Leeds Mind: Working Minds
Programme Evaluation Report

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The Working Minds Employability Programme at Leeds Mind

1. Introduction

This is an evaluation of the Working Minds employability programme run by Leeds Mind.

Working Minds in Leeds is a city-wide project specialising in supporting people with poor mental health in their journey back to employment. The programme offers a range of resources and support mechanisms, including information, advice and guidance, job clubs focusing on work preparation, volunteering, one-to-one counselling and mentoring, work placements, benefits and money management advice, post-employment support and mental health awareness training for employers.

The Research Toolkit Limited was commissioned in November 2009 by Working Minds to evaluate the programme, and through this to tell the story of the Working Minds participants' experiences of the support it offered. How has Working Minds helped you in practice? Could it have offered greater or different support? What would your world look like without Working Minds there to help you?

This is the report of that evaluation. As well as the accounts and stories participants themselves gave to us, it also reports on other data sets, including the outcomes of a survey of employers who worked with the Working Minds team, and of Working Minds Board members.

It is a feature of our society that the misfortunes of the individual often need to be measured in broader economic terms before intervention becomes a reality. Mental illness is no exception to this, and studies place the cost of poor mental health to the Yorkshire and Humber economy possibly as high as £6.4 billion annually, which is approximately 8% of the region's GDP.[1]

People with long-term mental illness are less likely to be at work than other disabled people, and considerably less likely to be at work than the UK adult population overall: the Labour Force Survey of 2006, for instance, showed that only 21% of people with long-term mental health problems were in work, compared with 47% of all disabled people, and 74% of the adult UK population overall.[2]

Evidence shows that the mental illness brings additional economic hardship for sufferers, including debt. Indeed, one report highlighted the existence of a "debt cycle", in which being in debt increases the likelihood of mental illness, whilst being mentally ill can increase the likelihood of falling into debt.[3] Working Minds is one attempt to break this cycle and to help people with poor mental health feel their way back into employment, or sustain existing jobs.

The importance of the relationship between mental illness and work has been recognised by Government policy. The Layard report demonstrated a need to improve the labour market position of people with mental health problems[4], which, as the Labour Force Survey figures show, is poor, and in 2007 the Departments of Health and Work and Pensions agreed to work together to develop a national strategy on mental health and work.[5]

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[1] Lindsey K and Francis S, 'The costs of poor mental health in Yorkshire and the Humber', unpublished report, October 2008.
[2] Labour Force Survey, Office of National Statistics, 2006.
[3] *In the red: debt and mental health*, MIND, 2008
[4] Layard, R. *Mental Health: Britain's biggest social problem*, 2004.
[5] See, for instance, Alan Johnson's Commons speech about the initiative at http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Speeches/DH_078397.

History of Working Minds

Working Minds began as a comparatively small-scale pilot in August 2007, funded by the Leeds Access to Employment Programme and employing two caseworkers to provide unpaid voluntary sector work placements for benefits claimants with mental health problems in the Chapeltown, Harehills and Hyde Park areas of Leeds.

Caseworkers also developed work focused mentoring partnerships.

Through its first three months, the project successfully delivered the following outcomes:

- Seven beneficiaries offered unpaid work placements.
- 12 mentoring partnerships established, seven of them work focused.
- 28 beneficiaries received skills support.
- A total of 35 work placement opportunities, with 16 voluntary sector organisations.
- 16 people underwent the project's two-day mentoring training.

In November 2007 the project team successfully applied to round two of the Access to Employment programme for funding to roll Working Minds out across the city.

The second phase of Working Minds, which forms the subject of this evaluation, was in partnership with Community Links, Touchstone, Leeds City Council, St Anne's Community Services, Leeds Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust, and Leeds Mind. This time the project specifically targeted people with mental health problems who had been receiving incapacity benefit for two years or longer from across the city of Leeds.

Stringent outcome targets were set for the two years of the project, which covered 2008 to 2010. These were:

Direct Outputs	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Mandatory:			
Employment support – no. of people supported towards employment	250	200	450
No. of people into employment	50	30	80
No. of gross new jobs created	5.75	2	7.75
Business support – no. of employers supported (minimum of 4 hours support)	20	30	50
Skills – no. of people assisted in their skills development	250	200	450
No. of people gaining an accredited qualification	40	35	75
Other:			
No. of people completing a tailored back-to-work plan	250	200	450
No. of referrals to Job Centre Plus funded provision	60	45	105
No. of referrals to LSC funded provision	50	35	85
No. of people assisted to access complementary/other support	80	60	120
No. of people receiving post employment support (minimum of 26 weeks).	50	15	65
Other Outcomes			
No. of people completing unpaid work placements (minimum 6	60	60	120

weeks)			
No. of people attending Self-help Group (minimum of 4 sessions)	30	20	50
No. of people receiving benefit and debt advice	40	25	65
No. of people attending Working Minds "Jobclub"	100	140	240

(Note: Year 2 targets were renegotiated during Year 1).

The project also outlined soft outcomes, including increased confidence levels, increased social networking and improved mental and physical health.

Evaluation method

We have constructed this evaluation using data gathered from two separate focus group sessions with a total of 12 participants, which were supplemented by one-to-one interviews and storytelling sessions, including with one woman who is currently in work as a result of the programme.

Interview subjects included eight women and four men, with a representative range of ages and ethnicities. Interviews were recorded either with digital audio or video, or both, and the transcripts of these conversations have been fed back to form the evidence base for this evaluation.

Coding of data was left open to catch themes as they emerged. Interviews were conducted using instruments designed in part by the participants, through post-it note sessions, to identify the areas of Working Minds that service users themselves felt should form the subject of our investigations.

Interviews were conducted using an appreciative approach. Appreciative enquiry centres on the role of the evaluator as a critical friend, something that relies on a constructive relationship between ourselves and the Working Minds participants we spoke with. From this perspective, participants' direct involvement in the design of our instruments inculcated a sense of joint ownership, and was a crucial feature in developing that constructive relationship.[6]

We conducted our own, small-scale survey of Working Minds' partners, and of those employers who had participated in the project's mental health awareness training. Separately to this, we surveyed members of the project's Board to assess their perceptions of the effectiveness of the programme. We also had access to, and report, on the results of Working Mind's self-evaluation of its MHA training, and of its survey of its own participants in February 2009.

The outcomes of the evaluation are reported in three sections. Firstly, we report on the results of the various surveys of employers (both those who partner Working Minds, and those who have benefited from their mental health awareness training), Board members and participants. Secondly, we report on our work with Working Minds participants themselves, and identify where common themes and experiences have appeared. Finally, we report our conclusions and outline some recommendations for further development in the future.

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[6] See, for instance, Preskill, H & Tzavaras Catsambas, T. *Reframing evaluation through appreciative inquiry*. Sage. 2006.

2. Quantitative outcomes and survey results

2.1 Working Minds data sets, summary

As part of our evaluation, the Working Minds team provided us with the most up-to-date output figures available (March 2010). These are reproduced below.

Outputs & Outcomes - Mandatory	Total per Funding Agreement		Actual to end of March 2010
1. Job Creation: Number of Jobs Created or Safeguarded	7.75		7.75
2. Employment Support: Number of people supported towards employment	450		197
3. Business Support: Number of businesses/employers supported	50		40
4. Number of people supported into employment	80		14

Outputs and Outcomes - Leeds District	Total Per Funding Agreement		Actual to end of March 2010
5. People gaining an accredited qualification	75		29
6. People completing tailored back to work plan	450		197
7. Referrals to Jobcentre Plus provision	105		42
8. Referrals to LSC provision	85		55
9. New mentoring partnerships established	15		0
10. People receiving post-employment support	65		13
11. People completing unpaid work placements	120		59
12. People receiving benefit and debt advice	65		31
13. People attending self-help group	30		37
14. People attending Working Minds "jobclub"	240		96

Although our remit is one of evaluation, not monitoring, some of the trends that appear in these outputs resonate with the themes that have emerged from the evaluation itself, and are worth exploring in a little detail.

