# A Common Approach to Assessment: Meeting the employability needs of our clients

**Final Report**
**(March 2009)**

**Workforce Plus Subgroup on Common Assessment**

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**Acknowledgements**

This report is based on the work of the Workforce Plus Common Assessment Subgroup. It draws heavily on the key findings from a series of workshops to capture the views of individuals expert in this area of activity, and documentation and case study material prepared by Cyril Hellier and Ron Crichton (Post School Psychological Services, MCMC, The Scottish Government). Special thanks go to all the partners involved, particularly those in Dundee and North Lanarkshire for piloting the training materials.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## The Policy Framework: Design and Implementation

In 2006, the Scottish Executive published two key strategy documents on employability issues.

- *Workforce Plus* focussed on creating a framework within which action to secure significant and sustained reductions in worklessness could be achieved, with a particular emphasis on harder to help client groups such as people on Incapacity Benefit (IB).
- *More Choices More Chances* was also about tackling employability issues, but where the focus was on young people in or at risk of entering the group not in education, employment or training.

Both of these strategic frameworks were endorsed by the new administration in 2007.

Subsequently, the Workforce Plus and More Choices More Chances agendas have become much more strongly aligned. This is in recognition of the facts that:

- to the extent that a more effective effort can be launched successfully for younger people at risk of worklessness, the flow into adult unemployment will be significantly reduced over time.
- many of the issues around employability dealt with by these strategic frameworks are similar.
- by aligning the agendas, a more coherent and consistent approach to employability can be built from school through to the pre-retirement stages of the employment life cycle.

The Scottish Executive introduced some machinery to help oversee and support the implementation of these two strategic frameworks, and this machinery again was endorsed with the advent of the new administration.

- The National Partnership Board (renamed the Scottish Employability Forum in 2009) provides a broad strategic overview of the two agendas.
- The National Delivery Group focuses on the efforts of local employability partnerships across Scotland with a view to sharing good practise and identifying constraints to local employability service delivery that government and government agencies need to address.

This report has been produced by the Common Assessment Subgroup of the National Delivery Group. The report is intended to help local partnerships improve their approaches to assessment of clients by introducing a more common and shared approach to assessment across partner organisations. The guidance in the report is meant to be valuable in a service delivery context, and links to more detailed practical guidance are highlighted within the report. These will be available on the Workforce Plus Employability Learning Network website (www.employabilityinscotland.com), which launches in Autumn 2009.

The report will hopefully be of value to both local funders and managers of employability and other relevant services, but also to frontline staff engaged in an ongoing assessment process with individual clients.

## 2. TACKLING WORKLESSNESS: THE CONTEXT

### The Policy Context

#### *Workforce Plus*

Workforce Plus was published in 2006 with a view to setting a framework for tackling worklessness more effectively across Scotland with a focus on harder to help clients in the Incapacity Benefit (IB) claimant group. Initially the focus was on 8 specific localities but subsequently the aspiration grew to seek the engagement of local employability partnerships across Scotland.

The key themes running through Workforce Plus include the following.

- Early intervention.
- Client focussed interventions.
- Employer engagement.
- Sustaining and progressing employment.
- Joined up planning and delivery of services.
- Better outcomes.

#### *More Choices More Chances*

Also in 2006, *More Choices More Chances* was published. The focus of this strategic framework was placed on young people not in education, employment or training. As with Workforce Plus, initially the emphasis was on a small number of 'hot spot' localities with high percentages of young people in this category. There was a significant degree of overlap between the areas targeted by Workforce Plus and those identified for priority by More Choices More Chances.

In broad terms the approach taken in More Choices More Choices involves:

- increased effectiveness of measures taken before young people reach minimum school leaving age to raise the likelihood that they will make a good transition into education, training or employment on leaving school.
- a challenge to improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for working with young people who have already left school but find themselves not in education, employment or training.

The initial focus on a small number of localities was subsequently widened out, with all 32 of Scotland's local authority areas asked to prepare plans for how they intended to bring about a significant reduction in the numbers of young people in their areas who were not in employment, education or training – or were at risk of failing to make an effective transition from school into one of these categories of economic activity.

***Rising Up the Policy Agenda (UK)***

Since 2006 worklessness has risen even further up the policy agenda at the UK level. A number of factors underpin this.

- Despite the most buoyant labour market for decades, there are still over 4 million people claiming DWP key benefits in the UK.
- This represents a significant drain on public expenditure with implications for levels of taxation, as well as imposing constraints on spend in other areas such as education and health.
- An additional consideration for the UK government is that if the growth in employment demand is to be met it is essential to dig deeper into economically inactive population.

Clearly the recent severe difficulties in the financial sector will impact significantly upon the buoyancy of the labour market and the demand for labour, making it all the more important that the fundamental problem of worklessness is addressed effectively. Some analysts predict that long term employment will quadruple over the next 3 to 4 years.

In the light of these various concerns, the Government has set ambitious targets for reducing numbers on benefits at the UK level:

- 1 million reduction in Incapacity Benefit stock (by 2015).
- 300,000 reduction in lone parents claiming benefits.

In order to achieve these targets, DWP has introduced a number of major changes.

- The new Employment Support Allowance (ESA) will involve significant transfers over time of lone parents and clients on or likely to have been on Incapacity Benefit into Jobseekers Allowance (JSA).
- Once on JSA, these new clients will be confronted with a more demanding 'work focussed' approach, with increasingly intensive service delivery from JobCentre Plus.
- At the same time, the new DWP Commissioning Framework is placing the delivery of employability services in the hands of a small number of large private and voluntary sector prime contractors. Under Flexible

New Deal, which will begin to be delivered from late 2009, JSA clients unemployed for 12 months will pass over to prime contractors who will have a year to move them into sustainable employment

One of the main consequences of the above changes is the likelihood that organisations working with people on benefits will be confronted with increasingly harder to help clients, many of whom will have multiple and complex needs.

***Rising Up the Policy Agenda (Scotland)***

Under the new administration.

- *Workforce Plus* and *More Choices More Chances* were endorsed as contributing to economic growth by helping raise economic activity.
- The Government Economic Strategy – published in 2007 – put growing Scotland's economy at the heart of government.
- There is a focus in the strategy on a 'Whole Government' approach, i.e. all government departments and agencies must contribute to economic growth, and so by extension to reducing worklessness. This requires engagement by:
  - National and local government.
  - Agencies, such as the NHS, as well as government departments.

***Increasing Drive to Secure Cost Effectiveness***

At the UK and Scottish levels, the view continues to prevail that sufficient resources are there, but they are not deployed as effectively as possible

Partnerships are now striving to secure greater cost effectiveness through range of mechanisms

- More joined up approaches to procurement of employability services.
- More co-ordinated approaches to measuring performance.
- More sharing of good practice.

Part of this move towards a more common approach across partner organisations to key employability processes extends to the assessment process – which will be discussed in detail later.

