

New Deal for Communities

The National Evaluation

Research Reports

**Availability of Jobs:
The recruitment and retention
practices of employers in two NDC
areas**

Research Report 26

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

Those wishing to know more about the evaluation should consult the evaluation's web site in the first instance
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Sheffield Hallam University

**Availability of Jobs:
The recruitment and retention
practices of employers in two NDC
areas**

Research Report 26

Authors:

David Devins
Sally Ann Halliday
Tim Bickerstaffe
Suzanne Hanson
Alison Darlow

***Policy Research Institute
Leeds Metropolitan University***

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Executive Summary

Getting people into work is seen as a key route to alleviating worklessness in disadvantaged communities. This report is the second in a series of publications relating to the Availability of Jobs which are accessible to NDC residents. The report focuses on the recruitment and retention practices of employers in two NDC areas and explores key aspects of the relationship between an NDC sponsored job brokerage service and local employers. Interviews were undertaken with thirty local employers who had recently taken on a new recruit through the job brokerage Service available in Newcastle and London. The research is based on a relatively small sample of employers and care should be taken in generalising the findings.

Employers views of the local labour markets

- a large proportion of the workforce are employed in what have been termed low status occupations
- most of these jobs are filled by people who live and work in the same area - for employers who recruit employees who live in a different area, the public transport system is a key issue associated with recruitment and retention
- employer entry requirements for low status jobs are often minimal and a lack of 'skills' is rarely an issue. Employers look for attributes such as the 'keenness to do the job' or willingness to 'give it a go'
- employers report that factors associated with low status occupations such as levels of pay and unsociable hours contribute to their recruitment and retention problems

Employers recruitment practices

- few employers cite the growth of the business as the driver of local recruitment. Most employers suggest that vacancies arise largely due to labour turnover
- most local employers (often part of a larger group) follow a systematic process to recruitment involving communication of the vacancy, initial assessment and selection of candidates; assessment and interview of short-listed candidates and transition into the workplace
- the detail of the recruitment process is highly diverse and contingent upon a range of factors including the nature of the position to be filled, the past and current practices of the employer and their previous experience of the labour market
- all employers report that new recruits have an induction although the scale and scope of the process is highly variable
- all employers adopted probationary periods in the initial stages of the employment relationship. These are a crucial time for both employer and employee although employers report that most new staff successfully negotiate the period

Employer retention practices

- employers are mindful of retention issues at the recruitment stage and this will often inform the criteria they use in selecting a candidate. Applicants with job histories with repeated short employment periods or detailing recurrent health problems are generally viewed with caution.
- the majority of employers wish to reduce labour turnover in low status occupations although they face major barriers within the business as the problem is difficult to quantify in monetary terms. However several employers are seeking to reduce labour turnover through a more 'caring' approach to those employed in low status occupations

- employee development systems, often founded on staff appraisals with line managers provide an opportunity for the development of employees in low status occupations. However these are inevitably focussed on the requirements of the business as opposed to the interests of the employee
- given the structure of the workforce (i.e. one supervisor to many employees) opportunities for career development in terms of promotion for those in low status occupations are limited

'Bending' employer approaches to HR

- many employers had relaxed their assessment requirements (or had low ones anyway) at both the initial sifting and interview stages of the recruitment process
- some employers adopted flexible approaches to working hours to accommodate the needs of individuals employed in low status occupations. However many employers were reluctant to change current practices
- several employers suggested that they adjusted the induction process to accommodate new recruits with particular needs (particularly English language skills in London): Many employers had introduced 'buddy' systems and/or induction periods with flexible time constraints to support the integration of new recruits

Employers views of job brokerage

- the vast majority of employers valued the job brokerage agency (@Work) and used it (along with other agencies such as the Job Centre) to fill vacancies in low status occupations
- employers valued the screening and appraisal service offered by @ Work and generally contrasted the service favourably with that provided through, for example, the local Job Centre
- several employers commented on the good quality of the candidates sent to them through the job brokerage scheme and attributed this to the input of @Work prior to interview. The majority of employers suggested that in contrast with those supplied by the Job Centre most candidates were employable
- job brokerage agency contact with the employer following recruitment of the applicant appears variable. Some employers suggested that the motivation for the contact was largely administrative (i.e. the Agency needed to do it to obtain their funding). Other employers reported that it was part of a more 'careful' approach based on improving customer service to employers

Summary and key issues for Partnerships

The research sought to explore three key issues associated with the role of employers in alleviating worklessness:

- a. to what extent do employer HR practices (recruitment and staff development) influence the retention and development of recruits who were previously unemployed?
- b. to what extent do employers 'bend' their HR practices to support the previously unemployed?
- c. what role do NDC (or other relevant policy interventions) play in influencing the HR practices of employers?

The key findings emerging from the research are:

- it is clear that employer practices influence recruitment and retention associated with low status occupations however the practices and the ways in which they impact on the

unemployed are variable and contingent upon a variety of internal and external factors. Candidates with poor health records and/or poor employment history are generally least favoured by employers

- there is some evidence of employers 'bending' their recruitment and retention practices associated with low status occupations. This occurred for applicants more generally as opposed to 'unemployed people' specifically
- employers suggest that the key role played by publicly funded agencies lies in communicating with the labour market and obtaining appropriate applicants for low status occupations

The research exploring the nature of the demand-side of the labour market highlights some issues and related questions for local NDC partnerships more generally:

- the job brokerage service offered through @Work is viewed very positively by the majority of the employers participating in the research. A key issue for local partnerships is the extent to which job brokerage agencies, other relevant local agencies and the Job Centre can work together to share good practice, minimise duplication and share other resources (such as information) to the benefit of the local community
- there are a range of interventions currently being promoted by the government to encourage improved business performance and good practice. A key question for local partnerships is the extent to which interventions offered through for example local Business Links and other local agencies are being used effectively by NDC partnerships
- employers suggest a need to improve the confidence and general motivation of some applicants (particularly those provided through the Job Centre). They also recognise an issue associated with literacy and verbal communication skills (in English). The partnerships may consider what opportunities exist for developing (extending) local provision to support the development of 'confident' and 'motivated' candidates and what steps (if any) are necessary to engage employers in the promotion/delivery of opportunities to improve verbal, reading and writing of English to relevant employees

1. Introduction

The extent to which jobs are accessible to NDC residents is a crucial element of the strategy to alleviate worklessness in disadvantaged communities. Getting people into work is seen as a key route to alleviating social exclusion and improving productivity. Without jobs to go to residents may develop their skills and general employability in a variety of ways but because they remain economically inactive, they may struggle to gain the confidence and spending power which can materially affect their lives in a positive way.

