

# Lived experiences of employment services for people who are long-term unemployed



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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	2
Table of Contents .....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
Study context .....	4
Study aims.....	6
Overview .....	7
2. Method.....	8
Participant selection .....	8
Profile of Interviewees.....	8
Ethical considerations and analysis approach .....	9
3. Engaging with employment services.....	10
Limited experience of Intreo's activation service .....	10
Referral for activation .....	11
The 'veiled threat' of sanctions.....	11
Repeat referrals.....	13
'Open plan' meetings.....	14
Personal Progression Plans and Jobseeker Assessment .....	15
4. Job search support .....	18
Advisor meetings.....	18
'Tree shaking' and job search monitoring.....	20
Job matching and job brokerage.....	22
5. Training, upskilling and work experience .....	25
Workshops and job-search focused training.....	26
Work experience, education, and training.....	28
6. Perceptions of advisors and mediators.....	32
JobPath staff.....	32
LES staff.....	34
7. Conclusion .....	36
References .....	38

# 1. Introduction

This report details the findings of research with former and current clients of JobPath and Local Employment Services (LES) about their experiences of activation and public employment services (PES) for people who are long-term unemployed (i.e., those on jobseeker payments for 12+ months). The research, described further in Section 2, was conducted from April to August 2021 as part of a larger EU Horizon 2020 project, *Governing Activation in Ireland*.

## 1.1 Study context

*Governing Activation in Ireland* is a study of the 'dual tracks' (McGann and Murphy, 2021) of welfare reform in Ireland over the past decade, and the impact that social policy changes and administrative reforms have had on frontline service delivery and claimants' experiences of welfare.

The first track of these reforms are the changes to income supports that have been implemented since 2011 under a series of *Pathways to Work* (PtW) strategies. These include the tightening of eligibility conditions for receiving jobseeker (Jobseekers Allowance and Jobseekers Benefit) and One Parent Family payments, and stronger 'mutual commitments' for claimants to actively seek work and participate in employment services. Penalty rates (sanctions) have also been introduced for claimants who breach these commitments, in what has been described as a shift from a 'predominantly passive system' with minimal use of sanctions or conditionality towards a more conditional welfare model 'focused on labour market activation and sanctions' (J Whelan, 2021b: 10). In this respect, Irish social policy is argued to have taken a 'workfarist turn' (Gaffney and Millar, 2020: 69), where the priority rapidly moving people into jobs rather than allowing people to passively remain on benefits. Motivating this turn towards activation is the conviction that 'a job is the best route out of poverty' and a desire to 'see people independent in work, not dependent on welfare', as then Taoiseach Enda Kenny put it when launching the *Pathways to Work 2016-2020* (DEASP 2016).

Accompanying these social policy reforms have been a series of administrative and governance reforms of Ireland's PES. Until 2011, Ireland operated a 'two-tiered' system of employment supports whereby some PES were directly provided by the state through An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), and others were provided by not-for-profit, community organisations under contract to FÁS. These included Jobs Clubs, which provide a short-term (e.g., 1 to 4 weeks) job-search assistance service for people deemed to be 'job ready'; EmployAbility Services for people with a disability, illness, or injury; and LES which provide guidance services to people who are long-term unemployed. Local development companies (or partnerships) provide many of these community-based employment services on a 'costs-met', or fee-for-service basis. Although some Jobs Clubs, EmployAbility Services, and LES are operated by other types of not-for-profit organisations. For now, these community-based employment services remain a key part of Ireland's system of employment support services. However, the PES provided directly by FÁS were taken over by the Department of Social Protection (DSP) in 2012 and merged with social welfare offices to create a new 'one-stop' service model for benefits and employment supports known as Intreo.

The Intreo model was rolled out gradually over the period 2012-2016 in conjunction with the first *Pathways to Work Strategy*. In tandem, the DSP also began referring long-term claimants on the Live Register to LES for mandatory activation while setting annual targets for LES organisations to achieve in terms of the proportion of clients placed into full-time employment. This was a significant departure for LES, which had previously worked with clients on a voluntary basis. While LES continue to work with some voluntary or 'walk-in' clients, today the vast majority are jobseekers who have been referred to LES by the DSP as part of their mutual commitments.

Another significant difference today is that Ireland's PES system is now a 'three-tiered' system, following the commissioning of JobPath in 2015 (See Figure 1). Unlike other contracted employment services, JobPath is a *quasi-market* in employment services meaning that it is delivered by agencies who are competing for clients, government contracts, and performance payments. Currently, JobPath is delivered by two private companies, Seetec and Turas Nua. Seetec delivers JobPath in Ulster, Connacht, and north Leinster (including Dublin) while Turas Nua delivers JobPath in Munster and parts of southern Leinster. The amount that Seetec and Turas Nua receive from the DSP each year varies depending on the volume of client referrals but also on the number and duration of fulltime job

placements they achieve with their clients (i.e., Payment-by-Results). On average, for each jobseeker, the two companies receive an initial payment of €311 when clients complete a Personal Progression Plan, and then subsequent performance payments depending on whether clients progress to 13, 26, 39, or 52 weeks of fulltime employment. The value of these payments (which represent about 90% of the total possible payments per client) varies from €613, on average, for a 13-week placement to €1,165, on average, for a 52-week placement (DEASP 2019: 18).

Since its introduction, JobPath has grown to become the largest contracted PES and the main welfare-to-work programme for people who are long-term unemployed or considered at 'high-risk' of becoming long-term unemployed (see Lavelle and Callaghan, 2018). Up until January 2021, a total of €252.3 million had been spent on JobPath while it is estimated that the DSP spends approximately €18-19 million per year on LES (Joint Committee 2021). However, there is significant overlap between JobPath and LES in that both services are targeted at broadly the same cohorts of jobseekers and deliver activation case management services for an initial period of twelve months. The DSP's own PES, Intreo, has now been refocused on newer claimants and supporting people who are short-term unemployed, although Jobs Clubs also continue to provide short-term CV-preparation, labour market advice, and job-search guidance to 'job ready' claimants. EmployAbility, by contrast, offers specialist support to people with a disability, illness, or injury and is somewhat outside the activation system.

Figure 1 summaries this 'mixed economy' of activation as it was from July 2015 to December 2021. Contracted PES are currently undergoing further reform and it is expected that the existing LES and Jobs Clubs will be decommissioned in mid-2022 and replaced with new Regional Employment Services (RES). Similarly, the existing JobPath contracts will expire in 2022 and the DSP is in the process of commissioning a new National Employment Service in its place.

FIGURE 1: IRELAND'S MIXED ECONOMY OF ACTIVATION



## Study aims

A key focus of the GAI study is understanding how different approaches to commissioning PES impact *what services are provided* and *how they are delivered* by employment services agencies. For this reason, the study has a comparative focus on JobPath and LES as they are the two most directly comparable employment services but are commissioned very differently. The aim is to understand the degree to which marketisation, performance-based contracting, and funding providers based on Payment-by-Results shapes the type of support jobseekers receive, compared with alternative approaches whereby PES are not subject to Payment-by-Results or procured from the market.

This report on *Lived experiences of employment services for people who are long-term unemployed* addresses these questions from the perspective of service-users, many of whom have experience of participating in *both* LES and JobPath. It builds on research undertaken in 2020, which focused on the perspectives of frontline employment services staff using a combination of survey research and follow-up interviews with JobPath and LES staff. The findings of that research with frontline staff have been published in an earlier report as well as journal articles:

- McGann, M. (2021) *Understanding frontline employment services in Ireland: 2020 survey of contracted employment services*. Maynooth: Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute. Available at <https://activationinireland.wordpress.com/project-outputs/>.
- McGann M. (2021) 'Remodelling street-level workers with quasi-markets: Comparing Ireland's mixed-economy of welfare-to-work'. *Administration & Society*. October 2021. doi:10.1177/00953997211050924. Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00953997211050924>.

In focussing on service-users' experiences, the report contributes to a growing body of qualitative research on people's experiences of welfare and activation since the reforms described above. This includes early work by researchers at the Waterford Institute of Technology examining how the introduction of mutual commitments, penalty rates, and focus on personal progression plans changed claimants' experiences of welfare (Boland and Griffin, 2015). More recently, Dr Joe Whelan at Trinity College Dublin and Dr Philip Finn at Maynooth University have both undertaken extensive qualitative research with welfare recipients about their experiences of activation and conditionality as part of their respective PhD projects (Finn, 2021; J Whelan, 2021a, 2021b). Beyond academia, both the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE) and the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) have undertaken qualitative research with claimants about their experiences of accessing services. This includes the INOUE's *Employment Services Research Project*, which conducted focus groups and interviews with jobseekers to map their experiences of Intreo, LES, and JobPath, and the NESC's study of low-work intensity households, which involved interviews with jobless households in a disadvantaged part of Dublin (Johnston and McGauran, 2018).

Each of these studies has played an important role in giving voice to the perspectives, understandings and experiences of service-users and claimants—the people who are most impacted by welfare and PES reforms. All too often, however, their lived experience is hidden in official evaluations of programmes, which predominantly adopt an econometric approach of statistically examining the net impacts of programmes on exits from the Live Register, progressions into employment, and/or people's earnings. These are no doubt important outcomes to evaluate, but they reveal little about *how* or *why* programmes achieve the outcomes they do, their unintended consequences, or about what the experience of participation is like for jobseekers—what Evelyn Brodtkin (2013: 8) calls 'the *missing middle*' in policy analysis:

- Did people receive the type of support they were hoping for?
- How were they made to feel by frontline staff?
- What was most or least helpful about the support they received?
- What could be done differently to further improve employment services?

These are no less significant questions to understand than the net impacts of programmes on transitions to employment or exits from the Live Register.

## Overview

The report is structured into five additional sections.

Section 2 describes the methodology used in the GAll project, and the approach used in this study. It describes how people with experience of JobPath and LES were recruited to take part, the sampling used to select potential participants for interview, and how the interview data was coded and analysed using a framework analysis approach.

Section 3 reports on people's experiences of being referred to JobPath and LES, and during the very early stages of engagement when the assessment of clients' needs, and agreement of Personal Progression Plans (PPP) are a key focus of meetings. It also examines the extent to which study participants had prior experience of Intreo's activation service or whether their referral to JobPath/LES was their first experience of activation case management. One issue considered in detail is the compulsory nature of claimants' participation in activation, how this is communicated to people upon referral, and the impact that this has on how they view employment services.

Section 4 considers the ongoing employment guidance and job search assistance received by participants during their engagement with JobPath or LES. For instance, how frequently did jobseekers meet with their advisor (as JobPath case officers are called) or mediator (as LES case officers are called)? What was the principal purpose of these meetings? To what extent were they experienced as helpful or unhelpful? It also examines the extent to which advisors and mediators closely monitored the jobs that people applied for in terms of both number and quality, and whether participants felt that they received the level of job search assistance they were hoping for. Were people advised about vacancies that they should apply for (i.e., job matching)? Did employment services try to broker jobs directly for their service-users or was the onus mainly on participants themselves to find work?

Section 5 examines the support that participants received in relation to training, upskilling, and gaining work experience. In so doing, it touches upon wider active labour market policy debates about the balance between so-called 'work-first' and 'human-capital development' approaches to enhancing employability. In other words, to what extent do employment services prioritise job-search effort and rapidly placing people into work over supporting people to develop their skills through training, education, and work experience programmes. As detailed in Section 5, this distinction between a 'work-first' and human-capital development' centred approach emerged as a key point of difference between participants' experiences of JobPath and LES, especially for interviewees who had experience of participating in both programmes.

The final section of the report examines interviewees' experiences and perceptions of the advisors and mediators that they dealt with. In particular, it considers how they felt treated by employment services staff but also whether jobseekers perceived that their advisors and mediators were experienced and qualified in what they were doing. Again, this emerged as another important point of distinction between service-users' experience of JobPath and their experience of LES. While the vast majority were very complimentary about how they were treated by employment services staff, they were not always confident that frontline staff had the skill-levels and necessary expertise to provide employment guidance that they felt would be meaningful for them.

## 2. Method and research design

This section outlines the methodological approach used to collect and analyse the data presented in this report. The overall GAll project uses a mixed-methods approach that is anchored in a street-level orientation towards studying the impacts of welfare and employment services reform. Key to street-level research on the delivery of welfare and employment services is the view 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’ (Rice, 2013: 1055). More than this, there can often be a significant gap between policy, as it is written in legal regulations and policy guidelines, and policy as it is produced at the coalface by frontline staff in service delivery organisations. This is partly because regulations and policy guidelines are ambiguous in many areas. They cannot cover every eventuality, given the complexity of the real world. So, frontline staff must use their discretion to interpret, adapt, and translate general policies into concrete actions suited to the particularities of each individual case. In effect, this means that the process of policymaking continues ‘*while policies are delivered*’ (Caswell et al., 2017: 2) and that ‘we should indeed be careful in using formal, official policies as proxies for policy practices’ (Van Berkel 2020: 200). If we want to understand policy changes, we need to look to how they are delivered and experienced on the ground by frontline workers and service-users.

The GAll project has previously used survey research and follow-up interviews to explore frontline workers’ perspective and approach to delivering employment services (McGann, 2021). This report builds on that research by examining the perspectives and experiences of service-users, drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 former or current jobseekers about their experiences of participating in LES and JobPath. The interviews were conducted between late April and early August 2021 over the phone due to social distancing requirements in place at the time.

### Participant selection

Participants were recruited via a multi-pronged approach, which included disseminating a call for participants via social media, welfare rights organisations (e.g., centres for the unemployed), and through parallel services that employment services often refer clients to such as Money Advice and Budgeting services and Education and Training Boards. In addition, the INOU circulated details about the study via its social media channels and through emailing its membership list of unemployed people. A purposive sampling approach was then used to select participants for interview. This was to ensure that people of varied ages, from different parts of the country were included, and that the interviews also captured the experiences of men and women. Moreover, unlike previous studies of jobseekers’ experiences (with the notable exception of the INOU’s Employment Services Research project), the interview sample was designed to capture a balance of people who had been clients of Turas Nua as well as others who had been Seetec clients. Of the 31 interviewees who had experience of JobPath, 15 had participated in services managed by Turas Nua while 16 had participated in services managed by Seetec. Ten interviewees were former or current clients of LES, including six who had experience of both JobPath and LES.