The first clear observation is that the outputs agreed as part of the bidding process, and subsequently renegotiated and reduced for Year 2 of the project in 2009, were still too ambitious for this particular client group. For instance, looking at the Number of People Supported Towards Employment (item 2), the project team was surprised to find that the

turnover of participants was much lower than expected, and that people often remained within Working Minds for six to twelve months, or even longer.

For some outputs, such as People Supported into Employment (item 4), the project team learned through practice that success can be a much longer term process than they expected, and that the restrictions of the benefits system prevent a transitional move into employment, both themes that emerged from our discussions with participants. Indeed, we found that participants viewed the time they could take to become employment-ready was a strength of Working Minds, ironically one that expresses itself as an apparent shortfall in the programme's outputs.

Some shortfalls in the programme's outputs are simply the result of its participants' choices. The disparity between the target output for accredited qualifications (75) and the actual number of qualifications gained (29) is the product both of participants preferring the non-accredited courses offered by the programme itself, and, in the case of people who did progress to award bearing courses in local colleges and universities, some suggestion of a high fall out rate.

Throughout these outputs, the programme's underlying successes are sometimes masked by the reporting regime itself, which will only, for instance, count one person doing two or three voluntary work placements as a single output. The same is true for attendance at Job Clubs.

2.2 Feedback from employer survey

A central aspiration of working minds from its inception has been to support and assist people with mental health problems on their journeys to work readiness whilst simultaneously working with employers and partners to challenge some of the misconceptions about mental illness and employment.

Although perhaps less emotive than some of the programme's work with its participants, it is clear that this strand of the project activity has made a real and measurable contribution to changing employment cultures across the city and the broader sub region. This is evidenced both by our survey of a small sample of employers who had worked with the project, and by Working Minds' own evaluations of the effectiveness of their mental health awareness training, both of which we report below.

Working Minds provides training and development events focusing on a range of topics of relevance for those employer organisations who wish to learn more about mental health issues. Employers who have recently undertaken training from the Working Minds team include: Leeds College of Music, Jobs & Skills, Joseph Priestley College, University of Leeds (Lifelong Learning Centre), Skillz Education, Yorkshire Water West North West Homes, Leeds Citizens Advice Bureau & People in Action. In addition, over the next few months they will be delivering training to IGEN, West Yorkshire Police, Learning Partnerships, Home Start, and the Hamara Centre.

In Working Minds' own recent survey (based on 236 responses) of employers who had participated in their mental health training courses, 92% of respondents rated them as excellent or good, and 91% agreed that the content was focused upon the needs of the employer. The use of case study material, by the Working Minds training team, to highlight issues of interest and relevance to the employer organisations was viewed as being particularly relevant. "The cases really helped to incorporate the business aspect", pointed out one representative from a public sector employer. Another indicated that the material was "Very useful, an eye opener, which puts everything into perspective".

A number of the employer organisations felt that the training enabled then to benefit from specialist support and information that facilitated the development of in-house policies and practices in relation to current and potential employees who may be suffering from mental health issues.

Employers were also impressed with both the quality of contributors to the training they had received, and the high standards set by the programme's administration, an important requirement for effectively working with employers.

As many as 93% of employers responding rated **contributors** as 'excellent' or 'good', and highlighted in particular the fact that they included people who had **personal experience of mental illness**. "All excellent," one employer wrote, "personal account of mental illness [was] very helpful," whilst another commented, "very open, genuine and honest."

Satisfaction with the **organisation of training** was also high, with 87% of respondents indicating that their training had met their expectations, something that was clearly going to translate into immediate action. "Very useful," one employer reported, "pointed out some things I hadn't thought of and will do something about now."

Employers were also happy with the **content** and **objectives** of the mental health awareness training provided, something that 94% of respondents agreed with, although there was perhaps some suggestion that longer sessions might have been preferred.

The project team made more detailed feedback from 21 West Yorkshire-based employers available. The employers concerned were mostly public or voluntary sector organisations, and the overwhelming view of the courses' structure, content and delivery was extremely positive.

If any areas for reflection did emerge, they revolved around a need for **longer, less rushed sessions** with more time for **interaction** and **discussion**.

There was some feeling, perhaps, that the workshops were designed primarily for people with little or no knowledge of the subject, and that a **more advanced, specialised** version might be considered.

The success of the project's mental health awareness training is reflected in the fact that some employers invited them back to give **repeat sessions**, in one case four times in total.

As part of this evaluation work, we asked a small number of employers who had undertaken training in mental health issues what impact the training had on their organisation and their employees. A number indicated that the training had a lasting effect on how staff members reacted to and dealt with those with identified mental health issues, a typical response being: "Staff are far more aware of the limitations placed on people with mental health issues, and expectations on behaviour have been altered as a result."

In addition to the recognition of mental health issues suffered by others, many employer representatives acknowledged that **current work practices** may have an **adverse effect on their own mental health**. A number had implemented, since the training, practices that reduced their own exposure to stress in the workplace: "Those people who identified changes in work practice to reduce stress have taken up that practice."

2.3 Feedback from Working Minds Board members survey

We asked the Working Minds Board members (representatives from a range of public sector and charitable organisations) a range of questions in relation to their perceptions of the effectiveness of the organisation.

Board members generally viewed Working Minds as providing a service that connects employer organisations with those who are experiencing mental health issues. Some commented that the work of the Working Minds team **positively challenged established views** - particularly in relation to work being good for mental health. Other comments included that Working Minds facilitated **greater connectivity** between a range of organisations through its partnership approach to working: "connectivity is achieved through effective part-

nership working to support customers who are experiencing mental health issues", one Board Member commented.

> *"In my view the purpose of Working Minds is to provide intensive tailored support to some of the most vulnerable people in Leeds. The aim of the support is to help give them the confidence to feel that they are able to consider accessing employment - helping them see that this may be of huge benefit to them - and help them prepare for this next step in their lives, supporting them along the way."*
>
> **Working Minds Board member**

There was some recognition by Board Members that the **employment targets** set for Working Minds were, perhaps, **unrealistic**. This has been even more difficult to achieve in the current economic climate, which has: "… placed significant pressures in securing employment for all those seeking work – with this customer group facing additional challenges," reflected one Board Member.

Board Members also indicated that Working Mind's **engagement with clients** was supportive in enabling them to progress in their life and employment goals: "they seem to have a genuine desire to help [clients] overcome some of their difficulties," reported one. Another Board Member suggested that Working Minds might usefully benefit from exploring models for delivery and support provided by others operating in the support agency environment: "there are big players in the employment support world that will present serious competition, they need to anticipate this. Employer training is definitely on the Government agenda, Working Minds should consider how best they can contribute to this."

> *"[Working Minds] have modelled new ways of working with customers ensuring services are joined up and act in the best interests for the customer and not led by organisational requirements. They have developed forums where active participation of service users is sought to drive and influence the model of delivery."*
>
> **Working Minds Board member.**

2.4 Feedback from Working Minds' survey of participants

In February 2009 the Working Minds project team surveyed its own service users. A total of 164 questionnaires were sent out, of which 32 were returned, a 20% response rate. The majority of these (37%) were from people who had been on the programme for less than three months, closely followed by those who had been participants for between three and six months (30%).

The outcomes from the survey make interesting reading. The survey showed that its respondents:

- felt that the service **met their vocational needs** to a very good or excellent standard (84%);
- rated the **range/choice of support** very good or excellent (87%);
- rated the usefulness of the **one-to-one support** as very good or excellent (90%);
- rated the usefulness of the **group work** as very good or excellent (66%);
- found the service very good or excellent at being **flexible to their needs** (87%);
- found the service very good or excellent at being **accessible** (80%);
- replied very good or excellent in respect of the **quality of the support** received (90%);
- rated Working Minds as very good or excellent, when asked if they **felt understood and listened to** (90%);
- rated the **information they were given** to make choices as very good or excellent (88%); and

- felt that they had **progressed towards their goals** while participating in the project (73%).

