

'Someone in my corner': Client and frontline perspectives of critical success factors in Supported Employment services

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This briefing examines what clients and frontline employment practitioners of Supported Employment interventions for individuals with health conditions other than severe mental illness say is important and distinctive about their Supported Employment experiences. The findings provide insights into frontline views of 'what works' and 'what's special' in Supported Employment services – and employment services more broadly – for clients with health conditions, disabilities and other complex support needs. Findings draw on interview data with 23 frontline Supported Employment specialists, 17 Supported Employment managers, and 25 clients from 16 different Supported Employment services (15 in England, 1 in Scotland).

Funded by the NIHR between 2022 and 2024, these findings form part of a wider project exploring Supported Employment across numerous UK interventions for population groups other than severe mental health. Population groups included in the findings include those with low to moderate mental health and/or physical health conditions, autism and/or learning disabilities, substance misuse issues, housing insecurity and homelessness, and ex-offenders. Supported Employment services in our study adhere to either the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) fidelity model or the five-phase Supported Employment model formalised since 2016 in Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) fidelity that is tailored to support people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

WHAT IS SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT?

Supported Employment is a distinctive 'place-then-train' voluntary employment model to support economically inactive or unemployed individuals with health conditions, disabilities or other complex support needs into well matched, sustained employment. Although 'train-then-place' employability models have traditionally been used to support disabled people towards employment, Supported Employment models have increasingly been used in recent decades as an evidence-based model for supporting disabled people rapidly into well-matched jobs alongside provision of wider support to tackle barriers before, during and after job entry. The quantitative impact evidence base for Supported Employment is strong (Bond et al., 2020; Whitworth et al., 2024) but there is a need to learn more about what clients and frontline staff of Supported Employment services say is important and distinctive about this model of employment support. This is the case especially for clients with health conditions other than severe mental health since this severe mental health population is the focus of long-standing IPS provision and research.

FUNDED BY

NIHR | National Institute for
Health and Care Research

KEY FINDINGS

Figure 1 below provides a visual summary of the key findings. Client and frontline employment specialist perspectives of what is important and distinctive about Supported Employment services centre around the core feeling of **'having someone in my corner'**. This revolves around clients describing a positive relationship of trust, help and allyship with their employment specialist and employment specialists being committed to enhancing the wellbeing and quality of life of their clients through their support to transition into well matched sustained employment.

I was completely lost, I was confused, I was early in my recovery and it was good for me to know that I have someone in my corner, to help me out with my fight. And that was the main, best positive way to get back on track. (Client)

It's nice to have like someone I know I can trust, someone I know I can rely on and someone that will help me out with like near enough anything that I've ever rung them about. He's had my back for me and it's a nice feeling. (Client)

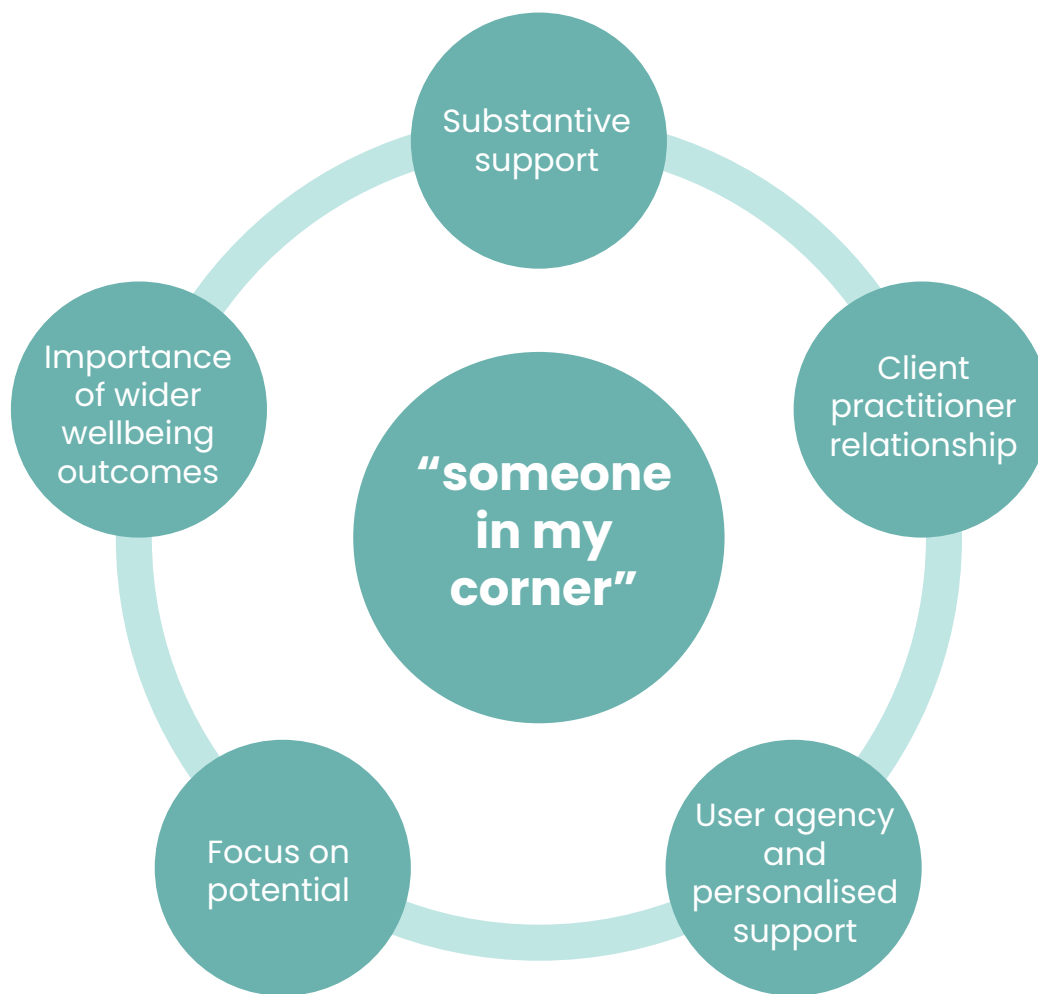
I just really liked having someone in my corner who I felt would always make time for me, really listen to me, really validated me. (Client)