1.1. Policy context

Policy continues to emphasise the development of the skills and the employability of individuals as a means of meeting the challenge of social exclusion and competitiveness. Many active labour market policies have focussed on the supply side (i.e. individuals) of the labour market. The key aim of these policies is often to improve the employability of the long-term unemployed by increasing their skills, removing obstacles due to personal and family circumstances, improving their job search and seeking to enhance their willingness to take up work. However the 'demand-side', and in particular the role that employers may play in the regeneration of disadvantaged areas is increasingly recognised by policy makers. The potential of for example, start up small firms (both social and private sector enterprises) and inward investors to generate new employment opportunities within disadvantaged economies exerts considerable influence. However with the exception of some notable examples, there is often little consideration of the extent to which these employers provide employment opportunities for local people.

The approach to recruitment adopted by employers can be an important factor in 'locking out' residents of disadvantaged communities from evolving employment opportunities. Job opportunities arise continuously in a dynamic economy as workers leave their current job or retire from the workforce. Many need to be replaced and this pattern of labour turnover has been shown to create more job opportunities than employment growth through the start up of new businesses or the growth of existing ones. However the way in which employers communicate vacancies, select candidates, induct new employees and develop existing employees can have a material impact on those most at risk of disadvantage. Working with employers is a key element of successful job brokerage schemes although this aspect of the intervention is often far less developed than the services provided to the individuals who are disadvantaged in some way.

1.2. Research aims

This report is the second in a series of publications relating to the 'Availability of Jobs' which are accessible to NDC residents. The first report provided an introduction to the nature of employer initiatives in NDC areas and highlighted successful practice where interventions addressed specific business needs. This report complements the previous work by focussing on the recruitment and retention practices of employers in two NDC areas and exploring key aspects of the relationship between the NDC sponsored job brokerage scheme and local employers. The research findings and their implications for other NDC areas are also discussed.

The research focuses on the practice and experience of employers in an attempt to develop an improved understanding of their role in alleviating worklessness. The aim of the research is to investigate the characteristics and experiences of employers recruiting previously unemployed people through NDC funded job brokerage schemes.

Key research questions include:

- a. to what extent do employer HR practices (recruitment and staff development) influence the retention and development of recruits who were previously unemployed?
- b. to what extent do employers 'bend' their HR practices to support the previously unemployed?
- c. what role do NDC (or other relevant policy interventions) play in influencing the HR practices of employers?

1.3. Methodology

In order to undertake the research, a qualitative approach was adopted to explore with local employers, issues associated with recruitment and retention and the experience of working with a job brokerage intermediary. We were also mindful of the impact of the wider local economic context on local practice (both employers and intermediary agency) and in order to account for this, the research was focussed on employers in two NDC areas (Aylesbury in Southwark and West Gate in Newcastle). Two factors influenced our decision to choose these areas. Firstly the areas represented very different local labour market contexts associated with a variety of social and economic factors which provide the basis for the investigation of the impact of specific area-based factors. Secondly we wanted to ensure that the employers contributing to the research had some experience of taking on residents of NDC areas. In order to do this effectively we worked with an agency (@Work) contracted to deliver job brokerage and other services related to alleviating worklessness in several NDC areas (including Aylesbury and Newcastle).

@Work provided the contact details of thirty employers in each area with whom they had placed residents from local NDC areas. Thirty employers participated in the research which was conducted in February and March 2004. The characteristics of the employers are summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Number of employers by establishment size

| Size | Aylesbury, London | West Gate, Newcastle |
|--------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1-10 | 2 | 2 |
| 11-50 | 3 | 6 |
| 51-200 | 4 | 8 |
| 200+ | 5 | |

The sample contains employers from a variety of sub-sectors within the service industry reflecting the contact details provided by @Work. Employers of varying size are represented amongst the sample. Many of the local employers were part of a larger national or multinational group and whilst most had employed NDC residents through @Work, the majority of them were located outside the immediate NDC area in West Gate (Newcastle) and Aylesbury (London).

The remainder of this report covers the following areas:

- local Context
- employers views of the local labour market
- employers recruitment and retention practices
- 'Bending' approaches and experiences of job brokerage
- summary and checklist for NDC areas seeking to develop demand-side approaches to alleviating worklessness

2. Local context

The two local areas of Aylesbury and Newcastle exist within contrasting economic and labour market contexts although both are examples of local areas which have failed to share in the economic prosperity of the city in which they are located. Aylesbury estate covers sixty acres between Old Kent Road and Walworth Road in the south London Borough of Southwark. It is home to 10,000 people living in predominantly social housing. West Gate in Newcastle is situated to the West of the City Centre. 9,600 people live in a variety of housing types in the area.

The NDC delivery plans provide a further insight into the local context for the two areas at the beginning of the programming period (1999) the key characteristics of which are summarised below:

The Aylesbury estate has a high proportion of unemployed (16%) with more than two thirds of these unemployed for over two years. More than a quarter who are not working have not had a job since leaving school. A large proportion of those claiming to be unemployed were not looking for work and almost a quarter suggested a lack of appropriate skills or English as a second or other language (ESOL) needs (23%). The majority relied upon the job centre or advertisements (63%) to obtain information about job vacancies. A large proportion of residents suffer from ill health and a lack of childcare facilities is also identified as a further barrier to work for residents. Local employment opportunities are mostly limited to employers (both large and small) along East Market Street and Walworth Road otherwise travel is necessary to adjacent areas.