### *Linking More Choices More Chances and Workforce Plus*

Over time the two employability frameworks in Scotland have drawn closer together. This reflects a recognition that there are significant linkages between the two agendas.

- Young people who fail to make a good transition from school to education, employment or training are in danger of becoming tomorrow's long term unemployed adults.
- Many of the changes required to raise the effectiveness of local approaches to employability are common across the young people and adult age groups including the importance of creating effective employability pipelines, the focus on cost effective interventions and the need for better quality local strategic and operational partnerships across a range of agencies.

Additionally, in localities it is often the same agencies – and indeed individuals – who are involved in partnerships for promoting Workforce Plus and More Choices More Chances. This makes for economies in partnership working where the two agendas are much more closely integrated.

### *Linking Employability and Skills*

With the publication of a number of key UK and Scottish policy documents - *Opportunity, Employment and Progression: Making Skills Work* (DWP, 2007), *Ready to Work, Skilled for Work* (DWP, 2008) and *Scotland's Skills Strategy* (The Scottish Government, 2007) - a stronger emphasis is now being placed on integrating the skills and employability agendas. It is argued that:

- increasing Scotland's and the UK's competitiveness requires a step change in workforce skills with fewer people reporting no or low qualifications and more with at least VQ Level 2.
- to move more unemployed people into work, and then to sustain them in work by helping them progress to better paid jobs, more weight needs to be placed on giving them higher levels of skills and qualifications.

One of the new processes being introduced here of relevance to the Workforce Plus agenda is the ***skills health check*** which DWP plan to make available to new JSA registrants on a mandatory basis in England. Currently discussions are taking place involving The Scottish Government, JobCentre Plus and Skills Development Scotland to work out how best to introduce this to Scotland.

## 3. DELIVERING EFFECTIVE EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES

### Defining Employability

The central focus of Workforce Plus – Scotland's strategic approach to achieving significant and sustainable reductions in unemployment – is on enhancing employability. The Workforce Plus definition of employability shows how broad-based a notion it is:

> *'Employability encompasses all the things that enable people to increase their chances of getting a job, staying in and progressing further in work. For each individual there will be different reasons why they are not achieving what they would like in employment – perhaps their confidence and motivation, their skill, their health or where they live compared to where jobs are available. Helping people to improve their individual employability is key to our aim of moving more people into sustained work'.*

In effect, employability is the combination of factors which enable people to progress toward and into employment, to stay in employment and to move on in the workplace.

### Delivering Employability: Joining Up Services

***Dealing with Multiple and Complex Needs***

There is a growing awareness of the importance of the contributions of a wide range of services to help enhance employability – particularly the further we drive into the hardest to help groups who have multiple and complex needs in some of the following areas.

- Basic skills
- Health
- Housing
- Addictions
- Money and debt advice
- Combinations of needs

Figure 1 shows from a study of IB clients in Glasgow the incidence of multiple barriers to employment. Over 50% of clients had four or more significant barriers.

**Figure 1: Problem of Multiple Barriers (%)**

| Number of Significant Barriers | % |
|---|---|
| 0 | 5 |
| 1 | 14 |
| 2 | 12 |
| 3 | 13 |
| 4 | 28 |
| 5 or more | 28 |

One implication of the analysis of the barriers faced by workless people trying to return to employment is that the client group is extremely diverse. This diversity also heightens the need to put in place good quality assessment processes and maximise the value of the various assessments of unemployed people carried out by the range of organisations with which they have contact. As Figure 2 suggests – for an imaginary set of 5 unemployed people – there is no such thing as ***the*** long term unemployed.

**Figure 2: No Such Thing as 'The' Long Term Unemployed**

| Barriers | Clients | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Low skills | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| No qualifications | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Poor health | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Criminal record | | | | ✓ | |
| Addiction | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Area discrimination | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Low esteem | | | | | ✓ |
| Carer | | ✓ | | | ✓ |

**The Pipeline Approach to Employability Service Delivery**

There is a widespread recognition that the changes in policy require corresponding changes in practice, and that it is no longer acceptable for more disadvantaged jobseekers simply to remain 'parked' in the benefit system, Although some employability partnerships are still quite narrowly focussed around Jobcentre Plus, SDS and local authority economic development departments, it is also now more fully understood that key services which do not focus specifically on employability nonetheless have a key role to play.

Clients need services which are easy to access at the time they need them. There is growing acceptance that these services need to come together in a ***pipeline of services*** which provide pathways for clients.

- Some clients will move from the start to the finish of the pipeline.
- Other clients will start later in the pipeline and may miss out some steps.

The key thing is that the pipeline is joined up and all the key gaps are plugged. This way it can cater for the needs of very diverse clients.

Figure 3 shows how Dundee organise their employability service delivery pipeline.

- The starting point is to bring clients into the employability pipeline. This will involve a number of new processes including referrals from organisations whose main business is not employability as well as active outreach activity by employability organisations.
- Assessment is explicitly introduced at Stage 2 where this focuses on an initial assessment of client needs.
- Stage 3 involves drawing on any specialist services (e.g. in areas such as addictions, financial exclusion etc.) required to help move the client forward.
- Stages 4 and 5 involve training and related interventions to prepare clients for opportunities in the workplace.
- Stage 6 focuses on work placement opportunities to build up work experience.
- Stage 7 is all about getting people into jobs.
- Finally Stage 8 kicks in. Once in ***employment,*** after-care services to sustain employment and help more clients into better jobs kick in.

**Figure 3: Dundee Employability Pipeline**

| STAGE 1 Referral/ Engagement | STAGE 2 Initial Needs Assessment | STAGE 3 Specialist Intervention | STAGE 4 Employability Training | STAGE 5 Accredited Training | STAGE 6 Work Placement | STAGE 7 Job brokerage + matching | STAGE 8 In-Work Aftercare |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partners introduce new clients to employability pipeline, completing Registration Form and starting Activity Plan.<br><br>This stage is **ESSENTIAL** | Partners assess initial needs of client and agree key activities to be undertaken with them.<br><br>This stage is **ESSENTIAL** | Partners deliver specialist services to client in line with Activity Plan (e.g. financial advice) | Partners deliver unaccredited core employability skills in line with Activity Plan | Partners deliver range of accredited training including ECDL, food hygiene, etc. | Partners arrange a Work Placement with employer to gain client work experience | Partners focussed on engaging with employers, secure job vacancies + match job-ready clients to jobs | Partners support clients entering work to maintain job through site visits, practical + specialist support |

Dundee partners do not view the pipeline as a linear process, and it is shown this way above only for ease of presentation. Not all clients will pass through all stages of the pipeline. Indeed one of the central functions of assessment is to develop a plan and interventions for the client that will bring the appropriate service to them at the right time. It is about customisation. At the same time assessment serves the funders well because clients get the services they need as opposed to ones which do not help progress them. The next section considers in detail the role of assessment in tackling worklessness.

