

ROTHERHAM SKILLS, EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION

Report on Stakeholder Consultations

by Tony Gore, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR), Sheffield Hallam University

Tel. 0114 225 3561

Email: t.gore@shu.ac.uk

Introduction

The purpose of this note is to distil the key observations made by a range of respondents to a consultation exercise conducted between June and August 2018. Around 20 representatives of public, private and voluntary sector organisations were interviewed face-to-face or by telephone, with each discussion lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. The discussions were wide-ranging and the topics covered varied according to the knowledge and expertise of each respondent, but overall the consultation focused on the following matters:

- General economic situation in the local area;
- Skills gaps and recruitment difficulties;
- Vocational education and training;
- Apprenticeships;
- Economic inclusion of disadvantaged groups;
- Specific barriers facing marginalised groups;
- Existing provision to address barriers and issues;
- Networking between policy-makers, funders, providers and employers;
- Suggestions for new initiatives (or how to make the current system work better).

The summary of findings presented in the rest of this document have been organised on a thematic basis around the following headings:

- Young people and work
- Recruitment and skills development
- Integrating disadvantaged groups
- Health and disability
- Other barriers
- Skills and employment policy

Young People and Work

- There is a pressing need to improve knowledge and awareness of the world of work amongst school students. This is partly related to the wide range of job types and occupations that is on offer around the Borough and immediately neighbouring areas, but also to more basic aspects such as time-keeping, appearance, professional behaviour, etc. The academic focus of many schools and the financial imperative to achieve examination result targets for all mean that there is a general reluctance to give up curriculum teaching time to information and awareness-raising sessions

about work-related training and employment possibilities. Even those schools that are willing to engage are often only able to provide relatively short sessions over a limited time period to a restricted cohort of pupils. There is some activity on this through local youth clubs (e.g., in Thurcroft), but again this is very patchy. The result is that many young people come out of school with false expectations of what work will be like and what is expected of them.

- This means that for many students (as well as teachers and parents) the perception of what apprenticeships involve is based on an outdated image of their past role (e.g., "for thickos who can't get into university but don't mind the grime of industry"; "more of a Plan B or C after university or FE college"). There is a need for widespread marketing of their modern role as a means of entry into a host of sectors and occupations, linked to appropriate qualifications (to degree level if required) and providing arguably better employment prospects than university graduates (and of course no student loan debts). The growing team of Enterprise Advisers is beginning to make some headway on this, but this needs to be expanded in terms of membership, school coverage and time spent with students. At present recruitment of new advisers is mainly done via word of mouth, but some marketing material to pass on to prospective candidates would be useful. Their contribution will also need to be sustained over many years for a sea change in attitudes to emerge. However, it may be facilitated to some degree by the new obligation for all schools to have a dedicated careers adviser.
- Find Your Future trial of students/apprentices 'speed dating' event at St Bernard's School in July represents a start along this road: Year 8 and 9 students sat down with apprentices and managers from different employers around Rotherham for 10 minutes each, to find out how the recruitment happened and what sort of work is involved for each apprentice/employer. Although a relatively small number of companies are involved at present (there were 17 at this first pilot session), it seemed to work successfully. Discussions are currently afoot about how the model can be resourced and administered so it can be rolled out more widely. One important aspect would be to sign up more employers who can provide apprentices or other trainees to share their experiences. The rationale could be framed much more in terms of how the school might benefit - the argument being that middle-ranking students would be more committed in terms of achieving good exam results if their ambitions have been inspired by exposure to appealing work and career possibilities.
- It would seem to be worthwhile to increase the scale and extent to which employers and training providers have direct engagement with schools, especially with a view to dispelling myths about what particular types of work involve. For example, raised awareness of the range of job types involved in construction and engineering ("not just hard hats and using tools") should help more pupils consider them seriously as a career choice. Similar misapprehension appears to abound with regard to apprenticeships (see above), so a full roll-out of the 'Find Your Future' model would help towards addressing such misconceptions. Other initiatives like the events run by the LEAF project are also invaluable, but may need to occur more frequently to spread the messages as widely as possible.

