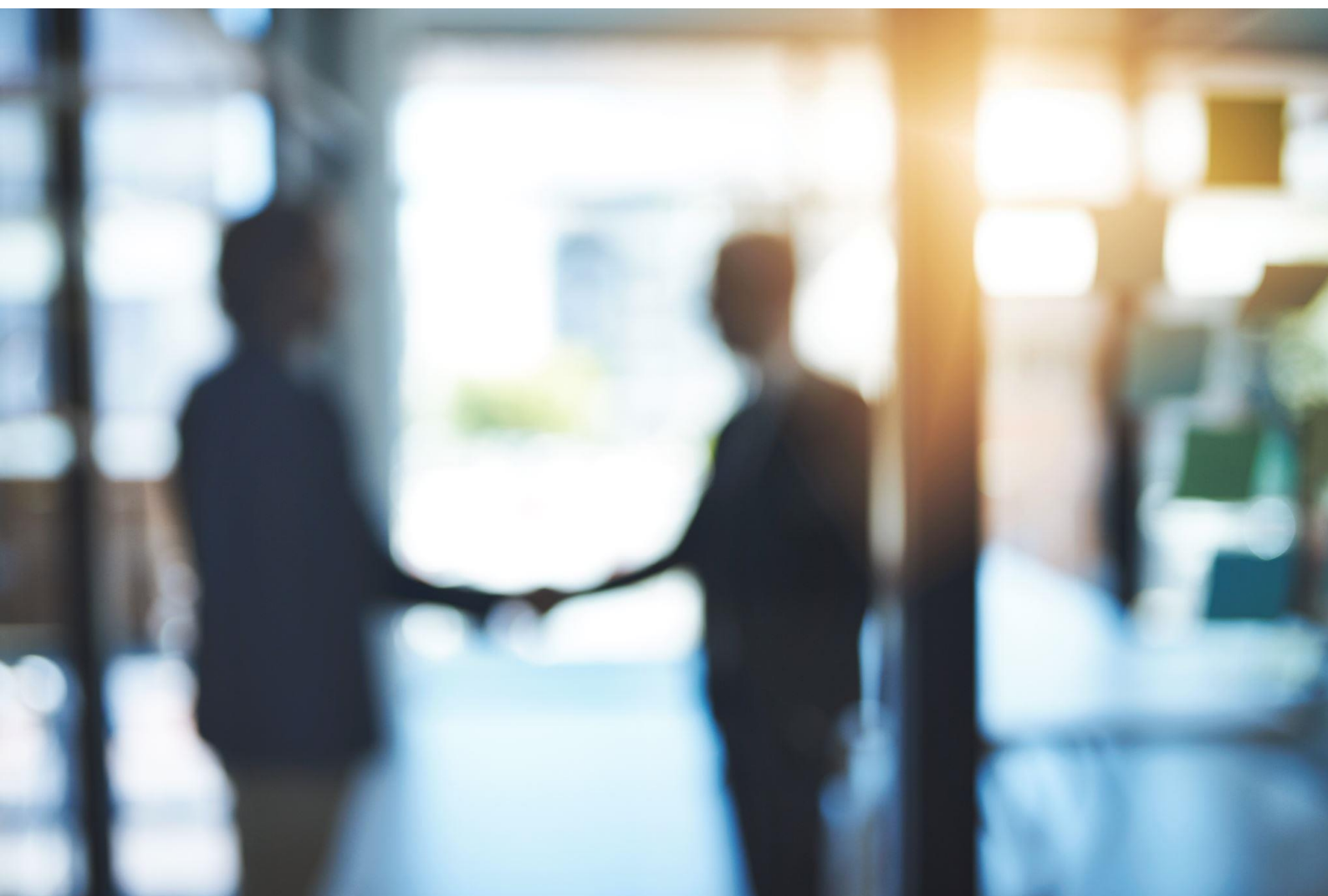


Understanding Frontline Employment Services in Ireland

2020 survey of contracted employment services



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1. Introduction

This report details the results of the 2020 survey of contracted PES in Ireland, which was undertaken as part of the EU Horizon 2020 funded project, *Governing Activation in Ireland* (GAI).

The past decade in Ireland has been a period of intense social policy change, characterized by two unfolding tracks of active labour policy reform (McGann and Murphy, 2021). The first of these is the so-called ‘activation turn’ (Bonoli, 2010: 435) towards a more conditional approach to the provision of income support, with the aim of increasing the incentives for claimants to move into work. In Ireland, this has taken the form of rate cuts to payments; a tightening of eligibility criteria; the strengthening of mutual obligations for claimants to job-search and participate in mandatory activation programmes; and the introduction of penalty rates for those who do not comply with these obligations. These reforms of income supports have been pursued through successive Pathways to Work strategies, and reflect a policy consensus that a ‘work-first’ oriented activation model was overdue in Ireland (Grubb et al., 2009; McGuinness et al., 2011).

Indeed, during the early years of the last financial crisis, it was common for commentators to argue that Ireland was a ‘laggard’ (Köppe and Maccarthaigh, 2019: 138; Wiggan, 2015) in activation terms. Key officials within the OECD likened Ireland’s pre-crisis activation regime to an emperor with ‘no clothes’ (Martin, 2015: 9) insofar as it was generally possible for claimants to receive benefits without any requirement to register for public employment services or activation programmes (Grubb et al., 2009). Hence an early OECD review called for a policy ‘shift towards a more coercive approach’ (Grubb et al., 2009: 130).

In conjunction with these substantive policy shifts, the organisations delivering public employment services (PES) have been markedly transformed. The main pre-crisis public employment services, An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS)—the National Training and Employment Authority—no longer exists. It was de-commissioned in 2011 and its employment services functions transferred to the Department of Social Protection, which created a new one-stop income support and activation service, Intreo. The new Intreo service rolled out progressively from 2012 to 2016, eventually resulting in a national network of approximately 60 full service one-stop centres.

Another significant change since 2011 is that largest operators of PES in Ireland—based on the total number of sites, number of frontline staff, and share of activation expenditure (see Lavelle and Callaghan, 2018)—are now private organisations. This is due to the introduction of the JobPath programme in mid-2015, which is currently delivered by Seetec in Ulster, Connacht, and northern Leinster, and by Turas Nua in Munster and southern Leinster.

The introduction of JobPath marked an important development in the governance of PES delivery in Ireland. It was the first time a PES had been contracted via Payment-by-Results and procured through competitive tendering. In contrast to other externally delivered services contracted by DSP, such as Jobs Club and the Local Employment Services (LES), the two JobPath providers are paid mainly for the outcomes (placements and job sustainments) they deliver rather than the support services they provide. Ireland’s system of PES has thus quickly evolved into a ‘mixed economy’ of activation (See Figure 1):

- A public agency (Intreo) provides PES to newly registered jobseekers for an initial 12 months.
- Those who are longer-term unemployed are referred to either:
 - A Payments-by-Results programme (JobPath) or,
 - One of the countries’ LES, which are delivered by 22 local development companies and community organisations and funded on a ‘costs-met’ of ‘fee-for-service’ basis

However, beyond a handful of government-commissioned evaluations (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, 2019; INDECON, 2018), we know relatively little about *how* employment services are delivered on the ground—what kind of support is offered, by whom, and whether (and in what ways) the services provided by Intreo, Job Path, and LES substantially differ in practice.

FIGURE 1: IRELAND'S MIXED ECONOMY OF ACTIVATION



Governing Activation in Ireland

The *Governing Activation in Ireland* (GAI) project seeks to understand how different approaches to commissioning PES—whether PES are delivered by public, private or not-for-profit providers and if they are funded through payment-by-results or fees-for-services—impact *what services* are delivered to jobseekers and *how they are provided* by employment services organisations.

Drawing on an approach that has been applied to study welfare reform and the frontline delivery of PES in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands (see Considine et al., 2015), the project aims to:

- Map key points of similarity and difference between Ireland's various contracted and publicly delivered PES
- Consider how differences in contracting approaches lead to variations in the kinds of support delivered
- Assess the extent to which the Irish experience of PES contracting is convergent with or divergent from experiences of in other liberal welfare states, especially Australia and the UK.

The project addresses these questions through employing a 'street-level', or frontline perspective. That is to say it takes the perspective that the welfare state 'does not live in abstract regulations and legal texts but rather in the day-to-day interactions between caseworkers and clients in local welfare offices' (Rice, 2013: 1055).

Key to a street-level orientation is also understanding the role of service delivery organisations and frontline staff as 'de facto policymakers' (Brodkin, 2013: 23) who continue the process of policymaking '*while policies are delivered*' (Caswell et al., 2017: 2).

This was one of the key insights of Michael Lipsky's pioneering study of street-level bureaucrats, more than 40 years ago. Lipsky challenged the idea that policy implementation (or delivery) could be separated analytically from policy formulation and design. While policy officials set the major dimensions of policy such as eligibility rules and the level of benefits, Lipsky argued that frontline workers still held considerable discretion in determining the nature and quality of the services and benefits provided by their agencies to citizens. *Governing activation in Ireland* is the first comparative study of PES in Ireland using this 'street-level' perspective.

Certainly, there have numerous studies of jobseekers' experiences of activation as well as occasional small-scale studies of how specific programmes were implemented by frontline case officers. However, the survey reported on in this report is the first time that a largescale survey of frontline PES staff has been conducted in Ireland that

includes frontline workers from different sectors of Ireland's mixed economy of activation. It is based on a survey of 112 LES and 77 JobPath staff, conducted in the third quarter of 2020, and supplemented by 20 in-depth follow-up interviewees 10 LES and 10 JobPath staff (see Section 2).

Overview

Further details of the research approach are described Section 2. Following the description of the study method, the report examines the characteristics and the profile of the people working at the frontline of contracted PES provision: How old are they? What are the educational and occupational backgrounds? Are they members of a trade union? And to what extent do these characteristics differ between those who work for JobPath agencies, and those who work for the local development companies and community organisations that deliver LES.

Section four then considers what it is like working as a frontline advisor, mediator, or guidance officer as the people who deliver employment support services to jobseekers are variably known. For instance, how many clients do frontline staff work with on their caseloads? How often do they meet with jobseekers? And how many people do staff meet with on an average day? It also considers the key activities that occupy frontline staff's time, such as how much time they spend on contract compliance and administration, compared with meeting with clients, interacting with employers, and working with other service providers. In so doing, it affords insights into the workload demands faced by frontline employment services staff and the extent to which they have the time and resources need to focus on providing personalised support to jobseekers.

The fifth section examines the extent to which frontline staff are subject to performance measurement and monitoring, looking at the type of performance indicators they are measured by and the degree to which performance metrics influence their decision-making.

In section six, the influence of additional factors on frontline workers' decision-making with clients is explored. These include jobseekers' own preferences about their preferred employment pathways, frontline workers' own professional judgement about what is best for clients, but also more standardised approaches anchored in the use of computer systems, profiling tools, and client classification instruments as case management tools.

Following this, section seven examines how the degree to which frontline staff are in contact with a range of external organisations that are relevant to supporting people into employment. Examples include other welfare and social services, training providers, and employers, as well as government agencies and departments. In essence, this section explores the extent of inter-agency collaboration and networking between employment services and other flanking social services and training supports. In so doing, it offers insights on the extent to which PES delivery is focused on rapid labour market attachment, or 'work-first', or whether frontline staff take a more holistic approach that also emphasises upskilling, retraining, and supporting jobseekers to overcome other non-vocational issues such as access to housing that may be hindering their participation in employment.

This question of whether employment services delivery is primarily oriented by a 'work-first' approach is considered in further detail in section eight, followed by a final discussion of what the survey results and interview data can tell us about how frontline workers view the jobseekers that they work with on a day-to-day basis. For instance, what are the main factors that frontline workers think are responsible for people being unemployed and on welfare?

2. Method

The findings presented in this report are drawn from a survey of 189 frontline contracted PES staff, conducted over July and August 2020, and 20 in-depth follow-up interviews undertaken between October 2020 and January 2021. The aim of the survey was to map the key differences in frontline practice, as well as in workers' professional backgrounds and perceptions of working with jobseekers, between Ireland's two main contracted employment services programmes: JobPath and the Local Employment Services Network. In future months, it is anticipated that Intreo case officers will also complete the survey. However, this was not possible in 2020 due to the combination of Covid-restrictions, temporary closures of Intreo offices, and reassignment of Intreo staff to processing emergency income support claims in the context of the Covid pandemic.

While other external services such as Job Clubs and Employability are also contracted by the Department of Social Protection, JobPath and the LES are of particular interest and significance because both programmes offer intensive 'end-to-end' case management and employment support for people receiving jobseekers payments as an alternative to Intreo's active case management service, which is primarily targeted at the short-term unemployed (people who have been on the Live Register for less than 12 months).

People who participate in JobPath or LES—who are predominantly long-term unemployed or deemed to be at 'high risk' of long-term unemployment—do so for a period of up to 12-months, after which they are referred back to Intreo, from which they may be subsequently referred to another external programme. For example, a person receiving Jobseekers Allowance may be referred to JobPath after 12 months on the Live Register. If they have not transitioned into employment by the end of the next year (and 12-month duration with a JobPath provider) they will be referred back to Intreo and possibly referred on to a LES for the third year of their time on income support.

In contrast to JobPath and the LES, Job Clubs are offered as an occasional CV preparation and job-search workshop training service that claimants can attend for short-periods (e.g., 1 to 4 weeks) while continuing to participate in other programmes. While the Employability programme is more akin to an end-to-end employment, it is targeted at a very different cohort of claimants: those with a disability, severe mental health issue, and people who are recovering from an illness or an injury. Hence, it is underpinned by a therapeutic model of employment support rather than the 'work-first' model of activation that the employment services targeted towards people on jobseekers' payments are based upon.

The survey instrument used in this study is adapted, with permission, from a questionnaire used by Mark Considine and his colleagues at the University of Melbourne to study the frontline delivery of activation in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands. It was developed and first used in the late 1990s to examine the impact of early marketisation reforms on frontline service delivery in those three countries (Considine, 2001). Ten years later, in 2008, it was again used to compare how frontline employment services delivery had evolved in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands after a decade of welfare and active labour market policy reform (Considine et al., 2011, 2015). The survey was mostly recently used in 2016 to examine changes in the contracting approach in the UK and Australia and, specifically, the impact that a shift towards a stronger performance-based payment model had on frontline service delivery in both countries (Considine et al., 2020a, 2020b; McGann et al., 2020). In short, the survey has been used to track the impacts of welfare policy and PES governance reforms on frontline delivery practice for more than 20 years, and across multiple countries. This methodology is highly regarded for its unique large-scale, longitudinal, and internationally comparative focus, characteristics that 'one hardly encounters in frontline activation work studies' (van Berkel, 2017: 20).

The advantage of this research approach for this study is that it allows insights into how the frontline delivery of employment services in Ireland compares with international counterparts, such as the UK, especially given some of the parallels between Ireland's JobPath programme and the UK's previous Work Programme, which was decommissioned in 2017. Occasionally in this report, reference is made to the findings of the previous UK and Australian surveys for such comparative purposes.

The Irish survey comprises of approximately 60 questions concerning the characteristics of frontline workers, how they carry out their jobs, the profile of clients they work with, their beliefs about the purposes and priorities of employment services, and their perceptions of jobseekers. Most questions were closed, multiple choice questions although a small number invited open-ended responses where participants could expand upon their answers.