## 4. ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN TACKLING WORKLESSNESS

### Role of Assessment in Enhancing Employability

A wide range of organisations conduct some form of assessment (formal or informal) where they engage with clients. A number of issues are raised by this assessment effort.

- Workless people get fed up answering the same or sets of similar questions from a range of different organisations.
- It represents a significant investment of staff time within the various service delivery organisations.
- Some organisations have better assessment frameworks and tools than others, and so there is considerable scope for shared practice to increase the effectiveness of the assessment process.

A number of different enhancements to dealing with the multiplicity of assessment processes have been proposed, each of which tries to deal with some of the problems identified above. There are, however, two broad issues:

- developing assessment tools and processes which have more in ***common*** across agencies, instead of being entirely customised to specific organisational requirements. The use of a single assessment for each client is the ultimate manifestation of this approach.
- greater ***sharing*** of assessments of individual clients across agencies and providers.

The Workforce Plus Subgroup took the view that the appropriate choice for the workless client group is the development of:

- a ***common assessment*** framework, as a single assessment would be too difficult to devise given the great diversity of agencies working with the unemployed.
- a process of ***greater sharing of assessments*** for individual clients across agencies. This is needed because the workless client group increasingly includes people with multiple and complex needs engaged with a range of service providers.

For the rest of this document, references to a needs led Common Assessment Framework are intended to capture both of these dimensions.

## Defining Assessment in Context

Organisations charged with delivering services involve client assessment in some form or another. At its simplest, it is a natural process of trying to identify the service needs of the client and how best these might be delivered. In terms of employability services, Skills Development Scotland's Get Ready for Work programme builds on what was Careers Scotland's perspective on assessment with the following definition.

> *'Assessment is a **process** for gathering information and evidence to **identify** strengths and development needs of an individual client; this to **enable** them to commit to achievable goals and successful/sustainable outcomes. The process may continue over time and through changing circumstances, a developing **relationship** with the client allowing greater trust and involvement.'*

## Purposes and Objectives

### *Broad Purposes of Assessment*

There are a number of specific rationales for delivering assessment to workless clients, building on the definition discussed above.

- Identify the starting point and distance travelled for the client.
- Develop an awareness of the client's individual strengths and needs.
- Isolate relevant and sustainable employability objectives.
- Identify additional support needs to tackle any barriers identified.
- Establish goals and strategies as part of a client action plan.
- Match resources to individual needs.

### *Specific Objectives of Assessment*

Assessment has a number of specific objectives, including one or more of the following.

- Delivering positive activity to build relationships and trust.
- Negotiating and agreeing ways forward with the client.
- Achieving a clear picture of where client is now (baseline) and wants to be (aspiration).
- Establishing what is right for client, and a shared understanding of their needs and how they will be met.
- Developing the client's knowledge, responsibility, accountability, and ownership.
- Identifying priorities relating to employability and stages towards that.

- Action planning to lay out a clear pathway and priorities relating to employability and stages towards that.
- Setting goals which are clear, realistic and client-owned.

**Key Principles**

A number of basic principles are the foundations of effective assessment.

- It is undertaken to ***identify*** individual ***needs*** to maximise their skills and promote improved outcomes.
- It is a ***process*** that promotes the minimum effective involvement of relevant partners
- It should be ***staged*** to ensure co-ordinated and collaborative working.
- It requires proactive sharing through good quality ***information transfer*** and agreed protocols.
- It recognises the centrality of the client and requires ***confidentiality*** issues to be addressed at the outset.
- It involves ***specialist*** roles, only in a context where roles and procedures are explicit and agreed.

Below some of the key principles are developed.

***Process*** – includes working with or through partners as well as direct contact with clients and progressive client engagement. Wherever possible, the aim should be to stage any assessment and intervention processes to ensure the most effective use of professional time and limit confusion, duplication or omission for the individual client in receipt of the service. The ultimate aspiration is to ensure that information relevant to an assessment is available and shared, effectively and respectfully, in order to support planning and goal setting. ***The principle of minimum intervention for maximum outcome should prevail.***

***Identify*** – to help recognise and understand strengths and needs of an individual in relation to their context of learning, training and/or experience of work. This process of assessment seeks to understand any barriers in the past and in current experiences of an individual. As far as possible the identification of need should be ***with and for the client*** and should focus on meeting that need. Further identification of any conditions or barriers, specific to an individual, represents a later stage in the model, when additional information is sought for a minority of clients, including the use of more specialised tools and/or agencies.

***Enable*** – to empower the client to take ownership and act to build on their strengths to allow them to form or reach a relevant goal. The personal planning process should lead to action that brings about useful outcomes for the client including support, training and ultimately, employment. Ideally, professional support should seek to promote autonomy in the client, so that individual action plans are more likely to be acted upon.

***Relationship*** – the success of the engagement of an individual is dependent on the quality of relationship established between the client and the organisation with which they are engaged. Establishing trust and a sense of fairness increases the degree of openness of communication, as well as increasing the chances of being realistic and objective. Many clients have complex histories, may lack confidence in themselves and others, and initially require considerable help to commit to creating short or long term goals.

**Aspects of Good Process in Assessment**

In seeking to identify characteristics of effective assessment the focus is upon:

- the strategies used to assess individual need.
- assessment tools which are helpful to the process.

***Strategies***

Focus groups to help develop the Common Assessment Framework identified the following essential features and characteristics.

- The quality of relationship is key, along with communication skills to help develop a one to one relationship.
- Helping an individual to acquire greater confidence and self belief, tied to improved aspirations is central. In part this is assisted by getting the individual to stand back from their situation in order to engage in personal planning with a greater sense of objectivity. The idea of the provider helping a client to navigate transitions seemed to fit this role.

Figure 4 summarises some of the other key strategies emerging from the focus groups.

**Figure 4: Strategies for Effective Assessment**

| | |
|---|---|
| • positive ethos /positive engagement<br>• trust<br>• one to one relationship<br>• active listening<br>• space to talk<br>• encouraging<br>• negotiating | • building aspirations goals /vision<br>• job coaching<br>• developing self confidence<br>• objectivity in the individual – achieving wider vision / context<br>• reflecting – seeing personal circumstances as a process. |

In summary, effective assessment involves multiple strategies aimed at building a positive relationship with the client through encouragement and negotiation. Client engagement is seen as an ongoing process and not necessarily a one-off event. This is often best achieved through one to one contact, but partners, (including key workers and job coaches) can help build a fuller and more accurate picture.

***Assessment Tools***

A number of potentially useful assessment tools have been identified, including the Rickter scale to measure distance travelled. North Lanarkshire's application of Rickter is described below simply to illustrate how it helps frontline staff in relation to progress along the employability pathway.

**North Lanarkshire Employability Assessment (Rickter Based)**
Routes to Work Ltd have developed an assessment tool which builds on a model from Tyne and Wear and which has been designed to operate within the Hanlon client tracking system. This assessment tool is based on the principles of the Rickter scale.