### Profile of Interviewees

As shown in Table 1, most interviewees were former clients rather than jobseekers at the time of interview. As such, the data may be subject to some recall bias. Although, in the vast majority of cases, people’s most recent experience of employment services was within the previous 24 months. Eleven interviewees were clients of employment services at the time of interview, while a further 17 had participated in employment services as recently as 2020 (6 interviews), 2019 (5 interviewees), or 2018 (6 interviewees). Including the experiences of former clients was important so that the study could explore people’s experiences before the pandemic, when meetings with JobPath advisors or LES mediators were still face-to-face and mutual commitments to participate in activation programmes were still in place. While both LES and JobPath continued to provide employment services via telephone or online throughout 2020 and 2021, the use of payment penalties was suspended for most of this period due to the national lockdowns.

The age profile of interviewees was varied. While relatively few participants were in their 20s, there was a spread of interviewees across people who were in their 30s, 40s, and 50s as well as some who were in their 60s. Likewise,

despite women accounting for a slight majority of participants, the sample included reasonable numbers of men and women across most age groups.

Table 1 shows that many interviewees had *multiple* experiences of participating in employment services. Indeed, of the 31 interviewees who had participated in JobPath, just under half (15) had been referred at least twice while six interviewees had been referred to JobPath at least three times.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES

	Female (n=19)	Male (n=16)
<b>Age:</b>		
• Under 30 years		2
• 30-39 years	8	3
• 40-49 years	3	5
• 50-59 years	7	4
• 60+ years	1	2
<b>Most recent experience of activation:</b>		
• Currently a client	6	5
• 2018-20	9	8
• Before 2018	4	3
<b>Participated in</b>		
• JobPath:	16	15
o Once	10	6
o Twice	3	6
o Three times or more	3	3
• LES	5	5
<b>Location:</b>		
• Border (Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Louth, Sligo)	4	1
• Dublin	7	5
• South Leinster (Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Kilkenny, Wicklow)	5	2
• Munster (Cork, Clare, Limerick, Waterford, Tipperary)	3	8

### Ethical considerations and analysis approach

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Maynooth University's Research Ethics Committee. Prior to each interview, participants were sent an information sheet with details about the study and how their privacy and data would be protected. They were also advised of their right to withdraw from the study should they wish to do so, and written consent was obtained from each participant prior to interview. With participants' consent, all interviews (which generally lasted 40 minutes), were recorded and fully transcribed. Details that might identify interviewees were removed from the transcript (all names in this report are pseudonyms), and a copy of the deidentified transcript was sent to participants for verification. This was to ensure that they were satisfied with how their privacy had been safeguarded and that the transcript represented an accurate account of the interview. It also afforded participants an opportunity to add further reflections that they wished to include in the transcript. NVivo software was used to manage the coding of the interview data, which was analysed using a framework analysis approach. Each transcript was coded for themes of interest drawn from the literature and first wave of frontline research, as well as emergent themes across the interview data. Cases were then grouped by variables of interest (e.g., age, what programme interviewees participated in) to systemically explore commonalities and differences between groups of interviewees.

### 3. Engaging with employment services

This section examines people's initial engagement with employment services, and the process of being referred to JobPath and LES by the DSP. Although the study focuses on employment services for people who are long-term unemployed—which are *contracted* employment services—it would be expected that many participants would also have experience of Intreo's employment service: for instance, during their first year of claiming payments or following the completion of a period of participating in JobPath or LES. Consequently, during the interviews, participants were briefly asked about their experiences of Intreo's employment service by way of comparison with the contracted employment services that were the focus of the research.

#### Limited experience of Intreo

Surprisingly, even though the Intreo service had been well established by the time of the study and all participants had spent significant periods (usually several years) on income supports, relatively few participants had ever engaged with Intreo's own employment service. Indeed, only 9 out of the 35 interviewees reported having received any form of ongoing employment support or case management from an Intreo case officer. Participants' experiences suggested that this employment support was very 'light touch', and predominantly limited to job search monitoring and infrequent appointments to review the jobs that people had been applying for:

*I would have been called for a couple of meetings from time-to-time, but very sporadically at that. ... And I had to keep a log sheet of, for maybe the next two weeks or the next three weeks of what jobs I was applying for and then go back on such a date and bring back the completed log sheet. (Cormac, 40s)*

*I was one year on Intreo before I was in [JobPath]. As well, they prepared the personal plan, but I think [JobPath agency] gave you more help than Intreo because that was only the plan. I [would] come into the Intreo and talk to the officer, maybe 10 or 15 minutes, and he [would] ask me about the jobs and was I looking for [work], and that's it. (Katie, 30s).*

Other than a small minority who had experience of developing progression plans and periodically reviewing their job search history with Intreo case officers, the vast majority had very limited, if any, contact with Intreo case officers. Occasionally, they would be asked to attend a one-off meeting to review their job searching or look over their CV, but they would receive no follow up appointments beyond this. For instance, one interviewee who had participated in both JobPath and the LES explained that he had only ever had one meeting with an Intreo case officer:

*I literally met with her once. She gave out about the size of the font on my CV and that was about it ... I never got another request. I was never asked to come in for a follow up appointment (Will, 30s)*

Other interviewees reported that they would occasionally be mailed a form to complete as evidence that they were applying for jobs. But they would rarely be continuously engaged with for a sustained period. As a widower in her early 60s who had been on jobseeker payments for several years explained:

*I used to go in every three months with my little list of jobs that I'd applied for. I would leave it for them, and I would sign my form and that would be it. I never got any form of support in any way (Angela, 60s).*

She recalled having one appointment, in total, with an Intreo case officer, which she herself had requested after completing the first of her two periods on JobPath:

*I really pushed Intreo to get an interview with my caseworker. And I got one interview with this guy. It was just like another JobPath interview ... I never was contacted again. He said I would be contacted again in about six weeks after that. I never heard hide nor hair (Angela, 60s)*

In many other examples, interviewees claimed to have never had a single appointment with an Intreo case officer. For instance, Claire, a former jobseeker in her 50s who had been a client of JobPath in 2018, recounted how she 'never actually met with a case officer' in her dealings with Intreo. The only engagement she had was 'these things they send out in the post to say that you've looked for work, evidence of work, and that kind of thing' (Claire, 50s). Siobhan, who was working part-time and receiving supplementary income support at the time of the interview, had likewise

never 'had any dealings with any of them' nor 'gone to them for anything' and that JobPath were 'the only people' [she'd] ever heard from' (Siobhan, 50s).

### Referral for activation

As in the examples of Claire and Siobhan above, for most participants, their referral to JobPath or LES was the first time that they had been required to participate in employment services. In every case, the process began with receiving a letter from the DSP, notifying interviewees that they had been selected for activation, and that they were obliged to participate or they would 'get money docked from [their] social welfare' (Will, 30s). In the case of JobPath, this referral letter was often the first time that participants had ever heard about the programme. They had little idea about what to expect, and in some cases were unclear about the difference between Intreo and JobPath – an issue that has similarly been identified by the INOU (2016) regarding confusion about the distinction between Intreo:

*I just thought it was part of Intreo. It was something that you had to do. It wasn't voluntary ... I had no idea who they were. To me, it was just someone who was going to help me find work or just listen to me to see what I wanted to do and to just give me a hand up, because I was struggling (Natasha, 50s)*

*The first time I didn't know what is that I never heard of it before. But I received the letter (Katie, 30s).*

Many interviewees commented on the tone of the letter, which included a block of bolded text outlining that their payments may be reduced if they don't engage. This issue of 'the very strong negative impact that the wording of the invitation letter had on some recipients' has previously been raised by INOU in its research on jobseekers' experiences of PES (INOU 2016, INOU 2019). As the INOU observes, 'the threat of a person's payment being reduced sets a tone that immediately establishes the wrong dynamic between the Employment Service and the unemployed person' (2019: 11). It 'establishes the coercive aspect of this process, rather than the supportive one' (INOU 2016: 20), which was also commented upon by interviewees who 'found it a bit daunting, what it says in the letter' (Claire, 50s) and that the messaging made 'people feel like it's a kind of pressure and a blackmail' (Megan, 40s). One interviewee described how the tone of the communications conveyed a certain level of distrust and disrespect towards claimants:

*All the letters I get from the DSP have this delightful sentence at the end in bold font that says, 'If you do not comply, we will cut off your payments.' So, it adds a certain level of - I would regard that as psychologically injurious to my dignity (Padraig, 40s).*

Padraig went on to elaborate on how the threat of payment penalties conveyed to jobseekers that they were regarded by the DSP 'as naturally inclined to be lazy'. It is a view of claimants associated with what has come to be described as the 'pathological theory of unemployment' underpinning welfare conditionality and activation policies. Namely, the belief that welfare dependence and long-term unemployment are primarily 'rooted in the character or the behavioural problems of the poor' (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 256)—their 'bad agency', as Sharon Wright puts it (2012: 310)—rather than structural economic conditions or other circumstances beyond people's control. The cumulative effect of being communicated with in this way could be highly corrosive of people's self-esteem, as Padraig reflected:

*[T]here's no real way to point to a fact and say this is what's causing it, it's more of a general feeling from a process ... Because they have this sentence in big black letters on every letter they send me, it gives you the impression that you're naturally inclined to be lazy and stupid. And I don't feel that I'm naturally inclined to be lazy and stupid. But I think if somebody kept telling me that, it might have an effect on my self-esteem ... 'You're nothing; you're lazy and you're stupid, and if we don't keep kicking you, you won't even get out of bed in the morning'. That's the impression that you get. And it's the only section in bold type. No matter what they say in the top, this bit is flashing out at you like a neon sign on a bad hotel outside (Padraig, 40s).*

### The 'veiled threat' of sanctions

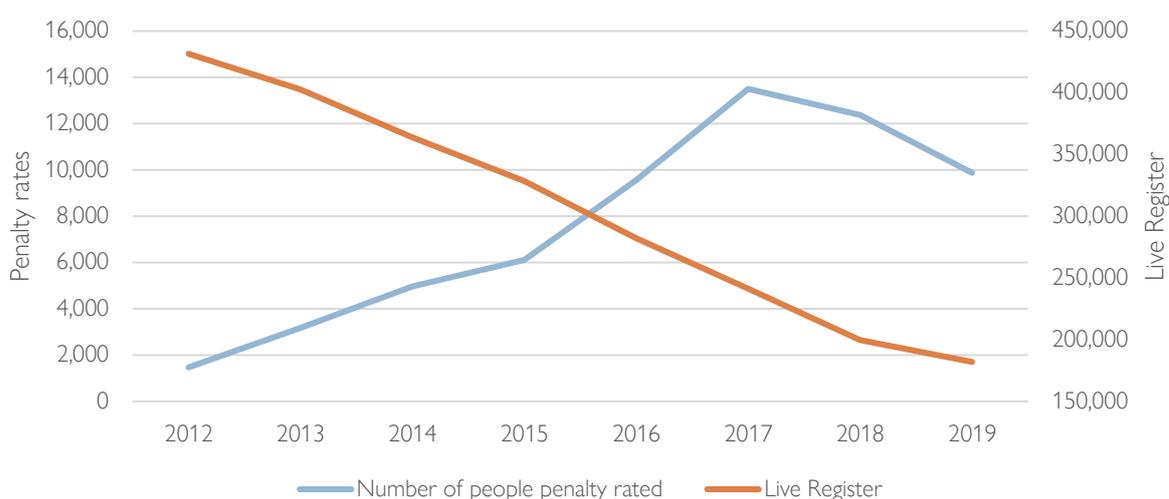
This issue of the compulsiveness of participation under the 'veiled threat' (Donal, 50s) of sanctions was a recurring theme, even though few interviewees had ever been sanctioned or penalty rated. Indeed, only 3 out of the 35 interviewees had ever had their payments reduced while participating in LES or JobPath. This is consistent with what

Cousins (2019) observes is a relatively minimal use of sanctions in the Irish welfare system compared with other countries such as the UK. Similarly, research by the NESC has also found that sanctions are rarely applied in practice, and that the initial approach is often ‘instead to change the post office in which a person is paid their social welfare payment’ (Johnston and McGauran, 2018: 124). This approach means that claimants re-engage with welfare offices (e.g. to determine where their payment is) without actually having their payments reduced. Nonetheless, since the introduction of penalty rates in 2011, there has been a sizeable increase in the number of people sanctioned by the DSP from 1,471 claimants in 2012 (the first full year of penalty rates) to 12,380 in 2018, to 9,878 claimants who were penalty rated from 1 January to 3 November 2019 (See Figure 2). Moreover, during this time, the number of people on the Live Register has more than halved so the increase in the *proportion* of claimants who have been penalty rated is significantly higher again. According to data reported by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, fewer than 7 per cent of the 259,275 jobseekers who engaged with JobPath between 1 June 2015 and 31 January 2020 were penalty rated ‘at some point during their engagement period’.<sup>1</sup>

While sanctions were a rare occurrence, Finn argues that their effectiveness ‘does not primarily lie in their application but as a coercive threat hanging over all jobseekers to shape their behaviour’ (2021: 77). To this extent, it was the *implied threat* of being sanctioned which interviewees perceived as ever-present and which they identified as ‘the main reason why people were there’ (Megan, 40s). As one former JobPath client who has since gone on to third-level education bluntly put it, ‘I showed up because that’s what you have to do to get your payment’ (Aisling, 30s). In Aisling’s case, she was all too aware of the consequences of losing her payment, which was something that had happened to her previously, due to an issue with her paperwork, while she was on illness benefit:

*You're told continuously that participation may result in payments being stopped. It's always there. And, you know, I've been on the dole where literally it stops overnight, and you didn't see it coming ... And then you've a few weeks, by the time you've found out what's going on, filled in whatever form you have to fill in, sent in the form, waited for it to be processed - once you're on the dole, you don't have breathing room. You can't afford to take a chance because, if you lose your dole, it could be a month before you get a penny back (Aisling, 30s).*

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF PEOPLE PENALTY RATED VS. LIFE REGISTER (2012-2019)



Source: data on number of people penalty rated per year as reported by the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection on 17 December 2019 (see <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-12-17/695/#pq-answers-695>). Live Register data is the seasonally adjusted Live Register for December of each year, reported by the CSO.

<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2020-07-0/837/?highlight%5B0%5D=837&highlight%5B1%5D=jobpath>.