The West Gate area has a relatively high level of unemployment (7.5% compared with 5.1% for Newcastle as a whole). The local economic activity rate is estimated to be only 41% compared to the national rate of 79%. One in three of working age residents in West Gate is currently in employment. The views of eight local businesses are contained in the delivery plan. Key issues reported were:

- no problems recruiting relevantly skilled staff
- ability to be IT literate is becoming increasingly important for staff to do their jobs
- some have a poor perception of West End due to a lack of employability and crime
- some posts are not advertised
- public transport is sometimes an issue

In common with much labour market policy analysis the NDC plan in Aylesbury tends to emphasize the supply-side of the labour market. Employers play a largely implicit role in alleviating worklessness and this may reflect the existing local labour market conditions characterised by excess demand for labour in the London area. The supply-side emphasis is reflected in the key outcome measures cited in the delivery plan. These measures include reducing the number of residents registered long term unemployed (aged 25+), reducing the proportion of residents citing lack of skills as a barrier to employment and reducing the proportion of lone parent families who are economically inactive. No outcome measures are stated relating to employers. The West Gate NDC identifies a range of programme actions to improve the employability of local residents on the supply-side and includes activities to engage private sector employers in terms of various forums and business support initiatives on the demand-side.

The NDC partnership report for Newcastle (March 2003) raised two key issues associated with the Jobs and Business theme. Firstly a concern was expressed about the lack of available jobs in the area, with many being low paid and low skilled, thus

providing little opportunity for training or career development. Secondly there have been problems engaging the private sector in the design and development of the programme. Key benefits of the NDC intervention to date include the job brokerage services offered through @Work and the delivery of an Intermediate Labour Market project. More recently (November 2003) NDC commissioned local research has been published which provides an overview of the numbers and types of businesses within the NDC area and provides an insight into their business support needs.

The NDC Partnership report for Aylesbury (February 2003) acknowledges gaps in provision that need to be addressed together with better information about employment needs on the estate. It identifies that more work needs to be done to identify and help the longer-term unemployed and harder to reach. Key benefits associated with activity to date include a variety of projects aimed to improve the employability and skills of residents which have been delivered through a local Learning Centre. The job brokerage service (provided through @Work but known locally as TALENT) has been a key element of the local approach to alleviating worklessness and has been successful in exceeding its delivery targets.

3. Employers view of the local labour market

This section of the report provides an overview of the employers view of the local labour market and explores issues associated with the employability of local candidates.

3.1. Demand for 'low skilled' labour

Most employers reported that the majority of the workforce 75%+ were employed in low status occupations such as sales or replenishment assistants, security, catering or customer facing leisure activities. All the employers in the research sample draw extensively on the local area for their workforce. However the definition of 'local area' adopted by employers is variable and most notably influenced by a variety of factors including availability, frequency and cost of public transport. Several employers noted the proximity of the place of work to the employees' home as a key issue in the recruitment and retention of employees in lower level occupations. This was reported to be an issue in both London and Newcastle.

In general employers suggested that they did not struggle to attract sufficient candidates for vacancies. Employers reported that due to the minimal entry-level requirements for many low status occupations, a lack of appropriate technical skills was rarely an issue. Evidence of a positive attitude, confidence and a wish to work for the employer were identified as key attributes of employability.

Hard to fill vacancies tended to arise not due to a shortage of applicants or applicants with insufficient skills but because of ongoing retention problems. The occupations associated with hard to fill vacancies are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of hard to fill vacancy in low status occupations

| Employers |
|--|
| Sales/Customer Service Assistants |
| Security guards |
| Waiting on staff |
| Kitchen staff |
| Van Drivers/Sales |
| Production operatives |
| Housekeeping staff |
| Care Staff |
| Replenishment Assistant (Shelf stackers) |
| Project workers |
| Cleaners |

Source: Face to face interviews with employers (n=30)

The local factors affecting the existence of a hard to fill vacancy are however varied and based on a combination of internal and external factors. For example, several London based businesses with branches in the west of the city noted the difficulty recruiting to sales assistants in these areas. This was attributed to the tight labour market in that area of the city and the problems in terms of time and cost of travelling across the city for a relatively low paid position. A minority of employers in Newcastle reported the problem of filling vacancies in local sites outside the city centre where travel could involve two or more metro/bus journeys. Employers saw travel time and cost in both areas as a key issue for those in low status occupations.

The majority of employers also noted the characteristics of a job which adversely affected employee retention rates although these characteristics appeared to have little

adverse impact on the number of applicants in the current tight labour market. Key characteristics included levels of pay, physical aspects of the job and unsociable hours. Many employers experiencing recurrent hard to fill vacancies alluded to the relatively low level of wages associated with the position (at or just above the minimum wage in Newcastle, slightly higher - up to £7 per hour in London). Employers suggested that some staff would move on to a local competitor 'for an extra few pence an hour' or they would use the position as a 'stop gap' until they could move into a different occupation which paid more and offered better opportunities or a more pleasant working environment. Many of the hard to fill vacancies identified by employers were associated with working 'shifts' and other employers noted the problems of staffing over a week-end. The following comments from managers provide an indication of the challenges employers face:

'Most difficult retention is on night shifts...unsociable hours and physically demanding work. No matter how much you tell people that it is hard work at interview they don't realise until they try to do it...they try to study or work during the day and then come to work at night and it just does not work.' (Local manager, London business employing 117)

'People start and they don't like the job...they do a couple of days and leave...The production operative job is quite hard work that involves standing around for long periods, bell-to-bell working, it is quite disciplined and there are shift patterns.' (HR Officer, Newcastle business employing 120)

'They have to work at least one day at the week-end...we cant afford to accommodate them or to set precedents that others who have been with the company for a while may want...we try to be flexible if they want to leave early for College but it can be difficult.' (Head Office Personnel manager, London Business 200+)

Some employers (particularly in hospitality) provide staff with transport (mini-bus or taxis) if they work unsocial hours. Many employers appeared willing to accept relatively high levels of labour turnover, often comparing it with high levels across their industry or sector.

'There are huge costs associated with staff turnover which we don't quantify...it affects my productivity as I spend all my time hiring people and there are all the administration and office costs associated with taking someone on.' (Local Manager, Newcastle business employing 40)

'Staff turnover causes huge problems with staffing...often things don't get completed on time and people get pulled off other things to get the job done but this always has a knock on effect...we cant really do much about it locally and Head Office will only do something if profitability is at risk.' (Local HR manager, London Business, employing 200+)

Many employers had taken steps to address staff turnover through various personal and organisational development initiatives in the workplace (section 4.5, p10) with varying degrees of success.