The assessment considers a range of areas commonly acknowledged to impact on an individual's "employability". The assessment is carried out by a key worker and the scores generated are fed in to the Hanlon system to create a picture of the client's current situation. The score given through this assessment can then help in the assignment of the client to a 'stage' on the employability pathway – North Lanarkshire's stages are.

- Stage 1: not yet job ready – no routine or social connections.
- Stage 2: not job ready – barrier removal.
- Stage 3: job ready – work preparation.
- Stage 4: employed.

As the majority of working age clients are assigned to a Routes to Work key worker it is the key worker's role to carry out this assessment at the following points in a clients journey.

- At registration.
- At the end of an intervention (e.g. training course), or
- at least every three months.

A "snapshot" can be taken on the Hanlon system, allowing key workers to measure their client's progress over time. However this does not mean that other projects and their frontline staff cannot help Routes to Work key workers build up a full picture of the client's progress. The key to effective assessment is the sharing of information.

Reference to specific tools or specific products requires to be undertaken at local level to reflect the range of practices represented. However, the emphasis in this guidance is on:

- the effectiveness of the assessment process, underpinned by multi-disciplinary working and sharing information at critical points of transition.
- the knowledge that front line staff possess about practices, procedures and the role of other partners.

These combine to help articulate pathways for individual clients to progress and experience continuity

Other information sources and tools may be available to structure assessment and engagement, although the main emphasis is on partnership activity and information sharing as the best means to validate assessment.

**Definitions and Purposes Combined**

In the employability context, assessment can be viewed from two perspectives:

- the client.
- the partner organisations delivering a service.

A summary is offered under each level.

***At Client Level***

- Assessment aims to develop a positive ***relationship***, helping the individual build a realistic picture of their ***needs***, ***strengths*** and ***experience***.
- It should result in ***action planning*** that includes goals and opportunities that support progression towards employability.
- The process should be a ***negotiated*** one that promotes client ***ownership***, empowering them to attain agreed outcomes.
- It should help the client set a current starting point and ultimately allow a retrospective measure of ***distance travelled***.
- Experience of working with partner organisations should include ***transparency, clarity and co-ordination.***

***At Partner/Organisation Level***

- Assessment requires a shared ***process*** for gathering information and evidence to ***identify*** the strengths and development ***needs*** of an individual; this to enable them to achieve realistic employability goals and successful and sustainable outcomes.

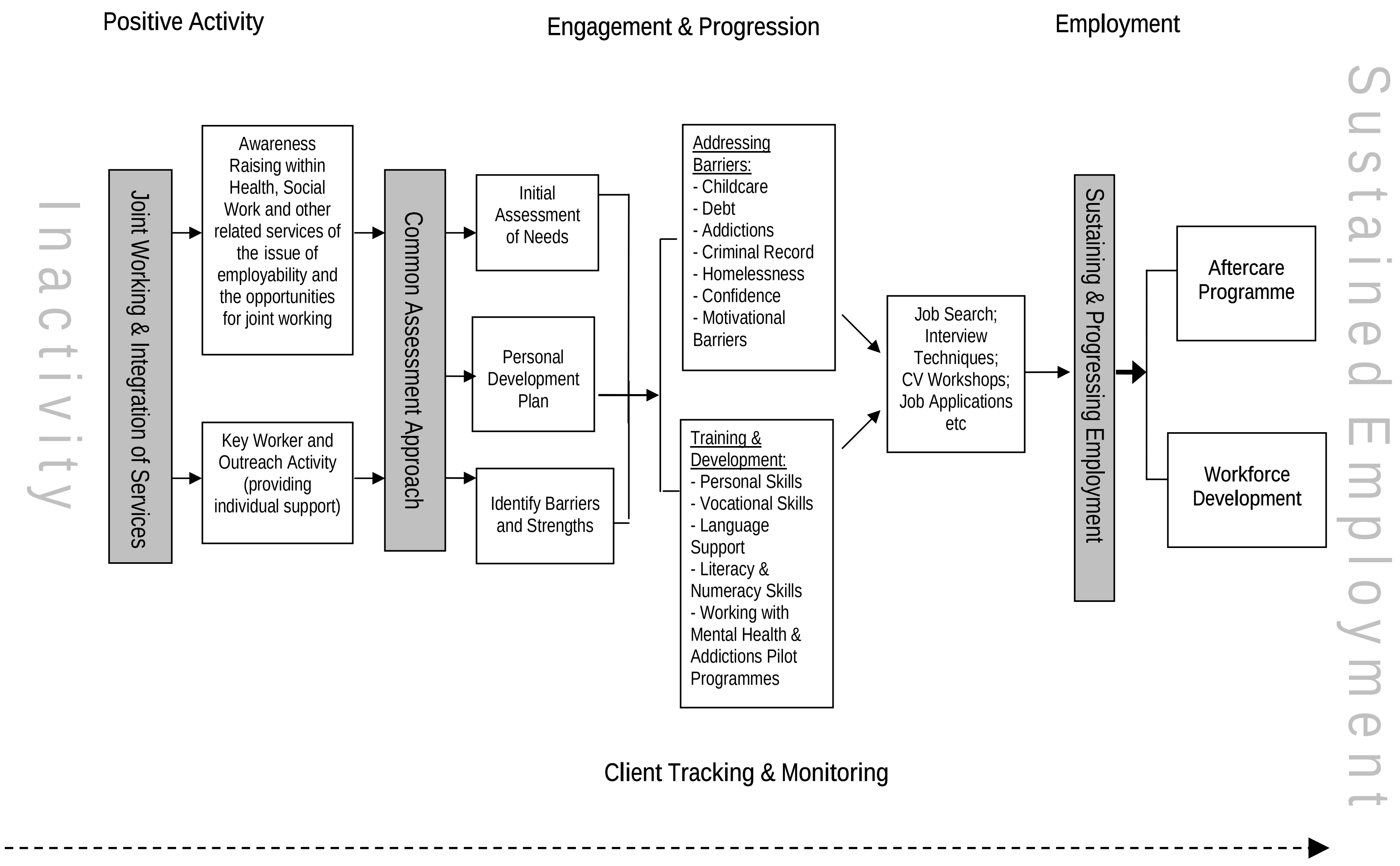
- It should involve an ***agreed language and procedures*** that are clear to both client and partner organisations.
- Building rapport and establishing a ***relationship*** are key to client engagement and empowerment.

**Assessment in Workforce Plus Context**

Assessment can now be added in to the employability services delivery pipeline to show where it fits and adds value. Figure 5 shows how assessment is integrated into West Dunbartonshire's employability pipeline.

- It positions the initial assessment of needs towards the early stages of the pipeline.
- It involves identification of barriers and strengths.
- These come together in a Personal Development Plan for the client.
- The assessment feeds through into signposting a referral to the services needed to implement the Personal Development Plan.

**Figure 5: Building Assessment into Employability Pipeline**



Although difficult to show in diagrammatic terms, the ***assessment process needs to be on-going,*** as barriers are tackled, new barriers and strengths identified and the Personal Development Plan reviewed and revised.