Recruitment and Skills Development

- Skills shortages - and associated recruitment difficulties - are apparent in traditional industries, most notably construction and engineering. These are a reflection of national trends, not just a local issue. This means that there is heightened employer awareness of the shortfall, and consequent willingness to contribute to finding a solution.
- Tapping into those who are currently unemployed or inactive might generate a few recruits, but the majority of people in this position tend to lack the basic skills and/or the aptitude. While some employers want to do their bit for economic inclusion, they face a clear tension between meeting such CSR goals and taking on people who are able to do the jobs required efficiently and effectively.
- Most job vacancy information and application channels are now available only via the internet. Sources tend to be fairly disparate, so would merit some form of consolidation (on a Rotherham and surrounding area - or SCR - basis). Those facing difficulties in terms of digital know-how, access and language skills are placed at a further disadvantage. Many employers appear to be avoiding JCP's Universal Jobmatch system because of the weekly targets imposed on claimants has resulted in an inundation of inappropriate applications.
- Large scale recruitment exercises do still occur from time to time, especially linked to opening of new or expanded plant or premises (e.g., the Pretty Little Things warehouse). There could be more consistency in efforts to ensure that the take-up of these opportunities by Rotherham residents is maximised.
- In the public sector the prolonged freeze on recruitment is gradually bringing the question of succession planning into sharper relief, as highly skilled and specialist staff reach or approach retirement age. One approach to addressing this is having a defined career and training pathway for apprentices and lower level staff. There are clear potential links here between this planning and the various types of accredited and bespoke training that are currently emerging.
- The courses offered by the soon to open UCR should play a part in meeting these needs, and SHU and University of Sheffield's Future Leaders Programme should also see more graduates staying in the locality, although there remains a feeling that the reasons for the 'brain drain' are still not properly understood. Again, direct liaison with a wider range of local employers - especially the larger ones - will be crucial in making the new degree level provision effective.
- A focus on upgrading the skills and qualifications of existing employees should arguably assist higher staff retention for local firms. However, meeting such needs will require continued dialogue between the various players, so that graduates acquire the relevant knowledge and skills, and employers accept that subsequent role-specific training may well be needed to build on this base. They will also have to adopt a longer-term perspective to developing their skills base, so that it can fit with the timing constraints inherent in launching and running further and higher education

courses. Equally the UCR and FE colleges should aim to work as flexibly as possible to meet employers' stated training needs.

- There is a clear awareness on the part of most providers that the off-site training element of the current apprenticeship model requires a consultative approach where employers have considerable scope to shape the programme to their own needs, in contrast to the old 'take it or leave it' transactional offerings. The same model has become imbued in provision designed to upgrade the skill levels of existing staff of employers such as the NHS.

Integrating Disadvantaged Groups

- Welfare reform has had the effect of excluding some people from the system, with many now getting by with the help of friends and family, with many hidden homeless and other hard-up people merely focusing on day-to-day survival rather than anything more aspirational like finding a paid job. However, there is no clarity yet on the number involved. (NB. More on this should emerge from our parallel work on Universal Credit roll-out and statistical analysis).
- SYHA is doing a lot of work with tenants, helping them find and retain employment - and employer liaison and outreach plays a big part in this. However, some tenants remain resistant to this, mainly on the grounds of reputation/legitimacy ("what does a housing provider know about getting a job?"). There also remains a question of how many people benefit from this activity, and whether it needs to be scaled up so that it has a bigger (more measurable) impact.
- Women and other returners to the labour market face the twin challenge of outdated skills (especially around digital awareness and ability) and relatively low confidence in their ability to adjust to a modern workplace setting. Putting in place more low level practical assistance would help overcome such barriers. Women returners - key issues here are around confidence in terms of presentation (not just communication but also the right clothes for the workplace) and skills/knowledge being out of date. While it's not hard to devise methods to overcome these, they don't seem to be available on a systematic or easy-to-find basis.
- There may be career development opportunities that can be opened up, especially for those who have taken time out to provide unpaid care for a family member or other relative. The Royal College of Nursing has developed a care certificate which validates the skills acquired through the experiences of providing home care. The idea is this can then act as a launch pad for entering accredited training and paid employment in social care (with potential progression into other areas of health) for those whose care responsibilities have ended. This model is being followed in Barnsley, and could be applied in Rotherham as well. However, given the funding shortfalls and relatively low wage levels in the health and social care sector there are challenges in attracting recruits in competition with other sectors such as retail.