3.2. What employers look for in a candidate for a low status job

The vast majority of employers stressed that the over-riding criteria for employment was that the applicant was 'right for job' and that discrimination on any basis was not practised. However, generalising what is embraced by the term 'right for the job' is complicated given the range of occupations and employers engaged in the research.

There was evidence, particularly amongst employers in London that entry criteria had been relaxed due to the problems recruiting in a tight labour market. Whilst the selection criterion was relatively rudimentary, some of the criteria for example related to the availability to work specific shifts or hours of work which were immovable from the employer's perspective. Candidates would not obtain work if they were not able to work these hours due for example to personal commitments or personal preferences.

The lack of qualifications associated with a prospective candidate were not reported to be a key determining factor in the decision to recruit to a low status occupation although some employers suggested that they were a useful indicator of the skills of a candidate and the potential of the candidate to learn. Experience in the sector was preferable for many employers as the candidate would therefore have some idea of the nature of the job they were applying for and some skills based on past experience. However most employers looked for skills in terms of motivation, enthusiasm and a willingness to 'give it a go'. Illustrative examples of employers' views are provided below:

'We look for qualifications in school leavers...just so that we can see that they have not wasted their time in school...if they left some time ago we look for some evidence that they have done something productive...could be anything...something that enables them to tell us about how they have dealt with other people...if they have something about them that says give me a chance.' (Customer Services manager, Newcastle business employing 70)

'Look for candidates who will engage with me...customer service is paramount and you need to be sure that the candidate has the confidence to do it...you can usually tell by how they speak to you...the ability for them to say what they want to say...experience is not so important as you can train anyone to do the work. I'm impressed by people who look smart but most don't and I've had to give up on this...some just don't own smart clothes and we give them a uniform anyway.' (Local Manager, London business, Employing 117)

The issue of postcode discrimination was explored with employers. Only one employer in Newcastle reported that the area in which a candidate lived may influence their decision to recruit. Most employers in London suggested that they did not have the detailed knowledge of London geography to know which were 'good' or 'bad' areas. Several employers located in disadvantaged areas appeared well disposed to recruiting members of the local community due to the belief that they were more likely to stay with the business if it was convenient for them to travel to.

Of core interest to an employer was the likelihood of a candidate staying with the business and turning up for work regularly. A coherent employment history was desirable and this had implications for applicants with repeated experience of short-term employment periods as well as the long-term unemployed. Many employers suggested that they would explore the reasons for unemployment with candidates and look for candidates who were able to provide a 'reasonable explanation' for their periods of unemployment. Equally the health of an applicant was often of concern to employers and would often be explored during the interview.

4. Employers recruitment and retention processes

This section of the report provides an overview of the drivers of recruitment before investigating the recruitment and retention processes of employers engaged in the research in London and Newcastle. Many of the employers in the research sample were part of larger national or international groups. Whilst local employers were responsible for local recruitment, they were often governed by the approaches and tools provided by Head Office. The extent to which local managers had received training to support them in the operation of effective local recruitment and retention was mixed and many of the participants in the research were general managers with little or no formal training in human resource management. The absence of training in recruitment and retention practices in small, independent owner managed firms was notable.

4.1. The drivers of recruitment

The research with employers in London and Newcastle suggested a variety of reasons underpinning the decision to proceed to recruit. Only two businesses (both small independent firms) cited the growth of the existing business as the driver of recruitment. The vast majority of employers cited organisational issues related to labour turnover as the primary reason for recruitment. However staff turnover appears to be an intermittent problem for many employers who have no clear understanding of the reasons for the variability associated with the level of staff turnover on the business. Noticeably persistent high levels of staff turnover often appeared in specific occupations (e.g. kitchen staff) or in jobs associated with unsociable hours.

In general, a systematic recruitment process (to varying degrees) is apparent in most employers once a vacancy is identified. The detail of the recruitment processes is highly diverse and contingent upon a range of factors including the nature of the position to be filled, the practices of the employer and their previous experiences of the labour market. In multi-site organisations elements of the process are undertaken by a centralised unit but in all instances the decision to recruit lies with the local manager with responsibility for the position.

The key attributes of this process generally are:

- communication of the vacancy
- assessment and selection of candidates
- assessment and interview of short-listed candidates
- induction process
- probationary period for successful candidates

4.2. Communication of the vacancy

Employers use a variety of approaches to communicate a job vacancy contingent upon key situational factors such as the nature of the job vacancy, the internal resources available for advertising and the approaches that have worked for the employer in the past. Several large employers regularly circulate vacant positions in company newsletters or post them on staff notice boards. Service businesses which are part of a larger group will often draw on resources (advertising and promotional leaflets) developed by a central Human Resource Unit display them in public places at the place of work. A minority of employers reported using local press to advertise vacancies. None of the businesses reported using recruitment agencies at this time largely due to the fees attached to the service. Some had used word of mouth through

existing employees. All had used the Job Centre at one time or other. Often employers use more than one approach at the same time. For example:

'Team member vacancies are advertised in store, in local job centres, other local stores...word of mouth is also used as we've got a lot of University students who say 'my friend wants a job' and their availability...late nights and weekends is ideal for us.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 23-35)

4.3. Initial assessment and selection of candidates

Few employers reported a lack of candidates responding to job advertisements. Many employers adopt a staged approach to the selection of candidates including:

- initial telephone interview
- application form
- further assessment, interview and perhaps subsequent interviews
- references

Several employers, particularly (but not exclusively) the larger, national retail outlets reported a general surplus of applications. Most of these organisations co-ordinated the initial approach from applicants centrally.

'People who are interested in working for us can call a freephone number, we collect some basic details and conduct an initial interview over the phone...if appropriate we send them an application form.' (Local manager, London Employer employing 117)

'We would typically get people to phone up for the job and to screen them over the phone to assess their suitability...if they are OK we'll send them an application form...at the end of the day if we cant understand them and they cant present themselves over the phone then they are not going to be suitable.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 30)

This process was used by several employers to screen out those whose conversational English skills were insufficient. However one employer operating a similar phone based system for initial screening noted that if an applicant had a valid NI number they would be provided with an application form.