In terms of **changes that might be made** to the programme, participants generally responded that there were none required, although there was some complaint about the limited number of centres available, and the transport difficulties this could cause. Respondents also mentioned the possibility of more social events, and more and varied training.

3. The impact of Working Minds on its participants

Our discussions with the Working Minds participants we talked to cover a huge and rich array of personal experiences and stories, sometimes tragic, often of frustration, but usually determined and forward-looking.

For the convenience of reporting these we have coded them under three broad categories: participants' experiences before joining Working Minds; their experiences whilst on the programme; and their feelings about the future and their prospects of employment.

3.1 Before Working Minds

As the Working Minds programme is intrinsically linked to employability, some investigation of participants' employment histories before joining Working Minds is important.

Case study: Sue

Originally from Castleford in West Yorkshire, Sue did a degree in Graphic Design at the Leeds Metropolitan University, in the days when it was still a polytechnic, before working for some years as a graphic designer, and in pre-press reprographics. Although many of her friends think of her illness starting with her degree, in fact Sue has suffered from depression since she was thirteen years old.

With her illness making full-time working difficult, Sue eventually became self-employed, which gave her greater flexibility. However, drugs prescribed to counter her depression made her unable to get up for work, which precipitated a series of personal calamities. "I had no money," she explained, "because of that I couldn't afford to eat, because of that I got TB."

As if this wasn't enough, she also suffered a house fire, in which she had to be rescued from the burning building. "I think an electric fire fell over," she said, "My mental health at that time wasn't good, and I didn't realise there was actually a fire in the house until all the lights went

off, I subsequently got trapped in the house, I couldn't get out and I got rescued by the Fire Brigade."

Her ordeal caused post-traumatic stress disorder, during which she suffered from flashbacks to the fire. Her mental health support worker, who Sue no longer needs, gave her a leaflet about a pilot for Working Minds in Chapeltown in Leeds.

"I started getting flashbacks to the fire, and I couldn't leave the house, because if I left the house I thought that there was a fire there," she said, "It was really, really bad.

"So being able to get the help from Working Minds, they got you voluntary work, and instead of you travelling they actually take you to the place, which I could not do on my own."

Sue feels Working Minds helped her cope with the prospect of work better. "I get really frustrated by things, and start getting anxious. They helped me a lot with that."

Her voluntary work is with Oblong, a community resource in Woodhouse, Leeds. "It's very helpful in terms of learning new skills, also getting a portfolio together," she said.

Some aspects of voluntary work Sue finds frustrating, and she is looking forward to returning to paid employment. "I'm used to being very practical and methodical, and like just getting things done to deadlines," she said, "When people are working with voluntary workers they tend firstly to think that you're unskilled, and secondly that you're doing it because you're bored with daytime TV.

"It doesn't matter if they take up loads of your time…whereas before when I was in paid employment I'd charge them for it anyway."

Participants' stories before joining Working Minds varied, although the majority of people we spoke with **did have a history of employment**, albeit punctuated by periods of illness. One woman had run her own web design business in Ireland before her illness, realising from her own experiences and employing people with mental health issues can be seen as an unattractive proposition. "I've been in the position of employing people," she said, "and to me, because it's been such a high pressure business, if there was anyone who said to me, 'well, look, I have this problem, and I might not be able to come in at this time,' or whatever, I would say to them, 'well, sorry, but the job's not yours, I need someone who can do it now.'"

Others had worked in administrative posts, one with Job Centre Plus. **Self-employment** figured prominently in participants' past lives, sometimes as a manageable response to the restrictions precipitated by their illness. "I spent several years being self-employed because I couldn't work full-time, so therefore I had no choice but self-employed work," one woman told us.

In other cases, self-employment was simply more typical of that specific vocational area. One participant described how his business as a painter and decorator had collapsed, which in turn facilitated the failure of his marriage. Others recounted how the pressures of their work, whether as self-employed or for others, have made their illness harder to manage.

For many of the people we spoke to, **personal tragedies** had either precipitated their illness, or made existing conditions much worse. One woman described how the death of her 17-year-old son had made her lose the will to live herself. Another participant described the death of his parents as a precipitative factor, another man told how the loss of his partner had led to his own illness, something that recurred through a relapse on hearing recently that a close relative was terminally ill. One participant described how a house fire suffered when her mental health was already poor caused post traumatic stress disorder.

Barriers to employment: confidence and self-esteem

One thing that emerged as a common theme was that the feeling of having 'failed' in employment led to **low self-esteem**, particularly as paid work is exchanged for benefits. "I was very successful, it's been a real stigma, being on benefits," one woman said.

Lack of **confidence** and **self-esteem** came out clearly as the biggest single **barrier to finding work** for all the people we talked to. "Confidence is a factor and the more time you are off the harder it becomes," one participant said, describing how periods of economic activity further eroded self-esteem, "You get negative thoughts, the longer you've been, you think, 'Oh well, I've got no chance now.'"

> *"We've got that many different areas of the benefit system that they're going to cut down on, it makes you panic a bit"*
> **Working Minds participant**

"It's a self-esteem thing" one man told us, "you want to face the world upright, and want to get out there, but then as soon as there's a minor misfunction within that esteem, the whole house of cards comes collapsing."

The critical importance of self-confidence and self esteem runs through the whole of our evaluation. Interestingly, just as participants measured their movement away from employment in terms of a collapse in self-confidence and self-esteem, so they also defined their forward journeys in terms of recovering self esteem and a sense of self worth.

One woman described how her self-confidence has improved through the **voluntary work placement** enabled through Working Minds. "Yes, a lot more," she said, speaking of her self-esteem, "because I'm doing voluntary work now, and it gets me out going to new places, doing new things, working with people."

Other barriers to employment

Even though a lack of self-confidence was identified as the biggest single barrier to employment, participants identified other barriers as well.

Perhaps obviously, **mental illness** was identified as a barrier in itself, and participants felt employers did discriminate against people with poor mental health. "Having mental health problems," one woman said, describing her own experiences struggling to find work, "the application forms that I've seen, they ask 'have you got mental health problems?' They shouldn't be allowed to ask."

The same participants felt that, as a woman, she faced a double discrimination. "I get discriminated against through being female and through having mental health problems," she said.

Case study: Tony

Having worked in painting and decorating since he was fifteen years old, Tony's health began to disintegrate as his business collapsed, something that precipitated the break up of his marriage. Tony blames his failure to watch his finances carefully enough, as his clients were in affluent areas of Leeds. "My customers were up that neck of the woods, Wetherby, Spofforth," he recalled, "I had a really good business, but then my marriage went pear shaped because of the business element.

"I'm Mister Happy, I go out there, I enjoy my job, but I didn't pay enough regard to the sums."

Tony's problems were compounded by the deaths of his parents. "I've got two daughters, twenty nine and thirty one, and my first problem was my marriage breaking up, because I've always been a family man, and then my mum dying, my dad dying," he said, "When dad died

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one of my brothers kicked me out of the house, I was living in my dad's house, made me homeless."

As Tony's mental health deteriorated, he found the challenges of living on benefit difficult to cope with. "You're trying your best to be imaginative, with the little amount that you get, because it is not a lot, it's not a lot, but you've got to be able to pay your bills, everything I've got is on standing orders," he said.

Tony was only able to meet his objective, to "get out of this place that I'm in at the moment," with the help of Working Minds, through which he enjoyed eight weeks of one-to-one counselling with a support worker. The most powerful thing he learned from this, he feels, is to take things at his own pace, something that his counsellor taught him. "Nobody's ever said that to me before," he said.

Having done voluntary work at the Mind Shop, Tony is now starting to think of the sort of areas he might work in. "I've got a love of art," he said, "I've got a love of painting art…I enjoy doing a piece of work, and then somebody saying 'Did you do that?'"