The involuntariness of their engagement meant that, for some interviewees, the point of participation was simply 'to play along' (Kevin, 50) and 'go through the motions' (Cormac, 40s) to maintain their payment rather than out of any sense that participation was worthwhile. They were otherwise mentally divested from the process of activation, highlighting the important gap between compliance and active engagement:

*Obviously, I'd sit through the training that they thought I needed – I knew I didn't need it but, you know, 'tick-a-box'. Because, as I say, most of the people who were in the workshops were in the same frame of mind: just get it done ... (Sarah, 40s)*

*Once you do what you're meant to do, which is attend the meetings ... once you turn up for your meetings, if there's any workshops that they have that they ask you to attend, you attend them, and you're seen to be looking and applying for work, I think once you abide by them rules, you seem to be OK ... You know the things you have to do. I didn't like it, but why make your life more complicated (Claire, 50s)*

*It was very much just somewhere to go every month because I didn't want to lose my [payment]. I never really felt like there was much help I was getting (Will, 30s)*

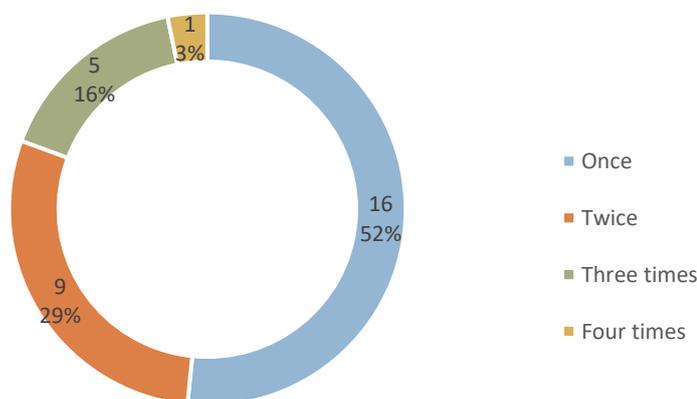
### Repeat referrals

Unlike those who knew little of JobPath before their referral, a significant proportion of interviewees (43%) were people who had been referred multiple times to the same service. In almost every case, participants were re-referred to the very same provider 'in the same building ... and the same offices' (Angela, 60s). As one jobseeker who had been re-referred only a few months after finishing his first year of JobPath explained:

*There's been people three times on it. So, then that [year] finished and there's a three or six month cooling off period before you are going to be contacted again. And then, the same thing again. Letter, 'You have been selected' ... back up for the same thing for another year ... Same office, different person (Jim, 40s).*

As shown in Figure 3, of the 31 interviewees who had participated in JobPath, 15 had been referred to JobPath at least twice, including six interviewees had been referred to JobPath three times or more. In several cases, receiving a repeat referral to JobPath prompted interviewees to withdraw from employment services by applying to either move onto another payment, participate in alternative form of activation such as Community Employment or TÚS, or even sign-off social welfare altogether so that they could avoid a second or third period of participation. For instance, Emer was working three days per week and receiving income support payments for the remaining two days when she was referred to JobPath for a second time. During her first year, she had had her payments reduced because of missing appointments that had been scheduled on days she was working. She made the decision to sign-off Social Welfare rather than face another year on the programme, even though it meant losing out on an estimated €80 per week because her employment situation hadn't changed:

FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF TIMES REFERRED TO JOBPATH



*I was in it one year and then I got another letter from JobPath to go back into it again for another year. And I made the choice then, because I just knew it would just bring me down, so I came off the two days Social Welfare ... I just I didn't want to put my head into another place that was going to bring me down, attending JobPath. So, I just signed off ... I was 80 euro down, but it was kind of like the money against your kind of mental health, I suppose, in a way. (Emer, 40s)*

In another example, Cormac, who was caring for his mother at the time of the interview, explained that he applied to go on illness benefit after receiving a second referral towards the end of 2019:

*I was back unemployed then for a year and then at the end of 2019, low and behold, I was referred to [JobPath] again. But this time anyway, I was more sceptical ... I went to my doctor to write me a letter to basically put me on an illness benefit – to get me out of going to [JobPath]. Because, with [JobPath], going in and out every week and feeling this kind of us and them approach, it would not help anyone's mental health either. I found I was just going in and doing a pointless thing of job-searching week-in, week-out and I did not fancy going through the whole thing again. So I went to my doctor, and the doctor actually said that I wasn't the first person that came to him looking to get out of [JobPath]. (Cormac, 40s)*

The examples of Cormac and Emer withdrawing from the Live Register after receiving a second referral are illustrative of a broader concern that has been raised in the international literature about the effectiveness of welfare conditionality policies such as mandatory activation and sanctions in moving people *into employment*. While evaluations of active labour market programs show that policy instruments such as job search obligations under the threat of sanctions can reduce the number of people claiming unemployment benefits, the evidence is more mixed on whether they move people into work. For example, in an early study comparing post-unemployment outcomes between sanctioned and non-sanctioned jobseekers in Switzerland over the period 1998–2003, Arni et al. (2013) found that the exit rate from benefits to *non-employment* was more than double among jobseekers who experienced or were threatened with a payment penalty. Similarly, in a UK study, Petrongolo (2009) found that the introduction of job-search conditionality requirements in the late 1990s had a significant impact on the short-term exit rate from unemployment benefits. But it also reduced claimants' probability of working over a longer-term period, which she partly attributed to the impact that conditionality requirements had on the likelihood of people subsequently claiming disability payments. This increased by up to 3 per cent after job-search conditionality requirements were applied. In a more recent study examining the rise in sanctioning of people on unemployment benefits in the UK over the period 2011–14, Loopstra et al. found that the increase in sanctioning did correspond to a 'substantial increase' in people exiting benefits, but most of them exited 'to destinations unrelated to work' (2015: 111). Put differently, while welfare conditionality policies may accelerate the rate at which some people move off welfare, there is also evidence to suggest that they push others to drop off benefits without increasing their employment participation, or to move to payments with less onerous conditions. From a policy perspective, this constitutes a significant implementation problem because it results in the opposite of the desired outcomes. As Raffass points out, when people 'disappear from welfare rolls but do not reappear as jobholders ... they effectively manage to de-commodify themselves, which runs against the active labour market policy ambition to expand labour market participation' (2017: 358).

### 'Open plan' meetings

Following referral, engagement with services would commence with a group induction session consisting of a joint presentation between someone from the DSP and the employment service. This would be followed by an initial face-to-face appointment with an advisor (JobPath) or mediator (LES), which would focus on developing a Personal Progression Plan (PPP). In the case of JobPath, these appointments—along with all subsequent case management meetings—would be conducted in an 'open plan set-up' (INOUE 2019: 19).

Although JobPath agencies have facilities for conducting meetings in private should clients request it, both JobPath agencies predominantly use an open plan layout where multiple advisors simultaneously meet with different clients in a shared front of office space. It is a layout frequently found in employment services in other countries and in which 'privacy' is afforded either by dividing partitions or the generosity of the spacing between desks (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Jobseekers interviewed by the INOU have previously seemed 'relatively positive' about this approach to

meetings, perceiving it as 'more comfortable' and 'less formal' (INOU 2019: 19) than appointments in social welfare offices. However, several of the interviewees in this study had serious concerns about the lack of privacy afforded to clients, particularly when 'you were talking about lots of personal stuff with someone who has only got a divider between you and the other person sitting the other side of the desk' (Sarah, 40s) and 'you could hear everything that they were saying and they could hear everything you were saying' (Angela, 60s). Some interviewees such as Beatrice, a former jobseeker who had participated in both JobPath and the LES, felt that the open plan environment 'where everybody is telling their business to the whole world' signalled 'a real lack of respect' towards jobseekers:

*I talk very gently with people. I don't shout and so on. But it's an open space where you see other people talking with their advisor also. And I've seen some people, like older people - much older people, like in their 50s - and they were not talking to them very gently or very nicely either (Beatrice, 30s).*

It was a sentiment echoed by Aisling, another former JobPath client who had since returned to education. Aisling, who had experienced abuse and depression, described the detrimental impact that the lack of privacy had on her sense of self-worth, particularly when you can hear other clients in distress:

*You'd have people who maybe have behavioural kind of [issues], who would be really struggling emotionally. Maybe they wouldn't have literacy skills and maybe getting distressed and start shouting ... So, there is no privacy. When the drunk fella starts kicking off, there is nowhere to go. So, you know, if that's the environment, you're appearing in every [other week], if that's what you have to do, it just reinforces any pre-existing conditions or notions that you have that you are on the absolute bottom of society (Aisling, 30s)*

Notably, it was predominantly women who expressed concern about the lack of privacy during appointments. In one example, an interviewee described meeting with her advisor within earshot of another client that had been giving her unwanted attention to the point she had asked the Gardai to become involved:

*I [I]t was incredibly worrying for me that he could overhear my private information. You know, guards were involved. The guards had to go down and have a little word with him about staying away from me. Then the next thing I know, I'm in the JobPath office with him sitting in the table opposite me, talking to somebody else. I actually said to [the advisor], 'Can I talk to you outside for a minute?' She said, 'No, we've only got this bit to do. We'll be fine.' And she would not leave the room with me. And I just wanted to say, 'Listen, I can't be in there with that man. I will go for coffee, and I will come back later. Or we can finish off the interview here. I don't mind sitting out here, but I don't want to be there with that man.' And she wouldn't step outside ... (Angela, 60s)*

## Personal Progression Plans and Jobseeker Assessment

A key focus of initial appointments was developing a Personal Progression Plan (PPP). In the case of LES, the interview data suggested that this was an informal process involving a brief discussion between jobseekers and mediators about their preferred employment goals and potential training opportunities that clients may wish to pursue. For instance, one former LES client who had subsequently gone on to participate in a Community Employment (CE) scheme recounted how developing her PPP 'was more about having a chat and understanding where I wanted to go, and then it went very quickly' (Beatrice, 30s). Another explained how the process essentially involved a brief conversation about his work experience, interests, and whether he felt he needed any training:

*She basically just asked me what my background was, what type of jobs I was looking for, asked me to have a look out to see if there was any education that I would be interested in taking. I think my first personal progression plan was just to keep on the lookout for jobs and to send through my CV so that she could have a look at it (Will, 30s)*

By contrast, the interview data suggested that JobPath agencies took a more formalised approach. Clients would be asked to undergo a standardised assessment process to identify key areas of strengths and weaknesses that would be incorporated within the PPP. This echoes the findings of the earlier wave of research with frontline staff, which pointed to significant differences between JobPath and LES staff in terms of how they approach client assessment. For instance,

70 per cent of the frontline JobPath staff surveyed, but just 46 per cent of LES staff, reported that they used the answers to standard client classification tools or profiling instruments when deciding how to work with jobseekers. Similarly, 53 per cent of JobPath staff reported that the answers to standard assessment questions were 'quite' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommended for each client, compared with just 27 per cent of LES staff (McGann, 2021).

The extensive use of profiling and assessment tools by JobPath staff was frequently commented upon in the interviews. The approach to completing the assessment questionnaire varied between jobseekers completing the questionnaire directly themselves via computer or, for the most, being asked a series of standard questions by their advisor. A small number found this process helpful in reducing the range of jobs they should be applying for, and in identifying potential soft-skills deficits such as confidence during job interviews that they should work on. For instance, one jobseeker who had participated in JobPath on three occasions recounted his first experience of the assessment process:

*My first personal adviser ... she was very understanding, down to earth, she did what they'd refer to as the Catalyst, which is to see your strengths. It's basically an aptitude test, I believe. So, after I went through a Catalyst, she did identify some things which I knew already, which was confidence and appearance and putting myself across. (Shay, 20s).*

In another example, a mother, who was returning to employment after several years out of paid work, contrasted the detailed assessment process she went through with JobPath to the basic assessment that Intreo had carried out:

*Completely different, because at [JobPath agency] I had an assessment and there were maybe over twenty questions when I started. So, I sat in front of the computer, and I answered the questions and after the questions they know more about me. But from Intreo, no. There were a few questions about education, age, where you want to work and that's it (Katie, 30s)*

Others, however, found the process 'a bit invasive' (Hannah, 50s) and objected to being asked what they considered sensitive questions about their health and personal circumstances. In some cases, participants even refused to answer the questions or demanded access to the data that was being collected about them:

*They asked me personal questions about family and stuff like that which I refused to answer, it's none of their business. And they were asking me health questions as well, which I didn't answer, which kind of riled the person even more. Because they are building a database and if you don't answer their questions, they're not filling their database and it seems to be like ticking a box (Ken, 40s)*

*We were brought downstairs and then this one person was sitting at a computer and asking me questions, and I had to click on their answers ... I had been given a heads-up by a friend about how horrendous it was, and how weird the questions were. So, I kept asking; I said I wanted my information given to me, printed out. I wanted the questions, and I wanted however they had assessed it, and I wanted all that information ... I was given a kind of a chart-y thing. I think what I was given was the outcome of the questions, but I wasn't allowed have the questions (Laoise, 50s)*

There was a perception among many interviewees that this assessment process was little more than 'a box-ticking exercise' (Niall, 30s) of little longer-term relevance to the support that they would receive. Moreover, the standardised nature of the questions was seen as too black and white, allowing for too little accommodation of the nuances and complexities of people's lives or any in-depth reflection about individualised circumstances. For instance, one interviewee with autism highlighted a question used by one agency about jobseekers' social networks. As he explained, the significance of a small social network could be very different for a person with autism, but this contextual difference could not be accommodated by the standardised nature of the process:

*There's a lot of questions. One of them is how are you feeling? How many friends do you have? Now like, dude, I have autism. I feel great I have no friends. But there's no way to categorise that on one of these sheets, you know. Like if you don't really get along with people and you write down and say a day where I meet nobody is a good day, but they don't account for that. They don't account for anything really, they just kind of process some numbers (Padraig, 40s).*

Several were particularly frustrated by the indifference that advisors seemed to show towards the assessment process, in that they rattled through the questions without pausing to discuss the responses. This gave the impression that advisors may not have valued or 'wouldn't have known themselves even' (Niall, 30s) what the purpose was:

*The assessment process was you sit beside this guy. He's on a computer. He pulls up a screen with all these boxes to tick. So, it's like, 'Can you type?' 'Tick', yes ... 'Do you have clothes to wear to an interview?' Who doesn't have clothes? 'Tick', yes ... I just felt a lot of the questions that he was asking, and ticking and ticking and ticking, there's no in-depth talk about what exactly each question entails. So, you don't get to give a detailed answer (Siobhan, 50s).*

*What struck me, the person who was asking – he didn't seem too sure of what he was doing. He just wanted to get the thing done. And the questions were so ambiguous, you can't answer some of them ... I kept saying, 'I don't know. There isn't a yes or no to that one', and he'd say, 'Well, we'll just put in this one' ... The last interview I had with them in [place], they asked me something really strange. It was 'Do you feel like you have proper clothes for interviews?' What are proper? I don't know. I said 'No'. And what they put beside that was that 'I have a problem with my personal appearance.' That's how that question translated (Laoise, 50s).*