It's working together to improve their lives. I think that's so different and it's brilliant. (Employment specialist)

That positive core relationship of allyship – of clients feeling they had someone in their corner – was enabled by five elements of the Supported Employment service:

1. Substantive support that is consistent, frequent, flexible, intensive;
2. Person-centred support: the importance of user agency and personalised support;
3. The client-practitioner relationship is key: respect, compassion, patience, listening, trust, partnership, non-judgmental, care;
4. Offering hope and possibility: improving confidence, promoting ambition, growing capabilities, broadening horizons;
5. The importance of wider wellbeing outcomes.

Fig 1: One core feeling and five key dimensions to client and frontline perspectives of Supported Employment



1. Substantive support that is consistent, frequent, flexible, intensive

In terms of the substantive support provided, service users valued assistance with job searching tasks, CV writing and interview preparation. However, they suggested it was how this support was provided that was important, highlighting that good support was consistent, frequent, flexible, and intensive and integrated with employer support and on-going in-work support for both clients and employers.

'I really liked that it was end-to-end support, so from like the initial...I don't know if I want to work, kind of thing, all the way through, what have you done before, all the way to CVs, then looking at jobs, then interviews, then post-interview, then staying in the work. And if you wanted, coordinating with your employer, or the interviewer all the way up, you know... like it's a really holistic experience.' (Client)

Every week we will talk for at least one hour. And when I asked him how many sessions I've got, because I was thinking like maybe I have six sessions with them or maximum 12 sessions, and then the guy said "No, we're going to do this until you get a job, it's fine". (Client)

It was so flexible, I could email, text, or call and he would just call me back when he was free, and it would usually be within 24 hours if not that day. (Client)

2. Person-centred support: the importance of user agency and personalised support

User agency, choice and control regarding support was evident and valued. Clients were empowered and supported by practitioners to share their life journeys and goals, drive their and support and employment aims, and to find solutions to problems. Clients reported more positive employment outcomes as a result. Employment specialists acknowledged that one size did not fit all in terms of their support offer and understood that clients were all in different places personally and all on different journeys toward employment.

They were talking to me, trying to find exactly what I wanted to do... they were caring for me as a person. And basically, they told me from the beginning they didn't want you just to get any job, they wanted you to get something that's based on my skills. (Client)

Really worked to understand me, my drives, my fears, my passions, my dislikes and likes, my values. (Client)

I think it can be very empowering for the clients to actually get a lot of control over what they do that's centred around their strengths and what they like doing. I think that also helps for engagement throughout the service...when it comes to actually getting jobs as well, sustaining them, because it's more than likely going to be something they've chosen, something that fits their needs. So it's going to be much easier to stay in a job where you've chosen it.' (Employment specialist)

3. The client-practitioner relationship is key: respect, compassion, patience, listening, trust, partnership, non-judgmental, care

Throughout these Supported Employment services clients and employment specialists described strong, positive, respectful and supportive relationships with each other. Service users valued these relationships highly and praised the qualities, nature and interpersonal skills of their employment specialists. Clients described how this fed into improved self-confidence and self belief and through this to increased trust and engagement in the Supported Employment service. Clients frequently described how this contrasted starkly with their experiences of Jobcentre Plus support.