- Among black and minority ethnic (BAME) populations there is a minority who face difficulties in finding employment, some because of limited spoken and written English, and others because their overseas qualifications are not recognised. For the former, there is some ESOL provision but it can be quite costly if you don't qualify for support; for the latter, there do not seem to be many readily available conversion mechanisms (and those that do exist can be very costly, with no means of providing financial support). As with many of the issues identified, both of these are nationwide rather than Rotherham-specific problems.
- One example quoted was recruitment of a substantial number of Roma via an agency to work in a warehouse in Doncaster, with a couple of the better educated members acting as foremen and intermediaries with management. While this provides immediate work and income by obviating the language barrier, it may only be a short-term solution.
- For certain excluded groups like certain Asian women and Roma there is a need for positive role models to encourage and inspire others from their communities to try to build a more prosperous life for them and their families. This works best when their achievements have grown in some way out of their cultural background (catering, fashion, hair styling, music/dance, etc.), and hence can be seen as accessible and relevant. There may be scope here to convert these to small businesses or social enterprises to put them on a firmer footing. One suggestion was to encourage property owners to allow shorter-term lets of empty property in the town centre for people to try out their ideas and plans.
- The network of employers who are willing to offer work experience tasters and placements remains relatively small. Efforts to help it grow would enable more people to be assisted through such valuable but less committing return routes. Clearly participants would be expected to demonstrate a certain level of technical competence and commitment, and in some cases this might result in direct recruitment into a permanent post. Even where this does not occur, gaining a reference or recommendation as a result of the time spent should be helpful in applying for other jobs.

Health and disability

- The number of employers who understand how to accommodate people with multiple or different needs as employees appears to be limited at present, particularly around the need for appropriate job design and a supportive working environment. There seems to be a dual fear of costly specialist equipment and adaptations on the one hand, and higher absenteeism or permanent staff loss for health-related reasons on the other. Those who have taken on workers with different types of disability suggest that both of these concerns are largely overstated. One issue is getting employers to develop a better understanding of people with multiple needs, in terms of accessing and staying in work. Some activity in this direction - e.g., through the employer outreach element of the WorkingWin trial - is making a valuable contribution to this, but appears to be relatively piecemeal at present.

- There is also a lack of work experience openings for people with learning difficulties, physical disabilities and other health conditions. Any involvement on the part of an employer appears to result from some form of personal knowledge or experience. Even then, it requires exceptional courage and commitment on their part to go down this road. It is important that both recruit and employer are not left unsupported to deal with any difficulties that arise. One suggestion to help increase the number of employers involved is to offer some form of incentive to take on and arrange appropriate skills training for candidates from this group, but the likely impact of this remains uncertain.
- Wider promotion of the nationwide 'Disability Confident' status for private and public sector employers alike - perhaps as part of the Workplace Health Awards - would help in terms of integrating many disadvantaged residents into the workplace. Given its current involvement in a range of activities around this agenda, RMBC is well placed to take a lead on this. The benefits to employers would be best couched in terms of the greater commitment and loyalty shown by most disabled recruits, and the consequent lower rates of absenteeism and staff turnover.
- There appears to be scope for further development of the social prescribing approach to initiate reintegration of long-term unemployed and inactive residents, building confidence and self-esteem via participation in activities with others, and plugging into networks in the process. Adding a work-specific element to the system (e.g., via the involvement of employers, training providers, etc.) would provide an easily accessible bridge for those who felt ready to make the transition.