Beyond uncertainty as to the purpose of the assessment process, there was also confusion about the distinction between the various client assessment processes used by agencies, and the policy requirement for jobseekers and advisors to agree a PPP. Indeed, many interviewees saw the two as synonymous. For instance, when asked whether his advisor had agreed a PPP with him, one interviewee immediately focused on the assessment tool used by one provider. He elaborated on how 'the personal progression plan, which ended up in this delightful spider graph' was 'all just metrics and numbers and graphs' and that 'they seemed keen to fill in these forms' (Padraig, 40s). Another interviewee recalled that his PPP would be periodically updated, always involving an assessment process:

*Every three months or so, I had to fill out this kind of questionnaire. Well, the advisor filled it out with me – he pulled it up on the computer. It was all questions about myself; how is my health and general kind of multiple-choice questions ... I think it's called the Personal Progression Plan (Cormac, 40s).*

In theory, PPPs are intended to be individualised plans of activities that are jointly negotiated, periodically updated, and mutually agreed between advisors and jobseekers. However, this was the experience of only a handful of interviewees, such as Michelle, who recounted how her advisor would review and discuss her PPP with her 'about once a month':

*She would have her files open on the system, and we would go through the forms - her files on me - and we would update them as we were going. And we would talk about it, and she would put in information in each section as we were going along. And it was on my job searches, my interests now, what kind courses I was interested in. She'd review that about once a month ... So, we agreed on the things that she was typing in there (Michelle, 50s)*

In contrast to Michelle, the equivalence that many interviewees perceived between the administration of assessment questions and their PPP suggested that, in practice, PPPs were often approached generically. Rather than an individually tailored plan reflecting jobseekers' personal input, interests, and needs, many experienced PPPs as largely 'already laid out' (Donal, 30s) by their advisors and something that they 'didn't really feel [they] had much input into' (Rachel, 30s). As further discussed in Section 5, training and upskilling activities such as courses were *occasionally* included in PPPs. But for the most part, the interview data suggested that jobseekers' PPPs were largely vanilla recipes comprised of three areas of work that jobseekers would focus on, coupled with job searching, updating their CVs, and preparing cover letters for applications:

*It was essentially start off with Catalyst [the assessment instrument]: What are your job goals? What are your interview skills like, your CV? Going through your immediate job seeking ability ... You give them three selective [areas], like hospitality, retail, supermarkets. Just tell them where you are ideally seeking. And then it was just 'sign here, sign there - you give us permission to contact your employer if you get one, and do follow up meetings.' That was my understanding of the PPP (Shay, 20s)*

## 4. Job search support

This section examines interviewees' experiences of, and perspectives on, the job search assistance and employment guidance they received once they had commenced participation in either JobPath or LES. It considers how frequently participants met with their advisor or mediator; how they saw the purpose of these meetings; the employment goals that jobseekers were supported to pursue and, the degree to which participants' job searching was actively monitored. Other aspects of employment services provision such as supporting jobseekers to improve their employability through training, upskilling, and work experience are considered in Section 5.

### Advisor meetings

During the initial phases of participation, the support provided revolved around assisting clients to prepare or update their CVs, followed by regular face-to-face meetings to discuss the types of jobs that clients were applying for and the progress they were making towards employment. In the case of jobseekers participating in LES, the experiences of participants suggested that they were often assisted, one-on-one, to prepare or update their CV - either directly by their mediator or another staff member with expertise in preparing CVs. For example, an older jobseeker who was participating in a Community Employment scheme at the time of the interview explained that her mediator had helped revise her CV so that it was up-to-date and easier to read:

*I thought my CV was all right, but she took it and tightened it up a bit. And it's just an easier format now to just add things on at the end (Yvonne, 50s).*

Another former LES client who in employment at the time of the interview likewise recounted how she had been assisted to develop tailored CVs for specific areas of work, rather than using the same, one-size-fits-all CV to apply for jobs in different fields.

*They made my CV job-specific for accountancy and they made it job-specific for community development work, and then they made it job-specific for sales and digital so that I could send my CV to three different types of companies rather than sending a CV that was all jumbled up ... I would just put every cert and every sort of experience I had on it, and it made it jumbled looking. It was then, when I had done a few bits with them, their CV guy kind of went through all the different areas and all the different parts. It was as simple as putting it all out on a big table and saying, 'If you were to say that was in relation to what' and we sorted it all out. And he did three separate CVs for me, and he said that will streamline and focus on the jobs you actually want to apply for rather than a more general CV (Emer, 40s)*

JobPath clients were likewise assisted 'to edit or alter' (Ray, 20s) their CVs during the initial stages of participation. On occasion, this would be directly provided by advisors. For instance, one jobseeker who was a JobPath client at the time of the interview recalled being asked for a copy of his CV by his advisor, who 'rejigged it a little bit, filled in a few gaps here and there' and now he was getting 'a bit further on in the process' (Ken, 40s) in terms of being called for interviews. In the case of JobPath clients, however, the interview data suggested that the main way that agencies would assist them with their CVs would be to refer them to group training sessions on CV preparation and cover letter writing. Participants' experiences of these internal training workshops are considered in further detail in Section 5.

*First of all, you do the introductory talks and then you do a CV kind of workshop and I think there was another one as well (Claire, 50s)*

*I was only in one workshop with them for the CV construction, but I brought my CV that was already constructed by another institution, and it was okay (Megan, 40s).*

*There was kind of afternoons, or actually maybe even a full day at one stage, of that sort of [thing]; where we did a cover letter and CV, and then we did a mock interview (Niall, 30s)*

Once clients had been assisted with developing or updating their CVs, they would continue meeting periodically with their advisor or mediator for employment guidance and job search assistance. However, the interview data suggested

that the frequency of this ongoing support varied considerably - not only between the different services, but also between different clients within the same employment service.

In the case of LES, jobseekers would generally meet with their mediator officer every four weeks. With the exception of one client who had been registered with LES for nearly nine months and who was being contacted 'once every three months or once every two months' (Graham, 50s), this applied across all LES organisations that participants had experience of. It is also consistent with the findings of the previous wave of research with frontline staff, where LES mediators reported that they would typically meet with their clients once a month (McGann, 2021).

By contrast, jobseekers who participated in JobPath would meet with their advisors more frequently; although *how* frequently participants met with their advisors varied considerably. For instance, one interviewee explained that for the first three months she would meet with her advisor 'every 15 days' but then 'for the remaining three quarters of the program [it was] once a month' (Angela, 60s). Rosemary, who was a single parent and a client of the same JobPath provider but in a different part of the country, likewise saw her advisor less frequently as time went on. Although, in her case, she 'used to get called into [JobPath agency] every two weeks' before 'they put it down to once a month' once she told them that she had enrolled to study a health care assistance course that was commencing some months later. At that point, her appointments became little more than showing up to the office to maintain her payment until she was eligible for the Back to Education Allowance:

*So, I would just sit up at reception and just have to sit there for a few minutes, because they'd have to tick a few boxes, as they called it, on the computer. And they'd just make you sit there for about 10, 15 minutes, and then the receptionist would be getting you your travel allowance. And then, once you get your travel allowance, then you can go (Rosemary, 30s)*

Another interviewee had her appointments 'pushed out' to every six weeks, again after indicating that she wasn't pursuing full-time employment. This was during her second round of JobPath, when Sarah, who was trained in jewellery design, mentioned that she was pursuing her own business and only wanted part-time work to supplement her self-employment:

*He was very nice in the sense that obviously when I laid it all out for him, that I really only needed a part-time job which, again, is the big faux pas for Intreo because they want you to have a full-time job. But, obviously with my other outside interests in trying to get my business up and running. He was very good, he pushed me out to six weeks (Sarah, 40s)*

In contrast, other participants were required to attend JobPath offices on a fortnightly or even weekly basis. For instance, Katie, who was returning to employment after caring for her children, explained that her advisor increased the frequency of her appointments from 'meetings with him once a week, firstly, and then every three days' (Katie, 30s). She was happy with this approach because she felt the meetings were 'very important to find employment' (Katie, 30s). She had the option of either one-on-one or group meetings, but she preferred the one-on-one support:

*That was our decision, how we can spend this time, working together or one-to-one with the advisor ... For me, it was better one-on-one. Because I'm much better when I'm face-to-face with one person rather than six or seven beside me. But that was good help from them because we had access to a computer if we wanted to change a CV. In the centre, the advisor said that we can come into the centre and use the computer for the job-search or if we want to print our CV there is no problem (Katie, 30s)*

Michelle, another former JobPath client who was returning to employment after caring for her children, similarly 'got a lot of use out of' the JobPath office (Michelle, 50s). Her appointments were weekly 'for the first few weeks', reducing to once a month when her advisor felt she 'was focussed' on what she was doing. Michelle would still use the office every week to research opportunities and print off CVs, commenting that she became 'just like a piece of furniture':

*I would spend hours going through jobs ... And I also spent a lot of time in there researching and reading. It was great to have that access to the Internet because I didn't have it at home - finding out about the job market and picking up on business (Michelle, 50s)*

Michelle subsequently went on to train in advocacy and community development and was in employment, working with people with intellectual disabilities, at the time of the interview. Along with Katie, she was one of the interviewees who reported an overwhelmingly positive experience of JobPath as being 'very supportive' (Michelle, 50s). This aligns with the responses to the JobPath customer satisfaction surveys conducted on behalf of the DSP, in which 74 per cent of clients surveyed during November and December 2020 reported that they were either 'fairly' or 'very' satisfied with the employment services that they had received (McShane, 2021). In particular, Michelle was effusive in her praise of the 'life coaching' that she received from her advisor, identifying her as the person who sparked Michelle to think about retraining in community development based on the extensive volunteer work she was doing at the time:

*Thanks be to God [for] the JobPath program, I can't praise it enough ... I brought in my CV and sat down with her, and she read the CV and she said, 'Tell me about yourself'. So, I spent about ten minutes talking and she said to me, 'This CV is just not you' ... I had applied for hundreds of jobs once my kids were fairly independent, and I got nothing. I couldn't understand why. And this woman explained to me that I was applying for all the wrong jobs, and because of where I was now in my life and my career, I should be interested in completely different stuff ... What she told me is that I should be looking at community development. I went on from there to look at advocacy, and I've trained in community development ... It's what I want to do (Michelle, 50s).*

### 'Tree shaking' and job search monitoring

Whereas it was Michelle's decision to attend the office every week to job search on the computers, other participants were given no choice. In addition to periodic one-on-one meetings with their advisor, they were also required to attend weekly job search classes that involved 30 to 60 minutes of searching for jobs on banks of computers. This activity of supervised job searching, which one interviewee likened to 'poverty class' (Aisling, 30s), was something that none of the LES clients were asked to do. But it is an approach that appears to be frequently used by JobPath agencies, with the majority of unemployed people interviewed by the INOU's for its *Employment Services Research* project reporting that their follow-up meetings 'principally involved people looking for work on computers in the open plan central area of the JobPath office' (2019: 30). The interviewees in this study who had experience of this approach universally derided it as 'a complete waste of their time' given that they were already applying for jobs on their own initiative and, for the most part, had access to computers elsewhere. Moreover, interviewees reported that the sites that they were directed to either had few suitable vacancies in their locality or listed jobs that they had already applied. So, from their perspective, it was a redundant exercise that was more 'hassle' than 'help':

*Then they started me going through a process of having to come into the office [once a week for six weeks] to sit at a PC and do research on, I don't know what really, because a lot of the time I was just playing on the PC. ... I was applying for jobs. I knew what I should be doing, and I wanted a job. But they insisted, and again, the threat of 'If you don't do this, your benefits could be in question.' (Frank, 50s)*

*So, as time went on, he got me to call into the office every single week. But I have to say, my weekly visit to the office were a total waste because for most of the duration of my visits – which usually tended to last about 45 minutes to an hour – I was just assigned a computer and told to job seek. Which was something actually I could have done from home (Cormac, 40s).*

*Every now and again he'd get me to sit on a computer for half an hour. Even though I was doing it on a Monday and Thursday myself ... But occasionally he would sit me down for half an hour, on their computer ... he'd have lots of tabs open, and I'd say, 'I've already looked at that, I've looked at that.' So, I had to sit there for half an hour basically so he could check a box (Sarah, 40s).*

This approach of increasing unemployed people's job search intensity through supervised job-search activities is a well-known strategy used by welfare-to-work agencies in other countries. It is often referred to as 'tree shaking' (O'Sullivan et al., 2021: 219; Thomas, 2007), where the aim is to either get clients to disclose undeclared (e.g., cash-in-hand) work or to increase their motivation to find work by applying additional pressure. In the present study, the 'hassle' factor of these supervised job search activities was intensified by the inflexibility some offices appeared to show towards appointment scheduling. In one example, a mother who was caring for an infant at home was required to attend job search classes without being given any say over the times that she would have to present at the office:

*So, it was very difficult because they asked you to come at a certain time to look for jobs online, and in their premises. With a child being that young it was quite hard to manage. They are very strict also on the requirements in the appointments ... And the thing is, I am very capable on computers ... So, I could actually look into jobs in at home, you know. And I was doing that. (Beatrice, 30s)*

Another interviewee recalled injuring herself on the way to her job search appointment. She called to explain that she was running late, but was told that she risked being marked down as not engaging if she did not attend on time:

*I slipped on the way down to the [bus], fell, cut, bleeding - I had my legs cut, it was awful. And when I rang them - because they were very strict ... You had to be there specifically at 9:00 a.m. and if you didn't you were penalized. It was marked down, and your payment would be held or reduced. So, I was running for the bus. I should have been in plenty of time. I had a good hour but with the fall and everything else, and when I rang them to explain I could be a minute late, and I was told 'Well, if you're not here on time, don't bother.' There was just no humanity, no bit of room. (Aisling, 30s).*

While only six of the interviewees who participated in JobPath recalled having to attend weekly job search classes, the interview data suggested that monitoring participants' job search effort was front-and-centre of the ongoing support provided by advisors. During their appointments, participants would be frequently asked 'to put in the jobs that [they] were after applying for' (Emer, 40s) and to provide evidence of what they had applied for since their last meeting. As Cormac, who had participated in JobPath twice, explained, jobseekers 'had to keep a checklist' of what jobs they had applied for that would then be uploaded into a computer system 'to keep track of how many jobs you were applying for'. This would essentially be the focus of his fortnightly appointments:

*I would get an appointment every two weeks. At those meetings, we would review my job applications for the previous two weeks, and how I got on with them. In other words, whether I got a reply from companies or not, and how many CVs I would have sent out to places and all this, and I was to keep a log of that. So that was really what the meetings consisted of (Cormac, 40s)*

Ray, a jobseeker in his late 20s who was participating in JobPath for the second time had a similar experience where:

*... it would be the same thing every two weeks. 'Oh, what have you noticed?' 'What jobs have you seen online?' I'd give them a list. I'd print out every job I applied for. And 'Oh, why do you think you didn't get called an interview or whatever?' Things like that (Ray, 20s)*

Niall, a former JobPath client who was participating in a Community Employment scheme, similarly recounted how he was required 'to take note of any applications' and provide a list of jobs that he applied for to his advisor:

*I had to write them into a sheet each week. They were taking a copy of that, but whether they followed up or anything like that to know had I actually sent emails ... But I had to give evidence at different times. I had to photocopy my email and once I had done that once I think it was kind of all right. They knew I wasn't joking, and I wasn't making up company's names or whatever. (Niall, 30s)*

Other interviewees commented on how the continuous emphasis on job search effort during appointments was 'a bit depressing' in that it reinforced a sense of failure:

*I think it's hard enough when you're in a situation, where you're looking for work, trying to find work, and then you're having to attend these meetings where the main goal is 'Have you found a job?' (Claire, 50s)*

The interview data suggested that this emphasis on job search monitoring and intensity was far less prevalent among LES mediators. None of the interviewees who had participated in LES reported being asked to provide evidence of job searches, or that they were set specific job search targets. By contrast, several of the interviewees who had participated in JobPath recalled being given weekly targets for job applications. These ranged from starting 'with two and [then] it had gone to three' (Rachel, 30s) jobs per week in the case of one interviewee; to 'at least 10 jobs per week' (Mark, 40s) in the case of an ex-prisoner; to 'up to 15 jobs per week' (Anna, 30s) in the case of another interviewee. However, as evidenced by the variation in the range of numerical targets, there appeared to be little

consistency between the number of applications participants were expected to complete while, for the most part, participants were simply required to show evidence that they had applied for some jobs rather than a set quantity.

*They would request what jobs have you applied for, and can you provide proof. I would always keep my emails, so I'd be able to show them every single time I applied for something ... I never received a target of how many jobs a week to apply for. (Shay, 20s)*

### Job matching and job brokerage

Despite the emphasis placed on active job searching, there was little evidence from interviewees' experiences of participants actually being referred to specific jobs, or of JobPath agencies brokering interviews on clients' behalf. It must also be noted that there was similarly little evidence of LES participants being directly referred to jobs by their mediator, other than one interviewee who was directed towards 'a delivery driver job' (Graham, 50s). Indeed, as further discussed in Section 5, the interview data suggested that LES clients were being predominately directed towards training and work experience programmes rather than job vacancies.

Among those with experience of JobPath, it was not uncommon to hear that despite being told 'that they would have job offers [and] that they [agencies] had contact with local employers ... it never happened really' (Megan, 40s). For instance, a former client who was participating in Community Employment at the time of the interview recalled that he 'was never referred to any jobs' (Mark, 50s) during his 12 months on JobPath. Instead, the onus appeared to be on clients themselves to find jobs. Another interviewee, Kevin, who was a client of JobPath at the time of the interview, likewise claimed that he had only ever been referred to one vacancy. In Kevin's case, this may reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labour market. Nonetheless, when he questioned his advisor as to why he hadn't been referred to more jobs he was told that it was not his advisor's job to find him employment:

*I was sent a link to one part-time job ... If I were to get this job, I'd be driving to [town], which is about 20 miles up the road, getting in a van, going to [city] working for the day, landscaping, coming back, getting back in. First of all, I don't see how landscaping is considered essential work in a lockdown, but second of all, it's just not suitable. But, like I said to the person the last time I spoke to them, I've only been sent one actual job link. And they said, 'It's not our job to get you a job'. (Kevin, 50s)*

Those who had participated in JobPath prior to the pandemic recounted similar experiences of being referred to few, if any, jobs. For instance, an older jobseeker who had worked extensively as a lab technician recounted how 'the one job [he] got offered' during the two times he had participated in JobPath 'was collecting trolleys at the supermarket':

*They didn't have any jobs there at all. I realized that I was doing it all. You know, I was on the websites. I was contacting people. (Trevor, 60s).*

Another former client likewise recounted that he was only directed towards one job 'working in a shop', and this was only after he questioned his advisor about why he hadn't been referred to any jobs:

*They only recommended one job for me over the year and I had to ask, 'On your system, that there's work that you could be applying to put me down for' ... I was looking around at the boards and I saw that they were getting this amount of people jobs a month, and that amount. And then listening to the staff saying to different people that 'Oh there's this job coming up, I'll put you down for that if you want.' So, I think, it was basically, they were being selective on who they were referring to jobs (Donal, 30s)*

As implied in Donal's comment, participants' disappointment at the limited referrals they received likely reflects providers' selective referral practices rather than evidence of providers not referring clients to vacancies whatsoever. That is, it suggests that the vacancies brokered by providers are being rationed and only offered to select clients. Indeed, several other interviewees gave examples of jobs that they had been directed towards although they complained that 'the employment on offer was kind of at the very bottom rung of the ladder' (Jim, 40s) and unsuited to their skills-set or circumstances. For instance, a jobseeker in her 60s who was looking to work as a librarian recounted how her advisor 'suggested at one point that there was a farm down the road that was looking for mushroom pickers and that [she] should go and apply there' (Angela, 60s). In another example, a single parent who

had worked in retail and store management positions for 20 years was directed towards processing work in a jellybean factory. There was 'no straight bus' to get there, meaning it would take 'over an hour to get there and over an hour to get back' (Natasha, 50s). This was during the summer of 2020, and Natasha was keen to wait until the retail sector re-opened to find more suitable employment:

*I don't want to be out of the house 60 hours a week, including travel time, and coming out with a little over three hundred quid once I've taken out travel expenses and everything. I just felt like it was such a downward direction to where I had left off in my work career. I didn't want to be sitting on a production line, it just wasn't me. And I knew there was jobs out there, I just had to wait for the retail shops to start opening up again (Natasha, 50s)*

Natasha went on to recount how her advisor arranged for a colleague to ring her 'to sell this job to me', while threatening to report her to Intreo if she refused to go for interview:

*'These are not your average garden jellybeans, these are gourmet jellybeans.' That's what he said to me. And I said, 'So, how much is it an hour?' And he said, ten something ... My thoughts were well if they're gourmet jellybeans, why am I working for minimum wage, 40-hours a week, sitting on a production line when I trained so hard to not be in those positions, to be able to get into a management role. So, I got a rude text message off her ... basically it was that she would have to contact Intreo and tell them that I am refusing to go to an interview (Natasha, 50s)*

Rachel, a former JobPath client who subsequently went on to disability payments, had a similar experience of being 'warned' after she resisted being referred 'for a job in a 24-hour call centre':

*I told them I didn't think I could do that. They were quite annoyed with me. And I tried to explain that from what I knew of call centres ... People don't call call-centres when they're happy. And you have to be polite, and everything is timed and monitored, and just thinking about it made me even more anxious. And then they sent me to a sort of weird group meeting for a different woman to my usual [advisor] ... There was a group of us, and we were basically told that we weren't doing well enough, and we weren't looking hard enough. This was a warning, and if we felt like we were on the wrong payment then that was something we had to take up with Social Welfare (Rachel, 30s)*

As conveyed by these examples, the impression among participants was that their JobPath provider was less concerned about them finding 'the right job' (Claire, 50s) than about them moving 'into any type of job' (Ray, 20s). As a lone parent in her 30s put it, 'they drag you down areas you don't want to go' – again, citing the example of being directed towards call centre work despite having trained in youth work and community development:

*I have a community development degree, so all my training courses from that were all in mental health and stuff like that. But they wouldn't help you with that side of stuff. They were talking about, you know, customer support and the phone ... And I'm like, 'But that's not where I'm going'. And I've been like a long-term unemployed mother ... I'm community trained, so I'm community staying (Rosemary, 30s)*

The impression was of a 'one size fits all' (Anna, 30s) model of employment supports, where '[t]hey just want to shove jobs upon a person' (Ray, 20s) and 'they don't look at your history and why you are here' (Claire, 50s):

*There was no reckoning for what you were coming in as, what experience you had in the past, what skill set you had, what education or training you had. You could come in with a PhD and be told that you have to go work in McDonald's or you're going to get off the social welfare (Jim, 40s)*

This conflicted sharply with the perspectives of the frontline staff who participated in the early wave of survey and interview research. In that earlier study, both LES mediators and JobPath advisors repeatedly maintained that they put jobseekers' wants and interests first, and that '[t]here's never any persuasion to do something they don't want to do' (FES6) (McGann, 2021: 28). Yet, among the service-users interviewed in this study, there were a small number of examples of people feeling that they had been harassed into very low-paid, low-skilled jobs that were ill-suited to their interests, skills, or experience. One former client, Aisling, described how her experience led her to sign-off the Live Register and to take up informal employment in the hospitality sector 'just to get away from JobPath':

*It was such a distressing experience. I just dropped out completely ... I literally took the worst possible job just to get off that program. This is a job that didn't pay minimum wage, didn't have breaks, didn't have a contract, didn't have anything (Aisling, 30s).*

In another example, Natasha similarly recounted how she eventually took a junior sales-assistant role in an off-license 'to keep them off my back'. This was even though, at that point, she had learned of a receptionist role coming up at a nearby sports centre once gyms reopened following lockdown. Natasha had a friend who worked in the sports centre, and she had been assured she would be hired once it re-opened:

*They were hounding and hounding ... I thought, 'I'm just going to have to get something because they are just going to send me off anywhere, and if I don't take the job or I refuse the interview, I'm going to get cut off.' Like I said, I am a single mother, I've got a house to run ... so I couldn't afford for the Social Welfare to cut me off. And I felt very threatened, to be honest, that that was a possibility – that I could get cut off the labour for nine weeks if I refused to go for jobs that they were suggesting to me. So, I felt under so much pressure to literally take anything that would get them off my back until this sports centre one came up, which I knew was literally just weeks away (Natasha, 50s).*

Natasha, who had since begun working in the sports centre job, went on to explain that she only lasted three weeks in the off-licence and that her 'back was absolutely broke' from the work:

*I had to hand my notice in because, number one, I had got the other job, but I couldn't have worked there a week longer anyway ... It was literally, for eight hours a day, lifting [and] packing up boxes of alcohol and putting them through the online system ... It was absolutely backbreaking. I could never have worked another week there. I would have just been absolutely crippled (Natasha, 50s)*

However, it must be stressed that experiences such as Aisling's and Natasha's were very rare and there was otherwise little evidence that interviewees were being coerced to apply for unsuitable or unwanted jobs. Interviewees frequently complained that the jobs that they were being directed towards—which advisors tried to *persuade* them to consider—were not what they had hoped for or jobs that they could sustain in the long-term. At the same time, most acknowledged that they were 'never actually pushed' (Sophie, 30s) to apply for jobs that they didn't want to do. The key frustration instead was that the jobs that advisors were focused on finding were largely minimum wage, call centre or process work; and that jobseekers were being given little employment guidance or job search assistance with finding better paid employment, more suited to their interests and qualifications.

*They didn't really care too much what do I know, what skills do I have, what education level I am? I was offered a job like a truck driver. I wasn't forced to do it, but it was completely silly for me that it even came up; that someone came up with the idea ... it's a different county even (Megan, 40s).*

## 5. Training, upskilling and work experience

Besides assistance with job applications and labour market advice, another key aspect of employment services is supporting jobseekers to develop their employability through training and upskilling. This is particularly important in the case of people who may be long-term unemployed and experiencing barriers associated with a lack of work experience, low educational attainment, or a lack of formal qualifications. However, in many countries—and particularly over the past decade—active labour market programmes have moved away from an emphasis on education and skills-development—the so-called human capital development approach—towards a ‘work-first’ model focused on job-search effort and rapid job placement (Bonoli, 2010; McGann et al., 2020; Seikel and Spannagel, 2018; Whelan et al., 2021). As Lindsay et al. observe, underlying this shift in activation policy is ‘the idea that the best way to succeed in the labour market is to join it’ (2007: 541). Work-first models may include some training support. However, the focus is on short training to gain entry certificates or permits for immediate vacancies (e.g., Safe Pass for Construction) rather building longer-term employability through significant upskilling (Lindsay et al., 2007).

There is much debate about the respective merits of ‘work-first’ compared with human capital development-oriented approaches (Card et al., 2015; Kluve, 2010; Martin, 2015; Whelan et al., 2021). For example, in meta-analysis of over 200 evaluations of ALMPs, Card, Kluve and Weber conclude that work-first programs characterised by ‘job search assistance and sanctions’ tend to have large short-term effects in times of economic recovery, and with cohorts who have few labour market barriers. However, their effects are more marginal for women and people who are long-term unemployed, while human capital development approaches may have larger impacts ‘in the medium or longer run’ and ‘in recessionary environments’, when they can be deployed as countercyclical measures (Card et al., 2015: 24). Other studies find that the effectiveness of ‘work-first’ support is likewise cohort and context sensitive; that outcomes are better among participants who are short-term unemployed and in areas where the overall rate of unemployment is ‘relatively low’ (Borland and Tseng, 2007). One particular concern in relation to ‘work-first’ programmes characterised by sanctions and conditionality is that while they may increase job search intensity, they do so by relying on extrinsic motivational factors such as the fear of losing payments. This externalisation of job search motivation can undermine the quality and effectiveness of people’s job searching ‘leading to lower re-employment quality’ in the long run (Gerards and Welters, 2021: 1). For instance, a recent Australian study drawing on panel data from over 6,000 unemployed people found that those who were subject to mutual obligations took longer to find employment in comparison to otherwise identical unemployed people and, when employed, moved into ‘lower quality jobs’ in terms of earnings and hours worked (Gerards and Welters, 2021: 3).

