claimants is higher in Wales at 8.4% compared to 6.2% in the UK as a whole[2].

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[1] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/2013265930/report.aspx
[2] ibid

2.2. Given this, and the fact that the employment rate for disabled people in Wales is estimated to be 9% lower than the UK average[3], we can infer that, whilst the overall employment rate for people in the 50 plus age group in Wales is broadly similar to the rest of the UK, people of this age group with disabilities and complex barriers to work are less likely to be in employment in Wales than the rest of the UK.

2.2. We welcome the fact that the Welsh Government has plans to tender a support programme for people with disabilities in Wales, and believe that this should aim to support more people into employment.

2.3. Given the disability employment rate in Wales, the ageing population and the fact that disability and age are linked[4], we believe that targeted interventions are needed to assist disabled older people into work. As sustainable employment is a key factor in reducing the prevalence of poverty, we believe that such interventions will be an effective way in assisting the Welsh Government in achieving its agenda in tackling poverty.

2.3 We welcome the Welsh Government's acknowledgement of the impact that isolation can have on mental health and believe that effective interventions to decrease isolation and poverty in older people will have a positive effect on employment.

3. The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023

3.1. The Welsh Government's Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023 is an invaluable document for ensuring that all older people in Wales have the social, environmental and financial resources they need to build well-being and resilience, reduce dependence and improve quality of life.

3.2. The promotion of flexible working arrangements for older people within the document are particularly to be welcomed as they make employment more feasible for people in the 50 plus age bracket with multiple barriers to work such as a long-term health condition or disability.

33. We also welcome the development of the Ageing Well in Wales programme and the measures taken by the Welsh Government in the strategy to raise awareness of mental health and age-related issues such as dementia and alzheimers.

3.3. One useful addition that the Welsh Government could consider making to any future strategy for older people is to use employment as a measure of social participation. As the current strategy quite rightly points out, effective social participation ensures that older people enjoy a better quality of life, have active social lives and minimises loneliness and unwanted

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[3] http://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/Disability%20Poverty%20in%20Wales.pdf
[4] http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8994496

social isolation. We believe that these benefits can also be gained through gainful employment, for older people of working age.

3.4. Another measurement that the Welsh Government may want to consider including in any future strategy for older people is transportation. Good public transport links are important in increasing the employment opportunities for older people, especially those that are disabled or live in isolated locations (There is further discussion of Transport in Section 5 of this submission).

4. Support that is most effective for older people trying to re-enter the labour market

4.1. Wales provides a number of challenges for providing sustainable employment. Poor transport infrastructure and high levels of poverty in areas such as the South Wales Valleys and the North Wales coast, which have some of the worst ratios of vacancies per job seeker in the country, coupled with the lower employment rate for disabled people compared to the rest of the UK means that the most effective support for guiding people into employment is that which is tailored to the needs of individual local communities.

4.2. It is therefore important that programmes, at all levels of the supply chain, work effectively with local authorities to align themselves to local employment strategies and avoid unnecessary duplication of services. In Wales, a strong relationship between programme providers and the Welsh Government is also invaluable.

4.3. As an organisation that specialises in supporting people with disabilities and health conditions, Remploy Cymru utilise our internal expertise to provide more, personalised support to candidates based on reducing their barriers to work. Remploy also works with local partners to signpost candidates to any additional interventions that may be required. We believe this more personalised, tailored support is the most effective way of supporting older people with barriers to work into employment.

4.4. A further effective way to support people into work is through the use and development of digital technologies, which can both make employment more accessible to people with barriers to employment and reduce social isolation (there is further mention of the importance of digital technology at 5.4.)

5. The impact of Transport in helping older people enter the labour market

5.1. One of the largest barriers that Wales faces in providing sustainable employment for older people is the poor public transport. Some more rural areas of the country lack any public transport links, with other areas having infrequent transport that can often take a long time to

travel relatively short distances. This can also lead to feelings of social isolation which can exacerbate mental health conditions such as depression.

5.2. This may have an impact on the employment prospects for older, disabled people as they are statistically less likely to be independent and mobile and are more likely to need to rely on public transport to travel to and from work.

5.3. We therefore believe it would be helpful if the Welsh Government recognised transport as a barrier to employment in any future drafts of their Strategy for Older People in Wales.

5.4. In addtion to improved transport links, we also welcome the Welsh Government's commitment to the Superfast Wales scheme, a partnership between the Welsh Government and BT which will provide fibre broadband to 96% of homes and businesses in Wales[5], which we believe will be effective in supporting more people into work by reducing the impact that that poor transport links have as a barrier into work. We also believe that this will go some way to reducing social isolation for many older people. Our digital advisor service, iRemploy, which provided employment support to 244 people across Wales last year[6], provides a strong example of how digital technologies can effectively support people with barriers to employment into work.

6. Mental health as a barrier to employment in older people

6.1. Mental Health is becoming a more prominent barrier to employment for many people in Wales, with the overall cost of mental health issues in Wales estimated to be £7.2 billion a year[7].

6.2. We therefore welcome the Welsh Government's acknowledgement of the impact that isolation can have on mental health and believe that effective interventions to decrease isolation and poverty in older people will have a positive effect on employment.

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[5] http://www.superfast-cymru.com/home
[6] https://www.remploy.co.uk/en/individuals/
[7] http://www.timetochangewales.org.uk/en/mental-health-stigma/stigma-statistics/