Other barriers

- The quality of public transport provision for getting to work is patchy, depending on where you live in relation to workplace location. Much employment is in relatively peripheral places and may require two or more bus journeys, involving fairly high fares at peak times, and infrequent (and sometimes unreliable) service patterns for those working unsocial hours. The Supertram extension to the town will provide another link to retail employment at Meadowhall, but the lack of any intermediate stops will not help to improve access to the industrial estates in between. Encouraging as many employers as possible to develop comprehensive workforce travel plans which could help prospective recruits in particular would be a positive step in ameliorating these constraints. One possibility here might be to include learning to drive as part of an apprenticeship contract: some construction firms are already exploring this option as a means of helping with access to different building sites. At an earlier stage, some form of travel training as part of careers provision in schools would be worth exploring.
- Related to travel issues is the accessibility of certain College courses following the merger into RNN - for example, plastering courses are now run at Dearne Valley and not elsewhere, deterring those living in the southern parts of the Borough from pursuing any ambition in this direction.
- Occupational stereotyping can also close off possible options for many young people, stemming not just from parental but also social peer influences. Some schools are

good at countering this, but the overriding focus on academic achievement in most means that the issue is seldom addressed by most.

Skills and employment policy

- Compared to five years ago the scale of resources available - and hence the breadth of provision for those outside the labour market - appears to be far lower. This is not just a matter of Borough Council expenditure reductions, but also less generous European and Lottery programmes. The latter's investment in the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) scheme in the Borough means that it is reluctant to fund other forms of employability support in the area. Linked to this has been the increased dominance of a few large players in the system, and a contraction of niche opportunities for specialist providers, for example around a lack of adequate resources (and associated affordability issues) for courses in basic literacy and numeracy and ESOL. This makes 'scaling up' to meet the full extent of the issues very difficult.
- That said, the governance web for skills, employment and economic inclusion in the Borough is fairly dense, with a lot of fruitful connections in place, but there are parts of it where there could be better coordination. This includes involvement of a much wider spectrum of employers, and the linking of them directly with further/higher education and training providers. Conversations between the key players are taking place but there is still some way to go in terms of reconciling their different needs and priorities.
- There are a number of uncertain features of the current policy landscape, partly associated with the hiatus around the proposed SCR Devolution Deal (and the linked devolution of control over the £27million adult education budget, due in 2021), and partly related to funding bids for specific initiatives which may or may not receive approval (e.g., the £120m investment in a 'global innovation corridor' for SCR).
- Treating the skills and employment arena as a continuum stretching from low skilled entry level to higher level advanced manufacturing and professional occupations would help to emphasise the opportunities available in the Borough, especially in relation to the integration and progression of young people, the unemployed and the inactive. There is also greater scope to encourage existing employees to consider upskilling as part of their career development beyond those firms and organisations which have already identified the need.
- The emerging digital-based Workplace Health Award could be a possible way of making initial contact with a larger number of employers, with a view to bringing them into the skills training and employability framework in the Borough. This could act as a gateway into other avenues such as joint working with schools, the colleges and training providers. Mutual appreciation of the respective situations of teachers and employers would seem to require some kind of forum for discussions to take place, with an emphasis on developing practical actions that might begin to bridge some of the gaps.

- This approach may also be used to develop a more collective approach to meeting individual firms' needs (where they would be unlikely to take such steps on their own). For example, the establishment of an Apprenticeship Hub (as in Greater Manchester) would involve the pooling of apprentices between firms in the same sector. This should then allow a greater number of firms to gain some benefit from paying the Levy, even though they might not be able to justify or support a trainee for the full two years. However, to gain full economies of scale (not to mention the permissible basis on which the Levy might be pooled), this initiative would probably have to cover the whole of South Yorkshire or even SCR.
- Labour market participation (work trials, placements, training, job search, etc.) should be seen as just one part of the process, with a lot of different preparatory activities put in place as a precursor or launching pad. Other public sector employers (e.g., the NHS) might be persuaded to follow the Borough Council's 'Access All Areas' model, which provides placements and trials for disabled and disadvantaged jobseekers in spheres such as business administration, grounds maintenance, buildings repair, street cleaning, etc. At the same time it should also be recognised that certain participants may never progress to paid employment, but that this is seldom predictable at the outset, and for those who do not engage with the labour market they may still be able to lead enhanced lives.