This section considers the degree to which the support received by jobseekers went beyond the forms of job search assistance and employment guidance outlined in Section 4, to include assistance with training, upskilling, and work experience. While the provision of training and work experience programmes are not the principal responsibility of employment services, these agencies can nevertheless play an important role in signposting people to training and work experience opportunities available through other agencies such as Education and Training Boards (ETBs) as well as private providers. For example, jobseekers are eligible to participate in short-term community work placements (e.g., TÚS) while participating in employment services. They can also avail of publicly funded training provided through ETBs. JobPath providers can also use discretionary funding to pay for additional training they think might benefit clients, while LES have access to a Mediator Fund for such purposes. In cases where training programmes require full-time attendance for longer periods (e.g., 6 months), this may prohibit people from participating in employment services. Nonetheless, frontline staff may still encourage clients to enrol in such training or work experience programmes if they consider it in their best interests, even though this may result in those clients leaving their caseload.

One concern about the performance regimes that apply to contracted PES is the disincentives that they can create for frontline staff to take such a longer-term approach towards working with clients. JobPath agencies only earn outcome payments if clients move into full-time employment, within 12 months. While individual advisors rarely receive performance bonuses, they nevertheless have monthly job placement targets that their managers expect them to achieve (McGann, 2021). Directing clients towards longer-term training or work experience may threaten their

achievement of these targets. Similarly, although LES are not subject to Payment-by-Results, the DSP measures their performance in terms of the proportion of their caseload that they place into full-time employment. Progressions into education, work experience or training go against the realisation of these targets, creating what Dias and Maynard-Moody characterise as a 'performance paradox'. This is where performance measurement creates a disincentive to 'attend to clients' entrenched employment deficits' (Dias and Maynard-Moody, 2007: 208) because the opportunity costs are high and interventions can't be guaranteed to produce outcomes within the short timeframe of the contract.

As described further below, the interview data suggested that jobseekers perceived the degree of assistance with education, training, and work experience to be a key point of difference between the support provided by LES compared with JobPath. The latter was experienced as predominantly 'work-first' oriented, offering restricted opportunities for training or upskilling, whereas interviewees with experience of LES felt that they received 'more options to look at' (Shay, 20s) in terms of possibilities for work experience or training.

### Job-search focused training

Among JobPath service-users, the vast majority perceived that the support they received was almost exclusively job-search focussed and limited to basic training in job-search skills such as CV preparation, cover letter writing, and interview skills. This training would be in the form of internal workshops, delivered at the JobPath offices over several hours 'or maybe even a full day' (Niall, 30s) that participants would undertake during the early months of their engagement. This appeared to be a standardised formula of support offered to almost all clients. It was very common for interviewees to have participated in such workshops, and several of those who had been on JobPath path multiple times described repeating the same training on their second referral:

*Two years, the same thing. There's not really any difference like. It's just you do an interview course, how to apply for a job, a cover letter – that's just the same to me (Sophie, 30s).*

*We did a course in CV writing, and letter writing and interviews at the very start of both of the JobPaths that I did (Angela, 60s)*

Common examples of the workshops undertaken were CV preparation, cover letter writing, and interview skills training, in addition to a small number of participants had also been directed to participate in group sessions on 'how to behave in a workplace, and that kind of thing' (Laoise, 50s). Some interviewees found aspects of this training helpful. For instance, one former client recalled how he had initially questioned whether he needed to do the CV preparation workshop that his advisor recommended but ultimately found it helpful:

*I just said to him, 'Do I need to do this CV workshop all over again?' And he said 'Yes', because [agency] take the view that everybody that's referred to them doesn't have experience of writing out a CV ... I done the workshop anyway ... I did find it quite interesting. I learned a few things from it (Cormac, 40s)*

Another former client also recalled finding the CV preparation training 'worth doing', explaining that the trainer 'was very good' and that he 'picked up a few things that [he] didn't know' (Frank, 50s). However, these examples were the exception. The predominant experience was that the training was 'very, very, simple' (Hugh, 40s), covering content that jobseekers largely already knew. For instance, one interviewee recalled how the CV preparation workshop began with being instructed that CVs must be done on computer and 'you can't go doing a handwritten CV':

*I was like, 'What the actual fuck am I at?' And then the second thing they said, 'The other thing is, if you're going to do a CV it has to be on white paper. So don't be submitting purple paper, or pink paper.' 'Should I not put stickers on it as well?' (Anna, 30s)*

Many interviewees commented on how the training was pitched towards 'the lowest denominator' (Sarah, 40s); namely, 'low-educated, poor work history people' (Jim, 40s) whereas they felt that, like themselves, many of the people participating in JobPath actually had extensive work experience. From their perspective, it was not tailored towards people's specific circumstances, nor of much benefit other than if someone 'did their Leaving Cert and wasn't sure what to do and had no CV ... [or] had been 20 or 30 years in the job and had no CV' (Niall, 30s).

*They go through the PowerPoint and they tell you 'Oh, you can't have your email address being "Dumpty306@gmail.com".' ... I didn't understand why I was going through that. I suppose it's just general, and they have to be very generic with everybody. But it was a waste of time. If they were helping me on my CV that would have been much better. But it's not a workshop, it's a presentation. They just present the thing, you go through the slides - what you do, what you don't do - interview skills that they tell you what to wear. (Beatrice, 30s)*

The level at which the training was pitched was also experienced as patronising by some participants. For instance, one interviewee highlighted 'the infographics' in some material, and the assumptions they conveyed about jobseekers:

*One of the bits that really stuck with me, because I think I frightened the life out of this trainer, [it] had a big clock image like we were in playschool. You know, big hands at three, little hands at eleven, you know, and she was going around the room and she was saying 'Okay, what time do you get up?' Because obviously, the joke there is you're all unemployed so you're all getting up at midday to watch daytime telly ... So, I said to her, 'Well 6am'. And she was so shocked. And I said to her, 'Well, if I don't get up at 6am and make my husband a coffee, I don't see him' (Sarah, 40s)*

Beyond job-search skills and CV preparation workshops, examples of interviewees being assisted with courses to gain vocational skills or formal qualifications were much rarer. Only 6 out of the 31 interviewees who had experience of JobPath reported receiving assistance with such training. For the most part, the courses that they were referred to consisted of a day or two's training to gain health and safety certificates, or accreditations in safe handling or forklift driving that they could add to their CVs. For instance, one former client who was an ex-prisoner explained that the only external training he received was being 'referred to do [a] manual handling course' (Mark, 30s). Another, Trevor, also 'did a manual handling online course that took four or five hours' as well as a train-the-trainer course that took place over a weekend. In a third example, Katie, recalled that she had done 'the First Aider training, and the Fire Marshall training, and the behaviour training', all of which were delivered by a third-party trainer at her agency's office.

Few of the JobPath clients in this study were directed towards more substantive forms of training. One exception was Anna, a former jobseeker who participated in JobPath after completing a postgraduate degree in social sciences. She recalled how her advisor discussed several training options, including short courses on computers, graphic design, and project management that they would pay for her to do. She decided to enrol in a course on Project Management, which she found considerably more beneficial than the CV preparation workshops that she had also done:

*I got a qualification out of it and that's a positive thing ... It's a five-day course. It's very, very basic stuff but people were almost more impressed with that, and wanting to talk about that than the degree, the masters, the PhD. So that was useful. All the other advice sessions on how to do an interview, or how to do a CV - they were absolutely useless to me (Anna, 30s)*

Another former JobPath client, Michelle, was encouraged to consider a level six course in community development, offered by a local community organisation. Michelle subsequently went on to work in community development and was pursuing further training in social enterprise and community development at the time of the interview. However, unlike Anna and Michelle, most interviewees described receiving little to no assistance with education or training, and this lack of support was a frequent criticism levelled against JobPath:

*That was the only thing that I was ever told to go to, was a CV one-day course ... I asked them was there any training courses - night-time training courses or part time training courses - that I could go on and try and do, like management courses ... No, nothing. Absolutely nothing. (Siobhan, 50s)*

*I was only in one workshop with them for the CV construction ... Other than that, I was never offered any kind of course, any kind of upskilling (Megan, 40s).*

*The only training they would really pay for it was if you had a job that was lined up, and you needed something like your safe pass or your forklift license ... And you definitely had the job, you just needed this one extra piece of paper or whatever - then they would pay for it. But aside from that there really wasn't any support (Rachel, 30s)*

## Work experience and upskilling

In contrast to what participants perceived to be a 'work-first' model of support on offer from JobPath, the interview data suggested that those who participated in LES were frequently encouraged to consider further education, training, or work experience programmes such as Community Employment (CE) and TÚS placements rather than focusing exclusively on immediate employment. This perceived emphasis on supporting people to engage with training and work experience also similarly emerged in the INOU's (2016) employment services research project, as well as in the Indecon review of LES prepared for the DSP. For instance, 72 per cent of LES clients surveyed by Indecon reported that their LES helped them 'with educational, training or other development opportunities' while 42 per cent agreed that they were assisted 'to get a place on a DSP employment programme' such as CE or TÚS. By contrast, only 21 per cent agreed that they were assisted to 'find employment of over 30 hours per week' (INDECON, 2018: viii). Likewise, a significant number of the LES clients interviewed for the INOU's employment services research project reported that their mediator assisted them 'in relation to training and education courses' or referred them to a CE or TÚS placement (INOUE 2016: 41). Most of the participants valued this support, although a small minority expressed concern 'that their mediator appeared to have a greater focus on training rather than work' (INOUE 2016: 33).

Neither the Indecon review nor the INOU's research on jobseekers' experiences of LES examined qualitative differences in jobseekers' experiences of different PES. By contrast, most of the LES service-users interviewed for this study also had experience of JobPath. Several reflected on the differences in approach they perceived between the two services. For instance, one person who was a client of LES at the time of the interview commented on how the guidance he was now receiving was 'not just restricted to the jobs' and that he was also being given options for upskilling and 'a list of courses as well that [he] could be involved in' (Shay, 20). Shay had previously participated in JobPath three times but felt that he was now being 'given more options to look at' in terms of training as well as 'the community employment side of things.' Another interviewee who had also previously spent a year on JobPath, likewise perceived that the LES was focused on helping 'you to find the job that you wanted to get, that you were qualified for, and if you weren't qualified for it, that they would look for free training' (Will, 30s).

The additional options for exploring training and community employment opportunities were also commented upon by Jim, a jobseeker in his 40s who, like Shay and Will, had participated in both LES and JobPath. He gave the example of a charity that he had wanted to work with in his local area. That was something, he felt, 'wasn't a starter with JobPath but it is something that could be looked at with the LES in the form of a CE scheme' and where they'll 'adapt a CE to suit your previous experience' (Jim, 40s). Comparing his experience of the two services, he likened JobPath to 'your strict father whereas the LES would be like your uncle minding you and getting you the stuff that he wouldn't normally get for you' (Jim, 40s). In the case of Jim, a former plumber who felt 'education was always [his] stronger point than manual labour', this included researching options for pursuing a master's degree after he discovered he was not eligible for funding under the Back-to-Education Allowance, which only funded up to a bachelor's degree:

*Well, I'm interested in [studying a Masters' degree] so an [LES] employee went to the trouble of finding out about one, saying 'Look, you can do this course if you want and we'll prepare you for it' (Jim, 40s)*

The contrast in the degree of emphasis on upskilling and education that interviewees perceived between LES and JobPath echoes the earlier wave of survey research with frontline staff. The differences in responses between JobPath and LES staff in that survey research suggested that JobPath staff were more likely to be 'work-first' oriented whereas LES mediators were more inclined towards encouraging clients to consider options for further education and training (McGann, 2021). For instance, survey respondents were presented with the scenario that, shortly after commencing on their caseload, an average jobseeker is offered a low-skilled, low-paying job. They were then asked what advice they would give such a jobseeker, on a scale from '1. Take the job and leave welfare' to '7. Stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity to come along.' Notably, 72 per cent of JobPath respondents reported that they would advise the jobseeker to take the job rather than remain on welfare compared with only 53 per cent of LES frontline staff. Similarly, on another question about which is the more important goal of their agency, 'to get people into jobs as quickly as possible or to raise people's education or skill levels so that they can get the job they want in the future', two thirds (66%) of LES staff reported that raising jobseekers' education or skill levels was the more important goal

of their agency. Conversely, only a minority of JobPath staff (40%) claimed that raising clients' education or skills levels was a more important priority of their agency than getting people into jobs as quickly as possible.

The interview data suggested that LES participants were not only assisted with short-term training in First Aid, Safe Pass and Manual Handling; they were also encouraged to consider further and higher education opportunities. As one interviewee who was participating in LES at the time put it, 'they really feel that education is as good as job seeking ... they make you feel like it's a perfectly good thing to do' (Aisling, 30s). One former client who had previously failed her Leaving Certificate explained that after she was referred to the LES by Intreo, her mediator sent her to do a two-week career guidance course facilitated by the Jobs Club. That led her towards developing a plan to go 'back into education' and to study a degree in adult education, which her mediator encouraged her to see as 'the right path':

*I worked in retail for many years, and, for me, that wasn't a career. I didn't think teaching was for me, everyone else saw it was for me, but I didn't really see it myself. But they helped me to see that, they really helped me to get that confidence to believe; to see that it was the right path for me (Jenny, 30s)*

In the meantime, while she was waiting on her application, Jenny was also supported to do a Level 5 course in business and administration 'as a back-up' in case she wasn't admitted to the degree:

*Intreo paid for it because I was on the jobseeking payment. But the advice from the partnership went to my case officer at Intreo and said '[Name] would like to do this short course, can you just make that happen for her.' And they were like 'Yep, no problem.' (Jenny, 30s)*

Indeed, of the 10 interviewees who had participated in LES, three had gone on to pursue further or higher education. Another example was Leonard, a mature age student and former client of both JobPath and the LES, who was in the second year of a social sciences degree. Previously, Leonard had owned his own business until a relative developed a chronic illness and Leonard became a full-time carer. For Leonard, the path towards returning to education began with a year-long course in community development that his mediator recommended. This was shortly after Leonard participated in a life-coaching course that he was referred to after commencing with the LES. While he found the coaching course 'a little bit cultish' and 'American-based', part of the course involved a career guidance session facilitated by someone from a further education college, who challenged him to think about retraining in community development. This was further pursued by his mediator, who identified a full-time course for Leonard to apply for:

*And out of that particular [life coaching] course ... my case officer in the LES said 'You know, she was advising you to go on to do studies, and to move into community work and everything else' ... There was a process had been set in motion. So, she rang me one day and said, 'Look, there's a course - a year-long study course ... they only take 15 people, it's a full-time course - nine to five or whatever.' And I said, 'Can you get me an interview?' She said, 'Yeah'. So, she got me the interview and I went to the workshop and got interviewed ... and I got one of the of the places (Leonard, 60s)*