This section has shown the importance of assessment in the context of employability service delivery and the basic principles of effective assessment. The next section considers the selection of an appropriate assessment model.

## 5. AGREEING AN APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT MODEL: NEEDS LED

### Searching for a Model

Good quality and appropriate assessment is central to the process of generating an effective service delivery for reducing worklessness. The first task in moving towards a common assessment framework, into which all partners buy, is to find and agree the appropriate model for assessment that works for employability.

The Workforce Plus Subgroup on Common Assessment supports the needs led model of assessment which has been developed and applied elsewhere by The Scottish Government's Post School Psychological Services More Choices More Chances Team, working with a number of organisations, including Careers Scotland, Scottish Enterprise's Get Ready for Work Programme and Scotland's colleges. Workshops and consultations with representatives covering a range of responsibilities and roles in service delivery in the Workforce Plus context resulted in adaptations to the model and helped develop support materials to accompany an implementation process.

### Needs Led Model

The model in Figure 6 below is designed to:

- identify client strengths and barriers, as well as development and support needs.
- enable an individual to plan and achieve their personal goals.

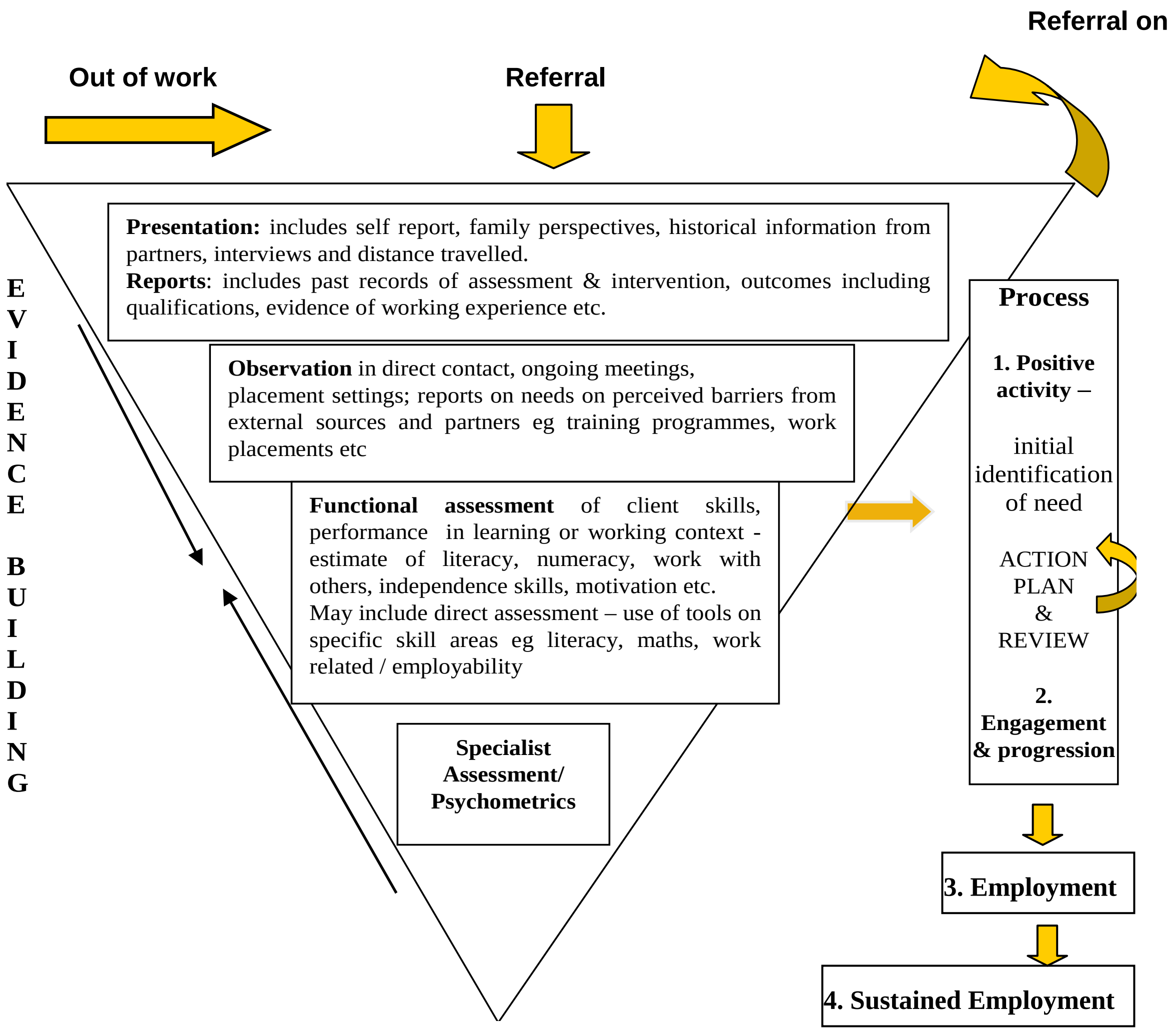
The aim of gathering information concerning an individual client and making use of available evidence in a structured and progressive manner is to build an understanding of their needs. In keeping with the principle of **minimum intervention for maximum outcomes,** this should involve the differentiated assessment required to ensure a positive and sustainable outcome for each individual.

#### *Stages of the Model*

All clients will not need to be taken through all stages of the process. The key is to develop a robust assessment to identify and address a client's need. It is perfectly possible to proceed with client engagement and writing of an Action Plan at the ***Presentation Stage*** so long as adequate and accurate information on the client has been collated and communicated. This is more likely where there is effective prior assessment and good quality information transfer, leading on to the value of developing a common assessment framework with a high degree of sharing.

If further information is required, the ***Observation Stage*** allows a fuller picture to be built from direct contact with the training provider or other relevant partners. This allows for greater confidence in the planning process where information gathered supports and reinforces initial understandings and serves to build an accurate picture of client need.

**Figure 6: A Needs Led Model to Assess Employability**




The ***Functional Assessment Stage*** follows on from ongoing experience of the client in practical training and working settings to establish basic skills, social competence, motivation etc. Ongoing contact with the client should continue to feed a ***Review Process***, with updating of goals. It provides further evidence to confirm initial understanding of client need, or to offer new understandings. Outcomes from intervention become the critical evidence in this continuing process, ultimately aiming to bring about a positive sustainable outcome for the client.

According to this needs led, staged model, further investigation using ***Specialist Assessment*** tools should only be required when all other opportunities to build a picture of client strengths and needs have been utilised and there are still unanswered questions. This is most likely to be when more information is needed to clarify the presence of a barrier specific to the individual's situation. It may involve further internal detailed assessment or external assessment by specialists, when all other information sources have been drawn upon.