The application form plays a major role in the assessment of the suitability of a candidate. A minority of employers insist on the application form being filled in at the place of work so that they can check if the applicant can understand English. The majority of employers interviewed use the application form as the basis for the initial sifting and short-listing of candidates. Employer assessment processes are highly diverse contingent upon a range of factors including previous and current employer practices and type of vacancy.

Application forms and occasionally written tests are used by employers either implicitly or explicitly to assess the Basic English (reading and writing) skills of potential employees. In some instances a poorly completed application form would disbar a potential applicant from employment. In other instances employers would provide assistance to the applicant, filling in the form themselves based on the responses of the applicant.

4.4. Further assessment and Interview of short-listed candidates

A minority of employers conduct further (often paper based) assessments of applicants using forms of psychometric testing or other analysis of personal traits. These are often used as a basis for the ensuing interview.

The interview is a key element of the recruitment process for all employers. The nature and length of interview(s) varies between and often within employers and is contingent upon a range of factors. The majority of employers reported that it was a process whereby the employer was able to tell the candidate about the organisation and the job whilst assessing the suitability of the candidate both in terms of technical skills and experience but arguably more importantly from the employers point of view, their soft skills in terms of motivation and willingness to learn the job.

'We will go through the whole organisation and say what it is, the working hours and rates of pay and it is made clear that they will be required to work evenings and weekends. They are told what we expect of them, what the pitfalls are and what the advantages are.' (Local manager, Newcastle employer with 100 employees)

'The interview gives us the chance to find out what they know...some people are good on paper others have the gift of the gab...we use the interview to tease out their experience and their knowledge so we can assess their suitability.' (PA/HR manager, London employer with 30 employees)

4.5. Transition into the workplace

Whenever a new employee joins an employer there is always a period of learning and adaptation before they become effective. Partly this involves finding out about the practicalities of the job and facts about pay, other employee benefits and the rules and regulations governing activity in the employer. However there is also the need to understand 'the way we do things here' in order to fit in with the existing culture of the organisation.

The initial induction process for a new recruit is highly variable in scale and scope with some employers suggesting an hour or two with key personnel (often the smaller businesses) and others (often the larger businesses who are part of a larger group) providing structured programmes which last up to a week.

Employers use a mix of formal and informal approaches to induction of new recruits. Generally (but not universally) employers will have a 'welcome pack' or 'staff handbook' to provide employees with a written copy of key policies and procedures. New employees will be shown around the workplace by the personnel or HR manager and introduced to key people. Employers often use a mix of media to underpin the induction process with videos and computer based systems in evidence.

'Induction is a combination of face to face and computer based processes. I'll have a chat with them and welcome them and after a while I'll get them to sit down and go through the computer-based system...The system has a number of modules...general induction, health and safety, fire training, technical knowledge...I'll sit with them and get them used to the system...if they are familiar with computers I'll just leave them to get on with it and check up on their progress occasionally. At the end of each module there is a test and most pass it...if they don't they have to go through it again.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 60)

After the initial induction with the person responsible for recruitment new recruits are then taken to their department head who provides further work based induction training. Several employers employed 'buddy systems' to help the new recruit settle into the workplace. For example:

'New recruits will be assigned to an experienced member of staff and they will work alongside them for as long as it takes for them to know what to do and how to do it...sometimes this can take one week sometimes seven weeks.' (Local HR manager, Newcastle business employing 120)

The vast majority of employers reported the use of a probationary period to assess the suitability of the new recruit. Employers reported that the probationary period was a crucial time for both the employer and the employee. Many employers had developed feedback systems to ensure that the new employee was aware of their performance in this period and many employers suggested that they allocated some time for the employee to rectify any problems which emerged. This approach undoubtedly contributed to the suggestion by the majority of employers that most new employees successfully negotiated the probationary period and were retained by the employer.

'The probationary period lasts for 12 weeks...the importance of this is stressed to new staff...they are reviewed after 3 weeks using a standard process which is known as 'know how well I am doing'...some don't get through this because of their poor timekeeping or absence but the majority do...if there are problems they get advice and counselling the first time and then other warnings are given...it is a six-stage process before we dismiss them.' (Local HR manager, London business employing 200+)

'Calls are recorded and quality monitored so that they can listen to themselves identify faults with their line manager and try to improve.' (Local manager, Newcastle business, employing 30)

4.6. Role of training and development

Employers express a variety of views associated with ongoing training and development of employees. These views range from employers who practice the philosophy of continual development for all employees to employers who take few steps if any to identify the training and development needs or to promote training and career development opportunities.

However, the majority of employers have appraisal systems in place and the majority of these systems cover all staff. Generally appraisals take place every six months and involve a dialogue between the line manager and the employee surrounding the employees work performance and, in some cases, their aspirations. Inevitably the style and specifics of the appraisals vary considerably both within and between organisations. For example:

'Every six months employees have an appraisal with their line manager and they review progress and set new targets...performance is rated 1-3 on set criteria and a lot of 3's can result in a pay increase...the employee also gets a chance to identify what they think should be done better.' (Local HR manager, London business, employing 200+)

'As time goes on new tasks are introduced...we use a skill matrix and provide training (usually through the central training unit) so that staff get the skills so that they are able to fill a variety of positions.' (Local manager, London business employing 117)

'All staff have an appraisal and a personal development plan...we get them to talk about their career aspirations and we try to accommodate them...if we can see potential in people we encourage them...sometimes we push them other times they push us...we try to promote within and if the member of staff does not get promoted we try to identify what they need to do for next time an opportunity comes up.' (Local HR manager, Newcastle business, employing 120)

'90% of appraisal is listening to what staff have to say...asking them about what they want to achieve and how they might achieve it...If I think that they have potential I will sit down with their supervisor and talk about their development.' (Department manager, Newcastle business employing 60)

Several employers have developed their own systems to support progression in the business. This has often been prompted at least in part by difficulties experienced in filling supervisory positions. The approaches are predominantly work-based adopting a competency system. In some instances employees are encouraged to complete a number of tasks within a specific stage before moving on to the next stage. The stages were variously labelled 'bronze', 'silver', 'gold' and 'platinum' or 'introductory', 'intermediary' and 'advanced' and signified a progression towards supervisory and management positions.