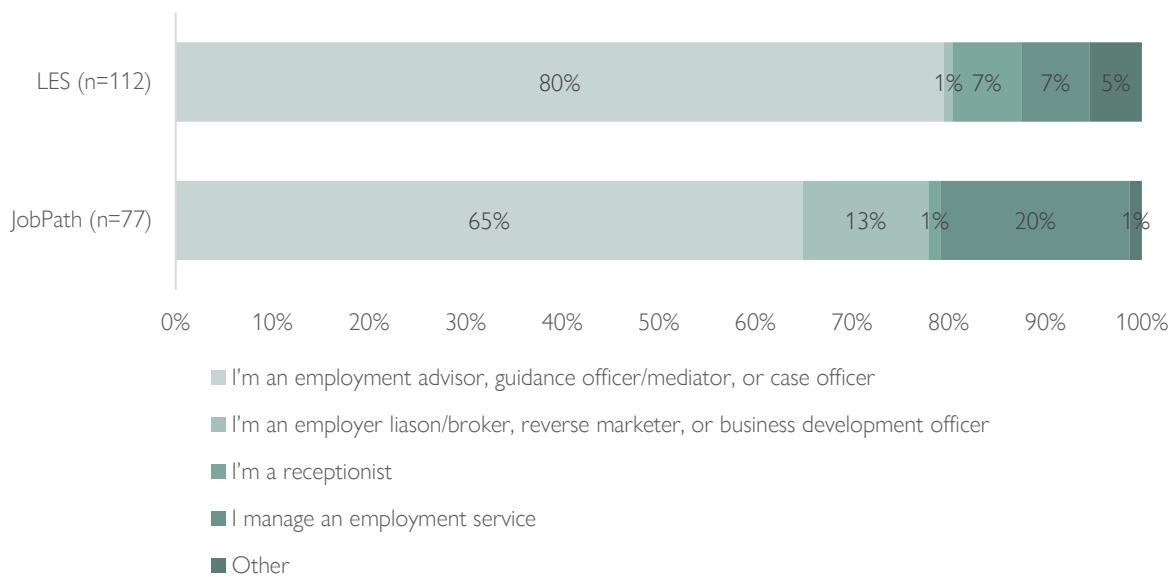
The survey was conducted online, using JISC’s online surveys platform (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>). No third parties were involved in designing or administering the survey, which was programmed entirely by Dr Michael McGann, who also managed the recruitment of survey participants. All JobPath and LES providers were approached (and agreed) to participate in the survey, and senior managers within these agencies facilitated participation by emailing their frontline staff information about the survey and the website address where staff could find out more about the research and enter the survey. A screening question was then used to ensure that only frontline staff, defined as people working directly with jobseekers to find employment, completed the survey.

Each JobPath agency, and the network of LES, completed the survey over a two-week period, with some agencies undertaking the survey in July and others in August 2020 to accommodate organisational needs. While social distancing requirements continued to be in place during these months, many of the lockdown measures had been briefly lifted and contracted PES had resumed servicing jobseekers. Nonetheless, the Covid context in which the research was conducted remains significant as jobseekers’ mutual obligation requirements were suspended. The risk of incurring payment penalties for non-attendance of appointments or non-participation in activation programmes was also removed at this point. Moreover, the referral of jobseekers by Intreo to both JobPath and LES services was disrupted by national lockdown measures and the redirection of administrative resources to processing claims for the emergency Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PuP). Consequently, the number of clients on JobPath and LES caseloads maybe lower than usual during the period when this research was conducted.

Profile of Respondents

A total of 189 responses were received, including 77 (out of 253 potential) JobPath respondents and 112 (out of 170 potential) LES respondents. As Figure 2 shows, the vast majority of respondents (80% of LES and 65% of JobPath respondents) were advisors, guidance officers, or mediators with a personal caseload of clients they worked with. Compared with the LES respondents, the JobPath respondents included a higher proportion of people who manage or co-ordinate an employment service (20%) as well as frontline staff responsible for brokering job vacancies for their clients with employers (13%). Further details of the profile of survey participants, such as their age, qualification levels, and professional background are reported in the survey findings.

FIGURE 2: JOB DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS



Profile of Interviewees

Follow-up interviews with 20 survey participants were conducted between late October 2020 and January 2021. Participants were chosen for interview on the basis of their location, and that they had indicated a willingness to be contacted for a follow-up interview at the end of the survey. The sample of follow-up interviewees was designed to capture a variation of experiences by gender and location. It was evenly balanced between JobPath and LES participants and included a spread of people working in different JobPath and LES organisations. For example, the JobPath interviewees included both employees of Seetec and Turas Nua. The ten LES interviewees were drawn from eight different organisations.

As shown in Table 1, in total, 14 employment advisors or mediators were interviewed, along with four employment service managers, and two frontline staff who worked as employer liaisons or job brokers. However, most of the managers along with one of the employer liaisons also had previous experience of working as an advisor or mediator and could therefore discuss their experiences of working as an advisor or mediator during the interview. In the remainder of the report, interviewees are presented anonymously in that pseudonyms are used and the details of the agencies and locations where interviewees' work are not disclosed.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES

	JobPath Interviewees	LES Interviewees
Gender	8	9
▪ Male	2	1
▪ Female	8	9
Job Role		
▪ Advisor/Mediator/Guidance Officer	6	8
▪ Employer Liaison/Broker	2	
▪ Manager	2	2
Locations (Counties)	Dublin, Louth, Offaly, Wicklow, Kildare	Dublin, Louth, Monaghan, Wicklow, Kildare, Limerick, Cork

3. Who works at the PES frontline?

A key focus of the survey of frontline PES staff was to understand the characteristics of the people who deliver employment support to jobseekers, and whether these characteristics differed between the various contracted providers. As shown in Table 2, the key similarities between the frontline workers delivering JobPath and the frontline workers delivering Local Employment Services (LES) is that both programmes are predominantly delivered by women, working on a full-time basis. In the case of JobPath, 95 per cent of the frontline workers surveyed—over two-thirds of whom were women—reported that they worked full-time. This proportion was considerably lower among LES respondents (77%), although the majority of LES staff also worked full-time.

Beyond the gendered composition of the two frontline workforces, the results indicated several important areas of divergence between LES and JobPath frontline workers. In particular, the results suggest that:

- LES workers are highly unionized and professionalized in terms of a focus on guidance counselling, with many years' experience of working in the welfare and employment services sector.
- The JobPath workforce is non-unionised and comprised of younger workers from a range of professional and educational backgrounds.

As shown in Table 2 above, no JobPath staff reported being members of a trade union compared with two thirds of LES respondents. Just under 87 per cent of LES frontline staff reported that they had been working in welfare or employment services for five years or more, compared with fewer than 12 per cent of JobPath frontline staff.

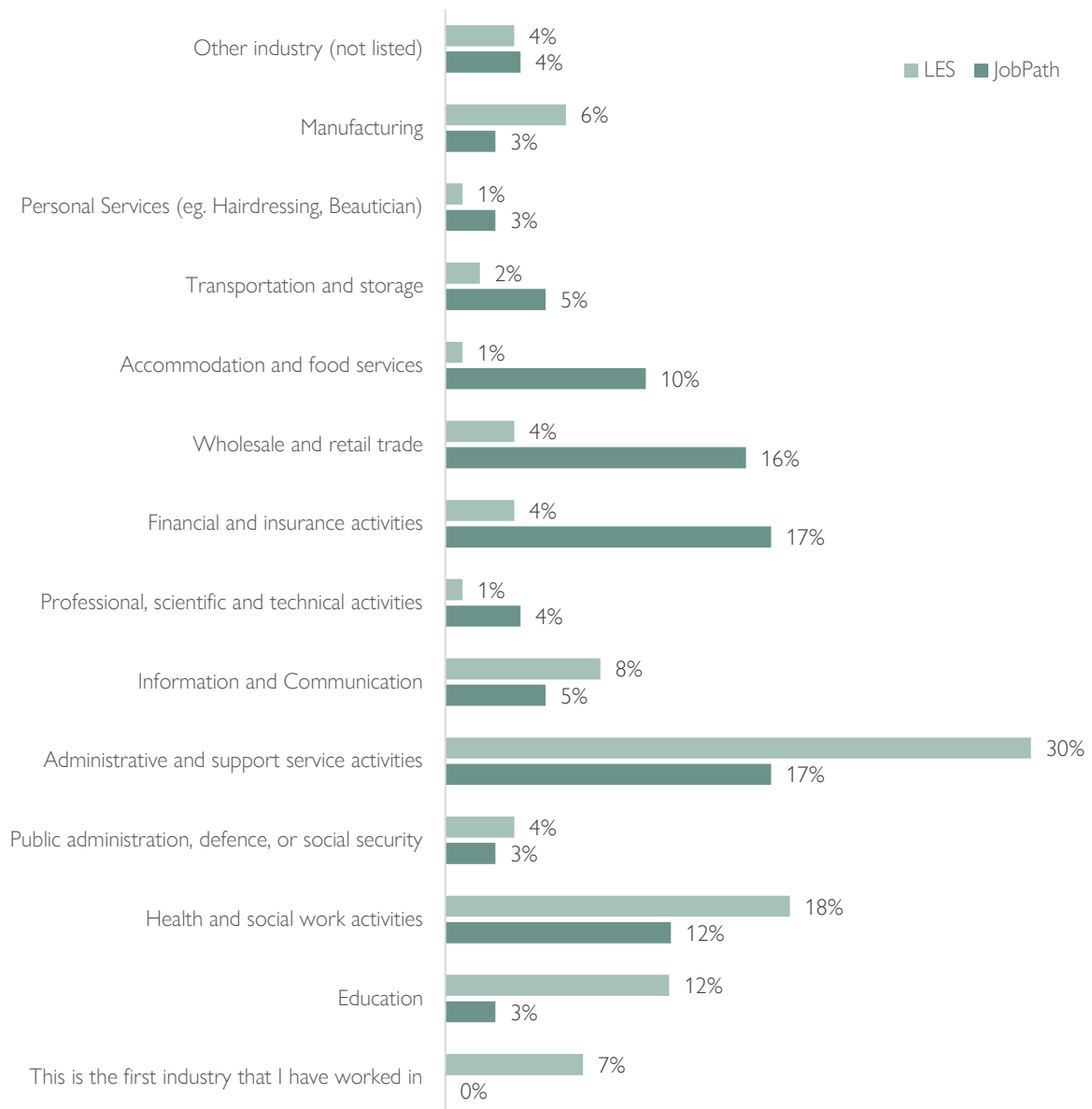
This difference is not unexpected given that JobPath was only introduced in mid-2015. However, it does suggest that the frontline staff recruited to work in the new activation programme largely came from outside the welfare and employment services sector. That is, they were not recruited from other social and public employment services but from sectors of the economy that previously were not involved in delivering support services to jobseekers or claimants. As such, working with unemployed people was a new experience for these workers.

The data reported in Figure 3 further support this view. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the industry that they were employed in previously, before working in employment services. As shown in Figure 3, the main industry that LES staff had worked in previously was Administrative and Support Services (30%), followed by Health and Social Work (18%), and Education (12%). Together, these three sectors accounted for the previous industry experience of 60 per cent of LES staff. While significant numbers of JobPath staff also had experience of working in these sectors (a combined proportion of 32%), many JobPath staff reported previously working in the Retail (16%) and Hospitality (10%) sectors, or in Financial and Insurance Activities (17%) – sectors that very few LES staff (9%) had worked in before joining the employment services sector.

TABLE 2: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS BY GENDER, WORK PATTERNS AND DURATION OF EMPLOYMENT

	JobPath Respondents	LES Respondents
• Work full-time	94.8%	76.9%
• Work part-time	5.2%	23.1%
Gender		
▪ Female	67.5%	79.3%
▪ Male	32.5%	19.8%
Years worked in the welfare or employment services sector		
▪ Less than a year	5.2%	2.7%
▪ Between 1 and 5 years	83.1%	10.7%
▪ More than 5 years	11.7%	86.6%
Trade union membership		
▪ Yes	0%	66.6%
▪ No	100%	33.3%

FIGURE 3: INDUSTRY WORKED IN BEFORE EMPLOYMENT SERVICES



Follow-up interviews with a selection of respondents reinforced these differences in both LES workers' longevity in the sector, and the different career pathways that JobPath staff had taken before joining the employment services sector. Several of the JobPath advisors interviewed, for example, explained how they had made a career change from a sales or marketing role in the hope that they would find greater fulfilment from what they perceived as more meaningful work. As an advisor in their 30s explained:

I was actually a sales manager ... And I had worked in marketing and different things over the years ... I had a very nice position, the usual company car, the works. But it just wasn't fulfilling me. I just felt I just needed to do something more. (FES10, Advisor, JobPath)

Another advisor with previous experience of working in sales, commented on the parallels between their sales background and working as an employment advisor:

I did a business degree and moved into sales. And recruitment and sales are pretty similar ... because as well as selling a job to someone you are also selling someone to work with you as well. And I think

that when you move into what we're doing at the moment, the kind of people aspect in it is huge. So, I think, from working in sales, just those skills that you get from gaining trust in people and being able to understand people ... (FES5, Advisor, JobPath)

Notably, three of the JobPath advisors interviewed were unemployed at the time they were recruited as advisors. From speaking with senior JobPath managers, it is understood that the contracts signed between the DSP and Seetec and Turas Nua contained social benefit clauses obligating the providers to recruit a proportion of their staff from the ranks of the unemployed. Those JobPath advisors who had previously been unemployed also often had prior sales or marketing experience. For example, one former advisor explained that they had previously been on work experience programme before finding a job as an advisor. Before that, they had worked as a telemarketing manager, where 'it was all targets', so 'I do suit the job well':

I was made redundant, unemployed for a year ... [I applied] and I got that interview and then got the job. I started ... as an adviser, first. So, I said to myself the day I stepped in through those doors, 'I'm not going to treat anyone ... and still to this day I'd never, ever look down on anyone. (FES15, Employer liaison, JobPath)

Another advisor that was interviewed had likewise experienced redundancy and unemployment from a retail sales job before moving into the employment services sector:

I worked up through a few positions in major retailers ... I was made redundant. That was kind of the tail end of the crash. I was unemployed for a little while, worked again in retail management on and off for about a year and a half, and then again made redundant ... The job advertisement mentioned training, interview skills ... All stuff that I'd done in terms of taking people on, and training them in new positions, within the retail environment (FES16, Advisor, JobPath)

In contrast to the JobPath staff interviewed, most LES staff had worked in community employment services for most of their careers. For instance, 7 out of the 10 LES staff interviewed had been working in employment services for more than twenty years. Most had been involved in the sector since the very early days of the LES, and in some cases even before then, as one mediator explained:

I originally started back in the 80s ... Originally the job centre got funding through the Taoiseach at the time, Garrett Fitzgerald. He had supported that concept, and the idea back then was to address the problem in [area]. I grew up in and was raised in [area] as in fact was most of the original staff in there ... I started off doing reception (FES4, Mediator, LES)

Another mediator that was interviewed had joined the sector in the mid-1990s after initially being 'getting a little bit of part-time work' following their university degree 'writing the plan for the local employment service':

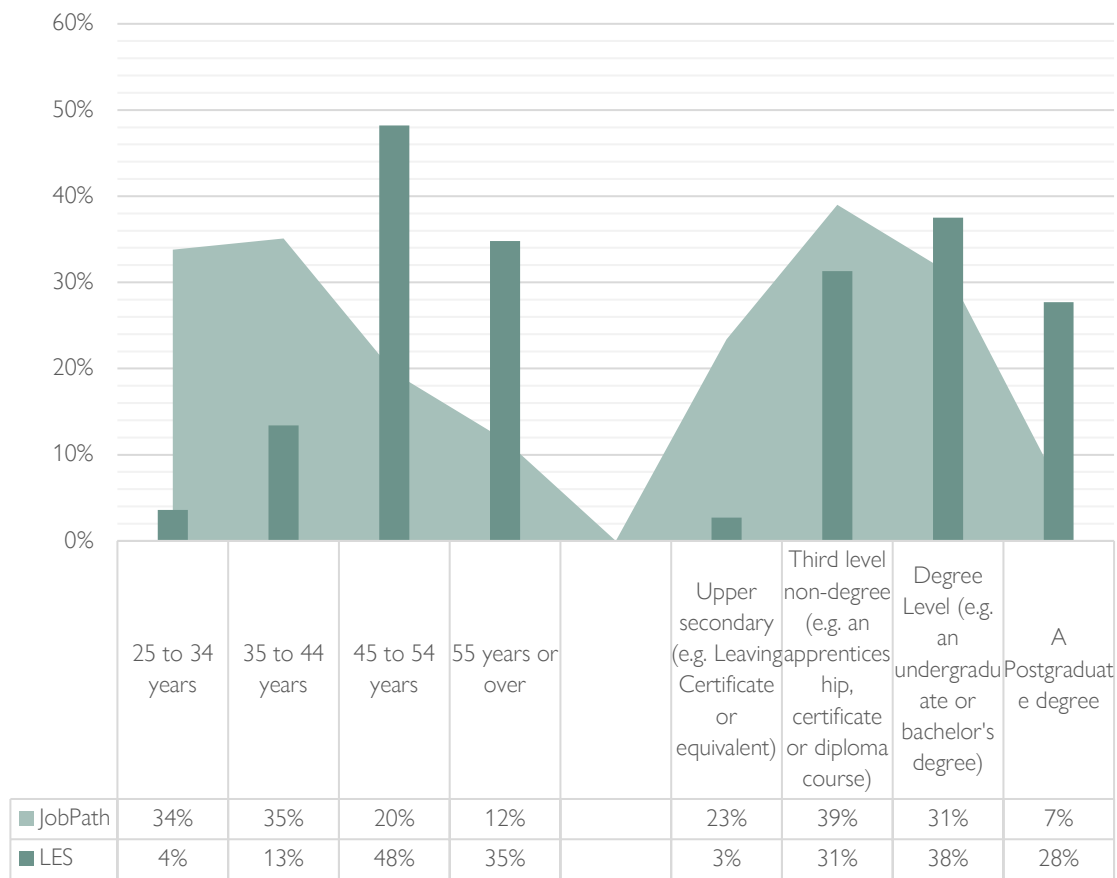
And when I saw the job description of the mediator, I said, 'Oh, that's my job' ... I had had a vision of working in the community in a helpful way ... When I saw that job descriptor, I knew that one of those jobs had to be mine and yeah it actually happened then about six months later ... I started working as a mediator in [area], which is the community I'm actually from. (FES18, LES Mediator)

In line with the interview excerpts above, the survey data indicated significant age differences between LES and JobPath staff, along with differences in their respective qualification levels.