Assessment and interventions are mutually supportive activities and should appear seamless to the client. The process is best seen as a staged one, whereby a developing picture of client need builds, whilst in the context of providing relevant support. Such activity should increase the chances of correctly understanding a client's learning, employability and life skill needs, as well as the barriers that require to be overcome to enter and sustain learning and work settings. The staged aspect is critical to ensuring the minimum – but effective – involvement of each agency. Case study examples of staged assessments in the Get Ready for Work context were collated by the Common Assessment Subgroup (http://www.careers-scotland.org.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?lID=6680&sID=189).

The main goal is to work towards a relevant sustainable outcome for the client. Ideally, co-ordination of assessment and intervention across partners should be facilitated by an agreed key worker with the explicit role to support the client whilst maintaining an overview of the activity of all related agencies. However, each agency involved has the responsibility to ensure that its actions are taken from a perspective that takes account of the work with the client, by relevant others.

### Applying the Needs Led Model to Workforce Plus

Discussion in the Subgroup as to the relevance of the proposed model to Workforce Plus assessment practices, where it might ***add value*** and suggestions for ***adaptation*** led to several conclusions. The model:

- creates awareness of the elements of a good assessment process.
- lets partners see their responsibilities – how they fit in.

- generates content which reflects what is happening on the ground, i.e. it has built-in common sense.

Spelling this out in a bit more detail, the PSPS needs led model offers a useful framework to reinforce existing good practice and also cohere and develop it. Further it is largely self explanatory, once accompanied by written guidance, or a pack. The model is open and ***transparent,*** enabling partners to identify with the ***process*** and articulate their role within it and at which ***stage*** they can best add value. It articulates a ***common language*** and coheres a ***common process*** intuitive to current practice.

There is, however, a clear need to adapt aspects to make it more fit for purpose within the Workforce Plus context and to align it with existing terminology, activity and documentation across settings. A summary of the issues that still require to be addressed to better adapt the model to Workforce Plus involve:

- continuing to contextualise Workforce Plus language and exemplars in each stage.
- emphasising early client engagement as central to pre-referral and referral.
- considering reducing the number of stages (functional and direct assessment possibly collapsed into one stage) to keep complexity to a minimum.
- making more explicit the four Workforce Plus stages, e.g. employment before sustained employment.
- ensuring the process of client engagement and the stages of professional activity are clear.
- including client 'loop journeys' (i.e. when going between providers).

**The Needs Led Model in Practice**

Consideration of implementation in the Workforce Plus context highlighted issues regarding how best to 'land' the model in a complex and diverse setting, and how to introduce and share it with partners. These included:

- ensuring a ***shared*** understanding of where services sit and relate to each other.
- emphasising positive outcomes for ***relationship*** building in improving the collaborative process.
- considering how it could be introduced to local ***provision***.

- conducting ***pilot(s)*** to establish evidential based practice and improvements, further refine, and possibly have champions to develop locally.
- seeking ***evidence*** that the model delivers improved outcomes as part of implementation.

The challenges implied were not ignored, not least the diversity of quality across existing service providers. However, this very diversity raises an opportunity to pursue and support quality improvement and to highlight partnership working.

Existing information can be mapped on to the framework that this model provides and additional assessment strategies considered. In practice, this progressive gathering of evidence can be seen as drilling down. It presupposes that different agencies have specific responsibilities to identify and respond to need, and raises the question as to who is best placed to undertake such roles. The answer will depend on both the individual circumstances and the relevance of particular agencies. Ideally one agency should take the lead in co-ordinating activity around points of decision making for individual clients. The model serves to offer a guide as to where to focus the process.

***The ultimate aim of assessment should always be to provide information that results in action leading to a positive and sustainable outcome for the client.*** This may be through other partners at the top of the triangle, or it may involve increasing involvement of the provider in direct action, lower down the model.

In a system characterised by early intervention, good communication and sharing of information, the need to undertake direct assessment is minimised. In such cases a client who is appropriately placed, is being ‘assessed’ in a dynamic way, as a result of being in an intervention programme. Their response to it will increasingly act as critical information to determine next steps and should influence the responses of relevant partners involved.

The needs led model is relevant to all partners working in collaboration to support clients and to meet their employability needs. Figure 7 provides a self evaluation questionnaire to allow a partner to consider current practice with the aim of maintaining and improving standards of assessment practice.

**Figure 7: Checklist Applying Needs Led Assessment to Employability Services**

**1. Presentation & Background:**
- ✓ Does your organisation use any kind of pre-assessment to be aware of client need before meeting them?
- ✓ Can you access reports from stakeholder agencies that help provide background prior to referral?
- ✓ Are there good transition links with relevant key partners for both incoming and departing clients?
- ✓ How do you structure initial meetings / interviews with clients?

**2. Observation:**
- ✓ What opportunities are there for observing a client in a working / learning setting?
- ✓ What helps you to structure your observations in seeking to understand the employability needs of a client?
- ✓ Do you have good links with specific agencies to share information and planning for Review?
- ✓ Do you have good links with specific agencies to share information and planning for transition?

**3. Functional assessment:**
- ✓ What assessment strategies do you have available to make judgements about the functional skills of a client in the context of specific skills / tasks?

**4. Direct assessment:**
- ✓ Which products / measures / tools do you use to get a better picture of specific e.g. IT / literacy or numeracy skills of a client?

**5. Specialist assessment / Psychometrics:**
- ✓ Which specialist services do you have access to, in order to confirm your suspicions of particular barriers?
- ✓ Who can you consult in order to discuss emerging ‘hypotheses’ about a client’ needs?

This section has begun to illustrate the contributions that different organisations can make in the client assessment process. The next section considers more directly the relevance and value of a needs led Common Assessment Framework.

## 6. DEVELOPING NEEDS LED COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

**The Current Situation**

The definition of assessment and the principles discussed earlier combine to allow the consideration of a needs led model of assessment. They focus on the process of assessment, with an explicit assumption at the outset that all partners act as ***interdependent*** stakeholders who share a ***collective responsibility***. Ultimately the client benefits from an experience of co-ordinated services that seek to maximise continuity and progression.

Many organisations work with unemployed people at various points on the pathway that may eventually lead them to sustainable employment, even although this may not be part of the organisational objectives for their clients. This includes organisations which:

- provide or support a range of positive activities, such as volunteering, community learning, etc.
- deliver services (such as money advice or addictions counselling) not focussed on enhancing employability.
- offer projects or services developing basic skills, raising confidence or otherwise promoting employability among those more distant from the labour market.
- focus services on more vocational skills targeted at labour market opportunities.
- work to support job search and other activities close to the point of job entry.
- look ahead - for example, organisations working together to deliver the proposed new ***skills health checks***.

Key partners will vary across settings but are likely to include:

- Community groups
- JobCentre Plus
- NHS
- Providers and contractors from the private, public, not for profit sectors
- Secondary schools and support services.
- Service user groups
- Skills Development Scotland
- Social Work
- Voluntary sector

## Business Case for a Common Assessment Framework

To invest in a Common Assessment Framework, there needs to be some return for the participating organisations in terms of greater effectiveness for their clients and/or resource savings. It must work for organisations, or clients will not get the potential gains. It is not sufficient for this to be seen as a ‘good thing’ – it has to generate good value for services and their clients relative to any of the costs and risks associated with its implementation.

