

## Research Summary

### Delivering Labour Market Policies through Local and Regional Partnerships

This study investigated the role played by Jobcentre Plus in strategic partnership working at the local and regional level. The research took place in the context of the development of a Partnership Strategy for Jobcentre Plus, reflecting an increasing recognition that a range of organisations needs to work together effectively at the strategic level in order to achieve wider labour market policy objectives. The research work was linked to the development of materials to provide support and guidance for members of Jobcentre Plus staff who are engaged in local and regional partnership working.

The research was undertaken by the Policy Research Institute, GHK Consulting and the Centre for Research in Social Policy and focused on four Jobcentre Plus regions and eleven districts within these regions

The research was designed to address the following broad questions:

- With which strategic partnerships is Jobcentre Plus engaged at the local and regional levels?
- Which Jobcentre Plus staff are involved in strategic partnership working at local and regional levels, and in what ways?
- What are the main barriers to Jobcentre Plus involvement in local and regional strategic partnerships?
- What is the impact of Jobcentre Plus involvement in local and regional strategic partnerships?
- What types of support and/or guidance might be helpful in enhancing the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus involvement in

local and regional strategic partnerships?

Key findings from the research include:

- Jobcentre Plus is engaged in a wide range of strategic partnership activities at the local and regional level, typically with the investment of significant time on the part of senior managers
- In general, partner organisations appreciate the contribution of Jobcentre Plus and in many cases Jobcentre Plus plays a central, leading role in the partnership.
- While there is a general feeling that strategic partnership working contributes positively towards Jobcentre Plus business objectives and targets, the precise impact on labour market outcomes is difficult to identify
- A number of barriers to effective strategic partnership working were identified, including a limited history of partnership working on the part of Jobcentre Plus, the short-term nature of local targets, limited local flexibility or autonomy, pressure on the time of key staff and limited experience and/or skills among other staff members
- There is a need for further guidance and support for Jobcentre Plus staff involved in partnership working, covering issues such as improved information about partnerships and partner organisations and development of communication, negotiation and networking skills.

## **The research programme**

This report presents the findings of a study conducted over 12 months by a research team comprised of researchers and consultants from three organisations: the Policy Research Institute (PRI), Leeds Metropolitan University; GHK Consulting and the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), Loughborough University.

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The research programme comprised the following exercises.

- Interviews with Jobcentre Plus Regional Business Development Managers and representatives of selected regional partner organisations
- Visits to eleven case study districts comprising interviews with a cross section of Jobcentre Plus staff engaged in partnership working

- Interviews with selected representatives of local partnership bodies and partner organisations in the case study districts
- Feedback visits to eight of the eleven case study districts in order to verify the overall findings, obtain updated information and test out initial ideas for guidance and support material
- A postal survey of the 51 strategic partnership organisations identified as operating within the 11 case study districts.

## **Key findings**

### **Extent and nature of strategic partnership working**

- Jobcentre Plus is engaged with a wide range of strategic partnership bodies at the regional and local level. A typical Jobcentre Plus district is likely to be involved with between 4 and 5 local strategic partnerships.
- It is difficult to estimate the amount of time taken up by strategic partnership working at the district level, but the evidence from one 'typical' district is that this amounts to the equivalent of the time of one senior member of staff.
- Jobcentre Plus contributes towards local and regional strategic partnerships in a number of ways, with the time, experience and knowledge of Jobcentre Plus representatives being appreciated by partner organisations.
- Knowledge of the operation of mainstream national programmes and access to information about local labour markets, employers, job seekers and benefit claimants

are also valued contributions by Jobcentre Plus.

- In around half of the partnerships studied in detail, Jobcentre Plus could be described as a key or leading partner. In most other cases Jobcentre Plus is seen by partners as an active, willing and helpful but not leading partner.

### **Motivations for strategic partnership working**

- Jobcentre Plus respondents and participants from partner organisations reported a range of motivations for their engagement in strategic partnership working. Typically, there is a feeling that such activity is likely to help with the achievement of targets, at least over the medium to long term.
- Other motivations include raising the profile and influence of Jobcentre Plus; increasing the opportunity to engage with 'hard to reach' groups and keeping in touch with local organisations and developments.
- In most cases, Jobcentre Plus objectives and motivations were seen as consistent with those of strategic partnerships and member organisations.
- The majority view among Jobcentre Plus and partner respondents was that Jobcentre Plus was participating effectively in local partnerships, within the context of nationally-set processes and objectives, and limitations on resources at the local level.

### **Effectiveness of strategic partnership working**

- Factors that appear to be associated with particularly effective strategic partnership working on the part of Jobcentre Plus include some

previous history of involvement in partnerships; the stimulus of specific local labour market problems; the characteristics, skills and attitudes of key individuals and good formal and informal relations between partners.

- Respondents highlighted a number of constraints or barriers that they felt were limiting the ability of Jobcentre Plus to increase the effectiveness with which they engage in strategic partnerships.
- The main constraints include a focus on nationally-set short-term performance targets; limited flexibility to operate at local level; recent focus on internal issues and an organisational culture that appears to be primarily inward-looking.

### **Impact of strategic partnership working**

- The vast majority of participants were convinced that strategic partnership was important and should have a positive impact on the local labour market. However, respondents found it difficult to elaborate in detail the relationship between strategic partnerships and labour market impact.
- Respondents agreed that the relationship between strategic partnerships and labour market outcomes was a complex one. Some respondents emphasised demand-side effects; others focused on the supply side of the labour market; others were concerned primarily with the need for partners to work more effectively together on specific initiatives and to avoid gaps, overlaps and discontinuities in provision.

- Overlying all of the above was a desire to improve communication and increase trust between partner organisations as a means of increasing the level and quality of local social capital.

### **Need for guidance and support**

- Jobcentre Plus and partner respondents agreed that the provision of various forms of guidance, support and/or training for Jobcentre Plus staff would be helpful in facilitating the further development of the organisation's contribution to strategic partnership working.
- The specific issues, topic and skills for which guidance or support might be required varied considerably by area and by the level or experience of staff. Specific issues raised include more up-to-date information about partnerships and partner organisations; communication about Jobcentre Plus strategies and programmes; increasing the confidence of individuals to participate in partnerships; improving communication and negotiation skills and helping individuals to represent Jobcentre Plus effectively in an ambassadorial role.

- Enhancing, where appropriate, local discretion over partnership-related activities
- Adjusting local targets to take account of the longer-term impact of strategic partnership working
- Training, support and guidance for staff involved in partnership working
- The establishment of a site on the Intranet devoted to providing support and guidance on partnership working
- Encouragement of networking and information sharing in relation to local and regional partnership working

### **Recommendations**

The report makes a number of recommendations designed to improve the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus involvement in local and regional strategic partnerships. These include:

- Widespread dissemination of the Jobcentre Plus Partnership Strategy
- Further research and regular audits of partnership activity at local and regional levels