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Job seekers need more than a revolving door

The government's drive to get people off benefits and into jobs appears to be faltering with new research showing thousands are back out of work within weeks. **Rosie Niven reports**

The media storm surrounding Gordon Brown's 'British jobs for British people' comments back in September obscured the actual intention of his speech, which was to drive home his desire to get the workless back into employment.

Possibly more controversial than Mr Brown's unfortunate choice of words are the measures that will form this policy. For the past two years the government has been considering introducing greater level of compulsion into its policies to help it reach its 80% employment target. But a report published by the National Audit Office (NAO) suggests its employment policies to date are failing to deliver sustainable outcomes.

The NAO's report (*New Start*, 16 November) found a number of people who move off benefits and into work do not stay employed, with some 40% of jobseeker's allowance claimants claiming the benefit again within six months. These findings may influence the government's approach as it considers stepping up efforts to get other economically inactive people into work, including those on incapacity benefit.

One problem identified with the policy is targets geared towards measuring how many people get into work, rather than the number of people that find sustainable work. Tomorrow's People – a charity which helps the people furthest away from the labour market to get back into work – measures its success by how many people

remain in a job for a year or more. But the charity senses the government is becoming more open to adopting a similar approach.

Steve Swan, the charity's national sales and development manager, says there has been a lot of feedback from the sector that is influencing government policy. 'We do not want to be a conveyor belt,' he adds. 'We want to engage one to one, identify barriers and develop solutions.'

While many other organisations share Tomorrow's People's ideals, there is currently no incentive to deliver on them in the contracts they work to. Organisations that the government contracts to deliver employment programmes are only required to get people into work, not to help them stay in work and progress.

'People need support for getting a job and keeping it,' says Mr Swan. 'It might be an entry level job, but we would work with an employer to help them progress. Funding from government department doesn't encourage this. We do it because it's what we believe in, but some organisations won't do anything that is not in their contract.'

In his review of the government's welfare to work policy earlier this year, David Freud considered sharing the benefits with a provider when an individual has remained in work for three years. Mr Swan agrees this is a move in the right direction, but advises the government to give providers enough working capital to deliver their programmes so that voluntary operators are not at a disadvantage.

Michael Fothergill, policy and communications officer at Off the Streets and into Work, also supports recommendations to extend job measurements to sustainability and better support for people when they get jobs. 'Often people are dumped in jobs with no prospects. So many vulnerable people work in places where they can be replaced at the drop of the hat if they

miss work.

'People in work need to know where they can go for support if they are having problems,' he adds. 'Then we can enable that person to progress into better jobs. With a lot of the people we work it involves three years to get them job ready and three years afterwards. So that could be a six year period altogether.'

Simone Aspis, parliamentary campaigner and media worker at the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council, believes the so-called 'revolving door' may be particularly detrimental to disabled people. 'There are examples of disabled people who have taken up inappropriate work and ended up worse off. They may become more stressed as a result of that work, particularly people with mental health problems.'

A lack of joined-up thinking and the current rules governing the benefits system are to blame, for failure to get more disabled people into work, Ms Aspis says. She gives the example of how disabled people are offered grants for equipment and support if they are in paid work, but nothing for work experience or education. 'Disabled people often have to fight very hard to get this help.'

Steve Swan agrees the benefits system must incentivise people to get into work, not deter them. He says the prospect of losing housing benefits so soon after starting a job puts off many claimants and believes that reviewing barriers such as these will be necessary if the government is to achieve the 80% target.

'We need to stop this tragic roundabout,' said Mr Swan. 'We need to make it realistic. The benefits system needs to accommodate not penalise people.'

Sustainable employment: supporting people to stay in work and advance, www.nao.org.uk
Local labour market analysis, www.nao.org.uk

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NAO says 40% of ex-claimants are back on jobseeker's allowance within six months