

# **The “3DsLondon” Research Project**

## **Tackling Disadvantage, Disengagement and Discrimination in London**

### **Executive Summary**

1. London contains some of the highest areas of poverty, deprivation and worklessness in England. In response, a whole range of project initiatives have developed to improve access to work, particularly among those experiencing the greatest risks of long-term disengagement and social exclusion.

2. Often, however, some of these initiatives were carried out with little awareness of the initiatives that have already been tried and tested elsewhere in London. To help fill this gap, the ‘Disadvantage, Disengagement and Discrimination’ project, supported by Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Pan London European Social Fund (ESF) Funding has mapped and analysed learning and skills development projects that support access to employment by members of disadvantaged groups across London.

3. Information has been gathered on initiatives targeting workless people from the following disadvantaged groups: Black and Minority Ethnic groups; refugees and asylum seekers; disabled people; 16–19 year olds not in employment, education or training (“NEET”); older people (aged 50 and over); lone parents; homeless people; travellers; ex-offenders; drug and alcohol misusers; people living in areas with high levels of deprivation; returners to the labour market; people made redundant; long-term unemployed 12 months+; economic migrants.

4. This report summarises findings from returns from 362 provider organisations in the public, private and voluntary and community sectors, relating to more than 500 projects designed to help disadvantaged groups gain access to the labour market. A high proportion of survey responses came from voluntary and community sector organisations. The analysis of findings combines the survey returns with case studies of good practice and with information from 42 semi-structured interviews and nine focus groups involving providers, stakeholders and participant groups. The qualitative research focused on a subset of the disadvantaged groups that were included in the survey, namely: 16–19 NEET group, long-term unemployed, people living in areas with high levels of multiple deprivation with a secondary focus on refugees and asylum seekers, ex-offenders, people with disabilities, lone parents.

5. The findings build on existing research about barriers to learning and employment and provide additional evidence-based support for measures that give help to members of disadvantaged groups in their efforts to get employment and stay in work. The 3DsLondon research gives voice to the perspectives of people from disadvantaged groups that can otherwise easily go unheard in analytical and policy discussions.

6. All interviewees felt that there are important conceptual differences between disadvantage and discrimination, although the level of detail in which the distinction was explained varied between providers, participants and wider stakeholders. Many indicated that it was about the difference between social positioning and social action, and nearly all thought that the distinctions were blurred in practice, because social position influences the way providers, employers and public institutions act and can reinforce the social position of disadvantage.

7. By their involvement with employment initiatives, the participants interviewed had in effect overcome barriers to engagement, but there was a difference between those who had joined a project voluntarily and those who were part of mandatory schemes such as some of the New Deal programmes. The latter had more reservations about their project. For both types of participants the two most important aspects of involvement for them personally were:

- The general support offered by the providers; and
- The 'soft skills' that had been developed, such as raised motivation, enhanced self-esteem, communication and group working skills.

8. The barriers that project participants discussed during the interviews and focus groups were the high cost of travel and the difficulty of moving from social security benefits into low waged employment. Interviewees also saw a major obstacle in the attitudes and expectations of employers, whom they felt were unwilling to give them a chance. Lack of work experience or track record in employment was seen by them as the most important barrier to inclusion in the labour market.

9. Providers stressed the need for an inclusive and holistic approach to tackling disadvantage and emphasized physical and economic obstacles, as well as the social and cultural barriers that make it difficult for participants to move into employment even once they have become 'engaged' through learning and skills development. Providers have a good understanding of the needs of their target groups and often work in partnership with specialist organisations or community groups to reach disadvantaged target groups.

10. Many providers were uncomfortable with project funding arrangements, which were seen as rigid and target driven, making it difficult to take a holistic view of the client needs or to tailor provision. Funding was also seen as very fragmented, making it difficult for providers to consolidate their expertise for the benefit of their client group(s); it also resulted in a reliance on temporary staff, with the attendant problems of lack of continuity and difficulties of organisational learning and capacity building. Successive rounds of short-term funding result in projects ending and others being initiated – in other words "re-inventing the wheel" - using a disproportionate amount of resources on start-up rather than building on experience.

