



# maximus

## 'Over and Above':

the added value of employment support services

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## Foreword by Gareth Parry

In today's labour market the need for specialist, tailored employment support services has never been greater. Economic inactivity is the current watchword for government, policymakers and business with over 8 million of the working age population currently being classed as economically inactive, which includes over 2 million people as a result of ill health. And whether it's factors like ill health, age profile or skills gaps that are causing people to be outside of the workplace, behind every statistic lies a personal story that demands a personalised approach that could change the course of someone's life. Dedicated employment programmes such as the Restart Scheme and the Work and Health Programme have successfully helped hundreds of thousands of people into work in recent years. Maximus has significant experience of delivering these programmes on a daily basis and we are passionate about the societal impact that is being realised through them. Given the current economic challenges and the demands being placed on the labour market there is a need for a greater

understanding about what can be done to ensure that more people can be steered to a solution that is right for them.

Unless you are signed up to an employment programme or operate one, you are unlikely to be across the ins and outs of this type of provision. The advantage that we have as one of the largest providers of this kind of support, not just here in the UK but globally, is that we do understand just how much of a difference it can make to someone seeking work. We know that there is a real method to the design, implementation and delivery of employment support that can ensure an individual receives the targeted interventions that their situation demands.

Inside we evidence this. Through a programme of research and a series of focus groups with our Employment Advisers on the Restart Scheme and Work and Health Programme we have been able to crystallise the benefits that dedicated employment support services like our own are able to provide. If I could sum this

up in a sentence, what we do is go over and above the standard services that a participant might find in their local JobCentre Plus (JCP) to give them the unique, personalised support they require to rebuild and re-enter the workplace.

None of what we do would be possible without our dedicated team of Employment Advisers. They are the first point of contact for participants and it is through their knowledge, expertise and care that our mission of transforming lives is made possible. Moreover, at Maximus, we have a unique Community Partnership Network, made up of the best of public, private and voluntary sector provision, that our Employment Advisers are able to draw upon to ensure that participants receive the personalised support that is right for them. There are now over 400 quality, locally based providers, working with us to deliver targeted and outcome-driven employability solutions through our CPN.

Employment support services are working daily, round the clock to help people back into work. It's what we do, it's what we know, it's what we are good at. However I am passionate in believing that we and the wider sector could offer even more. If we were able to reach those economically inactive groups who are currently outside of the remit of JCP, we could offer this excellent, personalised support to a wider range of people and immediately help to grow the labour market. This I am sure is a goal that everyone - government, policymakers and employers - can agree is in urgent need of realising.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G Parry', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Programme Director, Employability Division  
**Gareth Parry**

# Exploring the added value of employment support services

Work is a central pillar of many people's lives, impacting on health, wealth and wellbeing. It's vital for society, with employment a cornerstone of a thriving economy and healthy nation. Moreover, there is scarcely any aspect of government policy which does not intersect with employment in some way, whether this be through education, health, or transport. In supporting a healthy labour market there are countless agencies and organisations who play a part.

Maximus has over 75 years' experience of delivering employment support services. We currently partner with central and devolved government on a range of employment programmes across the country. This includes DWP's flagship Restart Scheme, which offers enhanced support to help people who are unemployed find work; and the Work and Health Programme which offers specialist employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions.

## Maximus has over 70 years' experience of delivering employment support services.

Organisations directly involved in the employment support sector share a common goal of helping people into sustainable paid jobs. Yet even within this employability ecosystem, there are different roles that we play. For many people, employment support is initially accessed through JobCentre Plus (JCP) as the central government agency. This is then sometimes complemented by employment programmes which offer additional targeted support to those who need it.

While the distinctions between these offers are well understood by academics, policymakers and those with experience in the sector, a wider understanding is arguably less prevalent.

With this in mind, we recently carried out some research to explore in more detail the support offered through dedicated employment programmes.

Concentrating on the views of those at the front-line of delivery, we carried out a series of semi-structured focus groups with two cohorts:

- our own front-line Employment Advisers (EAs) who had previous experience working in JCP;<sup>1</sup>
- participants on two employment support programmes (the Restart Scheme and the Work and Health Programme).<sup>2</sup>

The groups discussed their perceptions of what is offered through employment programmes and the additional value our sector provides.