As shown in Figure 3, frontline LEST staff were substantially older and more likely to have completed a tertiary degree than JobPath staff:

- 69 per cent of JobPath staff were under 45 years or age compared with just 17 per cent of LES staff
- Over a third of frontline LES were aged 55 or over compared with about 1 in 10 JobPath frontline staff
- 66 per cent of frontline LES staff reported that they had completed an undergraduate or post-graduate degree, compared with 38 per cent of frontline JobPath staff.

FIGURE 4: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS BY AGE AND HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION



Follow-up interviews suggested that this difference in qualification levels reflected the emphasis placed on professional training in guidance counselling by LES organisations. In particular, many LES interviewees had undertaken courses in adult guidance counselling offered by Maynooth University’s Department of Adult and Community Education, and then go one to pursue further postgraduate study in related fields. Some LES staff had previously worked for FÁS, which had worked with Maynooth University to develop the certificate and diploma courses in adult guidance counselling.

I left school straight after my junior cert and I went into FÁS. So, I started with the certificate in Maynooth and then I did addiction studies, because I was quite interested in that. And then I went on to train in counselling and psychotherapy. (FES11, Manager, LES)

I did the Maynooth Career Guidance. I did the certificate in that ... I since have gone on and studied further. And I had training in psychotherapy and facilitation. (FES13, Mediator, LES)

Whereas most LES staff interviewed had undertaken formal guidance training delivered by an external educational organisation, JobPath staff had primarily been trained on-the-job, or via an employee induction programme when they started working for their agency.

It was residential ... two weeks. So, it was really intense. We had lots of role-playing situations. Obviously, all the technical sides of [IT system], ... training on how to help people with their CVs, interview skills and things like that. (FES6, Advisor, JobPath)

It is very much on the job as such. So, you're shadowing different people, doing different roles. Like we would have had a particular adviser and she would have focused on people that would be, what we would call kind of the harder cases ... So, my point is I would shadow different people that we're kind of focusing on different types of clients. (FES10, Advisor, JobPath)

4. Working as an advisor

The survey questions explored how JobPath, and LES staff carry out their jobs on a day-to-day basis, including the number of clients, on average, they see per day and the total number of jobseekers they manage on their caseload.

Caseload sizes and frequency of appointments

For the purposes of this analysis, only the responses of JobPath and LES staff who worked as advisors, mediators or guidance officers were included. Frontline staff in other roles do not manage a personal caseload. Table 3 shows the responses on these items for JobPath advisors, and Table 4 shows the responses for LES mediators, or guidance officers as they are also called. On average, JobPath advisors see more clients (12 compared with 7 for LES mediators) per day and have marginally higher caseloads of *activation clients* (101 clients, on average) than their LES counterparts (92 clients, on average).

In terms of the activities that their clients are undertaking, JobPath advisors indicate that the people that they are working with are mainly 'looking for employment only and not participating in any other activity' (approximately 45% of their clients), although a quarter of their clients (25%) are estimated to be participating in an activity such as a training course, non-vocational or work experience programme. The proportions of LES clients who are estimated to be 'looking for employment only' (44%) or participating in a training course, non-vocational, or training programme (27%) are broadly similar.

TABLE 3: JOBPATH ADVISOR CASELOADS

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Current caseload of activation clients (n=50)	100.8	20.4
Number of jobseekers seen on average per day (n=49)	11.7	2.5
Estimated per centage of their clients that are:		
▪ Participating in an activity (e.g., a training course, non-vocational programmes, work experience) (n=50)	24.4%	17.0%
▪ Currently looking for employment only and not participating in any other activity (n=50)	44.5%	20.3
▪ Not participating in an activity and are currently not looking for work (n=49)	20.7%	16.1%

TABLE 4: LES MEDIATOR/GUIDANCE OFFICER CASELOADS

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Current caseload of activation clients (n=88)	91.6	31.2
Number of non-activation clients on their caseload (n=83)	30.3	21.9
Number of jobseekers seen on average per day in individual appointments (n=81)	7.0	1.7
Estimated per centage of their clients that are:		
▪ Participating in an activity (e.g., a training course, non-vocational programmes, work experience) (n=89)	27.2%	17.6%
▪ Currently looking for employment only and are not participating in any other activity (n=89)	44.2%	22.0%
▪ Not participating in an activity and are currently not looking for work (n=87)	24.5%	17.7%

Importantly, LES mediators also work with non-activation clients who attend employment services voluntarily, on a 'walk-in' basis. These could be people in the community who are unemployed and looking for work but are ineligible for the Jobseekers' Allowance because of the means-test threshold or because they are a 'qualified adult' of a partner who is receiving a jobseekers' payment. Alternatively, 'walk-in' clients might be lone parents whose youngest child is under 7 years of age, and who are therefore currently exempted from mandatory activation or mutual obligations. As shown in Table 4, the survey results indicate that LES mediators work with an average of 30 'walk-in', non-activation clients. However, the high standard deviation (21.9) suggests that many LES mediators work with a considerably greater number of 'walk-in' clients than this, while many others work with very few 'walk-ins' clients. One interpretation of this could be that some LES mediators specialise in 'walk-in' or non-activation clients, whereas others specialise in working with jobseekers who are subject to mandatory activation.

In international comparative terms, the number of jobseekers per advisor/mediator in Ireland's marketized employment services programme is marginally higher than data would suggest for the UK, although it is significantly lower than caseload sizes in Australia's contracted-out employment services. For example, data from 2016 indicates that UK Work Programme advisors worked with an average of 95 clients each, while Australian employment services staff worked, on average, with just under 148 clients each (Considine et al., 2020b). However, the data on JobPath and LES caseload sizes reported in Tables 3 and 4 need to be interpreted cautiously because of the period when data collection took place. As noted in the Methodology, the survey was conducted in July and August 2020 following several months of Covid restrictions and national lockdown measures. Referrals from Intreo to LES and JobPath were disrupted by these measures and the redeployment of Intreo staff to processing Pandemic Unemployment Payment claims. So, the caseload sizes reported in Tables 3 and 4 are likely to be underestimates in comparison to more typical months and years.

Follow-up interviews indicated that not only do JobPath advisors see more clients per day than LES mediators. They also see their clients more frequently – typically 'every 15 working days' (FES2, Advisor, JobPath) or three weeks, as dictated under the terms of their contract. By contrast, LES mediators reported that they would usually see their clients monthly, although some LES staff reported scheduling appointments more frequently - depending on the needs of their clients:

The requirement is to see them once a month. But you might not. You could work with people and see the more if they need it. So, some of your clients you would have maybe weekly appointments for a period of time, and then they move into either job seeking or whatever, you might take them back to the monthly. (FES11, Manager, LES)

When we were doing face-to-face, it was around every three and a half to four weeks. If they were under 25, I used to keep in touch with them a lot more often because I was concerned ... that they didn't fall through the cracks. (FES20, Mediator, LES)

Whether LES mediators varied how frequently they saw clients differed considerably between organisations. It was not common practice among all LES interviewees. By contrast, JobPath interviewees tended to more frequently indicate that would see some of their clients on a fortnightly or weekly basis:

[T]here's steps that you take along the way that we kind of automatically stick to ... but we're kind of flexible around that as to how often we do appointments with them. Some people will require, I could have an appointment with them every week because I feel they need that; other people mightn't need as much (FES5, Advisor, JobPath)

... I would have tried to have seen everybody every ten days to two weeks because I feel that momentum keeps them moving and keeps them motivated. And at least they're coming in, and you know, 'God I have to go in there now. I better have something to tell her...' (FES8, Advisor, JobPath)

I would see them, ideally, once a week ... I would speak to them, in a sit-down appointment, once every three weeks or so ... Because [from week-to-week] you'd only see them and say hello. (FES16, Advisor, JobPath)

As indicated in the excerpt above, the weekly contact with some JobPath clients was not necessarily in the form of one-to-one appointments but related to clients attending group training activities to develop their CV and cover letter writing skills, or to work on their interview skills:

You could bring a couple of people in in groups, and we'll have a job search session. So, you're bringing in and collaborating and you're getting other people who are who are in the same place as them, and they're talking and they're meeting. ... So they could do ... interview skills. They can do the job market, preparing them for work, CV building sessions ... (FES2, Advisor, JobPath)

Sometimes, we do workshops as well. The workshops are running three to four times a week: CVs, cover letters, interview skills. (FES15, Employer Liaison/former advisor, JobPath)

How frontline staff spend their time

In addition to the size of their caseloads and the number of jobseekers seen per day, frontline staff were also asked about the overall amount of time they spend each week on various aspects of their job, such as:

- Working directly with clients,
- Liaising with employers and other service providers, and
- fulfilling administrative tasks to meet government reporting requirements.

The responses to these items provide a measure of the extent to which frontline employment services staff can devote time to providing jobseekers with one-to-one support to help them into employment, or whether administrative demands interfere with their capacity to provide guidance and personalised support to jobseekers. As shown in Table 5, frontline staff report that the bulk of their time each week (more than half) is spent in direct contact with client. This followed by spending time on administrative tasks related to contract compliance and meeting government requirements, such as recording details of appointments on information management systems and inputting training referrals, vacancy referrals, and job placement and sustainment data into databases.

Both JobPath and LES staff reported spending more than 50 per cent of their time each week in direct contact with clients, and about a further quarter of their time, on average, processing and recording information for the purposes of contract compliance and government reporting. The proportion of their time spent on these administrative tasks, and in direct contact with clients, was broadly similar across LES and JobPath respondents:

- On average, LES staff report spending about 56 per cent of their time each week in direct contact with clients and 27 per cent of their time each week on contract compliance and administrative tasks
- JobPath staff report spending, on average, almost 52 per cent of their time in direct contact with clients and 26 per cent of their time on contract compliance and administrative tasks.

TABLE 5: PROPORTION OF TIME SPENT ON VARIOUS TASKS EACH WEEK

Proportion (%) of time spent per week on:	JobPath (n=76)		LES (n=103)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
▪ In direct contact with clients	51.8%	24.7	56.1%	20.6
▪ Working with other service providers (e.g., addiction, housing, or other community services)	6.3%	7.1	12.9%	17.3
▪ Working with employers	11.7%	15.8	9.9%	14.6
▪ On contract compliance to meet government reporting/administration requirements	25.5%	21.3	26.9%	19.2
▪ On internal staff meetings	11.2%	10.5	9.3%	13.3
▪ On other tasks	9.6%	10.1	14.1%	17.6

However, the data presented in Table 5 suggests that LES staff spend a larger share of their time each week (13% compared with 6% among JobPath staff) working with other service providers such as addiction, housing, or other community services. Conversely, JobPath staff spend a slightly higher proportion of their time working with employers (12% compared with 10% among LES staff).

The proportion of their time that Irish frontline staff spend on contract compliance and administrative requirements is high in comparison to frontline employment services staff surveyed in other countries. For example, in 2016:

- UK employment services staff reported spending approximately 14 per cent of their time each week on contract compliance and government reporting activities (Lewis et al., 2017);
- Australian employment services staff reported spending just under 18 per cent of their time each week on contract compliance and government reporting activities (Lewis et al., 2016).

This may reflect the more regulated nature of employment services delivery in Ireland, and more intensive monitoring of contracted agencies by the Department of Social Protection (e.g., in relation to adherence to minimum servicing standards). Nonetheless, in follow-up interviews, frontline staff identified that the heavy administrative burden associated with maintaining contractual compliance and fulfilling government reporting requirements was detracting from their ability to provide personalised support to jobseekers. This resulted in tensions between fulfilling the administrative work needed 'to stay compliant' and being able to respond flexibly to clients' varied and often unpredictable needs. 'You can get overwhelmed', a JobPath advisor explained:

We [are] partnered with the Department of Social Protection. We have to be compliant as well. So every 15 working days for the first three months for a client, we have to arrange for them to come in for a meeting. And, if they don't show up for two meetings, then there's a process then. So, there's an awful lot of administration ... Every day you have a diary, and you have clients coming in to see you. So that's your priority. Then after that, I make time for my administration. So, it may take an hour or two hours a day, or I might take Friday then to address the administration. (FES2, Advisor, JobPath)

Likewise, an experienced mediator, explained that she would usually try 'to have one day without seeing people' to focus on the administrative work of the caseload, which 'would take a lot of doing' (FES7, Mediator, LES).

Among those who had worked in employment services for many years, there was a perception that administrative accountability had displaced the delivery of personalised support as the primary focus. In other words, employment services delivery now revolved around the fact that 'the computer has to be fed' (FES4, Mediator, LES) and 'about the numbers and how we report' (FES11, LES Manager) rather than providing person-centred support. As one mediator with over 20 years' experience of working in employment services explained: 'The accountability now is more important than actually the production of outcomes that are significant', elaborating that meetings now 'seem to be about systems and measurement rather than let's actually get people off the dole'. (FES18, Mediator, LES).