Other interviewees were supported to pursue work experience opportunities through Tús (part-time work placements in community or voluntary organisations for up to 12 months) or the CE scheme, which offers longer-term work experience placements of between one and three years in community organisations or public bodies. One example was Beatrice, a former JobPath client. Beatrice had previously worked for a financial services company in an administration role until she was made redundant. She had since gone on to study accountancy, bookkeeping and payroll but didn't have the work experience she felt she needed to find an accountancy job. She tried to raise this with her JobPath advisor—that 'she needed more experience than what [she] had'—but 'it didn't go very far' in terms of receiving any support to develop her accountancy skills. Conversely, shortly after commencing with LES, her mediator suggested the CE scheme as a way for her to gain work experience and continue with her training:

*It didn't take too long with her - like she said, 'Do you know what the CE scheme is?' And I said, 'I have no idea.' I heard previously bad stuff about the CE scheme. And she explained [it] to me, and I thought it was probably the best idea - to gain experience in accounting and payroll. So, she started to show me where to look for these roles on the website. And then I found, I think I found three at the same time. So, I got three interviews straight away (Beatrice, 30s).*

Beatrice subsequently spent two-and-a-half years on the CE scheme, doing bookkeeping and payroll for a community organisation. During this time, she undertook further training and upskilling, going on to find a fulltime accountancy role that she commenced two weeks before the interview:

*I wanted to study more. And the CE scheme is perfect for that because they push you to study during the [time] that you are with them ... I stayed there for two and a half years, and I gained experience in accounting, in payroll. During that time, I completed lots of courses ... I completed my certificate in accounting ... I completed the train-the-trainer, level 6, to train people. I've done the ECDL [European Computer Driving Licence] ... The last one that I completed; it was Human Resources. I have level six with [university] and also data analytics with the [private education institute] (Beatrice, 30s)*

In a further example, another former LES client, Will, recalled how his mediator supported him to find a TÚS placement. In Will's case, the placement was with a local development company working in a receptionist role that also involved social media work, drawing on his skills in digital marketing. When the placement finished, Will was employed directly in the role which, at the time of the interview, he had been working in for almost a year:

*I was contacted by TÚS. They were looking for someone to do reception work ... and when I told my [mediator] that at my meeting she said, 'Well, we have a position'. So, she basically got straight on to the coordinator and put my name forward ... The job that I was most suited for was a receptionist with social media, or an administrator with social media for the partnership. But then [mediator] knew that there was a position, because she hadn't realized that I might be interested in admin because I suppose it wasn't something that would have come up (Will, 30s)*

As illustrated by Will's case, the TÚS programme is in fact administered by local development companies. So, one possible explanation behind the level of referrals between LES and TÚS lies in the fact that both programmes are often under the umbrella of the same organisation. This makes information sharing easier and can streamline the referral process as happened in Will's case. Similarly, local development companies frequently administer the CE programme on behalf of the DSP. Again, this co-management of programmes under the umbrella of the same organisation reinforces awareness of the CE among LES staff, making it more likely that they will be positively disposed towards recommending work experience placements to clients. This was reflected in the earlier wave of survey and interview research with frontline staff. Many of the mediators interviewed for that research elaborated on their links to CE and TÚS schemes, explaining that they would make use of them as 'progression' options for older, very long-term unemployed clients, or women who were returning to employment after periods away from the labour force:

*I work well with the TÚS supervisors here. So, if there's any inclination, that you feel the person would benefit, and they have a position for them, [that] they would take them on the TÚS scheme. TÚS and CE aren't really recognised as placements, whereas I feel in the greater picture for DSP they should be recognized because it's a great achievement for someone to get into 20 hours a week. And people have come back to me and said, 'I never would have thought of it, didn't know anything about it, and I find it a great purpose in life to be able to get up and go.' Now the going may be just to sweep up in the local graveyard, or the tidy towns, or one woman was a cleaner down with the priests (Anita, Mediator)*

*Our clients in the last few years are what they call LowPeX. So, the Community Employment and training would be their main kind of progression options. Sometimes I would have somebody looking at third level. Sometimes I might have somebody looking at starting their own business. Sometimes its pure job seeking support that I would give. But a lot of the time, with the clients that I have who have been out of employment for a long time, they almost need to be socialized in ways. They need to get out of the house, and they need to be doing something and building up confidence (Siobhan, Mediator).*

*Some of the older clients, it's hard enough because they may have been out of work 5, 10 years. Again, we're very lucky. We have the TÚS program. The TÚS supervisors are employed through the local development company. We can self-refer, I've seen that being a real plus for clients (Michelle, Mediator)*

More broadly across the study, just under half of interviewees had undertaken a TÚS or CE placement at some point. This included 11 people had who participated in CE and 7 who had done TÚS placements (two interviewees had participated in both CE and TÚS). One interviewee, an ex-prisoner, described his CE placement as 'a life safer' (Mark,

50s) insofar as he had repeatedly been unable to find mainstream work due to discrimination and his criminal record. While the placement was in a 'bottom of the brackets job', it gave him an opportunity to contribute, to have routine, and to be part of a 'workforce for under-privileged or socially excluded people' (Mark, 50s). The kind of work experience activities that interviewees undertook were highly varied, pointing to considerable unevenness in the quality of the work placements afforded to jobseekers. These ranged from one person who had worked in a parish centre gift shop (Sophie, 30s), to another who had worked in a creche (Natasha, 50s), to another who had worked in a day centre for people with intellectual disabilities (Laoise, 50s), to another who had commenced a placement in a gallery (Megan, 40s), to another who had worked as a receptionist in a welfare rights organisation (Claire, 50s), to others who had worked in addiction centres (Rosemary, 30s; Yvonne, 50s) or been placed into local heritage collection (Hugh, 40s) or tidy towns projects involving maintenance (Kevin, 50s) or administrative work (Cormac, 40s).

Although work experience programmes are not the focus of this study, interviewees' experiences of these initiatives was broadly positive. This was especially in relation to CE schemes and the additional opportunities for training they afforded, with several participants calling for 'more community-based employment schemes, like CE and TÚS' (Sarah, 40s), and for jobseekers to be permitted to remain on them for longer than twelve months. For instance, Sarah, who lived in a regional area and who had done a TÚS placement with a local development company, felt that the brief period of work experience she had undertaken had been instrumental to her returning to mainstream employment:

*I know myself that I would not have gotten back into the workforce otherwise. Because lots of rural locations just don't have the normal job opportunities, or the internet infrastructure to support remote working (Sarah, 40s)*

Several interviewees did, however, express reservations about the low-quality of the work provided through some CE and TÚS placements; that 'there's an awful lot of them where they are looking for a cleaner' (Rosemary, 30s) and that a lot of the placements 'would be emptying bins or they would be doing this, that and the other' (Jim, 50s). As such, some participants were concerned that 'a lot of employers, or certainly the majority of them anyway, don't seem to put a lot of great store in TÚS placements' (Cormac, 40s). Others also commented on the potential for CE and TÚS schemes to displace mainstream employment. For instance, one interviewee was qualified in horticulture and grounds keeping. He explained that he had been unable to find ongoing employment in his field because 'all that work has been moved onto schemes since the economic collapse' (Kevin, 50s).

Nonetheless, the experiences of the participants in this study did suggest that CE and TÚS placements could provide a 'leg-up into the workforce' (Sarah, 40s) and into ongoing employment, as in the examples of Beatrice and Will above as well as other interviewees, such as Sarah and Rosemary, who gained employment because of participating in a work experience placement. There were also several examples of where, with the support of a local development company, participants had actively designed a tailored TÚS or CE placement; one that matched their work interests and built upon their pre-existing skills. For instance, a jobseeker who was participating in JobPath at the time of the interview, explained how she had worked with a local development company to facilitate a TÚS placement in a local gallery that she was already volunteering in. Megan had previous experience managing a music club, when she was working overseas, but she had only been able to find hospitality work in pubs, hotels, and restaurants since moving to Ireland. It was a field she was hoping to return to, and which she felt the TÚS placement could assist with.

*They [local development company] actually introduced me to the place where I am at the moment, as I'm completing the TÚS program. I have just started in a small [gallery] that I was volunteering in for three years. So, I am working there almost twenty hours a week and I can completely use all the skills that I did from all the courses, because I'm working as a guide and the front desk and the events manager ... And I'm really happy because I can finally use my skills the way I want to use them (Megan, 40s)*

Despite the broadly positive experiences of TÚS and CE reported by interviewees, it is important to keep in mind the small-scale of the study and the fact that the research did not set out specifically to examine people's experiences of work experience programmes. Only 16 interviewees had direct experience of TÚS or CE schemes. We should therefore be cautious about interpreting interviewees' experiences as generalisable to the wider population of claimants who have participated in community work placements.

## 6. Perceptions of advisors and mediators

This final section considers service-users' perceptions and experiences of the advisors and mediators that they dealt with. The relationship between caseworkers/advisors and their jobseeker-clients is frequently identified in international research as a key component affecting the outcomes of welfare-to-work programmes (Wilson et al., 2020: 26). In particular, advisors' 'interaction styles' (Van Parys and Struyven, 2018) and the degree of trust and rapport between jobseekers and advisors are frequently cited as critical to enabling people who are long-term unemployed to move into employment (Senghaas et al., 2019). These relational aspects of frontline work are likely to be shaped, in turn, by the professional identities, level of knowledge, and experience those advisors bring to their roles. Additionally, frontline workers' skills-set and level of professional expertise are also considered important in enabling 'personalized interventions' (van Berkel, 2017: 24) and services that are better targeted towards clients' needs (Rice, 2017).

The earlier wave of research with frontline JobPath and LES staff pointed to significant differences between the two PES workforces. These differences predominantly related to rates of union membership, qualification levels, and the age profile of workers. For instance, over a third of the JobPath frontline that responded to the survey reported that they were under 35 years of age compared with just 4 per cent of LES staff. Conversely, the vast majority (83%) of LES respondents were aged 45 or older compared with less than a third (32%) of JobPath respondents (McGann, 2021: 13). Similar differences were evident in frontline workers' qualification levels, with two thirds (66%) of LES respondents reporting that they had a university degree compared with just 38 per cent of JobPath staff. Indeed, almost a quarter (23%) of the JobPath staff surveyed reported having no post-school qualification.

Accordingly, a key focus of discussion during the interviews with service-users was gaining jobseekers' perspectives on the interaction styles and professional backgrounds of the mediators and advisors that worked with them; how they felt treated by them, and whether they seemed experienced and knowledgeable at delivering employment guidance.

### JobPath staff

Among the 31 interviewees who had participated in JobPath, the overwhelming majority reported positive experiences of how they felt treated by their advisors; that their advisors were 'kind' (Rosemary, 30s), 'a nice enough fella' (Hugh, 40s), and generally 'pretty nice' (Beatrice, 30s) to deal with. This aligns with the responses of JobPath clients to customer satisfaction surveys administered on behalf of the DSP, in which almost all respondents report high levels of satisfaction with their advisor relationship (McShane, 2021). A small minority of interviewees did, however, describe feeling 'bullied and harassed' (Natasha, 50s) by their advisor on occasion, and usually in the context of feeling pressured to apply for minimum wage jobs in sectors that they didn't want to work in. In rare cases, participants even reported that their advisors were 'openly hostile' (Ken, 40s) on occasion, with one interviewee recounting an instance where his advisor 'lost his cool' with him and falsely accused him of missing an appointment:

*I arrived in one day for an appointment and he got really angry with me. He said, 'You missed your last appointment, didn't you?' And I never missed appointments ... And he lost his cool with me ... And this was in an open office. So, there was people listening. I suggested that he cool down and stop being abusive, or I would have nothing more to do with him. And he did. He kind of cooled down (Frank, 50s)*

However, these examples were by far the exception and the overwhelming majority of interviewees were very complimentary of how their advisors treated them and how they 'gave [them] a lot of time actually' (Anna, 30s). For instance, one former client commented on the understanding her advisor showed her, explaining that he 'was quite flexible in his approach' and made her feel like she 'was actually a person rather than just a number coming through the system' (Anna, 30s). Other interviewees similarly recalled that 'there were nice people working there' (Trevor, 60s) and that they generally found their advisor to be 'very understanding, down to earth' (Shay, 20s). They recognised that advisors were 'just doing a job' and generally found them very 'pleasant, professional' to deal with (Claire, 50s).