Tony feels his confidence has improved so much through Working Minds that he could consider teaching art to adults. "If I could bring that to a classroom, but without any qualifications as an artist," he said, "but to say, 'Let's get some paints out, let's get some canvasses, let's get cracking!

"It's occurred to me, I don't mind talking to people."

For many of the participants we talked to, **mental illness was a disability** like any other impairment, and there was a feeling they should be afforded the same protection that is extended to disabled people. "It's not just attitudes that need changing, it's the law and society," one participant told us, "it's now the social model of disability, so it's not that you're not right for society, society has to adapt to meet your needs."

Although not necessarily expressing itself through the social model of disability, the feeling that the **workplace needs to change** to enable people with mental health problems to return there was a clear one. Greater flexibility, and greater collaboration between employers and the benefits system, were particular needs. "There is no safety net," one male participants said, "if they could only just invent a system where if you felt happy that you were okay to go for a job, you went for a job, 'Whoops-a-daisy,' you've got the same old problems starting again.

"Don't worry about it, you're trying. Come back, and you can still stay on your benefits.' But there isn't, there isn't."

> *"I didn't want to live, and even now I still don't. So for me it's a daily fight with finding a reason to carry on living. And Working Minds basically gave me that reason"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

The same participant would like to see a **probationary or 'buffer' period** to enable people to get used to the rigours of employment without losing the security of their benefits entitlement.

The first step towards overcoming the barriers associated with their illness was, for the people we spoke with, to acknowledge that **they needed the support of Working Minds**. "When I get off the bus and I come to a building like this, I realise that something has gone wrong," one participant said, "and for a long time I was sort of trying to cope with it without any support, and now I've got some support I know which is the better option."
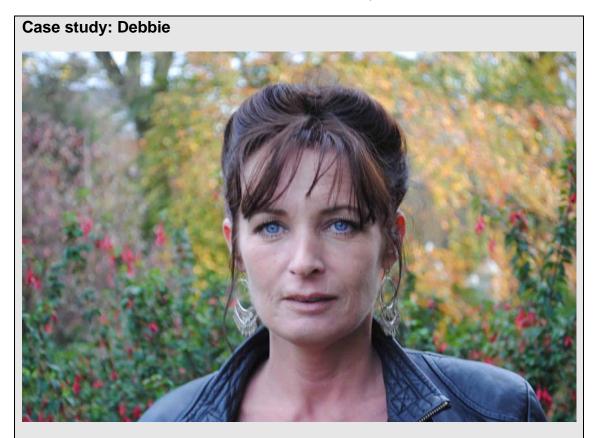
Participants also identified **age** and **caring responsibilities** as further barriers to finding work. Interestingly, although the current recession clearly impacted on people's chances of

finding work, people's biggest concern about the economic climate was the **threat to their benefits**. "They are saying they are going to take people off incapacity and make them look for work," one participant remarked, "it is worrying, it's the last thing you need when you've got other problems anyway."

Other barriers discussed during our conversation is with Working Minds participants included **lack of experience**, and **lack of motivation**.

Lack of experience tended to leave participants in a 'Catch-22' situation, where the longer they were out of the labour market the less of a **portfolio** or **curriculum vitae** they can show to break their way back. For all the people we spoke with, Working Minds was part of their journey back to recovery and work. It follows, of course, that for most people, the longer they are on that journey the better placed they are to return to work, yet, ironically, the more pronounced the gaps in their CVs become. Working Minds counters this through voluntary work and work placements, which are discussed later in this report.

The overarching barrier that participants discussed was the **stigmatisation of mental illness**, something they felt did lead to discrimination. "It stigmatises you, being on benefits, I didn't choose that, I didn't want to be in that situation," one person said.

Case study: Debbie

Debbie's story is one of crippling depression following the death of her youngest son, who had recently returned to Leeds with her after a six month stay in Spain, and momentarily forgot which side of the road UK traffic uses, with tragic consequences.

"The effect it had on me was, basically, I didn't want to live, and even now, I still don't," she confided, "So for me it's a daily fight with finding a reason to carry on living." Donating her son's organs brought a small comfort. "That was good, having contact with people knowing that they're still living because of him."

Debbie had enjoyed a good lifestyle in Ireland with her husband and three sons (she has two older boys) as a self-taught web designer and programmer, and following the collapse of her marriage and the loss of her youngest son five years ago, is determined to overcome her

illness and return to her former standard of living. Her goal is to launch a fashion design business specialising in adapting and refashioning existing clothing, such as that available through charity shops. "Charity shops already have wonderful clothing that can be readapted to modern living, to individual needs," she said, "so one of the ideas was that I would go around buying certain outfits from charity shops, reinvent them and sell them as they are, either on the internet or to clients."

Her business model would also include bespoke design and "the bread and butter of just doing alterations, things like that."

Working Minds has been pivotal in Debbie's journey to good health. "Confidence wise and self esteem and everything else are virtually non-existent, but gradually…I'm becoming more able to face the world, and I can see a future, because of Working Minds."

Working Minds, and the fashion design course she accessed through it, have helped Debbie counter the stigmatisation of her illness. "For me, because I've worked and had my own business and been successful, and had the ideal lifestyle," she said, "it was all such a complete contrast, that in itself, I kind of stigmatised myself, thinking that I'm a failure."

Debbie still has a sharp business acumen, and with the support of Working Minds has made good progress towards her goals, and has already had preliminary meetings with Business Link. "I'm apprehensive, in as much as the fact that financially it's going to be very challenging," she reflected, "I need to find a safety net financially…that's the only scary part, thinking of ending your benefit."

Periods of economic inactivity and their resultant reduction in participants' experience levels, become hard to explain. "If you say it's to do with mental illness there is always that prejudice there," one man said, "whether from the public or from employers. You don't know whether you're doing right by mentioning it or [if] you should keep quiet."

> *"If it wasn't for Emlyn and Working Minds, I wouldn't be here. And I know that for a fact"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

A final barrier participants discussed was an internal one, that of a **lack of motivation**. Working Minds will not lead to employment in itself, participants felt, if the individual does not have the motivation to want to get back into work. "I think you have to be wanting to get back into work," one woman said, "you can't be at the stage where you don't want to work, where you don't want to work, you're not ready for it. You have to be part of the way down the journey."

Impact of unemployment

People discussed various aspects of unemployment that they found unpleasant, including erosion of self-confidence and self-esteem, and the stigmatisation of being on benefits. The biggest impact, however, is the **economic** one. "Financial support, that doesn't worry me in as much as I haven't got anything, so I'm not going to spend anything," one man remarked. "It's like having the sword of Damocles hanging over your head."

Job Centre Plus

The majority of people we spoke to, who included one person who had worked for Job Centre Plus in the past, were clear that they **didn't expect to get back into work** through JCP or other similar agencies. This was partly driven by a lack of understanding, but also by their physical environments. "If you're in an open forum in the Job Centre, for example," one man said, "They'll say 'We've got a job here Mr So-and-so,' and you're thinking, 'Well I can't do that.' 'Why can't you do that?' And then you have to spill all the beans in an open area."

"If I didn't have that help [from Working Minds], where will I get that help?" Another participant asked, "I've tried going to a Job Centre and I tried to get onto the Pathways scheme, but nobody wanted to know."

3.2 The Working Minds programme

The participants we spoke with had mostly been **referred to Working Minds** through the mental health services, with the community psychiatric nurse cited in a number of cases. Other people discussed referrals from support workers, psychiatrists, and other agencies. For one woman, discovering Working Minds was an accident. "Somebody just gave me a number for somewhere, and it was the wrong place, but they told me Working Minds might be able to help me," she said, "I rang them. I didn't know anything about them, I just hoped they'd be able to help me, but I wouldn't know where you would go to get the information, or find it out. I just got it by accident."