A key aspect of this administrative accountability was the recording of clients' Personal Progression Plans (PPPs), which both advisors and mediators were obligated to do during their first meeting with a client. PPPs comprised of several tabs for recording clients' agreed job goals, documenting their challenges or barriers to employment, and setting 'future tasks' (FES16, advisor, JobPath) connected with job-searching or other activities deemed to contribute towards enhancing their employability. As one JobPath advisor explained:

First page is just your client details, then you've got the job goals. Again, we would have the job goals and we would also review the job goals. Every PPP, it's a matter of going 'This is the job goal we set 13 weeks ago, is that still the job goal?' If it's a situation that they've been applying for that job and they haven't even got an interview or anything, then do we need to re-evaluate and look at the job goals? ... So, again, barriers are very important ... The first PPP that we would do with people, we would have the barriers there. Have we overcome those barriers? ... Tasks and stuff, as well; so, what kind of tasks did we assign for the clients and also myself thirteen weeks ago, and have we achieved them ... And that's pretty much what goes into it. (FES5, Advisor, JobPath)

The PPP template was stipulated by the DSP, meaning that LES mediators were bound by the same structure:

You create one whereby you'd look at the two elements, which is the development side of things and the employment side of things. The employment side of things, you'll always put on it you need to register for Jobs Ireland, you need to register on Welfare.ie. You will also put on that there, please send me in a copy of your CV. And they ask why do you want to see my CV? And I'd say in the in the event an employer rings us and they have vacancies, I will ring you and say Joe Bloggs is looking for a forklift driver. I have your CV on file (FES20, Mediator, LES)

The degree to which advisors and mediators reviewed or updated PPPs varied. For example, some LES mediators said that they would update people's PPPs 'maybe like every other month' (FES12, mediator, LES) or 'every month' (FES13, mediator, LES) and 'every time I see them' (FES18, mediator, LES). Others, however, reported that 'once it's agreed, that's it, I don't change it' (FES7, Mediator, LES) or that they would only update PPPs periodically at quarterly Activation Review Meetings (ARMs):

You will always like look at the actions through every Activation Review Meeting. Generally, I would open up the PPP when the clients are with me and just go through the actions and see how we've progressed on each particular action. So they're our framework for your ARMs meeting (FES17, Mediator, LES)

Among some JobPath offices, the practice was similarly to review PPPs 'every 13 weeks' (FES21, Manager, JobPath) but advisors at other offices reported that their practice was to 'constantly' update PPPs and continuously review jobseekers 'challenges and actions during appointments' (FES6, Advisor, JobPath): 'as one [task] is completed, we'd open a new one. So we always have a few, not too many, just to be open at one time.' Likewise, an advisor at a different JobPath agency explained that PPPs would be routinely updated nearly every appointment. This was not their personal preference, but an organizational requirement that 'every three weeks or so, you should be sticking in a task of some sort or another' (FES16, Advisor, JobPath). While this advisor saw value in the initial development of a PPP as a longer-term planning document for supporting jobseekers to return to work, the advisor felt that the requirement to continuously update, and change PPPs was 'a bit too regimented' and meant that 'some of the stuff, you're just creating for the sake of putting in a task':

Part of our job is to every time you meet the client, set a new task. And it can be as small as add something new to CV, or contact a specific company, to something more long-term, as in find a course, sign up to the course ... Like I said, when you meet someone first and to give you a bit of guidance it's good to have there. And if you kind of go off track and wayward with it, it's good to revert back. But it's a bit too regimented for me to be constantly referring back to this as a thing (FES16, Advisor, JobPath)

As reflected in this advisor's comments, while all frontline staff recognized the importance of case planning and developing a personalized support plan for each client, several interviewees saw the official PPPs obligated by the DSP as more 'like a box-ticking exercise' (FES16l, Advisor, JobPath) or bureaucratic hurdle 'where it's like "I've done this bit of admin" and now we can move on' (FES12, Mediator, LES). Indeed, a number of interviews drew a distinction between 'the genuine ones [and] the ones on BOMI' (FES18, Mediator, LES); or between what's officially administratively recorded and what unfolds between frontline staff and jobseekers in actual practice:

I don't think it's used in a way that it could be useful ... I think there's a reluctance from staff in terms of what they put up there on the BOMI system, because they're so conscious of the compliance. There's nearly a sense of doing this because that's what we need to do but actually, I'm doing this here ... (FES11, Manager, LES)

On other hand, other frontline staff valued PPPs for the role they played as documentary evidence that they could use to 'show progression' (FES15, Employer liaison and former advisor, JobPath). For instance, after 12 months, PPPs could be used to show jobseekers that they 'leave the program having got something from it' (FES21, Manager, JobPath), and to give the DSP to show, 'here's their progression plan, here's what they've done' (FES3, Manager, JobPath).

5. Performance Monitoring and Targets

As reflected in advisors' and mediators' comments about the administrative burden associated with their work, frontline staff are closely monitored in their roles—both by their own agency management and by the government purchaser, the Department of Social Protection (DSP). This performance monitoring of frontline staff is sometimes referred to as 'triple activation' (van Berkel, 2013), the expression used to describe when accountability systems applied to contracted providers by commissioning government agencies become internally embedded within those organisations' own employee appraisal and management systems. For example, agencies contracted via Payment-by-Results may respond to this form of performance management from the government purchaser by passing on performance targets, such as monthly job placement targets, internally to their staff. Or they may financially incentivise their staff to try to exceed job placement targets by offering performance bonuses to high performing staff. Likewise, if government departments monitor contracted providers through caseload auditing and other quality assurance measures to ensure compliance with contractual obligations (e.g. regarding frequency of appointments, the content of Personal Progression Plans, and so on), frontline staff may also be monitored internally by agency managers to ensure they are fulfilling key procedural requirements of their jobs.

The issue of performance incentives and performance monitoring is a key point of difference between the way in which JobPath agencies are contracted by the DSP in comparison to the LES. Although each LES is given an annual performance target by the DSP—placing 30 per cent of activation clients into a minimum of 30 hours of employment—LES are paid for the costs of the services they provide, rather than the number of job placements and job sustainments they deliver. Conversely, JobPath agencies are funded primarily by the number of job placements and job sustainments they deliver rather than the fixed services they provide. Accordingly, a key focus of the survey was understanding whether these differences in how JobPath and LES providers are performance managed by the DSP filter down to differences in how individual LES and JobPath frontline workers are held accountable by their own managers for achieving performance targets and fulfilling other requirements of their jobs.

Figure 5 shows the results for JobPath staff on several survey questions about performance targets and monitoring, while Figure 6 reports the results on the same items for LES staff. These figures indicate several important differences between JobPath and LES staff. Notably, the results suggest that agency managers more closely monitor what JobPath frontline staff do in their jobs on a day-to-day basis in their jobs than LES frontline staff:

- 66% of JobPath frontline workers reported that they 'strongly agree' that their supervisor knows a lot about the work they do, day-to-day, compared with 30% of LES staff
- Only 12% of JobPath respondents and 16% of LES respondents reported that they 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that their supervisor knows a lot about the work they do from day-to-day.

The results would therefore seem to indicate that supervisory oversight is a feature of frontline working conditions in both programmes. This was reflected in frontline workers' observations in follow-up interviews about the extent to which their supervisors and local managers were closely following various aspects of their jobs, such as that their case notes and client appointment attendance records were up to date on agencies' information management systems. As one mediator with other 20 years' experience explained:

Our system is monitored in terms of appointments – they need to be updated. If you missed updating appointments, it would be picked up and you'd get a list of people ... If you're really busy, it's easy enough to miss updating someone's attendance. So, in my own office, we do it locally. The girl that's in admin, I get her to check those every two days to make sure I haven't missed anyone. But I know that the manager sends a list out regularly as well to make sure 'OK, you've missed this one, that one - update them' ... (FES13, Mediator, LES)

FIGURE 5: MONITORING AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT OF JOBPATH STAFF

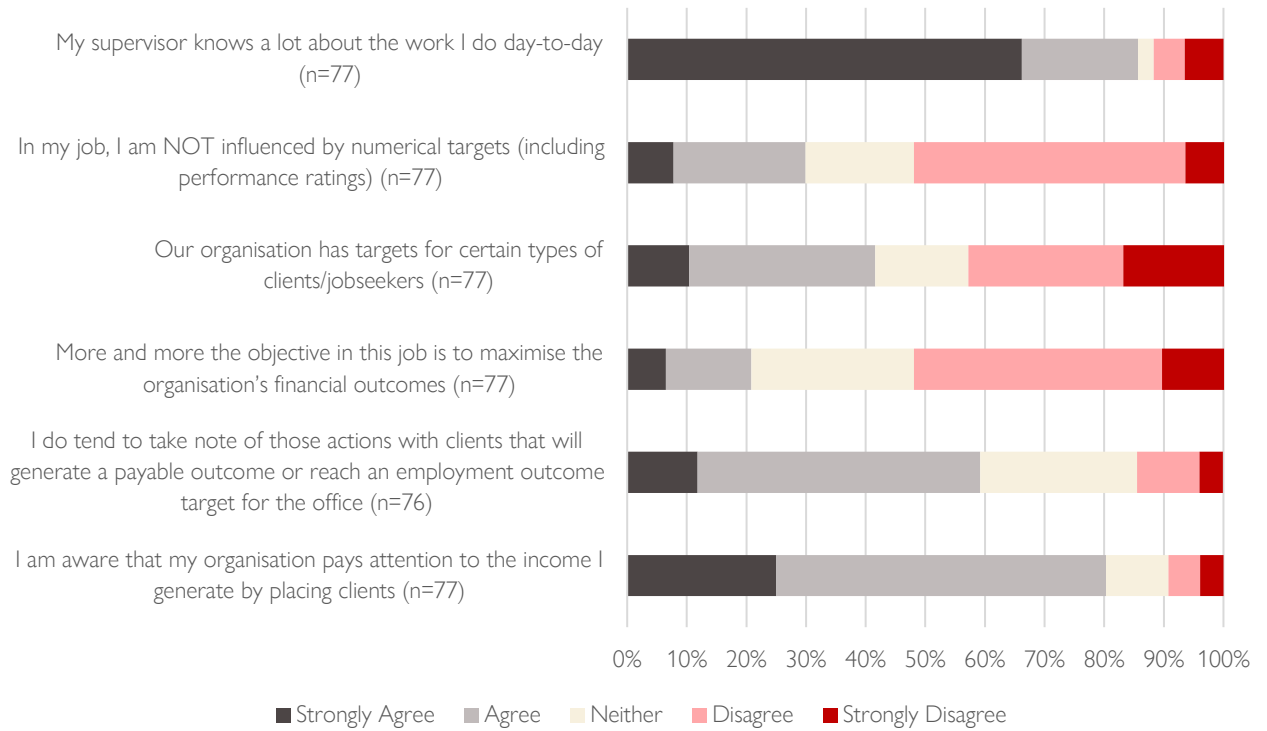
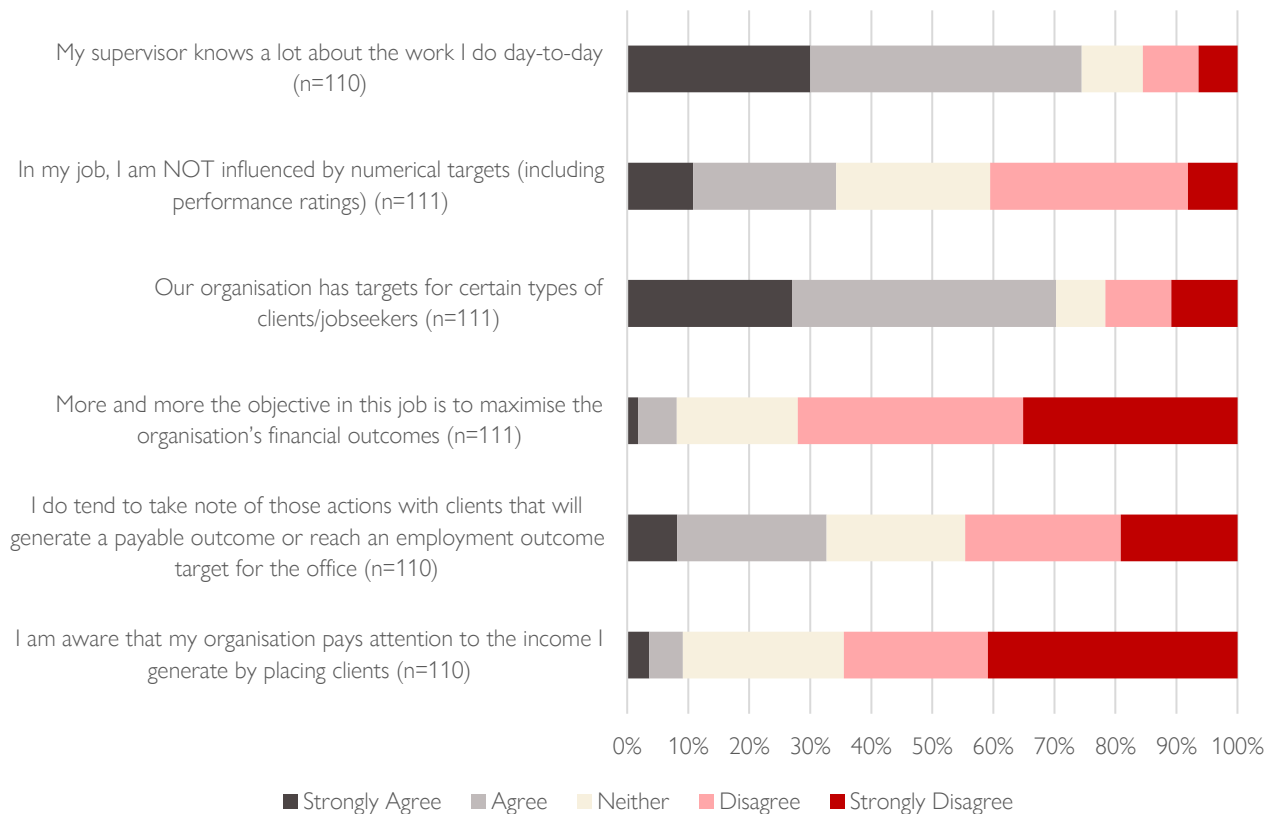


FIGURE 6: MONITORING AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT OF LES STAFF



In the case of LES mediators the primary, and usually only, information management system that they used was the DSP's Business Object Model Implementation (BOMi) database. LES staff relied on BOMi to generate and update Personal Progression Plans, record details of clients' attendance and missed appointments, track progressions to work and education, and organise referrals to training. BOMi was likened by interviewees to 'an accountability tool' (FES18, mediator, LES) that enabled not only the DSP but also agency managers to 'go in and check ... what your level of activity is in relation to appointments and so on' (FES20, Mediator, LES). From LES managers' perspective, these kinds of 'quality management systems' were pivotal to maintaining their office and staffs' compliance with procedural obligations enshrined in their contract. As an LES manager explained, 'there are legal obligations' like clients having 'to have seven days notice of an appointment when they're engaged under the Pathways to Work. Are we following that process as to the standards of the letters' sent out?' (FES19, Manager, LES). Although JobPath advisors did not use BOMi, each JobPath agency had an equivalent system for recording clients' progression plans, case notes, and any progressions into training or employment:

[W]e all use the same one and it works really, really well for me ... You put the clients' [name] in ... and then it just opens up that client's file. I also have, I can see where all my next appointments, I can see when I need to do certain reports for clients - who hasn't had an appointment, who's fallen out of the system, who we need to bring back in, who needs to be – you know, their personal progression plan needs to be updated – who's coming to the end of their programme. (FES2, Adviser, JobPath)

Describing the system their organization uses, an advisor explained 'there's quite a lot of admin involved':

Every time we have an appointment with somebody, we have to write up in detail notes about what's occurred ... what we've done, what we've discussed, what task we've set for the customer. And then basically we have challenges and actions set up for each customer (FES6, Adviser, JobPath)

Again, these information management systems afforded managers a window from which to observe advisors' day-to-day work with clients, and to track issues of procedural compliance as well as performance. For instance, one JobPath manager explained that they would 'do check's on people's customers'. These would be in the form of monthly quality review meetings but also 'random checks' on the personal progression plans that advisors had developed with jobseekers: client 'journeys, what they're doing, what interventions have been put in place, what information, advice and guidance has been offered to the customer, what supports are being put in place, is their journey with us tailored to them?' (FES21, Manager, JobPath). As an advisor from a different JobPath agency explained: 'Your centre manager ultimately at the end of the day is watching us'. This was on things like 'who's applying for jobs, how many do they apply for this month' but also, as the advisor elaborated:

They're watching how many people, how many non-engagements you have. Your stats on how many clients are actually showing up, which shows are they engaged [with] us individually as employment officers. So that's important. (FES10, Adviser, JobPath)

Beyond the supervisory oversight of workers on issues of administrative and procedural compliance, the results shown in Figures 6 and 7 indicate that performance targets are an ever-present feature of frontline employment services work - although the degree to which frontline workers report being influenced by such targets varies. For instance, 70 per cent of LES staff and 42 per cent of JobPath staff 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their organisation has targets for certain types of clients. While lower proportions of JobPath staff indicated that their organisation had differentiated targets for specific types of clients, there was a high awareness among JobPath staff that their organisation paid attention to the income they generated for the organisation by placing clients into employment:

- A quarter of JobPath staff surveyed 'strongly agreed' that they are aware that their organisation pays attention to the income they generate by placing clients into work;
- A further 55 per cent of JobPath staff surveyed 'agreed' that they were aware that their organisation paid attention to the income they generated by placing clients into work;
- Fewer than 10 per cent of LES staff either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were aware their organisation paid attention to the income they generated by placing jobseekers into employment.

These results are not surprising given that LES are funded on a costs-met rather than Payment-by-Results basis. Nonetheless, the results do, overall, indicate that the performance-based funding model of the JobPath contract is filtering through to frontline workers' awareness of the financial implications of their actions with clients:

- 59 per cent of JobPath staff either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they took note of those actions with clients that would generate a payable outcome, or reach an outcome target for their office
- 52 per cent of JobPath staff surveyed indicated that they are influenced by numerical and performance targets in their jobs, with only 30 per cent of JobPath staff indicating that they are *not* influenced by such targets.

By contrast:

- 33 per cent of LES staff 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they take note of actions with clients that would achieve a performance target or payable outcome;
- 40 per cent of LES staff report 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they are influenced by numerical and performance targets in their jobs, with 34 per cent indicating that they are NOT influenced by such targets.