'We use the computer-based system which has a series of modules...if people want to progress they complete more modules...when they complete a grade they get paid extra...there is a clear progression route for customer service staff which can take them through from Grade 1 to Grade 3 after that they have a chance to go for a management position.' (Department manager, Newcastle business employing 60)

'We like to encourage staff to gain qualifications...provide all staff with no qualifications with the opportunity to study for an NVQ level 1...there are a range of free courses available through a local training provider.' (Local HR manager, Newcastle business employing 120)

Many employers recognised however that career development opportunities for staff in low status occupations are limited because of the sheer number of people in these positions and the relatively small number of supervisory jobs available.

Several employers noted that in spite of making training opportunities available to staff in low status occupations, many remained reluctant to take them up. However, the extent to which external training opportunities are actively promoted appears mixed. Employers appear most likely to send people externally for training if they don't have a centralised training unit and if the course is free.

'The company offers a variety of training including customer service, first aid, basic health and hygiene and food safety...they provide a mixture of on site and off site training...if it is off site the company pays transport costs and the cost of the course...they can do it in work time.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 100)

5. 'Bending' employer approaches and using job brokerage

This section of the report explores the extent to which employers are willing to adjust or 'bend' their recruitment and retention practices to accommodate the interests of people who have been unemployed. It also explores the ways in which the job brokerage Service has affected their recruitment and retention processes.

5.1. Communication of the vacancy

The vast majority of the employers in the research sample had used the job brokerage Agency (@Work) to advertise vacancies available in the business. However @Work was not the only agency to be used by employers who noted that there were often many agencies subsidised by the government who offered various recruitment and training services to employers. The majority of the employers in the sample had used or continued to use the Job Centre to communicate vacancies. Both the Job Centre and @Work were seen as a key means of communicating low level vacancies to potential candidates.

The majority of employers continued to, or planned to use @Work services in the future. One employer who used a telephone hot line noted that the use of @Work had opened up a new source of potential candidates:

'Some people go to @Work who would not apply through our telephone hotline...so we tap into another group of people...@Work respond very quickly normally we can have people by tomorrow afternoon and they can start almost straight away.' (Local manager, London business employing 117)

In this way the job brokerage agency had provided employers with another route to the labour market. They were able to reach residents in the New Deal area who were registered with @Work. One local employer in Newcastle noted that @Work had been able to overcome any discrimination based on where people live as they were often able to omit this information from the application process by providing information to employers in their own format.

5.2. Initial assessment and selection of candidates

Largely in response to the tight labour market and the business need for labour, employers suggested that they had relaxed their initial assessment requirements and were willing to interview many of the candidates who had filled in an application form to their minimum standards. These standards differed in relation to the nature of the occupation and the varying minimum requirements of the employer). Some employers cited examples where they had sat with a candidate and filled in the application form for them based on their responses to the verbal requests for information contained in the form.

Employers generally identified @Work as making a significant contribution to this element of the recruitment process through the screening and appraisal service that they offered. However employers identified issues associated with ethnic minorities (and particularly immigrants/asylum seekers) who, whilst often well qualified, had insufficient communication skills (in English). Employers generally contrasted the service provided through @Work favourably with that provided through, for example, the local Job Centre. For example:

'@work are pretty good at screening the candidates...the Job Centre just send anyone...they don't check the application form and don't take time to help them...it means we spend time seeing people who are not suitable...we now use @Work because of the screening that they offer.' (Local HR manager, London business employing 200+)

'Overall we get a good service from @Work...sometimes we have had people who don't want to work the hours we are offering but they were not told about it by @Work before coming to the interview...I've brought this up with @Work a couple of times and they are much better now...their vetting service is really good.' (HO Personnel Manager, London Business employing 200+)

'@Work are great...they provide a summary of the candidates details and a written appraisal before the interview...they will ring me up and ask me what dates I am available for interview and they will sort it all out for me...all I have to do is turn up...sometimes you get terrible people from the Job Centre but everyone I have had through @Work has been employable.' (General Manager, Newcastle business employing 40)

Employers drew attention to a further aspect of the service offered by @Work prior to initial assessment. Several employers suggested that @Work helped applicants fill in their application forms. Some employers reported leaving application forms at the @Work Office for potential applicants. This service meant that the applications were quality checked before they reached the employer and employers noted that they were less likely to discard an application because it was not filled in correctly or key information was missing because a candidate 'had not been bothered' to fill it in.

5.3. Interview of short-listed candidates

As indicated in section 3.2 of this report, employers will often look for evidence associated with a candidate's soft skills particularly in terms of their 'willingness to do the job'. Several employers suggested that @Work had provided candidates with some coaching prior to attending the interview. In a couple of instances (only apparent in small independent employers in Newcastle) employers reported a member of the @Work team attending the interview on the employer's premises with the applicant. This was viewed positively by the employers who used the @Work representative to 'bounce ideas off' and to discuss the candidate's interview performance. Employers contrasted @Work favourably with the Job Centre. For example:

'We don't have the same relationship with the Job Centre because you're calling a call centre and it is not as good as speaking to someone one to one. If I ring (named contact) at @Work about something he'll come and see me face to face.' (Local Manager, Newcastle business employing 100)

'We've used the Job Centre off and on but they are not very user friendly...when you ring them up and try to tell them what you want they don't seem to listen...all they are interested in is filling the boxes on their forms...they want us to put salary in but it is often negotiable...also we have live in positions which can be an attraction for people but they can't accommodate this.' (Recruitment manager, London business, employing 117)

The majority of the employers who had used the Job Centre drew attention to the high proportion of applicants who either did not attend an interview they had arranged with the employer or who turned up and appeared disinterested in the vacancy being offered. By way of comparison few employers reported issues associated with 'no shows' or with the attitude of the candidate provided through the job brokerage scheme.