There was some feeling that **information about the programme** was inadequate at the first point of contact. "It just told me about Working Minds, it was an organisation that provided a service, it didn't say what kind of service," one person said, "It was up to me to get in touch with them, and do all the work." Others felt that the levels of information provided had since improved. "Two years ago there wasn't enough but now there is," one woman said.

Having received their referral, participants were invited to an interview, with an **informal one-to-one session**. Part of the application process involves filling in a simple form. "They help you fill the form in, they carry you through when you're not able to do that," one man said.

> *"You've got to be satisfied in your own mind that you can cope as well as you can with each one of those building blocks before you start moving on up to the next one"*
> **Working Minds participant**

The opening, informal one-to-one session with a case worker can last for up to two hours, and during that time the applicant agrees what is in effect a **contract of responsibilities** with their case worker. This contract specifies responsibilities in terms of keeping Working Minds informed about absences or missed sessions, as well as short and longer term goals for personal development and achievement.

This contract forms the basis for **individual plans**, against which Working Minds' participants can record their progress. "Each session, if you get a little further on, if you've achieved anything, it's marked off your plan, and you can readapt that so you kind of got a guide there showing what your future could be if you carried on," one participant said.

Participants were appreciative of Working Minds' **requirement for them to stay in touch**, which they saw as part of the programme's pastoral role. "They give you a number and if you haven't got credit on your phone they ring you back," one participant said, with another adding that "everybody's got a different case worker, but they all keep in touch with their clients, which is good."

Community of Working Minds

Increased **social networking** was identified by the project team as one of Working Minds' predicted soft outcomes, and the community enjoyed by the participants we spoke with emerged as a theme, although perhaps not as strongly as might have been expected.

For some, the fact that everyone had a mental health problem created community in itself. "We are all different, but yet there's like a consensus that we've all got a problem that we are trying to overcome, as best we can do in our own time," one person told us.

"I am aware that there is a common link, I think that helps build a community," another participant said, with someone else adding that "it's been like a little family, at times."

Participants felt that this **sense of community** actively help them develop greater self-confidence. "I think the socially to its good," one man said, "it gives you a bit of confidence, when you're mixing with people."

Some people we spoke to had been with Working Minds for only a matter of weeks, whilst others have been part of it for as long as 18 months, and participants' experiences of the support offered through the programme varied accordingly. Typical of this was the availability of **advice about benefits entitlements**, which some people felt was a failing. "Working Minds, as far as I know, don't give you things like benefits advice," one man complained, "they refer you ... your options are to go to the CAB, go to benefits advice."

Others thought, however, that **benefits advice was available**. "You can't really say that," one woman told us, "we do have a benefits adviser, who works with Working Minds." This kind of ambiguity reflected people's varying experiences of the availability of information about the programme when they joined, and perhaps is something that might be revisited as part of any future redevelopment.

Support offered by the Working Minds programme

Of all the forms of support offered by Working Minds, including Job Clubs, training, and voluntary work and work placements, everybody we spoke with felt the **one-to-one support** offered by the project's staff to be its most useful feature.

"I think that is the base for it all," one participant told us, "and then you start moving on to other things, because once you've had your one-to-one support, you've got more confidence."

Case study: Julian

Julian suffered a relapse at the beginning of 2009 when he heard a close family member was terminally ill, something that took him back to the premature death of his partner ten years before hand. A community psychiatric nurse referred him to Working Minds.

"So Working Minds came on the scene, and we met up, and it was a bit like a formal interview, if you like," he said, "the worker I was with, she went through everything with me, responsibilities and obligations on her part, drew up a contract and then we both signed, and made it more formal. I got a little plastic folder and a diary, and I was aware of my obligations about meetings and punctuality."

Julian was especially struck by the one-to-one support he received through Working Minds, which he felt "was the most helpful aspect, in that I felt I was being guided in a way that maybe other agencies didn't. There was close support there."

For Julian, the training became the second most vital element of Working Minds, not so much because of its direct impact on his employability, but because of the extent to which he discovered he could contribute to it himself.

"I was able to contribute to the courses in a way that was almost on a professional level," he recounted, "so they were prepared to take me on as one of the teachers for one of the courses I'd enrolled on, and that turned m around from being receptive to being a contributor. The income side was negligible, but it was mainly the self confidence, and the fact that when people said 'What are you doing these days?' [I could say] 'Actually, I'm teaching on a course rather than just learning on it.'"

For Julian, the one-to-one support that ran through Working Minds, and the teaching opportunity, were invaluable, although he does feel the programme could be developed further. "From my point of view there's quit a lot of gaps. It doesn't mean that those gaps

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can't be filled by other agencies or organisations, but they're not filled by Working Minds," he said.

With a keen grounding in business and enterprise, and with his new skills in teaching, Julian is working towards self employment in private tuition and business advice. "I've enrolled, on my own initiative, on a Leeds University Business School course," he said, adding that "What I would hope is to be clear and organised and up and running and businesslike…doing what I love and loving what I do."

The form of one-to-one support available seemed to be varied, and tailored very much to individual needs. Some participants found the availability of **telephone support** particularly useful. "It's a factor to me that I know that, at any time, I can pick up the 'phone and get hold of Emlyn [case worker] if I've got a specific problem," one woman said, "and if he can't help me he can help find someone else, give me another 'phone number."

For some of the people we spoke with, entry to the programme commenced with lengthy periods of **counselling**. One man, who just finished eight weeks of one-to-one counselling, described the gradual nature of his entry on to the programme proper. "It's step-by-step, through the counselling now," he recounted, "but I think what she might be doing is just letting the lead out bit by bit."

As participants' journeys through the programme continues, so their one-to-one support becomes more focused on practical issues of developing skills and becoming **accustomed to the work environment**. "It's like having a teacher sitting looking over your shoulder, and in a way that's good," one man said.

> *"You meet new people, we've had mental health problems, most of the people there, so you feel a bit secure, you're not left out or anything"*
> **Working Minds participant**

The same participant described how his case worker, Kate, had helped him with the very practical issue of writing his **curriculum vitae**. "If you want to do your CV, then it's a one-to-one job, really," he noted, "and Kate and I went through on-screen line by line, we got it all so I was happy and she thought it was okay."

Another participant described a CV writing course she had been on, in which she was appointed a **mentor** to help her **put her CV together**. "And he was doing that on a voluntary basis," she said, "he had some experience in recruitment so he was able to go through what sort of questions I'd get asked at an interview."

> *"You couldn't have done that without Working Minds, you couldn't have done it on your own"*
> **Working Minds participant**

One of the enormous strengths of people's one-to-one support was the way that it extended to cover their **whole lives** and not just their route back into employment. "It's not only about what goes on outside of your life ... but also how you're feeling at home," one man told us, "if you've got any problems you want to share with them or if you're having a bit of a problem with the bills, which has got nothing to do with finding a job."

This **holistic approach** from Working Minds clearly impressed itself on the lives of the people we spent time with, almost filling a gap between other, more conventional agencies. One participant summed it up like this: "They're not an employer, they're not just social services, they're sort of half and half, and they bridge that gap very, very well. And one-to-one support meant that they could tailor things to your needs, so it was close when needed, but hands off

when it wasn't." Participants were also adamant that support of this sort was not available from other agencies in the city.

Participants were also repeatedly complimentary about their **case workers**, and particularly about the fact that, in some instances at least, they had **themselves been through the mental health services** in the past. "I know that my case worker, he's been through the mental health system himself, and his experience means he can empathise with me," one participant told us, "and he's been there, and done that, and he's now cleared the model, is back doing positive things."

"To me, I think, unless you've been there, you don't really know what it's like, it is unimaginable," another added.

Job Clubs

Working Minds' Tuesday **Job Club** was the main vehicle through which **group sessions** and their resultant sense of community were delivered. "The Job Club is not there for you to have a look at and go," one participant told us, "it's also there so that you can catch up with somebody, we find out what other events have been organised, we socialise there."