As indicated above, most JobPath staff reported being influenced by numerical and performance targets and, in follow-up interviews, all JobPath advisors described having monthly job placement targets that they would be expected to achieve. These targets were set by senior managers in head office and monitored at the frontline by local office managers. As one advisor explained, 'They come right down, so from the managing director all the way down. They're then given to the regional manager, who in turn gives it to your centre manager' (FES10, Advisor, JobPath). However, in no cases were JobPath staff paid performance incentives for achieving or exceeding their targets. Although local managers indicated that they sometimes rewarded performance in other ways, such as by giving staff time-off on a Friday afternoon for successes that they noticed those staff achieving:

... I would say, for example, on a Friday morning [team meeting], which would have been regular now this morning, I would go 'What time was your last appointment? [Advisor name], that was a fantastic result you had today, or yesterday.' And she'd go, 'Oh my last appointment is at half-past four.' And then I'll go, 'You better leave early.' And then I'll go silent. Next thing you'll hear, 'But I did [target]'. 'Did you so, I didn't notice that?' What do you think guys? So we have a bit of banter about it, and they openly want to say what they achieved this week. (FES3, Manager, JobPath)

Some JobPath staff reported anxiety about achieving targets, although they were also adamant that they would 'never put someone into a job just to get a number' (FES15, Employer liaison and former advisor, JobPath). As this staff member elaborated, 'That's not what I'm about', explaining 'I'd rather just say, "Look, we didn't get at this moment"' than tell a jobseeker 'he's grand, he can work in a supermarket, but he can't read and write.' In most cases, interviewees perceived that their targets were usually 'pretty achievable' (FES14, Employer Liaison, JobPath) and 'not crazy, crazy targets' (FES6, Advisor, JobPath) that were constantly front and centre of their minds. For example, one advisor explained that, at first, they were initially 'very focused' on meeting monthly placement targets but, over time, they have learned to be less worried and now try 'not to focus' on targets:

I look at it in a very different way now. I just feel if they are progressing, it will happen anyway. So, I try not to focus on it. But, coming towards the end of the month, if you're sitting on one job, you're thinking, 'Oh my gosh.' It is always in the back of your mind. (FES10, Advisor, JobPath)

Echoing other advisor's observations that, despite the targets, their work is 'not all sales driven' (FES6, Advisor), another advisor contrasted their experience of targets with the retail environment they had worked in before:

I've never felt, in this position, that the targets are really hammered home. It always feels more like a guide price ... I suppose, the key thing is, for the office, that they hit target. But there's never been a mentality from management that everyone has to hit their target. Once the office hits it, and once it's not an ongoing thing - I'm sure if I was getting no jobs in for three or four months in a row there'd be a conversation there - but it's not really intense. It's not like retail at all. (FES16, advisor, JobPath)

Like JobPath advisors, LES mediators often (but not always) also had personal performance targets, although their targets usually mirrored the annual performance target given to LES agencies by the DSP. Namely, '30 percent of your caseload into employment, full-time employment' (FES17, Mediator, LES). Their progression towards this annual target would be monitored from month-to-month through periodic performance reporting. There was frustration among both LES and JobPath staff with the nature of the targets they were measured against. Frontline staff did not feel that job placement and sustainment targets were the best indicators of client progression, and that alternative kinds of outcomes such as training outcomes and progressions to further education or work experience programmes should also be recognised. The need to recognise such alternative outcomes and forms of client progression stemmed from an awareness among both LES and JobPath staff that significant proportions of their clients would not progress to employment within the twelve-month window they had to work with them.

I've always said it to my boss, I think it's very unfair because progression looks different for everyone. And it shouldn't just be down to someone having 30 hours a week fulltime work, because that's not the end goal for everyone (FES10, Advisor, JobPath)

There's a reason for people, I suppose, being so long-term unemployed. Whether they didn't have opportunities in the past or whatever, that they do need to be given that opportunity to develop themselves. And I just don't think that happens overnight ... For a client to maybe achieve a certificate in something, or complete a course or whatever, those things do mean so much. They're just completely undervalued ... From the statistical end of it, or the placement end of it, I just feel all that stuff is completely undervalued whereas it means so much to that client ... (FES17, Mediator, LES)

The 30 per cent placement target that LES offices were tasked with achieving was, in many cases, seen as an arbitrary metric, with no basis in an understanding of the nature of the employment challenges that jobseekers' experienced, or recognition of the enormous variation in both the profile of offices' caseloads and local labour market dynamics. For example, one mediator described the 30 per cent target as 'pure nonsense really'. While this mediator personally almost always achieved the target, they put this down purely to 'the demographics of the area' and the fact that 'about 60 per cent' of activation clients on the caseload 'are short-term unemployed':

The actual achievement of the target reflects the breakdown of the caseload rather than the service, or the abilities of the individual case officers or mediators. And the targets become counter-productive in my view because, and I've talked to one or two colleagues who've felt pressure over this, they have a different caseload mix ... The danger then is that they're going to be leaning on people in a way which is alien in my view to the actual ethos that we are supposed to be set up under (FES4, Mediator, LES)

As indicated in the above comment, there was concern among LES staff that the emphasis on performance measurement could exert pressure on staff to change how they worked with clients, and that more disadvantaged jobseekers with longer histories of unemployment or more complex needs could be overlooked. That is, under pressure to achieve performance targets, mediators and offices could be forced to prioritise their most 'employable' clients to secure future funding and contracts, meaning that 'harder-to-help' clients would be left behind.

Both LES and JobPath staff adamantly maintained that they avoided such 'creaming' and 'parking' practices, and worked hard to help clients progress into education, training, and community work experience programmes as well as employment. As one JobPath advisor explained: 'that's, to me, just as important as them getting a job ... and we have loads of people doing that: doing a full-time training course, doing the back to education allowance'. But they did so despite the performance measurement regimes they worked under, which provided little incentive to invest resources into helping those they saw as having limited prospect of securing employment within 12 months, who risked 'being pushed pack further and further all the time' (Manager, LES):

If you want to get paid, get your contract renewed at the end of the year, you will only have interest in that one measure, come hell or high water. Everything else, you're going to put aside. I'm not saying that we do that. But, if you were totally self-interested, that's all you would do. (Manager, LES)

6. Working with jobseekers

As discussed in the previous section on performance monitoring, frontline staff rely heavily on computers and information management systems in their jobs. This reflects what some scholars have described as a shift from 'street-level' to 'screen-level' work in that interactions with clients remain face-to-face but meetings 'always run through or in the presence of a computer screen' (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002). This sense of being screen-level workers was conveyed by several interviewees, who described how 'the computer has to be fed' (FES4, Mediator, LES) and felt frustrated that their role was increasingly 'like feed the Tamagotchi' (FES18, Mediator, LES).

Use of client assessment tools and IT systems

The use of computer systems and standardised case management protocols by frontline workers is further explored in Table 6, which shows the responses of JobPath and LES staff on a range of items tracking the degree to which frontline staff used computer systems, standardised protocols, or other assessment tools in their jobs.

TABLE 6: USE OF COMPUTER SYSTEMS AND STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT TOOLS WHEN WORKING WITH JOBSEEKERS

	JobPath	LES
How influential are answers to a standard set of assessment questions or sub-questions in determining what activities are recommended for each client? (n=181)		
▪ Not at all influential	9.50%	29.00%
▪ Somewhat influential	37.80%	43.90%
▪ Quite influential	31.10%	19.60%
▪ Very influential	21.60%	7.50%
Do you use the answers to any form of standard CLIENT CLASSIFICATION (profiling) or checklist when deciding how to work with a client or any other course of action? (n=184)		
▪ Yes	69.70%	46.30%
▪ No	30.30%	53.70%
To what extent do you feel that the IT system you use dictates how you do your job? (n=188)		
▪ 1. A small extent	9.10%	3.60%
▪ 2	11.70%	3.60%
▪ 3	9.10%	10.80%
▪ 4	22.10%	13.50%
▪ 5	16.90%	24.30%
▪ 6	9.10%	15.30%
▪ 7. A large extent	22.10%	28.80%
Our computer system tells me what steps to take with clients and when to take them (n=187)		
▪ Strongly Agree	3.90%	3.60%
▪ Agree	27.30%	22.70%
▪ Neither	23.40%	21.80%
▪ Disagree	29.90%	40.90%
▪ Strongly Disagree	15.60%	10.90%
I use our IT system to track priority clients (n=186)		
▪ Strongly Agree	13.20%	4.50%
▪ Agree	50.00%	23.60%
▪ Neither	18.40%	25.50%
▪ Disagree	9.20%	34.50%
▪ Strongly Disagree	9.20%	11.80%

The results shown in Table 6 indicate that frontline workers' reliance on IT systems and standardised case management tools is considerable:

- 68 per cent of LES frontline staff and 48 per cent of JobPath staff report that the IT system they use partly dictates how they do their job.
- 22 per cent of JobPath staff and 29 per cent of LES staff perceive that the IT system they use dictates how they do their job to 'a large extent'.

In the case of LES staff, follow-up interviews suggested that the perception that IT systems dictated how they did their job was partly borne out of frustration with having to use the DSP's BOMi system to keep records of case notes, document jobseekers' personal progression plans, and report on whether clients attended appointments. For example, one mediator described BOMi as 'literally just an administrative, monitoring thing that you [do]':

I mean, you have to tick the boxes. You have to put in the things. Oh the latest thing is everybody is meant to be registered with Jobs Ireland. I don't really know why. But, I mean, they just have to be.
(FES1, Mediator, LES)

Nonetheless, it was time consuming work that dictated and limited mediators' capacity to invest time and energy into working with jobseekers to provide them with personalised guidance and support:

I'm expected to have BOMi updated perfectly at the end of the day. And that's the job ... but I have a responsibility to the person that I'm working with to do the best I can for them, with them, and that they're at the forefront for me. Rather than making sure that BOMi is updated and that the notes are recorded. Because BOMi is going to get nobody a job. BOMi is going to get nobody training, you know.
(FES18, Mediator, LES)

Notwithstanding the extent to which frontline staff perceive IT systems dictate how they do their jobs, only a minority (31% of Job Path respondents and 26% of LES respondents) perceived that their computer system told them 'what steps to take with clients and when to take them'. Indeed, fewer than 4 per cent of either LES or JobPath staff 'strongly agreed' that their computer system told them what steps to take with clients and when. This perhaps suggests that frontline workers primarily avail of computer systems for information management and reporting on what they do rather than as aides to decision-making or tools for determining what to do.

Indeed, more broadly, the survey results suggest that the use of standardised assessment and client classification tools as aides to decision-making is relatively limited among Irish frontline staff. Although there are some notable differences in the extent to which JobPath and LES staff report using such protocols:

- Only a quarter (27%) of LES staff report being influenced by standardised assessment tools when determining what activities to recommend to clients
- Over half (54%) of LES staff report that they do not use any form of client classification checklist or profiling tool at all in their jobs.
- 70 per cent of JobPath frontline staff report that they do make use of such tools
- 53 per cent of JobPath staff—almost double the proportion of LES frontline staff—indicate that the answers to standard assessment questions are 'quite' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommend.

In follow-up interviews, several staff from one of the JobPath agencies elaborated on the 'customer assessment' tool that their agency had developed which, according to one manager, comprised of 'ninety-two questions' aimed at knowing 'what supports we can put in place' (FES21, JobPath, Manager):

So it'd be like a set of questions talking about anything from, you know, how experienced are that job searching? Do they have any barriers or issues or financial problems or anything that is holding them back? So that would bring up challenges and actions that you have to look at each appointment. So, it might say 'customer has difficulty in job searching online' or 'doesn't have good interview skills' or 'has lots of debt problems'. (FES6, Advisor, JobPath)

It's a very powerful tool and there is nobody else really using it. It opens up the door for conversations ... Some of them, you need the questionnaire to be able to break down barriers. Like one of the questions would be 'Did you ever think of self-employment?' And somebody could say to, 'Yeah.' And then you go, 'Really, what would you do?' And they could tell you something completely different to what their job goals were ... And that leads you down a whole different track. (FES8, Advisor, JobPath)

The use of a related kind of assessment questionnaire was also reported by advisors from the other JobPath:

We do an assignment with people at the initial appointment ... and it runs through things like literacy levels, computer skills, confidence levels, their attitudes towards learning and education. So, it does identify some of those barriers. (FES5, Advisor, JobPath)

Staff from two different LES agencies also reported that they availed of vocational assessment questionnaires and even psychometric assessment tools. However, this appeared to be a less widespread practice across LES organisations and was not evident among mediators interviewed from other LES:

If there was a tool available, I would certainly use it. I wouldn't be against it. It has never been presented to us ... to have something like that. (FES, Mediator, LES)

Key influences on decision-making

Besides the degree to which frontline workers made use of computer systems, profiling tools, and other assessment tools, employment services staff were also surveyed about the influence of a range of other factors on their decision-making with clients. Among other things, these include:

- Frontline workers' own professional judgement,
- Clients' preferences regarding activities,
- The government's mutual obligations policy, and
- The need to get an outcome quickly.

Figure 7 details the results on these items for JobPath frontline staff, and Figure 8 provides a summary of how LES staff responded to these questions. Overwhelmingly, the results indicate that jobseekers' preferences for activities are the primary influence on determining what activities advisors, mediators or guidance officers recommend to clients. In total, 83 per cent of JobPath frontline staff and 91 per cent of LES frontline staff reported that jobseekers' preferences for activities were either 'quite' or 'very influential' on their decision-making in this regard. After client-choice, the main influence that frontline workers report on their decision-making is their own professional judgement. Three quarters (75%) of JobPath staff and over two-thirds (67%) of LES staff report that their own judgement is either 'quite' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommend for each jobseeker.

The degree of emphasis that frontline PES staff in Ireland place on jobseeker's preferences for activities is markedly higher than in other countries where frontline staff have been similarly surveyed. For example, in 2016:

- Less than 70 per cent of UK PES staff surveyed reported that jobseekers' preferences were either 'quite' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommended for clients.
- In Australia, this proportion was 69 per cent (Lewis et al., 2016, 2017).

This points to a greater emphasis on jobseeker choice in Ireland's activation model, which is further reflected in the survey results on the degree to which the government's activation or mutual commitment's policy influences frontline workers' decision-making. As shown in Figures 7 and 8, only 36 per cent of JobPath staff and just 28 per cent of LES staff reported that the government's activation policy was either 'quite' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommended to clients. To put these figures into perspective, in 2016, the proportion of Australian frontline staff who reported that their government's mutual obligations policy was quite or very influential in determining what activities they recommended was in excess of 80 per cent (Lewis et al., 2016). Among UK frontline employment services staff, this proportion was just under 50 per cent (Lewis et al., 2017).