In a situation where different agencies repeatedly collect and assess similar information for the same clients, there must be considerable scope for realising both of these requirements. This scope can be divided up into more effective services from the client perspective and resource savings in service delivery from the organisational perspective.

### *Resource Saving*

For the service delivery organisations there are significant potential resource savings from a Common Assessment Framework.

- It saves time by minimising staff input required to assess or re-assess clients.
- It generates economies of scale in developing and maintaining skill levels of staff involved in assessment though joint training across organisations.
- It helps organisations do better on service targets for a given resource, because of the enhanced service to the client.

### *Service Effectiveness*

The benefits of a Common Assessment Framework for clients can be articulated as follows.

- It removes the disjointed experiences faced by clients.
- It raises awareness of employability among cognate professionals as a spin-off from common training, so they are better placed to assess their clients and support or refer appropriately.
- It maximises the respective strengths of different service providers.
- It supports the development of quality standards in assessment.
- It generates more effective transitions and referrals for clients

- Ultimately it helps organisations respond more effectively to client needs, enhance the client experience and deliver more sustainable outcomes for more clients.

**Key Principles of a Common Assessment Framework**

***Effective Partnership Working***

Partnership working is crucial to effective assessment and support for clients. A number of fundamental principles serve to reinforce the features of effective partnership working. The Subgroup's consultations resulted in the articulation of a number of ***key principles*** in the Workforce Plus context.

- ***Interdependence/complementarity*** – each partner has to recognise the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The sharing of objectives, ultimately to make a difference to clients, demands that effort to overcome barriers is exercised.
- ***High quality communication and openness*** – each partner requires to make robust attempts to be fully aware of respective roles and remits of relevant stakeholders, to develop open and respectful working relationships and to communicate effectively with colleagues and clients
- ***Maximising impact*** – the aim of providers working in partnership is to acknowledge shared objectives and to complement each other in producing positive and sustainable outcomes for clients
- ***Accountability*** – partnership working can become a measured quality indicator in its own right. This would need to be built into both self evaluation and contracting regimes.
- ***Clarity*** – of ***roles*** and ***responsibilities*** as well as identified areas of ***expertise***.
- ***Identifying client needs*** – should be shared as a key aim.
- ***Confidence in their partners*** – this requires clear lines of communication, with agreed protocols and procedures, including:
    - common procedures for documentation.
    - an agreed staged model of intervention (each partner knowing their appropriate role, relative to others), with key working and follow through activity.

  These require a degree of adaptable and flexible practice with the client at the centre of delivery, and a ***shared process*** to identify needs, monitor and review ***progression.***

These principles support and augment the existing principles of the needs led model.

## 7. IMPLEMENTING NEEDS LED COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

### Implementing the Model Locally

The Subgroup identified a large number of suggestions on how a needs led Common Assessment Framework might be implemented locally. These included:

**Implementing A Common Assessment Framework**

- Build elements of the Framework as requirements into procurement process (carrot/stick – monitoring, evaluation, quality).
- Need for national support to promote common application across non Workforce Plus areas.
- Ownership and partner buy in to sell the benefits of adopting this model. Buy-in has to happen at level of CSP/Workforce Plus.
- Key agencies to lead and evaluate.
- Promote shared and improved wider understanding of assessment process.
- Clarity around other contextual structures:
    - what others are providing,
    - audit locally and nationally,
    - describe mandatory tools.
- Develop the model to meet local structures/priorities and embed in local good practice (e.g. information sharing protocols).
- Fit employability pathway stages with stages of assessment.
- Some organisations have statutory assessment – need to dovetail.
- Develop a user guide to support understanding.
- Make it easy for people to understand; keep it simple. Need to rid assessment of mystique.
- Explain model and relevance for clients and partners.
- Demonstrate and assist clients re-entering if they do not sustain outcome.
- Inter-agency training and development around assessment and employability pipeline.
- Develop information sharing protocols.
- Training on and communication of model – need to develop shared skills e.g. solution focused questioning and information sharing.

The West Dunbartonshire Service delivery model (shown in diagrammatic form earlier) is underpinned by developments toward a Common Assessment Framework including a common assessment tool, a core client dataset, common referral protocol, standardised consent form and a procedure for electronic data-sharing. This has the advantage of developing common 'core' assessment, with more detailed and specialist assessments as appropriate, consequently making the process increasingly joined up for the client. However it is acknowledged that developing a 'core' set of assessment tools to be adopted by the wide range of services is not straightforward.  A new web-based client tracking system is being introduced to facilitate more generally flows of information about clients, including assessments and outcomes.

In the rest of this section, a number of specific issues around local implementation are fleshed out as they are likely to apply to all local partnerships.

### Developing a Code of Practice

A good starting point is for local partnerships to give serious consideration to developing an agreed Code of Practice. This can be built upon the Framework Code of Practice for Sharing Personal Information developed by the Information Commissioners Office (http://www.ico.gov.uk/). As an illustration, the box below for the Information Commissioners Office Framework sets out a good practice framework for the initial process of partners agreeing to share information where the legal preface to this is *'Any information sharing must be necessary. Any information shared must be relevant and not excessive'*

**Your code of practice should do the following.**

1. Set out why you want to share personal information and what benefits you expect to achieve.
2. Provide for a realistic appraisal of the likely effect of the sharing on the people the information is about, and of their likely reaction to it.
3. Give advice on finding alternatives to using personal information, for example using statistical information.
4. Describe the information that you need to share to achieve your objective and the organisations that need to be involved.
5. Outline the relevant legal provisions, that require or permit your organisation to share information, or prevent it from doing so.
6. Address any issues that might arise as the result of sharing confidential or sensitive information.
7. Say whether individuals' consent for information sharing is needed and, if so, how to obtain consent and what to do if consent is withheld.

There is potentially a role for the Common Assessment Subgroup to provide guidance on this for local partnerships, perhaps through running workshops on the Information Commissioners Office self assessment tool around information sharing.

### Agreeing Standard of Assessment Data Required

In preparation for the introduction of common and shared assessments in a locality, an important foundation is an agreed set of data definitions and standards. Fortunately, excellent work on this has been done by the Workforce Plus Management Information Systems Subgroup (please see www.employabilityinscotland.com). The data definitions and standards are organised by categories, and a number of these are central to the assessment process, principally client stage, client group, client perceived barriers and client background.

Local partnerships need also to be clear about the new national minimum information standards for all adults (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/12/13130738/0) developed for health and social work services under the single shared assessment. These include questions on employment, as well as education, training and lifelong learning. All social work departments across Scotland will be required to comply with these standards.