A selection of comments from employers are provided below:

'When we invite them for interview we tell them about their appearance and what we expect...we don't want chains and torn trousers...if they read the letter they know what we are looking for and if they don't then it is a good bet that they are not suitable for us...all the people who have come through @Work have been appropriately dressed...they also do the things you would hope a candidate would do...look you in the eye...talk positively about things...they know a bit about the business...I think @Work do a lot of prep work getting them ready for interview...if they are not successful we let @Work know why and they can take steps to deal with the issue...at least one person has come back to us through @Work and has been successful.' (HR Manager London business, Employing 200+)

'When the Job Centre send you people we have to go through a half hour interview with them when they don't really want the job...they're wasting my time...I used to say to them (JC) why did you send me that person and I never got a satisfactory answer...if you say that to @Work they have the power to remove them from their register.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 100)

'The Job Centre usually send poor calibre people who are often forced to come...they completely waste my time because they are not really interested in working for (company)...it has happened a few times.' (HO Personnel manager, London Business employing 200+ nationally)

'The people I was getting through the Job Centre were people who didn't want work to be honest...I feel that the people that go to @Work...do want work...they are more keen...they seem to be the people who are really trying to get a job...the Job Centre send you people who have been out of work for 6 or 7 years who really don't want to work...the people from @Work will come to interview and make an effort.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 23-35)

One employer noted a preference for candidates provided through the Job Centre due to the 'payment' to the company associated with recruitment.

'I get people from both @Work and the Job Centre...I want to take on recruits through the Job Centre...If I do we get paid and that makes a big difference to us and it affects our decision...the Job Centre didn't tell me about this it was the employee when he came to the interview.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 60)

Other employers suggested that local Job Centres were open to developing the services offered to employers.

'We've just used the Job Centre very successfully...had 14 posts to fill and we held some focus groups in the local Job Centres to encourage people to apply...they (focus groups) were hit and miss, at one no-one turned up but at another we had loads there...it has helped us broaden the range of people we employ and target New Deal...we have just taken on two new recruits who start next week.' (HR Officer, London employer, employing 200+)

'We are having a meeting on Friday with the Job Centre...we feel there needs to be communication with the Job Centre. We're looking at the possibility of the Job Centre being able to screen applicants first for them.' (HR Officer, Newcastle business, employing 120)

5.4. Transition into the workplace

The retention of employees is a key element in managing the human resources of a business. Many employers reported a 'high' level of turnover almost exclusively in low status occupations. Most employers rationalised this in terms of the general 'high' level of staff turnover in their sector or within certain occupations. However employers have an underlying interest in reducing high labour turnover in low-skilled jobs in an effort to improve efficiency and productivity.

Employers have taken a variety of actions to support the transition of a new recruit into the workplace (as indicated in section 4.5 of this report). For example:

'We took (name) on through @Work...he used to turn up early (7.30) when we don't open till 8.00..he stood outside freezing...turns out he relied on getting here by bus and the next one would get him here at 8.10 so we just changed his start time.' (Owner manager, Newcastle business employing 33)

'We have girls who come in who have children who work certain hours to fit around their commitments...I fit my business around them.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 100)

'We have a part time hours shift - 9.15-2.45 - with the aim of reaching women who may be want to return to work who have childcare responsibilities so this might suit their responsibilities.' (HR Officer, Newcastle business employing 120)

'I've got people who only do a Tuesday and Wednesday night...I've got people who only do weekends...I've got people only do day shifts...there are a couple of staff who have dyslexia...they are not comfortable with the tills so they work out the back.' (Local manager, Newcastle business employing 23-35)

Several employers had taken steps to address this issue using ongoing training and development and in the words of one employer developing a more 'caring' approach to their staff. For example:

'Recruitment is the key to reducing labour turnover...the more time you spend getting the right people, the more time you spend with them when they join the business the better it is.' (Local manager, London business employing 117)

'They get trained well and they get treated well...they get a lot of different benefits...discounts in the store...reasonable rate of pay...and we have a close knit team.' (Local manager, Newcastle, employing 30)

'We have tended to employ people in the past and just leave them to it...there is not a lot to the job and they can just get on with it...we had a high staff turnover last year and we are trying to get over it by providing a more supportive environment...we take time to talk to staff and find out what is happening...try to ensure supervisors integrate people into their team...staff turnover has improved in the last year.' (Operations Manager, Newcastle business, employing 40-70)

Several employers suggested that they adjusted the induction process to accommodate new recruits with particular needs. For example:

'Sometimes English is a problem for people...we often have to go slowly and explain things several times...we use videos and have to stop them and rewind it and go through it again...sometimes the induction process can take twice as long as normal.' (Local HR manager, London employer employing 200+)

@Work generally contact the employer to ascertain how the new recruit has settled in to their job. The nature of this contact is variable between areas and within areas with some employers suggesting that they receive a letter and others suggesting that they receive a telephone call (some employers suggested both). Some employers suggested that the motivation for this contact with @Work was largely administrative (i.e. they needed to do it to obtain their funding) whilst other employers reported that it was part of a more 'careful approach based on improving customer service to employers. An example of the latter approach is outlined below:

'I've had a lot of people through @Work in the last couple of years...they (@Work) have excellent aftercare and are in regular contact for the first four weeks...they will call and see how they are settling in and if they (new recruits) go missing they will chase up people and encourage them to come in... @Work have also helped them to set up bank accounts.' (Local manager, London business employing 117)

5.5. After the probationary period

Employers suggested that when a candidate successfully completed the probationary period and became an established member of staff they were treated the same as any other member of staff disregarding their status (unemployed/employed) at the time of recruitment. The majority of employers reported that the appraisal systems in place covered all staff however employers generally reported no specific activity to support or develop members of staff who may be most at risk of exclusion for one reason or another.

5.6. Employers awareness of New Deal for Communities

In spite of dealing with a New Deal sponsored agency and recruiting employees from a New Deal area, most employers had no working knowledge of New Deal for Communities. Several employers had heard of New Deal for the Community but the majority of these could not explain what it was or how it impacted on them. Most employers suggested that @Work were subsidised by the government and aimed to get unemployed people back into work but did not know that they were linked in any way to NDC.

6. Summary and key issues for Partnerships

The research has drawn attention to the importance of the demand-side in alleviating worklessness in disadvantaged communities. Drawing on primary research with a small number of employers associated with two NDC areas, the research highlights employer practice in terms of recruitment and retention. Despite the very different local labour market context in the two NDC areas many of the issues emerging through the research apply to both NDC areas and to NDC areas more generally.