FIGURE 7: INFLUENCES WHEN DETERMINING WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE RECOMMENDED (JOBPATH RESPONDENTS)

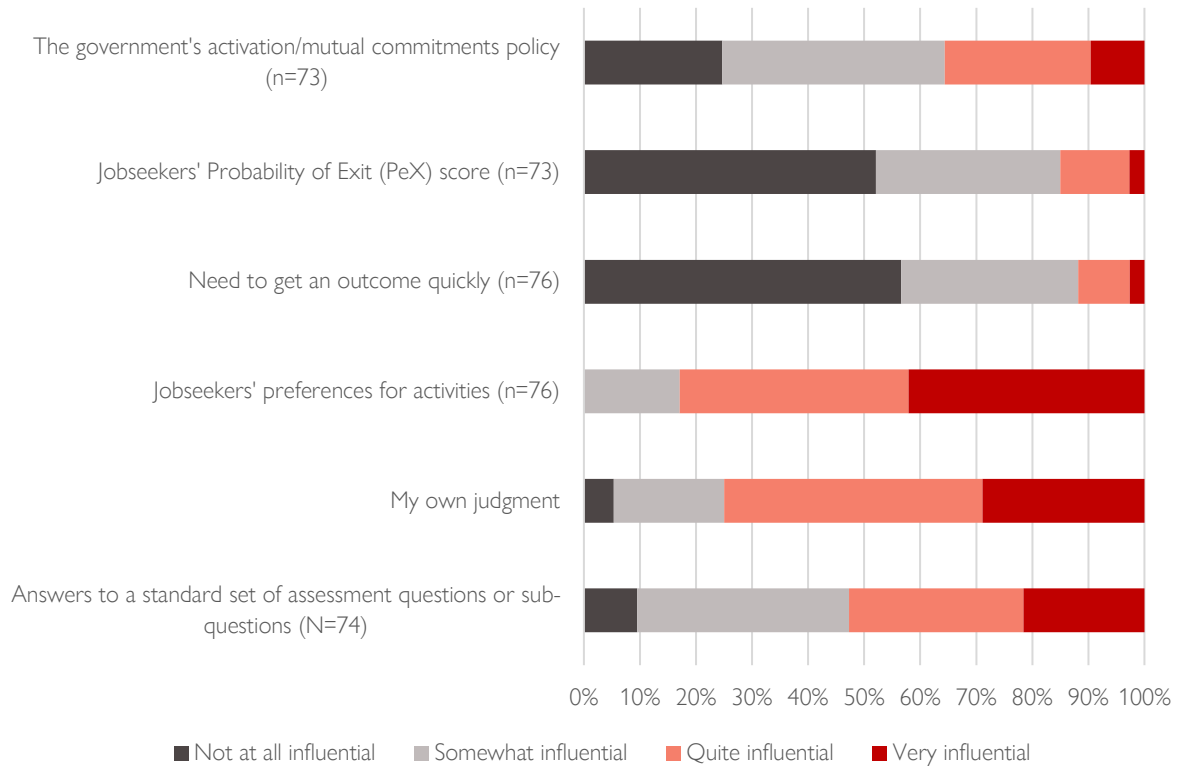
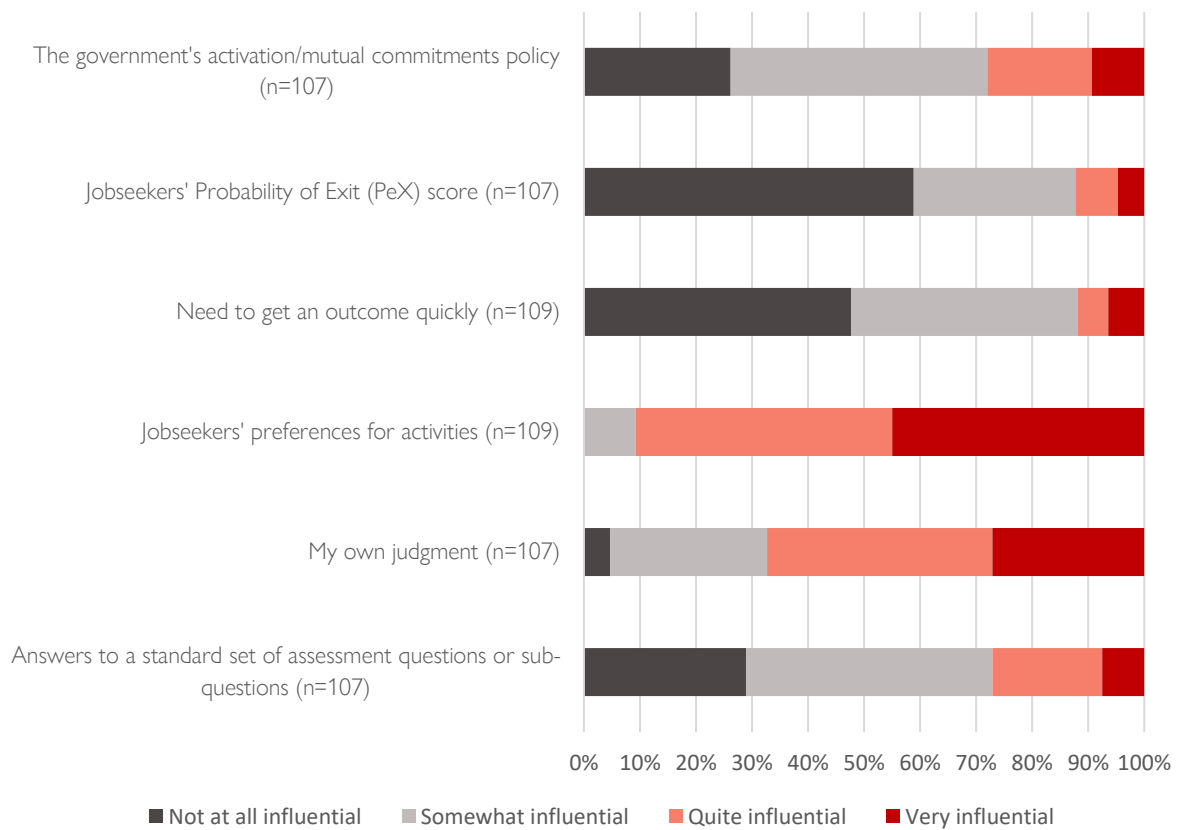


FIGURE 8: INFLUENCES WHEN DETERMINING WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE RECOMMENDED (LES RESPONDENTS)



Likewise, in comparison to UK and Australian frontline staff, activation workers in Ireland are substantially less likely to report that they are influenced by the need to get an outcome quickly. Indeed, fewer than 12 per cent of either JobPath or LES staff say that the need to get an outcome quickly carries much influence in determining what activities they recommend to clients. This finding is somewhat surprising given the survey data on performance monitoring and targets reviewed in previous sections, in which almost 60 per cent of JobPath staff and 33 per cent of LES staff 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they took note of which actions with clients generated a payable outcome or satisfied an employment outcome target for their office.

In short, the survey data indicate that, *from the perspective of frontline staff*, the delivery of employment services in Ireland is more responsive to client-choice than to the demands of government activation policy or the necessity of achieving performance targets. This seeming client-centredness, and emphasis on 'what [jobseekers] want rather than fitting them into somewhere' (FES7, Mediator, LES), was repeatedly conveyed by both JobPath advisors and LES mediators in interviews. For instance, one mediator, described how they would 'like to think that you are putting [clients] first', elaborating:

I would hope that the clients always feel that I'm there to work with them, I'm there to support them ... I hope that that's the way that they would feel ... I would never want any client to feel that they were dreading having to go to an appointment (FES17 Mediator, LES)

JobPath staff likewise perceived that working against clients' preferences was counterproductive, and that 'you have to be people-centred' in the sense of 'putting the best of interests of the person you are talking to first and foremost' (FES21, Manager, JobPath) at the forefront of everything you do. Long-term job sustainments, which was the key determinant of their funding and performance targets, were only possible if they worked with jobseekers to achieve their own employment goals rather than trying to place them into work at any cost:

[T]here's never any persuasion to do something they don't want to do. It has to be right for them. Because, at the end of the day, we are measured on sustainments and whether they stay in the job. So it has to be the right job for them (FES6, Advisor, JobPath)

The results shown in Figures 9 and 10 lend further support to the view that client-choice is a core driver of employment services delivery in Ireland, *at least in comparative terms to other liberal welfare states*. These figures report the results on several questions addressing the extent to which frontline workers perceive that:

- Their agency values client-choice
- They have leeway to decide which programme or activity clients should be assigned to
- Standard programme rules and regulations determine the decisions they make about clients.

Again, a very high proportion of both JobPath (42%) and LES (47%) staff indicate their agency places 'a great of emphasis' on giving clients more choice about the services they receive. Conversely, very few perceive that the decisions they make about clients are strongly determined by standard programme rules and regulations.

However, the results do suggest that the decisions of JobPath staff are slightly more likely to be determined by standard programme rules and regulations, and that JobPath advisors are given less leeway to decide which programmes or activities to refer clients to than LES frontline staff:

- 17 per cent of JobPath staff report that the decisions they make about clients are determined 'to a great extent' by standard programme rules and regulations, compared with less than 6 per cent of LES staff
- Just 1 per cent of JobPath staff report that their decisions about clients are determined 'very little' by standard programme rules and regulations, compared with 12 per cent of LES staff
- 70 per cent of LES staff report that they have leeway to decide which programme or activity clients should be assigned to, compared with 62 per cent of JobPath staff.

FIGURE 9: FRONTLINE DISCRETION AND CLIENT CHOICE (JOBPATH RESPONDENTS)

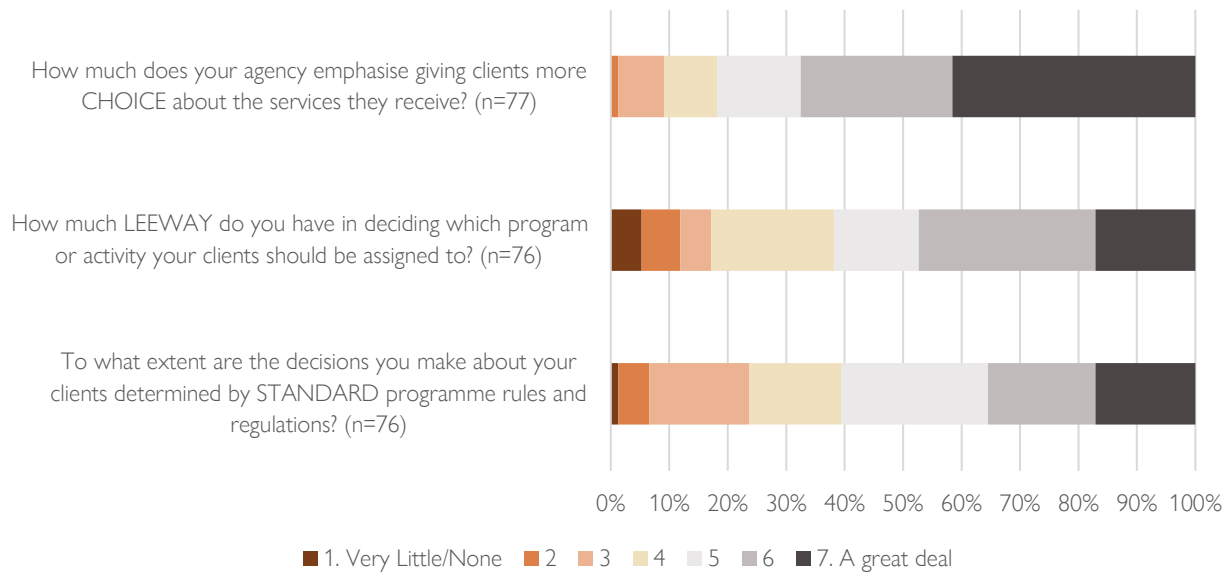
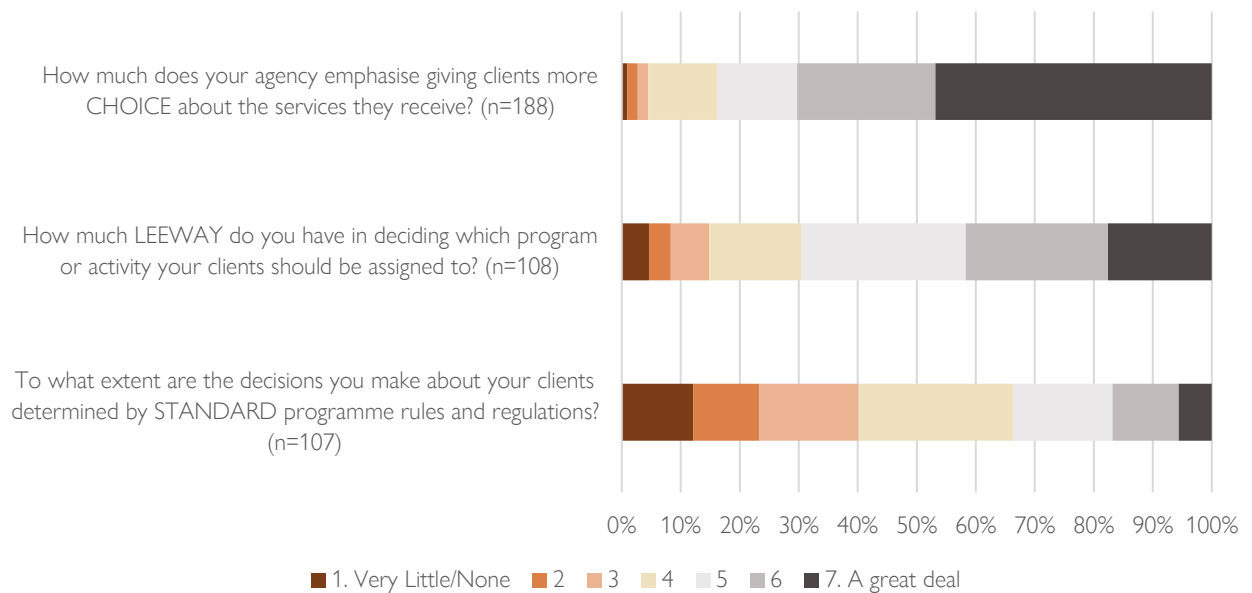


FIGURE 10: FRONTLINE DISCRETION AND CLIENT-CHOICE (LES RESPONDENTS)



However, it is important to acknowledge that these results only reflect employment services staff own perspective on the extent to which they have leeway to make decisions, and to which they and the agencies they work for value client-choice. The jobseekers participating in mandatory activation programmes may have a very different perspective on the degree to which the services they are provided with are responsive to client-choice rather than being heavily determined by standard rules and regulations. Likewise, jobseekers' may feel very different about the level of say they are personally given over the content of their Personal Progression Plans, despite mediators' and advisors' claims to being person-centred in their approach. One important limitation of both survey and interview research is the issue of what's sometimes described as 'the attitudinal fallacy' (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Namely, that there is always a danger that participants will over-estimate their own agency, or give the answers that they perceive they *ought* to give, or that they perceive *researchers want to hear*, rather than reporting on what they actually think or do (Brodkin, 2017).

7. Working with external services and organisations

In addition to working directly with jobseekers, the job of supporting unemployed people to find work also often involves working with a range of third-party stakeholders to assist jobseekers to gain access to support services. Examples include training providers, other welfare or social services providers, and employers. Indeed, these forms of inter-agency collaboration are thought to be increasingly important in the context of the extension of activation to cohorts who are further removed from the labour market (Considine et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2008; Rice et al., 2018; van Berkel, 2017), such as those who have been on welfare payments for several years or people who may have complex issues such as mental health, housing insecurity, or family/relationship issues hindering their employment participation. In this section, the findings are presented on the degree to which frontline workers are involved in such networking activities, and the intensity of their forms of inter-agency collaboration.

As previously discussed, JobPath and LES staff spend about 10-12 per cent of their working with employers and, respectively, about 6-13 per cent of their time working with other service providers. However, respondents were also asked to indicate how regularly (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.) they were in contact with a range of service providers and other key stakeholders related to the provision of employment support. These included other offices within their own organisation, officials at various levels of government, employers, training providers, and other welfare or social service providers. These contact items were designed to provide an indication of providers' networking activities both in terms of breadth and intensity, and therefore excluded contacts directly relate to assisting jobseekers to obtain an interview.

As shown in Table 7, the results indicate that Irish frontline staff have very high levels of *intra-organisational* contact, but more minimal *inter-agency* collaboration.

Just under 45 per cent of LES frontline staff and almost 38 per cent of JobPath frontline staff report being in daily contact with another office within their own organisation, such as their agencies' head office or a sister employment services office. However, the level of inter-agency contact between frontline staff and external service providers and outside stakeholders is less frequent and, in some cases, quite weak.

In particular, the results indicate that Irish employment services have only minimal contact with local councils. Almost half (48%) of JobPath staff and just under 36 per cent of LES staff report that they *never* have any form of contact with local councils. Conversely, a combined proportion of just over half (51%) of JobPath staff report that they are in daily or weekly contact with officials from an Irish government department. Notably, this is markedly higher than the proportion of LES staff (31%) who report daily or weekly contact with officials from an Irish government department. Indeed, 21 per cent of LES staff report *never* being in contact with government department officials. This would appear to suggest a greater intensity of contact between the government and JobPath providers, at least at the level of frontline service provision.

Outside government, the key external stakeholders that frontline staff are in regular contact with are training providers, followed by employers in the case of JobPath staff, and other welfare or social service providers in the case of LES frontline staff:

- Just under 30 per cent of LES staff reported daily contact with training providers, while a further 43 per cent reported weekly contact with training providers.
- While only 16 per cent of JobPath staff reported daily contact with training providers, 52 per cent reported that they were in weekly contact with training providers.

In other words, a combined proportion of 68 per cent of JobPath staff and 72 per cent of LES staff report being in contact with training providers *at least* once per week.