What I really liked, working with him, was that it felt like a conversation, it felt like everything I'd say was immediately, very energetically and compassionately, and effectively responded to... I really felt like we were equals, which was really important. I felt like he really, really cared about his work, but also me, and about making sure that I was in a job that satisfied me. But he also really helped me believe in myself. (Client)

They're not a therapist, not a friend, not a doctor, but exist in a very...it's a very nice place. Because you have a certain level of intimacy, but it's bounded and structured and personal. But you feel like you are on the end of a service as well. (Client)

There was a lot of trust, definitely. Which you definitely need in that sort of situation, like I said, you're quite vulnerable at that stage. (Client)

She just seems interested and passionate about her job and helping people get into sustainable, quality employment, that they want to do, and that they're going to be interested in, and basically so that they're going to have more stable lives in the future. (Client)

4. Potential: improving confidence, promoting ambition, and broadening horizons

Client's and employment specialists valued support that was centred around recognising and building on client's strengths and passions, improving individuals' confidence and ambition where needed, and growing hope and capabilities regards the viability of achieving meaningful positive change in their lives through well matched paid employment.

It kind of just opened my horizons because when I was depressed I was just seeing like this tunnel vision, just able to focus like 5 minutes ahead of me, you know, and with their help I was able to start planning forward, thinking of the future (Client)

It changed my perspective of what I was capable of and it really opened up doors for me that I hadn't in any way known were there, let alone been knocking on. (Client)

[The service] can just give people the confidence to say "I can do things, I can work, I am good", it's just so obvious but it's not maybe spoken about enough. (Client)

This approach was described by several clients as in sharp contrast to experiences of Jobcentre Plus provision where clients reported feeling like 'just another number' being 'processed' and where 'random jobs' or 'any minimum pay job' were the goal.

5. The importance of wider wellbeing outcomes

Supported Employment frontline specialists saw their role as supporting the health, wellbeing and quality of life of clients through well matched paid work – not merely as seeking to support clients into a job. Thus, the link between 'good work' and wider wellbeing was central to the service and to client's trust in and engagement with their employment specialists.

What can you see yourself doing, what's realistic for you, how does that factor into your appointments, your health, your wellbeing? (Employment specialist)

Someone who really wants to get to know you, because I think they understand, and now I understand, that actually, when you're in work that suits you, intellectually, emotionally, socially, creatively, in terms of your values, that you will stay in that work longer. 'Cause otherwise, if they're just putting you in a job that isn't right for you, or you're not supported in, you're just going to be back in the same circle, so you might as well just really get under the skin of the issue and really get to know the person.' (Client)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Worklessness related to ill health, disability and complex barriers are a significant policy challenge across all advanced economies. The findings of this research suggest that gaining and maintaining work for these individuals can be improved by employment support interventions such as Supported Employment that are built around a positive core relationship of allyship, trust and care between frontline advisors and clients and that our research found was enabled by several key service elements:

- Substantive support that was consistent, frequent, flexible, intensive sensitive to the differing situations and journeys of different clients.
- Prioritising a person-centred approach where agency, choice, control, and personalised support contribute to empowerment for service users and subsequent positive employment outcomes. Services need to balance meeting service targets with delivering the right pace and type of support to best help each client's wellbeing and employment journey.
- Delivering a service where a positive human relationship of trust, care and allyship between frontline practitioner and clients is centred. Services should recognise that the interpersonal skills of the employment practitioner are vital to building these types of relationships and therefore to service and client success. These should be key considerations used in the recruitment and training of new and existing staff to build and strengthen these skills. Practitioners should be equipped to provide support characterised by respect, compassion, patience, listening, trust, partnership, non-judgment and care alongside appropriate ambition and challenge around progression and outcomes.
- Hope and possibility are key. The clients that we spoke with had extensive support needs and often a weak history of employment. Their lives were frequently challenging and change often seemed a distant possibility. To be effective, employment services for these groups need to support and empower clients to feel hope, capability and possibility that meaningful positive change in their lives is possible through the employment service's commitment and ability to support them into well matched, sustainable paid employment.

- The importance of wider wellbeing outcomes. Services should strive to support clients into good quality, well matched, sustainable employment – not to any job – and should see employment as a route to achieving the larger goal of sustainable improvements to client’s health, wellbeing, quality of life, and increased independence from public services and benefits. Services should consider measuring health and wellbeing at baseline and after support using measures such as EQ-5D-5L or SWEMWBS.
- Capacity: resources matter, inevitably. Vulnerable unemployed individuals require support beyond that offered in many mainstream employability support services where caseload numbers are high, contact with practitioners is relatively limited, and support is more basic and generic. Service quality for these groups can be supported by adequate resourcing, lower caseloads, a weaker profit motive within contracts and providers, and the development of client-centred service values.

References

Bond G, Drake R, Becker D. (2020) ‘An update on Individual Placement and Support’, *World Psychiatry*, 19:3

Whitworth, A., Baxter, S., Cullingworth, J. and Clowes, M. (2024) ‘Individual Placement and Support (IPS) beyond severe mental health: an overview review and meta-analysis of evidence around vocational outcomes’, *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 43

Want further details?

Feel free to contact the lead author, Prof Adam Whitworth, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, to discuss further: adam.whitworth@strath.ac.uk

Funding Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

This work was supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research Policy Research Programme reference NIHR202996. The views and opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Sep 2024



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