From these focus groups, five key themes emerged, demonstrating where employment service providers offer a really distinctive service and set of benefits.



### 1. Our focus and expertise

### 2. Investing time

### 3. Developing trusted relationships

### 4. Delivering personalised support

### 5. Creating the right environment

<sup>1</sup> 10 of our Employment Advisers took part  
<sup>2</sup> 16 Restart participants; 19 Work and Health Programme participants

# 1. Our focus and expertise

Employment support providers are focused upon the delivery of specialist services, and they possess the expertise and experience to deliver successful outcomes. In terms of a participant's journey through the system, JCP has a critical remit covering the administration of Universal Credit and other working-age benefits, as well as helping with job searching and vacancy advertising. Work Coaches, as JCP front-line advisers, typically meet claimants once a week for the first three months and then every fortnight, to carry out work search reviews, assist with finding jobs, and then refer or signpost people to additional services as needed.<sup>3</sup> For many jobseekers, particularly the short-term unemployed, the lighter-touch assistance from JCP is all that is needed to successfully find work. For people with more complex needs, however, a deeper level of support is required. This is where specialist employment support comes in,

and across the programmes and services we deliver, we provide tailored, holistic support to participants to learn new skills, overcome barriers, and secure meaningful employment.

Delivering programmes through providers in partnership with government, has also been established as an effective model, with expertise, innovation, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness among the advantages our sector offers.<sup>4</sup> The recent report on the Restart Scheme by the National Audit Office (NAO) similarly found that providers offered more 'intensive and structured' support, designed to more systematically identify and overcome the barriers participants face.<sup>5</sup>

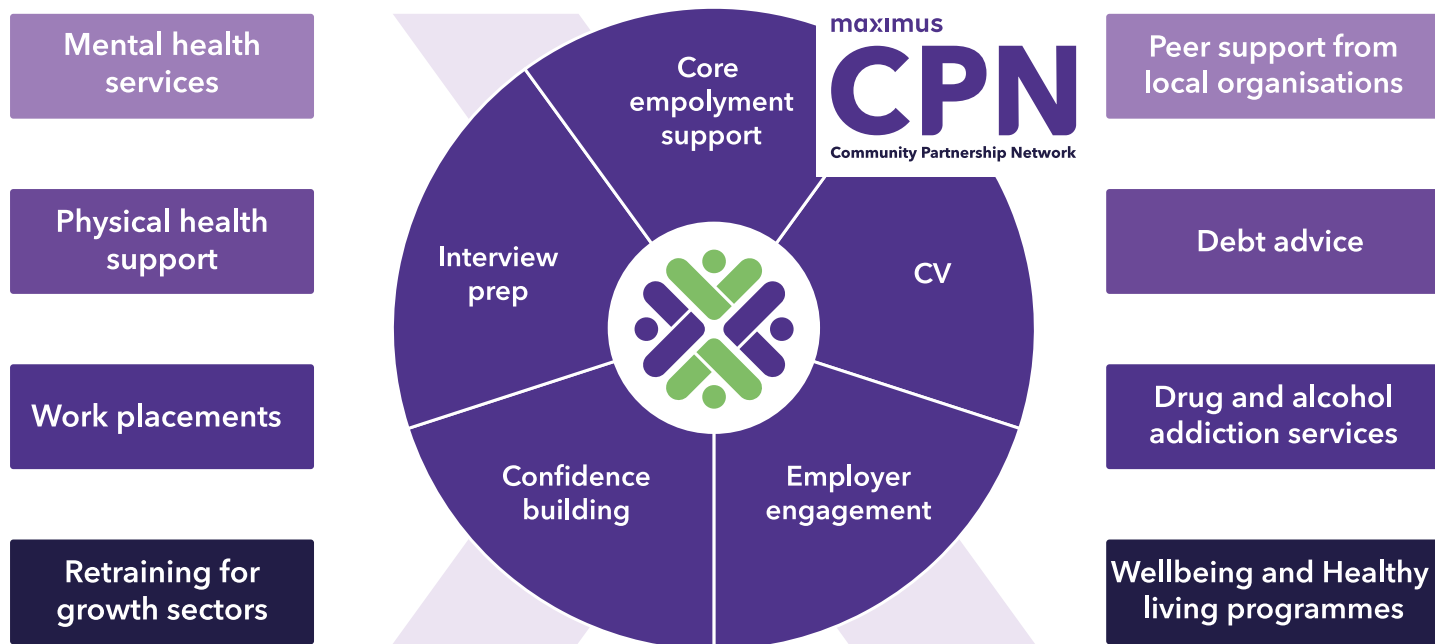
The feedback from our EA focus groups reflects this, with agreement that their role is devoted to identifying the barriers our participants face and putting in place whatever