TABLE 7: REGULARITY OF CONTACT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

	JobPath respondents	LES Respondents
How often would you have any other form of contact with the following? (excluding contacts associated with assisting a job seeker to obtain an interview)		
Another office owned by the organisation you work for (n=188)		
▪ Daily	37.7%	44.1%
▪ Weekly	36.4%	36.9%
▪ Monthly	14.3%	6.3%
▪ Quarterly	6.5%	0.9%
▪ Less than Quarterly	3.9%	7.2%
▪ Never	1.3%	4.5%
Officials from an Irish government department (n=189)		
▪ Daily	5.2%	4.5%
▪ Weekly	45.5%	26.8%
▪ Monthly	18.2%	23.2%
▪ Quarterly	7.8%	5.4%
▪ Less than Quarterly	9.1%	18.8%
▪ Never	14.3%	21.4%
Local councils (n=186)		
▪ Daily		1.8%
▪ Weekly	1.3%	2.8%
▪ Monthly	16.9%	13.8%
▪ Quarterly	6.5%	15.6%
▪ Less than Quarterly	27.3%	30.3%
▪ Never	48.1%	35.8%
Other welfare or social service providers (n=188)		
▪ Daily	7.8%	9.0%
▪ Weekly	37.7%	41.4%
▪ Monthly	18.2%	26.1%
▪ Quarterly	15.6%	12.6%
▪ Less than Quarterly	13.0%	9.0%
▪ Never	7.8%	1.8%
Employers (n=186)		
▪ Daily	23.7%	8.2%
▪ Weekly	31.6%	30.0%
▪ Monthly	22.4%	23.6%
▪ Quarterly	11.8%	9.1%
▪ Less than Quarterly	6.6%	19.1%
▪ Never	3.9%	10.0%
Training Providers (n=189)		
▪ Daily	15.6%	29.5%
▪ Weekly	51.9%	42.9%
▪ Monthly	23.4%	18.8%
▪ Quarterly	5.2%	2.7%
▪ Less than Quarterly	3.9%	3.6%
▪ Never		2.7%

However, follow-up interviews suggested that there were qualitative differences in the types of training providers that LES and JobPath agencies were in contact with. For example, when JobPath interviewees discussed referring clients to training, or training providers they were in contact with, they usually referenced short-term training courses to gain basic licenses or accreditations needed to work in specific sectors or occupational fields where there were immediate local labour market vacancies. Typical examples of what might be described as ‘licensing training’ included manual handling training and safe pass courses to work in construction, as well as forklift license training to work in warehousing:

There would also be a lot of training providers that we would work with, like the regional skills ... And we would also obviously arrange training with various local training providers that we would find ourselves - like the manual handling, the safe pass for people who would need that. (FES14, Employer Liaison, JobPath)

It's dependent on the client's needs and his work experience. He may need to just freshen up on a forklift license or his tickets. But the main training that we do would be manual handling, safe pass ... every single day you'd be booking people into them sorts of training (FES2, Advisor, JobPath).

LES mediators also frequently referred jobseekers to such types of licensing training. However, they also discussed examples of more substantive forms of vocational training (e.g., +QQI level5) and further education courses that would run for periods of months rather than days.

The institute for Further Education is near us. VTOS [Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme] is near us as well. So, we'd be referring people to VTOS or back-to-education ... And our nearest college is, kind of Springboard wise [subsidised vocationally oriented Certificate, Masters and Degree-level] as well, I'd do a lot of referrals to [college]... [College] has great Springboard courses. (FES1, Mediator, LES).

Springboardcourse.ie would be another big one that I would be pointing some clients towards ... and obviously CAO.ie [for admissions to higher-level education] itself. (FES4, Mediator, LES)

These longer-duration forms of vocational training in fields such as healthcare were also mentioned by JobPath staff. For example, one advisor discussed how they would often encourage early school leavers to consider further education:

Especially with some of the young people, they might say, 'Oh, I just want to work in construction.' But then I might say 'But hang on, have you thought about doing some more study?' Maybe they didn't get their Leaving Cert, so I would always say 'Have you thought about maybe doing a level five?' ... But a lot of them have said 'Actually, I don't know, I've never really thought about it...' ... 'Do a level five and see how you get on, and then maybe a level six. And if you really like it, do a Springboard course or something' (FES6, Advisor, JobPath),

However, in comparison to LES staff, these examples of recommending longer-duration vocational training and further educational courses were less frequently discussed by JobPath staff:

We're lucky enough that we have [education institute], they'll do the level fives and the level sixes. They've a lot of opportunities with the back to education ... But I find with that younger age group, they will look at upskilling and returning to education. And look, in fairness, I honestly feel that's the best opportunity for them. Because, long-term, to get to where they want to be they could take sort of a lower-skilled job but you would be hoping that they would consider going into like further or higher education (FES17, Mediator, LES).

These qualitative data suggest that LES staff are more inclined towards using a human capital development (HCD) approach that emphasizes building jobseekers' employability through training and re-skilling, rather than primarily focusing on people's job-search intensity and motivation – the so-called ‘work-first’ approach. Indeed, the data in Table 7 on frontline workers' frequency of contact with training providers indicate that this is a feature of contracted PES provision in Ireland, more broadly, compared with other liberal welfare states where frontline staff

have similarly been surveyed. In other words, there appears to be a particularly high level of contact between PES and training services in Ireland compared with other Anglophone countries:

- In Ireland, the proportion of JobPath and LES staff who are in at least weekly contact with training providers is between 68 and 72 per cent
- In 2016, only 49 per cent of UK frontline staff, and 58 per cent of Australian frontline staff reported at least weekly contact with training providers, with just 14 per cent reporting daily contact (Lewis et al., 2016, 2017).

Likewise, the results indicate that Irish frontline staff are in more frequent contact with other welfare and social services providers, although there are some differences between the degree of contact that LES have with other welfare and social services providers compared with JobPath staff.

- 50 per cent of LES frontline staff report either daily or weekly contact with other welfare and social services, compared with 46 per cent of JobPath frontline staff
- Approximately 21 per cent of JobPath frontline staff have 'quarterly' or no contact at all with other welfare and social services, compared with 11 per cent of LES staff.

By contrast, in the 2016 surveys of UK and Australian frontline employment services staff, only 28 per cent of UK activation workers and about 35 per cent of Australian frontline activation workers indicated that they were in either daily or weekly contact with other welfare or social services providers (Lewis et al., 2016, 2017).

8. Are Irish employment services ‘work-first’?

Taken together, the results reported on the frequency of contact between Irish frontline staff, on the one hand, and training providers and other welfare and social services providers, on the other, suggest that Irish employment services are less ‘work-first’ in orientation than equivalent activation programmes in other liberal welfare states. That is, Irish employment services staff have a greater focus on (a) building clients’ employability through education and training, and on (b) working with other welfare agencies to address potential barriers to employment, than their UK and Australian counterparts. Similarly, the results also suggested that LES staff are less ‘work-first’ in orientation than their JobPath counterparts insofar as they report slightly more frequent contact with training providers, and markedly greater contact with other welfare and social service providers, whereas JobPath staff are in more frequent contact with employers.

The data shown in Table 8 lend further support to this conclusion. They include the responses of JobPath and LES staff to several items designed to test the extent to which frontline workers are ‘work-first’ oriented in their approach to guidance, as well as the degree to which they are encouraged to be lenient when it comes to reporting jobseekers for breaching mutual obligations. For example, respondents were presented with the following scenario and asked to respond on a scale from 1. ‘Take the job and leave welfare’ to 7. ‘Stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity’. The scenario was: ‘After a short time attending your service, an average jobseeker is offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make them better off financially. If you were asked, what would your personal advice to this client be?’

In emphasizing that the job is ‘low-skill’ and ‘low-paying’ the question tries to probe if respondents perceive that people are generally better off in work than on welfare, and in emphasizing that the jobseeker has only been attending the service for a ‘short time’, the question also brings into view whether frontline workers favour rapid labour market attachment when working with clients. There were marked differences in how JobPath and LES staff answered this question:

- A very high proportion (44 per cent) of JobPath staff indicated that they would advise clients to ‘take the job and leave welfare’ in the strongest possible terms
- Just 24 per cent of LES staff reported that they would encourage clients to ‘take the job and leave welfare’ in such strong terms
- Overall, almost three quarters (72%) of JobPath staff indicated that they were more likely to advise a client in to take the low-skill, low-paying job rather than stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity
- Just 9 per cent of JobPath staff indicated that they would favour recommending a client to stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity
- LES staff were more divided in their opinions, with 53 per cent reporting that they would recommend taking the job rather than staying on benefits and 21 per cent reporting that they would lean towards encouraging people to stay on benefits rather than take the low-skill, low-paying.

The issue of whether employment services prioritise rapid labour market attachment over skills development is also explored in a second question reported in Table 8. Respondents were asked for their views—again on a scale from 1 to 7—on which is the more important goal of their agency: 1. ‘To help clients get jobs as quickly as possible’ or 7. ‘To raise client’s education or skills levels so that they can get the job *they want* in the future.’

As discussed previously, Irish frontline staff report that they place a great deal of emphasis on client-choice. In follow-up interviews, almost all JobPath advisors and LES mediators explained that they would never pressure a client to get a job that they did not want, and that the job goals specified in clients’ Personal Progression Plans always had to be aligned with, and reflect, what jobseekers themselves wanted. Nonetheless, when the issue of client-choice is embedded in the context educational and skills development, the survey data indicate important lines of difference. For instance, LES staff are considerably more likely than JobPath staff to indicate that the goal of their

agency is to raise jobseekers' education or skills levels so that they can get the job they want rather than try to help clients into work 'as quickly as possible:

- Two thirds (66%) of LES staff compared with 40 per cent of JobPath staff reported that raising education or skills levels was a more important agency goal than helping clients to get jobs as quickly as possible
- Just 14 per cent of LES staff, compared with 30 per cent of JobPath staff, perceived that their agency prioritized helping clients to get jobs as quickly as possible over raising jobseekers' skills levels.

TABLE 8: WORK-FIRST ORIENTATION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

After a short time attending your service, an average jobseeker is offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make them better off financially. If you were asked, what would your PERSONAL ADVICE to this client be?	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=111)
1. Take the job and leave welfare	44.2%	24.3%
2.	18.2%	13.5%
3.	9.1%	15.3%
4.	19.5%	26.1%
5.	6.5%	10.8%
6.	2.6%	3.6%
7. Stay on benefits and wait	0.0%	6.3%
Based on the practices of your office today, what would you say is the more important goal of your agency: To help clients get jobs as quickly as possible OR to raise education or skills levels so that they can get the job they want in the future	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=112)
1. Get jobs as quickly as possible	3.9%	5.4%
2.	11.7%	1.8%
3.	14.3%	6.3%
4.	29.9%	20.5%
5.	15.6%	14.3%
6.	9.1%	24.1%
7. Raise education or skill levels	15.6%	27.7%
Does your office encourage staff not to be lenient or to be lenient in reporting clients for breaching their mutual commitments (e.g., sanctioning)?	JobPath* (n=33)	LES (n=111)
1. Not to be lenient	15.2%	5.4%
2.	15.2%	6.3%
3.	30.3%	17.1%
4.	30.3%	32.4%
5.	3.0%	18.0%
6.	6.1%	9.0%
7. To be lenient	0.0%	11.7%
To get jobseekers to pay attention, I often remind them that enforcing compliance is part of my job	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=111)
▪ Strongly Agree	2.6%	3.6%
▪ Agree	23.0%	27.0%
▪ Neither	24.7%	21.6%
▪ Disagree	31.2%	32.4%
▪ Strongly Disagree	18.2%	15.3%

*One JobPath agency did not answer this question on reporting clients for breaching mutual commitments

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that among both LES and JobPath staff a higher proportion indicated that the priority of their agency is to raise education and skills levels than agreed that helping jobseekers into work as quickly as possible is their agency's main concern. Again, this is in marked contrast to Australia and the UK, where upwards of 50 per cent of frontline staff in both countries report that the main priority of their agency is to get clients into jobs as quickly as possible (Lewis et al., 2016, 2017).

On the issue of compliance with mutual obligations, the responses are more ambiguous. On the one hand, 60 per cent of JobPath respondents who answered this question reported that they are encouraged 'not to be lenient' in reporting clients for breaching mutual commitments. Yet, at the same time, almost half (49%) 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that 'To get jobseekers to pay attention, I often remind them that enforcing compliance is part of my job.' Indeed, LES staff are slightly more likely to agree with this statement even though just 39 per cent of LES staff report that they are encouraged 'not to be lenient' when it comes to reporting jobseekers' for breaching mutual obligations. Follow-up interviews indicated that sanctions—or penalty rates as they are officially known—are 'very seldom' (FES21, Manager, JobPath) used in practice. Many interviewees had reservations about using penalty rates and were reluctant to do so. As one mediator who had worked with activation clients for five years explained:

I could probably tell you on the one hand how many [clients] have had a penalty rate over the five years ... In theory, it is after two [missed] appointments. But like, we would try and be lenient. Well, I be ... I just, I think it's like a big stick. I don't like it. Like, you don't know what's going on for anybody and then the next thing is their payment is cut. That's so tough. (FES17, Mediator, LES)

Frontline staff—especially LES managers and mediators—had two distinct objections to the use of sanctions. For some, their main objection was ethical in that they believed sanctions aggravated poverty and disadvantage:

... People who can't manage to come to two meetings – literally there are people who can't manage that - is it right then to take away their source of income when they're just not able? ... If somebody is not able to do the basic thing to keep the bread and butter up on the table, is it right? Is it ethical to actually cut their money? (FES18, Mediator, LES)

Additionally, several interviewees also perceived that penalty rates did not work in practice. Instead of motivating engagement, frontline staff perceived that they just 'get people's back up' (FES20, Mediator, LES). While there may be some cohorts for whom the threat of penalty rating may incentivise compliance—usually younger jobseekers in the view of interviewees—frontline workers seldom believed that this was the case for most people. Indeed, they worried that payment penalties would be counter-productive, undermining trust and provoking opposition to the process of engaging with employment services in the first place:

I think the language is wrong. I don't think it's a nice terminology to use towards people ... I think when you put a compliance, or when you put that sort of marker against people, you get resistance. That's what happens. It can reverse kind of what you're trying to do. (FES11, Manager, LES)

Now there are that cohort of people who, superficially, look like they don't want a job but it's actually a defence mechanism because they're terrified that 'If I go to this training course, I'm going to look stupid. If I go to this training course, it's going to come to light that I haven't got great literacy skills' ... And in the activation world they are the people that are worst affected because the activation becomes the barrier, from their point of view, to actually tapping into the supports ... And they are the very ones that, in seeking refuge, put themselves in the firing line for penalty-rating which is then ultimately going to reinforce 'the State is after me' paradigm. You are going to create this environment where people are ducking and diving (FES4, Mediator, LES)

9. Perceptions of jobseekers and unemployment

This section considers frontline workers' perceptions of jobseekers and their understandings of welfare and unemployment. It examines the extent to which frontline staff in Ireland endorse what is sometimes described as the 'pathological theory of unemployment' underpinning work-first activation. This is the view that the main reason why people are on unemployment and on welfare has to do with their own lack of agency, motivation, or effort. In other words, unemployment stems from the 'character or the behavioural problems' (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 256) of jobseekers rather than a lack of available (decent) jobs, or structural economic conditions. In other countries, namely Australia, frontline workers' belief in this behavioural problem figuration of unemployment has been shown to be associated with their willingness to use sanctions and support for 'work-first' approaches (McGann et al., 2020). These attitudinal frames can therefore have important implications for frontline practices.

As shown in Table 9, survey questions explored frontline workers' understandings of welfare and unemployment in several ways: through examining their beliefs about the 'generosity' of welfare payments and their views about whether people are on benefits because of a lack of effort on their part or circumstances beyond their control. Indeed, this latter item explicitly questions frontline workers on the degree to which they endorse the pathological theory of unemployment.

In interpreting the results reported in Table 9, the Covid context in which data collection occurred needs to be borne in mind. Mid-to-late 2020 was a period when hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland were out of work due to Covid restrictions, so we should expect support for individualized and behavioural understandings of unemployment to be low. Nonetheless, the questionnaire repeatedly stressed that participants were being asked to reflect on their experiences of delivering employment support services in typical, pre-Covid times. Moreover, at the time of the survey, neither JobPath nor LES staff worked with any claimants who were receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Their caseload consisted almost entirely of people on jobseekers' payments who were already unemployed before the pandemic. Furthermore, the results on the questions still provide an important comparative perspective, given that JobPath and LES staff were both surveyed under the same conditions.