11. The stakeholders saw work with, or in relation to, disadvantaged groups as central to their organisations' objectives. Whilst some pointed to the

resources available to disadvantaged groups and how much money was spent on particular issues such as Skills for Life, others felt that however much had been achieved it was but “a drop in the ocean” or “only scratching the surface of the deeper social issues”. There was broad agreement on what constitutes success in project delivery for disadvantaged groups including outreach work and capacity building with voluntary and community sector groups.

12. The limitations of current funding regimes are acknowledged by the stakeholder organisations, including fragmentation, revisiting old ground and some mismatch between funders’ objectives and the focus of provider organisations or the expressed needs of the target groups. Whilst the different stakeholders recognised the operational need for a co-ordinated approach, the particular focal interests of their own organisation could drive them in different directions.

13. The report also highlights the importance of collaboration between different agencies in order to tackle the multiple disadvantages that many individuals experience and that put them at risk of social exclusion. Different agencies necessarily have distinct governance styles, remits, objectives and protocols. Nevertheless agencies may wish to consider fostering the more coordinated approach that seems to be emerging. Such a co-ordinated approach across a range of agencies, embracing inter alia social security benefits, health, housing, and child care, is required to ensure that clients are properly equipped to enter the labour market.

14. The research results are available as three main outputs:

- An on-going web-based database for provider and stakeholder organisations in London who want to find out what initiatives for disadvantaged groups are already offered. It can be searched by single or combined criteria including target group, project objective, London borough or Learning and Skills Council (LSC) sub-region, funder, type of provider organisation, project outcomes and other aspects.
- A CD toolkit format, which will be particularly useful to practitioners. This includes summary charts from an analysis of the projects in the database; a model of ‘critical success factors’, five good practice case studies and the executive summary and recommendations from this research report.
- A model of critical success factors has been developed from analysis of the database findings and the views expressed in the qualitative interviews and focus groups by project participants, by providers of training and guidance, and by stakeholders and employers. This proposes that a combination of internal and external factors can make a qualitative difference to disadvantaged individuals’ progress in learning and skills development and their move into employment.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations arise directly from the research results. They are directed principally at funders and commissioning bodies, since it is they who determine the direction of present and future initiatives. In some cases there are also recommendations, either direct or implied, for providers in considering the services they deliver and the good practice guidelines that are available. It is through their activities that interventions for members of disadvantaged groups become effective:

1. Major funding organisations should consider working together more closely to
  - co-ordinate their tender requirements to enable providers to prepare more effectively for applications to different funders and funding rounds
  - avoid fragmentation of projects in relation to target groups and in particular geographical areas
  - share good practice as identified for example in independent evaluation reports that some funders have commissioned.
2. Funders (possibly working jointly) should consider the scope for giving projects with a good track record reassurance of continuing funding and show awareness of the timescales required by provider organisations for building and maintaining capacity. This would avoid a loss of experienced staff and awareness of the project amongst members of the target group(s) at the end of each project.
3. Funders should consider taking a more prominent responsibility for advocating the value of this work, and should recognise the time needed for the lengthy process of tackling disadvantage through the learning and skills development required to ensure that participants are ready for jobs in London's labour market.
4. Arrangements should also extend to ensuring that provider organisations are able to develop and maintain the on-going capacity to respond to emerging policy requirements and initiatives, and to interpret and understand client needs in a changing environment.
5. Providers are urged to make fuller use of existing channels for sharing good practice, including the database that has been developed with this research, and of Adult Learning Inspectorate findings that work to a common benchmark of good practice.
6. Both providers and project funders need to work more closely with sector skills councils and with individual employers to ensure that work experience is built into many more of the projects that they actually fund.
7. The lack of employer involvement in many projects is a point of weakness that needs to be tackled by many different agencies through:

- better information from government agencies to employers (eg about 'Access to Work' information for disabled people)
  - better links between providers and employers with the support of funding agencies to ensure co-ordinated rather than fragmented approaches to employers
  - sector skills councils, LSCs and initiatives such as LDA's 'Diversity Works' working to help raise awareness amongst employers of the business benefits of recruiting and training a more diverse workforce.
8. More innovative ways may need to be found by funding organisations and policy makers to consult with project participants as well as with providers, with a view to broadening the outcome target definitions attached to projects.
9. To monitor progress on such developments the major funding agencies should consider ways of keeping the 3DsLondon database up to date, expanding it and including a regular assessment of evaluation reports.