Job Clubs are staffed by volunteers as well as mental heath employment outreach workers and although they form the main catalyst for participants' feeling of community, they offer one-to-one support as well, which is highly sought after.

"I found that one-to-one approach didn't always work," one man observed, "because when I was there they were busy with other people, there were too many cases for them to spend the time."

The Job Club gives those people who choose to go the **opportunity to use a PC**, both to look for work but also for more general purposes, including accessing coursework. Volunteer workers will help participants use the Internet. Participants also have access to a phone to follow up any specific opportunities they discover.

Training

Training was probably more important for most of the people we spoke with than the Job Club. Participants' experiences of training varied from Working Minds own courses in subjects like **money-management** and **healthy living** through to accredited courses in the city's colleges and universities.

Generally speaking our interview subjects were positive about Working Minds training provision. "They've been really helpful with courses, and that's really what I wanted. So far they've done everything that I required," one woman said, summing up the feelings of most other participants we spoke with.

Working Minds own training provision tended to focus on **issues concerned with well-being**, such as healthy eating and cooking, money-management and yoga.

> *"Working Minds sort, they're not an employer, they're not just social services, they're sort of half and half, and they bridge that gap very, very well"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

Some participants did say they would like to see a **wider range of courses** available and although acknowledging that the programme had boosted their self-confidence, would still like to see more courses expressly addressing these issues. "We haven't had any opportunities to do things like confidence building, self-esteem, or things like that," one participant said, adding that he was aware they might be available elsewhere. This having been said, others did discuss group sessions in confidence building, interview skills and condition management,

perhaps again highlighting a need to reflect on the information provided to participants about the range of resources available from Working Minds.

During our discussions, it seemed that there was a comparatively high level of general interest in the **group training sessions** which was not particularly translating into a high level of attendance. Reasons for this varied, with some participants stating that the group sessions clashed with other commitments, although they were not sure that running more sessions would rectify this. "I think that if they had more opportunities that it would be better, but I don't know," one woman said.

In some cases **poor attendance** was the direct result of mental health issues. "I've got a memory problem," one woman told us, "I get the letter, and I put it down, and I completely forget that I've received it."

People did feel that actively chasing participants up, perhaps through their case workers, might help, but the biggest issue seemed to be the range of courses and services on offer. "The ones they send out, like healthy living and healthy eating, don't interest me," one man said. We did not really find any particular interest in subjects like this during our evaluation, although there was a suggestion of greater interest in the yoga sessions.

> *"The biggest thing is the time, you can't put you in a box and say 'Oh you'll be ready in two years', 'You'll be ready in four years,' 'You'll be ready next month', you can't do it, because everything goes up and down"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

From some points of view, this apparent indifference reflects the complexities of providing training for a group of people who have been drawn together not by a common interest or subject area, but by mental health issues. Some participants would have preferred to see more **art-based courses**, for instance, while others would have liked to see more on **self-employment** - even then, participants with a background in self-employment felt that such courses might not be much use. "I've done loads of little courses in the past for my business, so getting something like that wouldn't really be of interest," one woman said.

People we talked with did feel, however, that Working Minds had helped support them in updating their **employability skills**, something that was critical after lengthy periods of absence from the labour market. "You've got to find yourself in an open employment market, you've got to adapt to the market, because it is not going to adapt to you," one woman said.

Some participants were unrolled on **external courses** relevant to the areas they hoped to find work in. One man was registered on an accredited module in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Leeds' Business School, and one woman was taking a part-time course in fashion design at Leeds City College, "it's been really good," she said.

Voluntary work

For the participants we spoke with, voluntary work was a critical stage on their route back to employment. This was for a number of different reasons.

Most of our participants had either done periods of voluntary work, or were just starting it. In most cases the choice of voluntary placement had some vocational angle, and allowed people to **develop new skills**.

One male participant described how he had just started helping at a day centre in Armley. He had already had a session with a woman who was teaching him how to keep the books. "Bookkeeping, which I am interested in," he said, "she's going to teach me, and I've only just started so I don't know what it'll be like. It's to do with the food side of the day centre, and I'm just doing the petty cash bookkeeping at first."

Voluntary placements through Working Minds tend to be within the voluntary sector itself, and case workers help participants with the administration needed for an application to become a reality. "I wanted to do voluntary work, and he brought me the forms last week," one woman said, speaking of her caseworker, "we then sent them off. As soon as I saw the form I thought, 'this is going to happen, this is real, I'm going to be doing it.'"

"It's very helpful in terms of learning new skills, also getting a portfolio together," another woman, training to be a web designer, said, "because I've done a few websites for that, it's good to be able to have a portfolio."

Some participants discussed voluntary work as a means through which they could **boost their confidence**. "It's got me out, got me going to new places, doing new things, working with people."

Case study: Caroline

Caroline has now been in her present job for eight months, and her manager rates her as her best member of staff. She had been unemployed for years before trying Working Minds. Other agencies, she thinks, had tried to push into any work that might be available, something she feels could have had damaging consequences.

"They were trying to just push me into any job, jobs that I didn't want to do, like working in retail, in selling games, games that I didn't know anything about and that I've got no interest in," she said, "it was over at the White Rose Centre, and they wanted me to do 20 hours, seven days, and it's like two bus journeys to get there, a bus into Leeds and a bus out again."

One of the main features of Working Minds that most helped Caroline was the way it designed her route back to work to suit her needs and capabilities. "They ask you what you want to do, they are looking at what you've done before, where you are in yourself, in your illness," she said, "it's just support, and not shoving people."

In the past Caroline has suffered from discrimination at the hands of employers, and found the one-to-one support available from her caseworker the single most important lifeline towards her new, successful career.

"I have been discriminated against by employers before in the past when I first became mentally unwell," she said, "I worked for somebody for seven years, and then I was unwell, and I ended up in hospital for eight weeks.

"When I came out my employer was threatening to finish me." Caroline's caseworker helped her find her way through Job Centre Plus. "I hadn't been in a Job Centre for years, I didn't even know how they worked or what to do," Caroline recalled, "she came, we looked for jobs, we discussed what I'd like to do, what I thought I was good at ...

"I went for a few jobs, I applied for and got a couple of interviews. This was the first job I went for, and that was the job I got."

Caroline has overcome early feelings of trepidation, and now holds a busy part-time post with her employer, a major private healthcare provider. "I get entertainers in for the elderly, I do activities with them on a daily basis," she said, "I do one-to-ones with them, I do fundraising, I do raffles, I am always running round the building selling raffle tickets."

Looking to the future, Caroline is filled with confidence. "I've had a word with my manager, and she says she would give me full time, she said she would employ me, they've got a unit that is shut down at the moment, but she's said that when they open their unit, she would offer it to me full time.

"It makes you feel good, it makes you feel like you've achieved something."

Although not paid employment, voluntary work was seen as an important **bridge between Working Minds and economic activity**. "It makes a big difference, voluntary work, you think, 'I'm getting nothing out of it,' but you are, because you're not focused on you, it's other people, through doing that, it's funny but it works," one man said, "you get lots of fulfilment and a sense of satisfaction and references ... and you make contacts for something like paid work, as well."

> *"I think I'd be lost without Working Minds. It's been a big help to me, I'd like it to keep helping, I wouldn't like it to stop"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

The same participant described how his contribution to a training course was so positive that he was given paid work helping with the teaching. "It helped in two ways," he said, "it helped just because it was something to get engaged with, to get involved, and I got a bit of money for it, and it was self-confidence."

Overall participants' experiences of voluntary work and the support offered by Working Minds to make it possible were positive. One concern that did emerge during our discussions was around the **impact of voluntary work** on **benefit entitlements**. In particular, participants were uncertain whether the 16 hour rule only applied to paid employment, or whether it applied to all work, paid and unpaid. One participant, who had worked for Job Centre Plus in the past, was adamant that it only applied to paid work. "If you're doing voluntary work you're not getting paid for it," she said, "so therefore you've got no income, they can't touch it."