Three questions were posed at the outset of the research namely:

- a. to what extent do employer HR practices (recruitment and staff development) influence the retention and development of recruits who were previously unemployed?
- b. to what extent do employers 'bend' their HR practices to support the previously unemployed?
- c. what role do NDC (or other relevant policy interventions) play in influencing the HR practices of employers?

It is clear that employer practices influence the recruitment of new employees (who were previously unemployed) to low status occupations through the individual organisation's approach to advertising of vacancies, the selection and short-listing of candidates and the application process. However the ways in which employer practices impact on recruitment are variable and contingent upon a variety of internal (to the organisation) and external factors. Often those with poor health records or and/or poor employment history are least favoured by employers. The induction process and probationary period are also highly variable across employers however they represent a key process for the employer to provide, amongst other things, the necessary training associated with regulatory requirements, the products and services offered by the company, to introduce the 'way we do things round here' and to assess the performance of the candidate.

There was some evidence of employers 'bending' their recruitment and retention practices for low status occupations although not specifically for unemployed people. For example, various employers reported a loosening of their selection criteria, support for the filling in of application forms and longer, more in-depth induction processes. The vast majority of employers reported the use of employee development systems, often founded upon staff appraisals with line managers. All employers reported that the status of an employee (i.e. employed/unemployed) prior to recruitment had no effect on the development processes and approach adopted by the organisation.

Employers suggest that the key role publicly funded agencies such as the Job Centre and job brokerage agencies play is in providing a route to the labour market for low status occupations. The additional screening and appraisal service offered by the job brokerage agency is clearly valued by employers as is the general 'employability' of the candidates provided through them.

The research provides an insight into the complexities of the demand-side which have implications for the development of NDC services for local employers. One of the key challenges facing those developing services aiming to alleviate worklessness is the extent to which they can take account of the diversity of employers' interests and practices in the offerings that they provide. The research also suggests some key issues for consideration by NDC partnerships more generally.

6.1 Building on success and mainstreaming

Almost universally, employers express positive views of the job brokerage service operating in both NDC areas. Clearly employers value the screening undertaken by @Work and the speed and flexibility of their response to employer requests for labour. Many of @Work's clients are residents in the NDC area and employers reported that many of the candidates placed in employment were drawn from minority ethnic groups. This implies that they have met with some success in engaging those from disadvantaged areas and helped to place individuals from ethnic minorities into jobs. In terms of mainstreaming, the key issue is how agencies such as @Work and the Job Centre work together to share good practice and other resources to the benefit of the local community and to minimise duplication. Already there are examples of sharing good practice and expertise between @Work and the Job Centre through for example secondments within the NDC programme (see, for example, Job Brokerage: Inter-agency working - Research Report 15) which can provide the foundations for further knowledge development.

6.2 What role for existing interventions?

The vast majority of employers in the research highlight the key role employee turnover plays in the incidence of vacancies arising. The research also suggests that the majority of employers (in this sample if not generally in the economy) provide initial induction training along with ongoing access to training opportunities through staff development systems. Many of the businesses which are part of larger groups have relatively sophisticated Human Resource systems in place however an opportunity exists to encourage small, independent (not part of a larger group) businesses to develop their recruitment and retention capability. Local enterprise agencies and Business Links have a key role to play in encouraging good Human Resource practice through for example advice and guidance and/or the 'Build a better business programme' and/or 'Investors in People' and partnerships should seek to ensure that efforts are made to promote appropriate offerings to local employers.

6.3 Local training provision and employer interests

The research suggests that employers look for candidates who are motivated and enthusiastic to fill low status occupations. Formal qualifications appear to have little role to play in the recruitment decision making process associated with low status occupations. A major challenge for the NDC and its partners is to develop, promote and deliver innovative learning processes which encourage the development of 'soft' skills associated with for example self-confidence, appearance and motivation for those who are at most at risk of exclusion. A key element of any approach will lie in encouraging learners to go on to use these skills in the job market.

The research with employers also suggests that reading and writing (in English) is still a barrier to recruitment for those employers who rely upon the completion of an application form by the candidate. It appears that @Work provide some support to help overcome this, however further problems can be encountered at interview if conversational English is deemed insufficient (as was the case in London). Many employers identified current staff with problems communicating in verbal English however very few employers had any knowledge of the provision of appropriate learning opportunities in the community. There is clearly an opportunity for local providers to work with local employers to promote relevant offerings (particularly if they are free of charge) to local employees. The approach may aim to use the employer as a communication mechanism or may seek to engage them more actively in the development process (e.g. providing space for workplace delivery, recruiting learners).

6.4 Checklist for local Partnerships

The research has identified a range of issues associated with the demand-side of the labour market. From this analysis a series of issues which may be of interest to local partnerships in developing their approach to alleviating worklessness are outlined below in the form of a checklist:

Characteristics of the demand-side

- have key local employers (inside and outside the NDC area) been identified?
- are their recruitment practices 'locking out' local residents? If 'yes' what opportunities for intervention exist?
- are local employers taking steps to minimise staff turnover? If 'no' what can be done about it?
- what role could local employers play in promoting local training opportunities to their staff?
- does the NDC have a productive relationship with key employers? Are local employers aware of NDC? Does NDC need greater brand awareness with employers? How does the NDC (further) develop a productive relationship with employers?

Supply side issues

- does the NDC have the right partners? Does the partnership include key local agencies such as the Business Link, Chamber of Commerce, job Brokerage Agency and Job Centre Plus? Are key local employers involved?
- can the NDC work with local employers to support positive changes in their approach to recruitment and retention? Are interventions such as the 'Build a better business' and 'Investors in People' appropriate?
- do local providers offer informal training opportunities to improve residents' attributes such as self-confidence and motivation? Are these skills placed in the context of getting a job?
- what is being done to ensure that good practice and local experience is being shared between job brokerage Agencies and other mainstream partners?
- can the NDC use the positive relationship between the employer and the job brokerage agency more productively?
- what happens when the funding for job brokerage services runs out?