help is needed to overcome them. This is greatly aided by quick and easy access to the wide range of services offered through organisations in our Community Partnership Network (CPN), allowing EAs to holistically address participants' barriers. EAs stressed this focus as being fundamentally different to the role of the Work Coach, involving different processes and requiring different expertise.

Having a dedicated provider, separate from the wider remit of JCP, was also noted as important by the participant focus groups. Participants felt that we really understood their needs, however complex, including those related to health and disability. Feedback praised the range of support people had received to identify and overcome barriers and work towards employment.

*“ I help get people into work, but it also feels like here we address every barrier a person has.”*<sup>6</sup>

*“ I can sit with my participants, and we can draw up a CV and apply for jobs together.”*<sup>7</sup>



Numerous examples of effective interventions, such as collaborative CV writing, job searching clubs, interview preparation, and training courses, were positively evoked.

Crucially for the participants, these were all properly targeted, reflecting what was needed to progress towards the kind of employment that they wanted, and which worked for them. They also laid the foundations for long-term employability by developing confidence and the skills required to secure work in the future. Several participants commented on the 'wow' moment in their journey, when after a range of interventions, they realised they were ready to enter into work.

A further distinction is that our support extends beyond this. Participants are supported into jobs, through engagement with employers, preparation for interviews, and guidance through any recruitment process. We then also provide in-work support, helping people gain security and stability as they commence in their new role.

<sup>3</sup> NAO (2021) Employment Support: Department for Work & Pensions. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Employment-support.pdf>  
<sup>4</sup> See for example, Finn, D. (2018) The role, organisation, and services of the British Public Employment Service - Jobcentre Plus. International Labour Organisation, pp. 36-7. Available at (PDF) The role, organisation, and services of the British Public Employment Service - Jobcentre Plus (researchgate.net)  
<sup>5</sup> NAO (2022) The Restart Scheme for long-term unemployed people: Department for Work & Pensions, p. 7. Available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/the-restart-scheme-for-long-term-unemployed-people.pdf>

## 2. Investing time

Reflecting this fundamental distinction in purpose is the amount of time our EAs are able to spend working with participants. The link between the time advisers spend with participants, reflected in caseload, and the effectiveness of support has been internationally recognised.<sup>8</sup> In JCP, Work Coaches typically meet with claimants for 10 minutes a fortnight.<sup>9</sup> While this can prove entirely sufficient for the majority of jobseekers, for those with barriers, more time is needed, and this is where specialist employment support providers are vital. As the NAO noted in its recent report into Restart, providers do offer more time to participants.<sup>10</sup> This is typically a minimum 30-minute appointment, though there is flexibility to extend as needed. On more specialist employment support programmes – for groups with more significant barriers to employment – engagement can be more intensive, whether face-to-face or over the phone.

<sup>8</sup> Finn, D. (2018), p. 47.  
<sup>9</sup> NAO (2021), p. 9.  
<sup>10</sup> NAO (2022), p. 7.



Feedback from the focus groups stressed the importance of this additional time. It allows our advisers to have meaningful discussions with participants and really understand their barriers, motivations and skills. It enables them to properly assess which interventions will provide each participant with the best support. Our EAs were clear that they feel they have the time, and autonomy to be flexible with this, to provide effective support. This was also recognised by our participants, with frequent references made to the benefits of the time available with their adviser. Participants agreed that this allowed them to be at ease, rather than under pressure; to feel valued as individuals; and to feel that they were really listened to and understood.