The majority were not so sure, something that clearly might deter people from seeking voluntary placements.

3.3 Returning to work

Although the participants we spoke with were united by a desire to return to paid employment at some stage in their future, only one was in paid employment when we spoke with her, in her case with a large private healthcare provider, although some of our other participants were at an advanced stage of preparation for economic activity, one as a hairdresser and beautician, another as a textile designer and another as a business adviser and teacher.

Having identified, perhaps not surprisingly, a **common desire to return to work**, we explored the reasons for this. Three clear drivers emerged from this (in no particular order).

Firstly, participants felt under pressure from **media coverage** about **benefits claimants**, and in particular from a perception that some incapacity benefit claimants were lazy. "Where you see on TV," one man said, "when they say about certain types of people who don't want to work, you get all the pressure."

Secondly, participants wanted **more money**. "You are under financial pressure as well," one participant told us, "because when you are on benefits you don't get a lot of money."

Thirdly, participants felt a return to paid employment would **benefit their health**, clearly linking this to the economic benefits of employment. "It's a fifty-fifty thing, fifty percent you need the money and fifty percent you need your health," one woman said, "but your health has always got to come first."

"If you didn't have the money, your health would suffer," another participant added.

Challenges of employment

We also discussed with participants what they expected the main challenges of starting work to be. Their first responses were related to the conventional aspects of obtaining employment after lengthy periods of unemployment, in all cases two years or more, but in many cases much longer than that, and in one case 17 years.

Participants felt that developing **clear and effective curricula vitae** was critical from this perspective, and talked extensively about the help they had received from Working Minds towards achieving this. One participant identified support in the preparation of his CV as an example of the sort of thing that Working Minds does really well. "Giving us advice on pulling out CVs together," he said, "and helping us get some experience."

The two aspects of their CVs that most concerned the participants we spoke with were a **lack of up to date skills,** and a **lack of employment experience**.

Working Minds countered the first through supporting participants both into and through vocationally relevant college courses. "I've learned new skills," one woman said of the support she had received through Working Minds, "and updated my skills, because the technology changes, if you haven't been in work for a while, if you're working with computers it does change."

> *"I'm in Working Minds because I suffer from my mental health, but now, with the support of Working Minds, I don't have any medication to take"*
>
> **Working Minds participant**

As discussed earlier in this report, a lack of experience is rectified through voluntary placements, something that participants consistently identified as important. "I have been out of work for over four years," one woman told us, "nobody helped me whatsoever, so I had absolutely nothing to show on my CV to say what I had been doing for the last four years.

"Whereas since being with Working Minds, I can turn around and say, 'I do teaching now, I've gone into hairdressing, I do voluntary work at the hospital.'"

Although the participants we spoke with valued voluntary work for these reasons, there was also an awareness that **paid employment** will bring with it a range of **additional pressures**.

"I've worked for employers before, and I know myself that the only reason it hasn't worked is because I suffered," one woman told us, before recounting that "I moved on to work for the [major bank], and worked in a branch there, that actually tripped me up completely, it wasn't really a job I enjoyed, and it made me terribly phobic."

It was only once she started to work for the NHS that someone suggested she needed help. "For me it's been acknowledging that I had issues with anxiety and depression, it's been me actually coming to terms with it," she said.

The participant we spoke with who was currently in work confirmed the additional pressure of paid employment. "When I worked for the [major charity] there was no pressure on me, because I didn't get paid, it was voluntary," she said, "if I wasn't well I didn't have to go. But this was different, I did get paid and I did have to go. I just struggled really badly with confidence and my self esteem."

The same participant discussed how, with the support of her Working Minds case worker, she was able to overcome these pressures, and how "now I do the job better than anyone else, and I've only been working for them for eight months."

> *"It's like having an angel around, isn't it"*
> **Working Minds participant**

For the participants we spoke with, the fact that they can call on **Working Minds' support after they have started work** in this way is particularly important. "Working Minds does help you when you are in work as well, they won't go away," another woman told us, "the support is still there, and that's the important bit, you need that support when you start work. If you've been poorly, and like me, I've been out of work for 17 years, when you've been out of work for so long and you go back into it, there's all that stress and pressure, it's daunting."

Understandably, therefore, one of the more pronounced challenges facing participants considering returning to work is that of **managing their own health**, which people felt was central to their ability to cope with the pressure of paid employment.

"For me it's feeling confident that I can manage my health," one woman told us, later adding that "if I can say to an employer when I go for an interview that I've been doing courses and things, I can actually say to them, 'I know how to manage my health, now,' there is no risk in them employing me."

"My goal is for me to get a paid job where I have the confidence to go into the [work] place, be happy there and to know how to manage my bosses or other people there who could put me back to where I am now," another woman told us, "to be able to do that so I still keep my confidence and be able to provide for my son."

> *"I've recommended it to so many people. You know, when you talk to somebody and they start going on about their problems, and they're not getting any help, go to Working Minds"*
> **Working Minds participant**

It is within this sense that employers' attitudes and suspicions are themselves a source of pressure that two of the main strands of Working Minds activities connect up - **supporting participants**, and providing **mental health awareness training aimed at employers** themselves.

There certainly was some evidence of these pressures existing in reality. The former Working Minds participant successfully in employment who we spoke to told us, "I felt stigmatised ... I

don't want to tell lies, I put it on my application form that I suffer from mental illness ... when I first went [there] I was being observed all the time in my job.

"There was always a management around. Now they are not around any more."

Clearly, reaching a stage where the individual can **cope with their own condition** and the pressure of paid employment can be a lengthy process, and one of the enormous strengths that participants identified about Working Minds is the way that this journey is tailored to suit the capabilities of individuals.

It was for this reason that participants felt that judging the project simply in terms of the number of people who returned to work was unfair. "You are not going to go out and get a full time job tomorrow," one participant said, "you've got to build up your confidence, practising and may be starting off with a couple of hours of voluntary work, and build it up until you get to the stage where you can do paid work.

"If you just measure it by how many people are getting to work, you need to look at how many people are getting ready and being helped on the path to work as well."

Self employment

Amongst the participants we spoke with, self employment was of some interest to about half, and the primary objective of about one third. This interest was driven almost entirely by the way in which self employment would allow individuals to **tailor their work commitments** in a way that met the restrictions of their illnesses.

"You are your own boss, you can go to work when you want to, you know when you're having a good day or a bad day," one participant told us.

"For me, partly, it's not just because people won't have me, it's because I can't have them either," another participant told us, "I can't easily fit into rigid structures and schedules, I have to make my own."

For some participants, though, the questions of full-time versus part-time and employment versus self employment would be decided simply by **what was on offer**. "I think it's a matter of being open to any options," one woman summarised, "I'm looking towards being self employed and I'm looking towards working for someone else. I'm keeping all my options open because the job I'd like to do, really, it's full-time. If I had to do it part-time then self employment is the only option, really."

4. Conclusions and recommendations for further development

Analysis of Working Minds' actual as opposed to target outcomes shows that the project team learned through practice that **an individual's journey back to work readiness** can be a **much longer process** than they initially expected. Even though target outputs were renegotiated downwards at the end of Year 1, they still seem to have been too high for this particular client group.

The programme's **ability to meet its targets** was further restricted by the reporting regime itself, which will only count, for instance, one person doing two or three voluntary work placements as a single output. Similar restrictions existed for Job Club attendances and other performance data.

The programme's **work with employers**, both as partners and as beneficiaries of mental health awareness training, has clearly been a great success and has made a real contribution to changing employment cultures.

Working Minds' survey of the employers with which it had worked showed a **high level of satisfaction** with the relevance and administration of their courses, something reinforced by our own survey. If any changes might be considered, they would revolve around a need for longer, less rushed sessions with more discussion time. There is perhaps additionally the need for more specialised, advanced MHA training.