The results reported in Table 9 indicate that attitudes towards welfare and unemployment vary between JobPath and LES staff. When asked to estimate the percentage of claimants that they think would rather be on benefits than work, JobPath staff gave an average estimate of just under 39 per cent of claimants. This is broadly in line with estimates among frontline staff in Australia and the UK. For example, in 2016, UK frontline staff estimated, on average, that approximately 41 per cent of claimants would rather be on benefits than work. In Australia, frontline staff estimated this proportion as 39 per cent (Lewis et al., 2016, 2017). However, LES staff perceived, on average, that 33 per cent of claimants would rather be on benefits than work to support themselves and their families. Likewise, the proportion of LES staff who attributed being on benefits to people's 'lack of effort' rather than 'circumstances beyond their control' was marginally lower (27%) than JobPath staff (38%). Indeed, a higher proportion of LES staff (39%) reported that circumstances beyond people's control rather than a lack of effort were to blame for people being on benefits whereas less than 29 per cent of JobPath staff attributed being on benefits to circumstances beyond jobseekers' control.

JobPath and LES staff also differed somewhat in their attitudes towards government spending on welfare benefits for various cohorts, such as unemployed people, young jobseekers, and lone parents. In terms of benefits for unemployed people:

- The vast majority of JobPath respondents (61 per cent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that there should be more government spending on benefits for unemployed people than now, while 21 per cent felt that the government should spend more on benefits for the unemployed than currently
- Just 23% of LES respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that spending on unemployment benefits should be increased, with 41 per cent of LES respondents favouring increased spending on unemployment benefits.

TABLE 9: PERCEPTIONS OF WELFARE AND UNEMPLOYMENT

In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits?	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=112)
1. Lack of Effort	2.6%	3.6%
2.	7.8%	2.7%
3.	27.3%	20.5%
4.	33.8%	33.9%
5.	18.2%	16.1%
6.	7.8%	13.4%
7. Circumstances beyond their control	2.6%	9.8%
... What percentage of people who apply for benefits would rather be on benefits than work to support themselves and their families?	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=109)
▪ Mean estimated proportion	38.5%	32.5%
▪ Standard Deviation	19.9	22.3
Do you agree or disagree that there should be more government spending on benefits for <u>unemployed people</u> than now?	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=111)
▪ Strongly Agree	6.5%	15.3%
▪ Agree	14.3%	26.1%
▪ Neither	18.2%	26.1%
▪ Disagree	48.1%	26.1%
▪ Strong Disagree	13.0%	6.3%
Do you agree or disagree that there should be more government spending on benefits for <u>younger jobseekers</u> than now?	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=111)
▪ Strongly Agree	15.6%	29.7%
▪ Agree	29.9%	15.3%
▪ Neither	7.8%	25.2%
▪ Disagree	32.5%	25.2%
▪ Strong Disagree	14.3%	4.5%
Do you agree or disagree that there should be more government spending on benefits for <u>lone parents</u> than now?	JobPath (n=76)	LES (n=111)
▪ Strongly Agree	10.5%	19.8%
▪ Agree	42.1%	31.5%
▪ Neither	27.6%	25.2%
▪ Disagree	14.5%	18.0%
▪ Strong Disagree	5.3%	5.4%

Likewise, JobPath respondents were also more likely than LES respondents to disagree that government spending should be increased on benefits for younger jobseekers. Almost half (47%) of JobPath staff surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with proposals to increase government spending on benefits for younger jobseekers, compared with 30 per cent of LES staff.

Nonetheless, substantial proportions of both LES (46%) and JobPath (47%) staff felt that there should be greater government spending on benefits for younger jobseekers than currently. Likewise, their attitudes towards increasing spending on benefits for lone parents were broadly similar, with 53 per cent of JobPath staff and 51 per cent of LES staff either agreeing or strongly agreeing with proposals to increase spending on benefits for lone parents.

Follow-up interviews suggested that JobPath staff's reservations about increasing jobseeker benefits stemmed from the concern that payments could function as benefit traps, particularly for claimants who had access to secondary forms of assistance such as rental allowance, housing assistance payments (HAPs), or medical cards.

The money people are on social welfare, yeah you would still hear 'Why would I bother?' 'Why would I bother with the money I'm on? And sure, I have a medical card and I have HAP [Housing Assistance Payment] and sure if the dishwasher breaks, I can just go to the community welfare office and they will replace it ... (Employment services manager, JobPath)

But I don't think [benefits] should necessarily be any higher because you need to give people incentive to go out there and work. ... Because sometimes there's a job for somebody and it's paying €10.10 an hour. And they've got to get there as well, and they've got their rent allowance and all their benefits put together it comes to more than what they would be earning (Advisor, JobPath)

There's ways of working the system ... I mean, you do a ready reckoner and people are better off being on a Jobseekers [payment] and getting the rent allowance and everything else. They would want to be earning like €25 an hour to be coming out with the same money depending on their circumstances ... It isn't right, and it shouldn't happen that you are better off not working (Advisor, JobPath)

I don't think that there's enough incentive for some people to move into employment. I believe that the payment staying the same constantly might be a barrier ... But for people that are only going to move into, where their skills only allow them get to something like minimum wage, where the most they can gain is about €400 a week ... They look at it as if they are only getting an extra 200 quid a week to spend 40 hours a week working hard for someone. Whereas I can get 200 quid for not doing it ... I would say it's fair for what it is, I wouldn't like to see some people getting less than that (Advisor, JobPath)

Some LES staff also held such concerns, especially given the low wages that jobseekers were likely to earn at the periphery of the labour market:

I definitely feel that you will have some clients that will become comfortable and would feel that it's not worth going to work - especially if they're going into like a low paid job. And also say younger clients that will get by because they might be living at home and they'll get by or whatever. But, yeah, there can be challenges around that. It's not sufficient. You are going to have clients that are living in poverty, but there is the side of it where they will just get comfortable and that can be hard for them then to shift into employment. (Mediator, LES)

Oftentimes I'm having to try and sell a [Community Employment] scheme to somebody in a way; somebody who hasn't done anything in a long time now and is quite resistant to doing something. It's quite difficult to get them to do something like a CE scheme when they're getting €198 or whatever it is a week, and they're only going to get €220 on the CE scheme. They see that as working for €20 a week rather than as a stepping-stone towards a job ... I'm not saying people should have money taken away from them or anything like that. But I definitely would be more in favour of a social welfare system that supported people, but only for a period of time. (Mediator, LES)

Frontline employment services staff's understandings of the reasons why jobseekers were unemployed and on welfare were further explored in an open-ended survey question, which asked respondents to list up to three main issues or barriers that, in their experience, hindered the employability of the jobseekers they were working with (See Table 10). All participants completed this question, and their answers were coded thematically in qualitative data analysis software and compiled into analytically distinct categories. For example, issues such as age or childcare responsibilities that concerned people's health or circumstances were grouped into the category 'Personal circumstances' while issues related to access to services and resources (e.g., lack of transport in the area, or limited availability of educational and training programmes) were grouped into the category 'Structural challenges' (which had further sub-categories of infrastructure and services, labour market conditions, and welfare traps). Some circumstances mentioned by respondents such as addiction or homelessness were grouped into the category of 'Social issues' insofar as these are issues that social policies and welfare services frequently aim to address.

TABLE 10: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY FRONTLINE STAFF AS AFFECTING JOBSEEKERS' EMPLOYABILITY

	JobPath (n=77)	LES (n=112)
PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES	77%	52%
▪ Childcare responsibilities	31%	13%
▪ Age	12%	5%
▪ Mental health	27%	28%
▪ No driving license or car	6%	0%
▪ Disability - physical health	8%	8%
PERSONAL MOTIVATION & CHOICE	47%	32%
▪ (Low) Confidence, self-esteem, belief	19%	13%
▪ Dependence on welfare (prefer welfare to work)	14%	8%
▪ Lack of motivation or effort	22%	19%
SOCIAL ISSUES	29%	59%
▪ Addiction	25%	36%
▪ Convictions	3%	8%
▪ Homelessness or housing insecurity	4%	13%
▪ Inter-generational unemployment	3%	7%
STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES	83%	57%
(POOR) INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES	69%	29%
▪ (Access to) EDUCATION and TRAINING SERVICES	1%	3%
▪ (Availability of) CHILDCARE	10%	1%
▪ (Lack of) TRANSPORT	56%	21%
▪ HOUSING (access to and cost of)	6%	4%
LABOUR MARKET CONDITIONS	16%	16%
▪ Lack of (decent paid) jobs	13%	13%
▪ Stigma or discrimination	3%	3%
WELFARE TRAPS	10%	10%
VOCATIONAL BARRIERS	74%	82%
▪ Lack of experience	25%	21%
▪ Lack of qualifications or skills	25%	24%
▪ Language Issues – limited English	9%	11%
▪ Low literacy and numeracy	17%	16%
▪ Low educational attainment	19%	26%

As shown in Table 10, common challenges that both JobPath and LES staff both mentioned included:

- Mental health (27% and 28% respectively)
- Lack of qualifications or skills (25% and 24% respectively)
- Lack of experience (25% and 21% respectively)
- Lack of motivation or effort (22% and 19% respectively)
- Lack of (decently paid) jobs (13% respectively)
- Low literacy and numeracy (17% and 16% respectively)

Nonetheless, the issues that LES and JobPath staff mentioned as challenges facing jobseekers differed in several respects. Most notably, JobPath staff were far more likely to cite poor infrastructure and services as barriers to

employment whereas LES staff were more likely to cite social issues such as addiction, homeless, and housing insecurity as key issues affecting the jobseekers they work with. For example, 36 per cent of LES respondents cited addiction as a key barrier to jobseekers' employability but only 21 per cent of LES staff cited lack of transport as a significant issue. Conversely, more than half of JobPath staff cited lack of transport as a key challenge whereas just one in four cited addiction as an issue.

Indeed, issues related to access to infrastructure and services such as transport and childcare services were only mentioned by 29 per cent of LES respondents in comparison to 69 per cent of JobPath respondents who mentioned such structural issues. Conversely, only 29 per cent of JobPath respondents mentioned any form of social issue such as addiction, a conviction/criminal record, or homelessness as a significant issue facing their clients whereas these kinds of social issues were cited by 59 per cent of LES staff.

These differences in response may reflect the absence of community-based employment services in rural parts of Ireland, as LES are predominantly concentrated in the main cities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway) and major towns on the eastern coast. As Table 10 also shows, issues connected to personal motivation and choice were also more frequently mentioned by JobPath staff, nearly half of whom (47%) cited either low confidence/esteem, a preference to remain on welfare rather than work, or a lack of motivation or effort on jobseekers' part as a key factor affecting jobseekers' employability whereas only a third (32%) of LES respondents cited any of these motivational or choice factors as a key challenge facing their clients.

Conclusion

The survey presented in this report is the first comparative study of contracted PES in Ireland from a frontline, or 'street-level' perspective. The findings provide an overview of key points of similarity and difference between two of the main contracted employment services commissioned by the Irish government – the network of LES delivered by community organisations, which has been a long-standing feature of Ireland's PES system since the mid-1990s, and the JobPath programme delivered by two private agencies under Payment-by-Results contracts since mid-2015.

The findings presented in this report indicate that the frontline delivery of JobPath and LES resemble each other in several ways. Caseload sizes are broadly similar between JobPath and LES staff, in the region of 92 to 101 jobseekers, on average, per mediator or advisor. However, the survey results do show that JobPath advisors see more clients per day, on average, than LES staff, and they meet with their clients more frequently. Given that JobPath and LES staff report spending similar proportions of their time each week meeting with clients, this would suggest that LES staff see jobseekers for longer appointments whereas JobPath meet with clients for shorter appointments on a more frequent basis. Indeed, compared with LES mediators, JobPath advisors see about 5 additional clients per day and meet each client at least once more per quarter (based on meeting clients every three weeks, rather than monthly).

A finding from the survey results is the significant administrative burden associated with managing a caseload of activation clients.

Both JobPath and LES staff spend a quarter of their time each week performing administration. This is mostly in the form of procedural tasks to ensure that they are complying with their organisation's contractual obligations to the DSP and entering case-related information into database software to meet government reporting requirements. Frontline staff therefore rely heavily on information management and database systems in their jobs, and many—if not most—feel that such systems dictate how they do their jobs.

Indeed, close to 70 per cent of LES staff feel that the IT system the use—DSP's BOMI system—dictates how they do their jobs, with mediators elaborating in interviewees upon how this focus on information processing and administrative compliance detracts from their ability to provide meaningful and personalised support to clients. Part of the role of PES frontline staff was likened to feeding the computer or Tamagotchi.

While not as many JobPath staff feel that their roles are so dictated by IT systems, almost half nevertheless still feel that their agency's IT system dictates how they do their jobs and JobPath advisors commented extensively in interviews about the administrative demands associated with their work. In particular, some JobPath advisors were frustrated by organizational demands to continuously create new tasks for clients to undertake as part of their Personal Progression Plans, with the result that sometimes jobseekers were being given tasks just 'for the take of it.'

Another notable finding is the extent to which frontline PES delivery is subject to supervisory oversight and performance monitoring, especially in relation to JobPath staff. Indeed, when asked about the extent of supervisory oversight they are under, two-thirds of JobPath staff strongly agreed that their supervisor knows a lot about the work that they day from day-to-day. The findings also suggested that JobPath staff are acutely aware of performance targets and the financial implications of their actions with clients, even if advisors maintained that the need to get an outcome quickly is not a major influence on their decision-making and that they are almost always guided by jobseeker's personal employment goals rather than placing people into jobs at any cost. Still, over 80 per cent of JobPath staff report that they are aware that their organisation pays attention to the income they generate by placing clients, and 59 per cent say that they take note of those actions with clients that will deliver a payable outcome or satisfy an employment target for their office. This cognizance of performance targets is, not surprisingly, less evident among LES staff given that LES are contracted without the use of Payment-by-Results.

The other most notable differences between the LES and JobPath surveyed was their very different professional backgrounds, and their varying perceptions of welfare and unemployment. Frontline LES staff are predominantly in their mid-to-late 40s or older and have been working in employment services for the bulk of their careers. Most have a university degree and are members of a trade union, whereas none of the JobPath staff surveyed are members of a trade union and fewer than 40 per cent have a university degree. Predominantly, JobPath staff are under 45 years of age and have less than five years' experience of working in welfare and employment services, having previously worked in sectors such as retail and hospitality, or sales and marketing, that very few LES staff have experience of working in.

The survey findings also indicated that, compared with LES staff, JobPath staff were (i) slightly more likely to endorse the view that people are on welfare through their own lack of effort rather than circumstances beyond their control, and (ii) markedly more likely to disagree that spending on benefits for the unemployed should be increased. Nonetheless, in comparison to frontline staff surveyed in other countries, the findings indicate that the proportions of Irish frontline staff who attribute being on benefits to a lack of effort on jobseekers' part is relatively low. Likewise, the findings also suggest that support for a 'work-first' approach to activation is weaker among frontline PES staff in Ireland than in other liberal welfare states such as the UK or Australia.

Frontline staff in Ireland are more likely to say that raising jobseekers' education or skill levels so that they can get the job they want in the future is their agency's main goal, rather than working to get jobseekers into employment as quickly as possible. Likewise, Irish frontline staff report more frequent contact with training providers and with other welfare and social service providers than their counterparts in Australia and the UK. Nonetheless, the findings do indicate that JobPath staff are more 'work-first' oriented in their approach than LES staff, who report a greater emphasis on working to raise jobseekers' education and skills levels, and who appear to be in more frequent contact with training providers and other welfare and social services than their JobPath counterparts.

The *Governing Activation in Ireland* study remains ongoing. A series of in-depth with jobseekers are currently being conducted to gain their perspective on the nature of employment support services provided by JobPath and LES organisations, as well as the publicly run Intreo service. It is also hoped that Intreo case officers will be surveyed in the coming months so that the survey results can provide a comparison between internally and externally delivered PES in Ireland. As these pieces of additional research are completed, further research reports will be made publicly available. These may be accessed via the project's website <https://activationinireland.wordpress.com/>.

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