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*You have more time which makes such a difference.*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> EA focus group comment

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*I can spend half an hour, or even an hour with participants, and you can use the time to do what you need to do to help people.*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> EA focus group comment



### 3. Developing trusted relationships

The time spent with each participant also enables the kind of relationships which generate real results to develop. Put simply, our EAs really get to know their participants. This means that they can get a deeper understanding of what people's barriers to employment are - including those which may not appear directly related to finding work. They can gain clarity on people's motivations and interests, as well as draw out relevant skills and experience which participants may not be aware of themselves. As a result, EAs can target interventions effectively, providing support which is appropriate and will really help.

The importance of these 'trusted relationships' has recently been highlighted by the Institute for Social Innovation and Impact as a critical factor in securing successful outcomes for those furthest from the job market.<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in the feedback we received from EAs, who noted that as trust develops, participants feel able to have more open and honest discussions about the real, often hidden, barriers they face, and are more receptive to advice and support.

Participants themselves reported that it was a real benefit to have a consistent, dedicated adviser who was contactable and that they could trust was there to help them. This was especially important to those with complex barriers and those who had been unemployed for a long time. Participants described the relief of not having to keep repeating their experiences and advocating for their needs again and again. These trusted relationships were also highlighted as a necessity for any discussion of sensitive issues, such as addiction - a finding which chimes with those from a DWP research report on the importance of safe spaces for such conversations.<sup>14</sup>



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*It's that trust that you build...you can really build those relationships and when somebody trusts you, they know that you're doing what's right for them.*<sup>15</sup>  
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15 EA focus group comment

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*I really get to know participants which helps me understand how to help them.*<sup>16</sup>  
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16 EA focus group comment

13 Paterson-Young, C. & Hazenberg, R. (2022) 'Does the past dictate the future?' Journal of Education and Work. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13639080.2022.2092603>

14 DWP (2021) An evaluation of the Group Work (XDBS II) Trial: process evaluation technical report, pp. 80-83. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1003584/process-evaluation-technical-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1003584/process-evaluation-technical-report.pdf)

## 4. Delivering personalised support

In addition to providing specialist support to address barriers, we can also tailor how this is delivered. Feedback from both participants and our EAs stressed the importance of personalising the approach, which can take a variety of forms. This includes providing personalised support to individuals or cohorts, such as funding for training courses that participants need for a job they are working towards, or help with interview clothing and preparation for a specific job role. It applies equally to how participants access and engage with us. This is particularly important for those with physical or mental health conditions, for whom the requirements of job seeking can easily become an additional source of anxiety and stress.<sup>17</sup>

Comments from the participant focus groups demonstrate that even small adjustments can make a real difference, whether it is holding initial meetings in a coffee shop where

someone feels more comfortable, providing a quiet space for a private discussion, or arranging appointments around childcare. The point was made again and again that being treated as an individual, and understood as a 'whole person', was an empowering element in delivery.

The focus groups provided further evidence of the additional social value our sector generates, illustrating how our colleagues really do go above and beyond every day to help participants. Examples we heard about include EAs regularly helping people register with a dentist, access a food bank, or order a school uniform. Such help can too easily be overlooked, yet we know that this can support wider change which transforms lives, families and communities. Our advisers were equally clear that the flexibility to help with these issues can also help unlock progress and generate tangible outcomes.