Several interviewees were particularly complimentary of the support and guidance that their advisor had given them, including one former JobPath client who had been encouraged to consider retraining in community development:

*She would have had own family, so we had a lot in common. But we didn't spend a lot of time talking about our personal lives, I have to say. She had an awful lot of common sense, very business-like. She takes crap from no one. But she was so astute, I was really, really impressed with her (Michelle, 50s)*

Other interviewees, however, were considerably less impressed by the competencies of their advisors. While they generally viewed their advisors as friendly to deal with, they questioned the degree to which they had the 'level of knowledge ... suitable for the job' (Frank, 50s). To this extent, they distinguished between advisors' kindness, on the one hand, and their professional capabilities and level of expertise, on the other:

*Oh, he treated me well. There was no problem with that ... It was just in the area of giving me advice, and how to pursue job applications and advice on maybe how to write cover letters and stuff like that that he wasn't particularly good. (Cormac, 40s)*

*He didn't strike me as being that experienced, to be honest. And in fact, I don't really think any of them are ... I'm not sure why he left, but I got the impression that he wasn't able for it. (Hugh, 40s)*

*[She] was nice when she spoke to me. But I could tell she had no idea of the situation that I was in... They train them in their script, and what to say, and how to de-escalate the situation because all you get is 'Oh, I hear that. And I'll mark you down now, and I have to close down this computer system'... I don't understand why people from a sales background are doing jobs like this... (Rosemary, 30s)*

Several interviewees commented on the fact that the advisors that they were assigned had themselves previously been JobPath clients, and on the Live Register until relatively recently. This echoed the findings of the earlier research with frontline staff, with three out of the ten JobPath staff interviewed for that research having been recruited from the Live Register (McGann, 2021). Four of the jobseekers who participated in this research recalled their advisors being former clients, and they questioned the degree to which they were qualified to work in employment services:

*He basically said at one stage that he was on the dole, and he got the position he was in from going to these meetings ... Which he just loved to hound and sing about. (Siobhan, 50s)*

*There was no skill set, from what I could see ... One fella there had just come off the dole himself... His only experience had been to go through the process of being on one side of the desk, and then the following year he turned to the other side of the desk (Jim, 40s)*

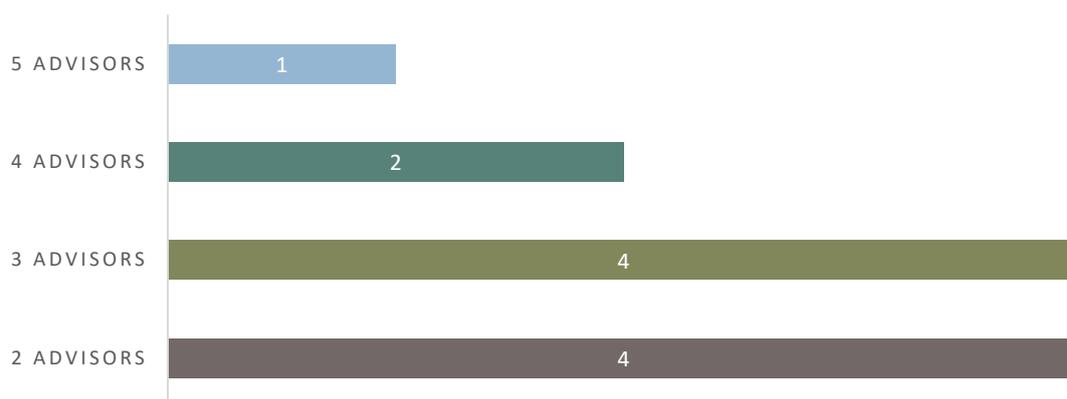
More broadly, interviewees were of the view that the entry requirements for working as an advisor were quite low due to the work being low paid, and that the frontline staff came from a broad range of disparate backgrounds. As one interviewee somewhat disparagingly put it, 'the qualifications apparently that you needed ... to become a personal employment advisor was that you wanted a job that was better paid than where you were' (Angela, 60s). While a minority recalled that their advisors had backgrounds in HR or recruitment, many others were of the view that 'they are sort of like call-centre staff' (Sarah, 40s). For instance, an interviewee who had had multiple experiences of JobPath recalled having a conversation with his advisor about how 'she came from a call centre background':

*She had worked in previous call centres, and she had landed the job with [agency] and she was just using that as the example of you can be working in one industry and then bounce into a job seeking industry. That kind of piqued my interest. 'How did you - what qualifications were in your background, how did you manage this?' The conversation got cut short there because you were asking personal information of her, which I don't blame her to be honest. She was mid-to-late 20s (Shay, 20s)*

One concern that was frequently relayed was the high rate of employee turnover in JobPath, and the perception that advisors 'were dropping off like flies' (Ray, 20s), as an interviewee who was then participating in JobPath put it.

*I had a lady for a couple of months, and then she actually left [agency] and I got a different fella. They were both very nice, but they probably wouldn't have had maybe the level of skill or information that maybe someone at Intreo would, or someone even in FÁS would have had all those years ago (Niall, 30s)*

FIGURE 4: PARTICIPANTS WHO HAD MULTIPLE ADVISORS DURING A 12-MONTH PERIOD



*I went through a number of advisers because they moved on. One girl got promoted. So, I guess that means she doesn't talk to the street people ... I don't know what happened to the rest of them. I mean maybe it's a difficult job ... They do deal with people who give them negative reactions all the time and I imagine that would be stressful. I don't know. I've no idea. But I know they rotate through staff very quickly, and it happened in the second round as well, where you rotated through staff. I'd have the same advisor for maybe four or five meetings and then I'd be onto someone else. (Padraig, 40s)*

Among the interviewees in this study, it was not uncommon for people to cycle through three or four different advisors alone during a 12-month period. Indeed, 11 out of the 31 interviewees who had participated in JobPath recalled seeing 'a succession of different people' (Hugh, 40s) and 'being passed between different employees of the office' (Rachel, 30s). As shown in Figure 4, of these, 7 had been dealt with by at least three different advisors during a single period on JobPath. For instance, one former client who had been recalled how she 'had four different representatives' (Sarah, 40s) during her first year on Job Path, while another person who was participating in JobPath at the time of the interview described being 'onto [his] third advisor' in ten months:

*I got a new one last week ... The first guy seemed to be trained in human resources, and he was very reasonable. But then they put another person onto me who was completely untrained. She was a young female in her mid-20s, and she'd actually been interviewed and hired over Zoom or whatever – she was working out of her parents' bedroom ... and she had had absolutely no training at all. (Kevin, 50s)*

In one example, an interview had even had five different advisors within the just a few months:

*[Name#1] left after about three weeks ... So, I've then got [name#2] as an [advisor] and he had come from reception ... to becoming a person who was providing employment advice to me. He lasted eight weeks, went off to be a second-hand car salesman. Then when he left, the business manager, came in for one day and she did nothing at all with me but arrange the next interview, and she didn't know who was going to be with. So, when I turned up for the next interview after that I got somebody called [name#3]. [Name#3] it seemed, had worked on reception with [name#2] and she was trying to move out of reception and into an employment adviser position because it was better paid. So, I had her once. So, now I had had four people in a period of about three months. And then I got [Name#5] (Angela, 60s)*

### LES staff

As with the JobPath advisors, interviewees overwhelmingly regarded the mediators that they dealt as 'very nice' (Graham, 50s), 'personable' (Jenny, 50s), and 'very good to deal with' (Jim, 40s). This echoed the observations of participants in the INOU's research on service-users' experiences of the LES, in which many participants reported 'that they were dealt with professionally and courteously by staff and that the meetings were conducted in a friendly and supportive manner' (INOU 2016: 30). Likewise, several of the jobseekers with experience of the LES in this study said that they felt their mediator 'actually gave a damn' (Will, 30s) and came across as being 'totally out for the person' (Emer, 40s) and as being 'more concerned about the individual as opposed to how many jobs you applied for this week' (Jim, 40s). 'They actually look at you like you're human' (Aisling, 30s), as one former LES client who had been

assisted to return to education put it. Another former LES client, who had likewise been encouraged towards further education, described how he had initially had a few disagreements with his mediator, but that over time they had developed a strong rapport to the point that he continues to go back 'just to say "hello"' which, he felt, was 'reflective of the experience [he] had in that office':

*We had a couple of barneys which actually made life more interesting ... We had some larger, more life sort of discussions ... My impression is that she was trying to draw me out to see - one to get to know me as a person, two to get to know my interests, three then to find out if there's somewhere that she could help me to go to. And you got that impression ... and I started engaging more (Leonard, 60s)*

The key difference in interviewees' experience of mediators was the continuity of the jobseeker-advisor relationship, and the degree of confidence they had in their mediators' expertise and level of experience. Unlike interviewees who had participated in JobPath, LES clients almost always worked with the same mediator throughout their period of participation. This 'continuity of contact' was again something that those who participated in the INOU's research on LES remarked upon, seeing it 'as being useful' (INOUE 2016: 35) and it stems from the longevity that many LES mediators have in their positions. For instance, almost 87 per cent of the LES staff surveyed in the earlier wave of research on frontline employment services staff reported that they had been working in the welfare or employment services sector for 'more than five years' (McGann, 2021: 10). Among the LES staff who participated in subsequent follow-up interviews, 70 per cent had more than twenty years' experience working in the sector.

This longevity of working in the sector was also remarked upon by the service-users interviewed for this study, who frequently observed that their mediator came across as having 'a wealth of experience' (Shay, 20s). For instance, one interviewee who had previously participated in JobPath and dealt with an advisor who was a former client, contrasted how the mediator he was now working with 'has been doing it for 12 years and has vast experience' (Jim, 40s). Mediators were also seen as coming from quite distinct occupational and professional backgrounds in comparison to those working in JobPath. For instance, one interviewee who had been assisted to find Community Employment believed that her mediator was 'a psychologist', recalling that she had noticed that her mediator 'has a place where she actually has a [practice]' (Beatrice, 30s). In another example, a jobseeker who was undertaking community employment at a detox centre recalled how her mediator also shared a background in community development 'and had done a lot of further education'

*She had done some studying in working in the voluntary sector, in the community. Like, when you're working in the community you will come across everything, but she was very experienced in what she did (Yvonne, 50s)*

Again, these observations about mediators' backgrounds reflect the findings of the earlier wave of research with frontline staff. For instance, while Administration and Support Service activities was the main field that LES staff reported having previous experience (30%) in, 18 per cent of the LES staff surveyed reported that they had previous experience in Health and Social Work while a further 12 per cent reported that they came from a background in Education. By comparison, among the main sectors that JobPath staff reported having previous experience in were Financial and Insurance activities (17%), Administrative and Support Services (17%), Wholesale and Retail Trade (16%), and Accommodation and Food Services (10%). Just 3 per cent of the JobPath surveyed reported that they came from a background in Education, although the proportion with a background in Health and Social Work (12%) was greater. Nonetheless, what both service-users' experiences and the research with frontline staff show is that there are marked differences in the profile of JobPath and LES staff in terms of their level experience of working with jobseekers, their professional backgrounds, and their qualification levels.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings presented in this report on service-user's experiences build on the previous wave of research with frontline JobPath and LES staff, conducted between July 2020 and January 2021. They also add to the growing body of empirical work on Irish jobseekers' experiences of activation and conditionality. This includes work by the INOU (2016, 2019) and NESC (Johnston and McGauran, 2018), as well as academic studies by Joe Whelan (2021a, 2021b) and Philip Finn (2021), among others (cf., Boland and Griffin, 2015; N Whelan, 2021). Understanding the experiences and perspectives of jobseekers and unemployed people is critical to appreciating how programmes operate in practice, and the reasons why they produce the outcomes that they do. It also offers important insights into the unintended consequences of programme designs and service models, and the quality of experience different approaches evoke.

The perspectives of service-users in this study point towards the administrative nature of activation, as it is experienced by many claimants. Although direct experiences of sanctions and penalty rates are rare, the compulsoriness of participation is ever present in how employment services are experienced by jobseekers. For many, the rationale and purpose of participation is largely compliance, giving rise to an experience of just 'going through the motions' for the sake of maintaining payments, with little expectation of receiving substantive assistance with finding work. The frequent reminders in communiques that claimants risk incurring payment penalties if they do not attend appointments reinforce this compliance-centred orientation towards 'participation'. It is intensified in the case of people who are re-referred for activation, and typically to the very same office of the same employment service. Fifteen of the former and current jobseekers that participated in this study had had this experience of being referred multiple times to the same employment service. Many questioned the point of going through the same process all over again if it had not led to employment the first time around. Although equally it suggests that the initial time frame given to agencies to work with clients is too short; and that longer referral periods may enable different approaches to employment guidance and supporting jobseekers to return to work rather than replicating the same formula of short-term job search assistance over and over.

The earlier wave of research with frontline staff suggested that while JobPath and LES share many resemblances, there are several key points of difference. One is the intensity of support given to jobseekers in terms of the frequency of face-to-face appointments. Another is the profile and characteristics of the people who work at the frontline of the two employment services. And a third is the degree to which the support provided is orientated towards 'work-first' and short-term job search assistance rather than developing employability through education, training, or work experience. The findings presented in this report on service-users' experiences largely confirm, and indeed strengthen, these earlier observations.

Among those with experience of JobPath, there was a recurring sense that the focus of support was on their job search effort with a view to encouraging clients towards whatever jobs they could get with the skills and experience they already had. This would be complemented by 'polishing' activities designed to increase their job search success rate, such as guidance on preparing CVs, writing cover letters, and interview presentation. Face-to-face meetings with advisors were quite frequent, although some participants had meetings more frequently than others while the frequency of appointments also changed over time. On occasion, participants would also be brought in for 'tree shaking' activities in the form of job searching on office computers.

Among those with experience of LES, meetings with their mediator were considerably less frequent and it was notable that a significant number were directed towards education, training, and work experience opportunities in TÚS and Community Employment rather than immediate employment. In other words, the kinds of progression pathways that mediators were oriented towards appeared to be qualitatively different and less focused on rapid labour market attachment. A concern here is that for unemployed people who need, or very much want to find employment quickly, the model of guidance offered by LES may not be best suited to their needs. There was limited evidence of LES clients being directed towards immediate labour market vacancies or referred for available jobs, as opposed to the further education, training and work experience opportunities jobseekers were supported and encouraged to consider. Of

particular note is the degree of emphasis on supporting participation in TÚS or Community Employment schemes. In the case of community work placements, this may reflect the fact that in many areas LES, TÚS, and Community Employment schemes often come under the umbrella of the same local development company.

Service-users' also had quite different experiences of the LES mediators and JobPath advisors that they dealt with, as described in Section 6. The overwhelming impression of both mediators and advisors was that they were kind, friendly to deal with, and treated clients with dignity and respect. However, interviewees were less positive about the level of experience, qualifications, and skills-set that frontline workers brought to their jobs. This was particularly an issue as regards JobPath advisors, who were perceived as coming from disparate but often low-skilled backgrounds that interviewees struggled to see as giving people the experience and knowledge needed to provide tailored employment guidance. Another concern was the high rate of staff turnover, which undermined the continuity of the service.

While the findings presented in this report resonate with previous research on jobseekers' experiences of activation, and consolidate those of the earlier wave of research with frontline staff, it is important to acknowledge the small-scale of the study. Only 35 service-users were included in the study, several of whom had not participated in employment services for some time. This was necessary to ensure that the interviews captured the experiences of people who had participated in activation before the Covid-19 pandemic, and prior to the suspension of payment penalties in early 2020. A study that only included current service-users could have produced an uncharacteristic and very atypical experience of employment services. That said, other than appointments being conducted remotely and jobseekers no longer being able to attend offices for group workshops or to job search on computers, there did not appear to be wide disparities between the experiences of current and former JobPath and LES clients. Nonetheless, the number of interviewees who had experience of LES was relatively low (10 people). So, the findings on service-users' experiences of LES may require verification in further studies. In particular, future studies may wish to consider the degree to which service-users' experiences of LES vary across different parts of the country. This potential for variation in jobseekers' experiences, depending on which LES they are referred to, has been raised as a concern by Indecon (2018) in its review of LES for the DSP. Although the service-users' interviewed in this study came from diverse LES organisations, located in different parts of the country, the low number of overall participants with experience of LES precluded making any meaningful comparison in this regard.

This report represents the final wave of research for the *Governing Activation in Ireland* project. The project will conclude in January 2022, although further journal articles and peer-reviewed publications are in progress. These will be made available as they are published via the project website - <https://activationinireland.wordpress.com>.

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