Working Minds Board members views of the programme are positive, particularly in relation to its **partnership working** and **client support**. Some Board members did not feel that the employment targets set for the project had been unrealistic.

Working Minds survey of its own participants showed particular satisfaction with the programme's **one-to-one support, understanding, and information provided**. If any areas of provision were perhaps less favourably viewed, they would include the usefulness of the **group sessions**, and the extent to which participants felt they had **progressed towards their goals**.

The participants we spoke with had in many cases experienced **discrimination from employers** first hand, and the dual approach of Working Minds - offering support to people with mental health issues in their journeys back to work whilst simultaneously proactively changing the workplace culture - makes a strategic as well as a practical contribution to countering the high cost of mental illness to the regional GDP.

Although some of the people whose experiences we captured had extensive histories of economic inactivity, most had some vocational experience during the previous four or five years, and all had **positive expectations for the future**, although most felt it might be a long journey back to work, with many intermediary goals to attain on the way.

Participants identified a **series of barriers to finding work**, including lack of experience as the result of long periods of economic inactivity, out of date skills, inadequate CVs, age, caring responsibilities, employer discrimination, and the stigmatisation associated in general with having mental health issues. However, the hardest and most immediate barrier to overcome was that of a lack of confidence and low self esteem. We certainly identified evidence of a **vicious circle of low self esteem**, wherein participants' confidence levels dropped as a result of being out of paid employment, and low self-confidence prevented an early return to the workplace.

The most pronounced **impacts of unemployment** on the participants we spoke with were the economic ones, and its impact on their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Participants did not feel that other agencies, such as Job Centre Plus or Pathways, were likely to assist them in their journey back to work.

The people we spoke with had been **referred to Working Minds** through a variety of routes, including the mental health services, support workers, psychiatrists, and other sources.

Participants were appreciative of the **contract of understanding** they negotiated during their interview for entry onto the programme, and in particular of its requirement for them to stay in touch with their case workers.

The evidence we collected showed conclusively that the support of Working Minds, particularly the one to one support, **boosted the self-confidence** of people going through the programme, in some cases immeasurably, and through this made the programme's biggest single contribution to people's eventual return to work. Participants were particularly positive about the use of case workers who themselves had experience of the mental health system.

Participants did identify closely with the **social model of disability**, and in particular with its requirement for society to adjust to accommodate people's impairments, in this case mental illness. People in particular felt that there was a need for a more 'exploratory' return to work, in which, if employment proved impossible, the safety net of benefits and other support would still be in place.

Working Minds was **identified as unique** by participants, who felt both intimidated by other agencies and initiatives such as Pathways and Job Centre Plus, and treated as a 'statistic', a benefit claimant who had to be pushed back into work irrespective of whether the work was right for them or whether they were at the stage where they could cope with it.

Participants' feelings about both the **group training sessions** and the **Job Clubs** were perhaps a little more mixed, with comparatively high levels of interest translating, in the experience of the people we spoke with, into a low participation rate. Various reasons might be offered for this, including a need to chase participants up, and broadening the range of subjects covered. However, we felt the reasons might lie a little deeper, and question whether the sense of 'community' that comes with these activities is actually something that the participants we talked to wanted.

There was certainly evidence that emerged that questioned both the existence of, and indeed the particular need for, **community**. There was considerable confusion between participants, for instance, over whether basic resources such as benefits advice or confidence building courses were available. We would suggest, and in our recommendations do suggest, that this might be rectified through clearer information about how the programme functions, and the resources it offers. However at the same time it must be noted that the need for this also reflects a lack of community in practice.

This is not meant as a criticism of the program, and where community does exist there is evidence that it boosts self-confidence through social networking. However, it is also clear that community, where it does exist, it is based primarily on shared disadvantage amongst a group of people who, overall, want to overcome their disadvantage and move on to paid employment.

Our feeling is that Working Minds' greatest strength lies not in its creation of a community, but in its understanding of and support for people as individuals. The people we worked with were hugely complimentary about the one-to-one support they received from their caseworkers. The holistic approach of Working Minds, in which caseworkers helped people with the broader challenges of their journeys to well-being as well as those related to employment, emerged particularly prominently.

The **c**ommunity of Working Minds existed most strongly in the relationship between **individual participants** and **their caseworkers**, and the way that this relationship remained active after people had enrolled on courses or voluntary work placements or, for that matter, had started paid employment. The fact that their case workers would be available, on a one to one basis, by phone or by text message, should they find things are going badly, was clearly a lifeline to the people we spoke with.

Voluntary work placements were identified as an important stage in the journey back to paid employment by the participants we spoke with, some of whom had been through a number of separate periods of voluntary work. As well as enabling participants to develop new skills and experience, there was some evidence that voluntary work could boost self-confidence and self-esteem. There was, however, some confusion about the extent to which voluntary work might impact on participants' benefits entitlements, further underlining the need for clearer benefits advice and guidance.

Participants' **desire to return to work** was driven by three factors, which were firstly, the negative portrayal of benefits claimants in the media; secondly, the need for more money; and thirdly, a feeling that a return to paid employment would benefit their health.

The **need for adequate CVs** was highlighted as important, and an area where Working Minds' intervention was particularly effective.

Participants were aware of the fact that paid employment will bring with it pressures that might not exist with voluntary work, reiterating the importance of **Working Minds' continued support** after the commencement of employment. It is in response to these pressures that some participants felt self employment might give them a greater freedom to manage any limitations that may that come from their illness.

Recommendations for further development

This evaluation is our report on the outcomes from our discussions with Working Minds' key stakeholders; its project team, the employers it works with, its Board members and above all, its participants. As such, it might be argued that we have presented the evidence we have uncovered; recommendations should be made by the Board, in discussion with the project team.

That having been said, there are areas of Working Minds where recommendations might be made, and we outline these below.

The overarching point to be made is that Working Minds is extremely important to its participants, particularly through the one-to-one support that exists up to and, indeed, into employment. When we have asked service users which changes they would like to see made, their response has generally been a resounding 'None.'

In terms of our observations, however, we would raise the following suggestions.

Questions about the **information provided to participants**, and the range of resources offered by Working Minds, did consistently come up, something that contrasts with the findings of Working Minds' own survey of its service users. As we noted above, the community of Working Minds is not one that particularly manifested itself through shared understanding of these issues, and it might be sensible to review the information provided to people as individuals both before and during their journey through the programme.

There are practical things that could be done that might boost **attendance at group training** sessions. Participants suggested chasing people up more, perhaps through their caseworkers, and possibly broadening the range of subjects offered. This latter point might, however, again simply be an indication of a need to review the information offered. Similarly, there was some suggestion that a minority of people felt that Working Minds lacked cohesion, and was a little 'bitty.' Again, this is something that might best be rectified through more comprehensive information.

We did wonder whether some form of **social networking structure** in its own right might be useful, rather than attempting to achieve this through the Job Club or group sessions, perhaps through a fixed calendar of social gatherings on a set day each week. One-to-one support could be available at these for people who needed it.

Benefits advice clearly causes some concern for participants, particularly around whether voluntary work placements might impact on benefits entitlements. Developing a clearer, in-house benefits advice service or resource would give participants an immediate contact point to answer some of their questions, which were clearly deterring some people from pursuing voluntary placements.

Finally we felt that the project team has achieved a great deal of learning around the **challenges of mental illness** and participants' **journeys back to work**. In particular, we felt that it is far more clearly an individual experience than the team had perhaps expected at the outset, and one that will take as long as it needs to until the individual is able to do face paid employment and at the same time manage their health effectively. The way in which Working Minds removes the pressure to get back into employment too quickly from its participants was consistently identified by them as one of its greatest strengths.

Although not a recommendation, we would conclude our evaluation by expressing the hope that the project team will be able to take steps to ensure that this learning is not lost, perhaps by commissioning further research, or through collaboration with other providers of employability support for people with mental health issues.