17 Stewart A. and Wright S. (2018). Final Findings: Jobseekers, Welfare Conditionality. Available at <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/40426-Jobseekers-web.pdf>

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*I'm afforded so much flexibility to help my customers the way I think is best.<sup>18</sup>*

18 EA focus group comment

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*I can offer people the help they need, which makes my job much more satisfying.<sup>19</sup>*

19 EA focus group comment

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## 5. Creating the right environment

Our branches and offices are deliberately designed to create the right environment for participants to achieve and progress. The feedback from our focus groups indicates that this makes a significant difference. On one level this relates to the physical space, with open plan, light and bright offices, additional rooms for privacy, and no formal or visible security presence. Participants sit side-by-side with an adviser with the computer screen visible to both. The focus groups universally agreed the provider environment was pleasant, with additional emphasis placed on the positive 'buzz' from branches, where they could see and hear people being helped and feel part of a larger team. That it contributed to a collaborative approach, with services delivered 'with' participants rather than 'to' them, was also stressed. EAs further highlighted that the physical layout helps to foster teamwork and a sense of productive positivity, with all colleagues invested in helping each participant.

Equally important is what is done to create a warm, friendly, and welcoming atmosphere. Participant feedback is a testament to the success of our colleagues in ensuring this is the case. Branches were praised for being genuinely welcoming, with a 'family' feel. The friendliness of colleagues, refreshments offered, and relaxed atmosphere were all mentioned as factors helping participants feel valued and at ease.

This was compared with the environment offered by JCP, which by necessity has a different set-up with constant security presence. There is also a fundamental association between JCP and the payment of benefits and potential sanctions - widely recognised as a persistent stigma for both job seekers and employers.<sup>20</sup> Participants agreed that it was beneficial to have a separate environment, which focused on employment and created a 'safe space' dedicated solely to exploring options for moving into work.



### Supporting the over 50s

The challenge of supporting the over 50s back into employment is a pressing issue for the UK. A significant number of the participant focus groups were within this cohort. While the overall findings of this report are therefore relevant for their journeys back into the workforce, there were some key points raised that made a real difference to supporting the over 50s:

- A friendly and welcoming environment is crucial to engagement and building confidence.
- Real importance is attached to having a distinct employment support service, perceived as somewhere to retrain and access new jobs, free from associations with benefits and the welfare system.
- Employment support needs to be underpinned by a genuine understanding of complex barriers including health and disability.
- A benefit of having time with EAs is to enable a full understanding and assessment of what can be a wide range of existing skills and experience.
- Personalising support is vital both in reflecting participants' circumstances and in targeting the skills and development they need.

Such points support the conclusions of the recent research carried out by the ReAct Partnership on improving employment outcomes for the over 50s.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Winton, A. & Subosa, M. (2023) Improving Employment Programme Outcomes for Over 50s. ReAct Partnership. Available at: <https://ersa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Improving-ES-Programme-Outcomes-for-over-50s-FINAL-January-23.pdf>

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*Our branch is open and easy for people, and they really respond to that.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> EA focus group comment

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*Here we have a relaxed and social environment.<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> EA focus group comment

<sup>20</sup> Jones, K. & Carson, C. (2023) Universal Credit and Employers. Manchester Metropolitan University, p. 36. Available at: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/UniversalCreditandEmployersFinalReportJan2023.pdf>



## Conclusions – ‘Over and Above’

Employment support services are a vital component in the wider employability ecosystem. Both JCP and providers of employability support are working every day to achieve a common purpose: to help people into paid employment. What is perhaps less well understood is the added value that employment support providers and their services bring. By exploring the perceptions of those closest to front-line delivery, this research has set out to illuminate this.

Our project has shown five key areas where providers go ‘over and above’ the JCP offer to support those with barriers into employment.

- 1** We focus on providing a distinct form of employment support and have the experience and expertise to deliver it.
- 2** We invest the time required in each participant to engage and support them.
- 3** By developing real, trusted relationships, we work with people to understand what they need to help them move forward.
- 4** We personalise how we deliver this support to suit people’s needs, circumstances and ambitions.
- 5** We provide a welcoming environment where people feel safe to explore how they can move into employment.

The need for genuinely holistic employment support has never been greater than it is today. Throughout this project, we heard our EAs talk about the pride they feel from being able to really help people, and participants speak about the difference this makes to their lives. Maximus is proud to play its part in delivering these vital services and transforming the lives of the participants who work with us.



‘Throughout this project, we heard our EAs talk about the pride they feel from being able to really help people, and participants speak about the difference this makes to their lives’.



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