**Embedding Through Training**

Training will be necessary in most localities to bring frontline staff across a range of organisations to a common understanding of what is involved in delivering common and shared assessments. The process of delivering the training jointly for the staff of a range of organisations also helps to embed common and shared assessments by building up contacts and informal networks across staff, both within and across organisations. A training programme (please see www.employabilityinscotland.com) was developed and delivered with assistance from the Training and Employment Research Unit at the University of Glasgow and piloted in Dundee and North Lanarkshire.

**Tackling Barriers to Local Implementation**

Effective implementation depends on tackling the barriers likely to impede the process. Consultations during the work of the Subgroup generated a diversity of perceived barriers to effective assessment. Barriers to common assessment were articulated at a ***structural*** and an ***individual*** level.

- ***Structural barriers*** relate to data sharing, diversity of practice, funding and resource allocation – compounded by a competitive culture between providers. In relation to the assessment process there can be a preponderance of different and non complementary processes and tools, which in themselves can cause confusion and lack of consistency and continuity for clients.
- ***Individual barriers*** relate to a lack of focus on clients as central to the process. Additionally, lack of time to build trust and a positive relationship can often result in clients being 'processed' rather than

their needs being assessed. Finally, assessment can be idiosyncratic – basically it is only as good as the person delivering it.

Clearly there are significant implications for local development, training, support and quality control in the wider Workforce Plus context. Barriers do need to be acknowledged and addressed in an ongoing manner. The more specific and detailed barriers emerging from the Subgroup process are listed below. Sometimes the allocation to structural or individual barriers is arbitrary, and indeed some of the issues raised could appear under both headings. However, a comprehensive set of barriers is presented in a concise format. Local partnerships need to come to a view on which of these barriers carry weight in their patch, and respond accordingly.

**Barriers to Common Assessment**

***Structural Barriers***

- No shared ethos across agencies leading to inefficient use of time and effort.
- No current shared framework to adhere to: diversity of agency views and practices.
- No commonly agreed terminology, tools or criteria – no common language to cohere practice.
- A lack of agreed information sharing processes/protocols/procedures – all contributing to a lack of continuity and fragmentation at point of transition.
- Concern that some clients being ‘assessed to death’.
- Need to develop trust to underpin the sharing of information relating to individuals.
- A need for shared understanding as to:
  - The purposes of assessment; (‘assessment for its own sake’); What to assess? Why assess? Whose role is it to assess, i.e. who does what?
  - The relative emphasis placed on formal assessment of ‘deficit’
  - The relationship between resource issues (gate keeping) and assessment of need.
- A need to relate assessment to outcomes.
- A host of ‘real life’ factors:
  - some clients have a complex history.
  - agencies often working under considerable pressures.
- Loss of information on moving from service to service – process not joined up.
- Too many different models of assessment.
- Funding – drives behaviour and competition and can lead to conflict between person centred approach and partnership working.
- Lack of focus on client – concentration on targets.
- Competition culture among agencies.

***Individual Barriers***

- Do not want to refer ‘our’ client.
- Confidentiality being used as an excuse not to share assessments - hiding behind confidentiality.
- Idiosyncrasy – assessment is only as good as the assessor.
- Differences in interpretation and language surrounding assessment models.
- Inappropriate referrals.
- Focus on client assessment – need to assess if services are meeting client need.
- Lack of evaluation/self evaluation.
- Lack of time to develop relationship.
- Staff skills and skills of assessors.
- The attitude of the person undertaking the assessment.
- Lack of knowledge regarding what is ‘out there’.
- Level of client ability – additional support needs reduce employability prospects.
- Lack of cooperation from clients.

The work done by the Training and Employment Research Unit evaluating the pilot delivery of the common assessment training programme produced some insight into potential implementation problems.

- Senior manager buy-in is essential, but likely to be variable, with commitment weakening among managers of organisations further from the core employability services.
- There is lack of conviction among some frontline staff of the value of the needs led model.
- There is inconsistency in the implementation of agreed approaches to securing client sign off to provide authority to share data, as well as perennial problems with the quality of client data input.

These and similar obstacles to local implementation of common assessment are taxing and sometimes irritating but they can all be tackled.

### Pulling It All Together

A number of different elements can go into a Common Assessment Framework for a particular locality. Although the detail will differ across local partnerships, the 'template' of key contents is likely to include some – but not necessarily all – of the following.

**Common Assessment Framework: The Building Blocks**

1. Signing up across key agencies, ideally through CPPs, to a common business case for introducing a needs led Common Assessment Framework.
2. Achieving acceptance of a particular approach to assessment (e.g. the needs led staged model).
3. Developing assessment and information gathering documentation which is common to specific sets of services (e.g. within the family of employability services).
4. Developing some core elements of assessment across different service delivery families.
5. Adopting a common approach to securing client sign off to share their information and assessments with other organisations.
6. Developing data sharing protocols between major players (e.g. colleges and SDS) where necessary.
7. Committing to release of front-line staff for training and awareness raising to promote the effective implementation of a Common Assessment Framework.

In order to drive forward with the introduction of Common Assessment Frameworks, The Scottish Government and its agencies can play a role through promotion and, perhaps more importantly, through procurement. In reality, in order to make Common Assessment Frameworks a more established part of the local employability environment; it will require the efforts of both local partnerships and national bodies with responsibilities in the employability – broadly defined – arena.

## 8. WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE

The Workforce Plus Common Assessment Subgroup see this report as part of an ongoing process where there is much work still to be done, despite having discharged their original remit.

Some more detailed issues around the application of the needs led model were listed earlier and are repeated here, and these relate to:

- adapting it to the Workforce Plus context and language.
- emphasising early client engagement as central to pre-referral and referral.
- considering reducing the number of stages (functional and direct assessment possibly collapsed into one stage) to keep complexity to a minimum.
- making more explicit the four Workforce Plus stages, e.g. employment before sustained employment.
- ensuring the process of client engagement and the stages of professional activity are clear.
- including client 'loop journeys' (i.e. when going between providers).

Additionally, a number of other developments need to be progressed.

- The case study material considered by the Subgroup is based largely on young people in the MCMC group. Given the more joined-up approach to MCMC and Workforce Plus, it will be important to generate good case study material for adult workless people on the employability journey and test the robustness of the current Common Assessment Framework for their situations.
- The Subgroup's report has drawn heavily on only a small number of local employability partnerships. Work around assessment will mature in a number of localities, hopefully stimulated by this report, and the good practices generated in these areas will need to be captured in due course.
- There is scope to enter a development process where local partnerships try to design and agree some key common parts of the process, such as a common tool for measuring distance travelled. It is a logical development of the work carried out for this report, but it would need a number of local partnerships and local partners to commit the time to make it happen.

- This report has not explored the role of funders, particularly those operating at the Scottish and UK levels, in supporting or even promoting the development of common and shared assessments. The discussion of the business case in this report can form the basis for beginning a dialogue with these funders.
- Finally, it will be necessary to evaluate the efforts of local partnerships to implement a Common Assessment Framework, and to share the lessons with the localities through the National Delivery Group.

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