

Supported Employment fidelity beyond severe mental health: **Guidance for services, commissioners and policy makers**

Who is this guide for?

This guide should be used by commissioners, policy makers or providers setting up, funding or managing new Supported Employment services for population groups other than severe mental health. The findings provide insights into what is key and distinctive to understand and get right in these Supported Employment services in relation to fidelity in order to maximize the programme experiences and work and wellbeing outcomes of clients.

Why does fidelity matter?

Fidelity supports the quality of the process by which services achieve strong service experiences and vocational outcomes for clients. In Supported Employment programmes fidelity frameworks provide a list of key service characteristics that are evidenced to associate with positive employment and wellbeing outcomes and that act as a helpful scale for developing and benchmarking services. A large body of evidence demonstrates that services that adhere to Supported Employment fidelity deliver large positive employment impacts on a range of vocational outcomes (e.g. job entry, job sustainment, hours worked and time to job entry) across a wide range of population groups compared to business-as-usual services that do not adhere to Supported Employment fidelity (Bond et al., 2020; Whitworth et al., 2024). Within Supported Employment services, evidence also highlights that stronger fidelity adherence associates with stronger job outcomes performance (Yamaguchi et al., 2021).

Existing fidelity approaches

There are two main fidelity models under the Supported Employment umbrella – Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). These different fidelity models share key features:

- A place-then-train model of rapid job search and entry into paid work in the open labour market whilst simultaneously supporting health and other support needs. This contrasts with standard train-then-place approaches that seek to first tackle barriers before next considering job search and entry and/or that consider unpaid voluntary work or sheltered employment as successful outcomes;

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- A five-phase model: open engagement and referral with zero exclusion, whole-person vocational profiling, proactive employer engagement and job matching, secure well-matched employment, and offer on-going in-work support to clients and employers;
- Core progressive values of voluntary participation, strengths-based support, client preferences and agency, co-production, and intensive and personalized support.

Despite these important similarities, IPS and SEQF fidelity models differ in key ways which reflect their creation and appropriateness for different main population groups. IPS and SEQF should be considered as 'equal but different' – they each hold a particular position in the landscape, they sit alongside each other and are both needed, and they should be used in relation to particular population groups:

- IPS is the right model for clients where clinical (or other) integration is needed/possible and where clients have a moderate to high level of need. Individuals with mental health, physical health and/or substance issues are common examples;
- SEQF is the right model for adults with learning disabilities and/or autism. SEQF might also be considered for other groups with high levels of need and where integration with clinical (or other) teams is not necessary or possible.

Research background to this guidance

These findings form part of an applied research project funded by the NIHR between 2022 and 2024 exploring Supported Employment across numerous IPS and SEQF Supported Employment interventions in the UK for population groups other than severe mental health (the traditional group supported by IPS services). Population groups included in the findings are 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. The findings and guidance here draw on data from 71 interviews with frontline employment specialists and team managers of Supported Employment services, clients from a variety of different Supported Employment services, local commissioners of Supported Employment services, co-location partners, and employers. They highlight key considerations regards fidelity to inform future design, commissioning and service delivery.

Fidelity is seen as a valuable service structure and performance tool

The Supported Employment services that we interviewed were clear that fidelity provided a beneficial structure, guide and benchmark around which their services could anchor and measure their development:

'I can't imagine delivering IPS without it [the fidelity scale], because it keeps us on track, it keeps us focused. It's a really useful, really well researched, evidence base'

'Fidelity is from the start and that's our quality, it's our benchmarking... I feel like it's a golden thread throughout... it keeps us on track.'

An important part of this was that interviewees were convinced that stronger fidelity brought stronger job outcomes performance for their clients, in line with the wider evidence base:

'if you are... high scoring fidelity you will get more outcomes. It sorts itself out really'

'there's definitely a connection'

'if you've got a strong fidelity, you'll see your outcomes increase. Because if you look at the model of supported employment, there's no reason why if you're delivering it properly that it shouldn't work'

'we've definitely seen with the improvements of our score the more outcomes we get'

Fidelity as structuring staff discretion and an active process of on-going development

At the same time, services were clear that fidelity should not be understood mechanistically as a simple checklist or 'silver bullet' where mindless adherence would guarantee results. This was described in two different ways.

First, fidelity was described as a beneficial facilitating structure for a Supported Employment service that left ample positive space for crucial discretion and client personalisation by employment specialists within it. Thus, staff values, quality and training remain absolutely key. Provider staff welcomed that combination of clear, evidence-based guidance and structure provided by the fidelity framework without impinging upon – indeed creating clearer space, structure and encouragement for – their own creative frontline discretion and personalised support for clients:

'a good degree of specification and sufficient room for flexibility and personalisation'

'I feel that I can definitely do the right thing by the individual a lot, lot more and I think that's really, really important'

Second, fidelity was seen as 'live', active and ever evolving within a service:

'I would say that it's a process that's developed over time, where we work towards implementing aspects of the fidelity scale into how we work and the processes that we've developed over time.'

This highlights the importance of seeing fidelity not as a natural, given or static feature of Supported Employment services but, rather, as something that takes time, focus, energy and resource to grow and strengthen – and to continue to do so through any contract via a service's on-going self-reflection and focus on continual improvement.

Boiling down Supported Employment's quantitative and qualitative USPs

Although the IPS and SEQF fidelity scales weight their component fidelity items equally, the stakeholders that we interviewed tended in contrast to describe what they felt to be especially distinctive and powerful about a Supported Employment model as compared to other forms of employment support – many of which provider staff had previous experience of working in – for these kinds of population groups that are farther from the labour market. Three different elements were described:

1. **Quantitative resourcing:** central was the basic – but felt to be key – issue of the increased resources and lower caseload sizes that were possible in Supported Employment services compared to other models. In the UK context a maximum advisor caseload of 25–30 has become the norm in IPS services for population groups beyond severe mental health; in SEQF services for adults with learning disabilities and/or autism a maximum caseload of 15 is typical. Caseload size is a specific fidelity item in the IPS fidelity scale and is guided explicitly in the SEQF model (though is not formally part of its fidelity scale).
2. **Qualitative values and genuinely person-centred support:** interviewees also described as particularly key those fidelity items that spoke to the model's emphasis in its values and principles on support personalisation, client preferences and client agency – for example, individualised job search, personalised follow-on supports, and fidelity items around employment diversity and job matching.
3. **Distinctive model features:** also highlighted were particular features of the Supported Employment model that did not exist at all or to the same extent in other forms of UK employment support: proactive and personalised employer engagement and support; clinical integration (in IPS); employer mediation, workplace accommodations and on-going in-work support for clients and employers (given client consent). These features were felt to be key to effectively supporting these types of clients with more complex support needs.

The spirit rather than the letter of fidelity: IPS fidelity generally maps well onto different population groups, but with some recognised challenges

The SEQF fidelity model is designed and tailored specifically for the learning disabilities and/or autism population and it unsurprisingly fits the needs of that group very well.

For IPS services, interviewees often reported that they were using the IPS fidelity scale designed originally for severe mental health groups/settings – although increasingly with fidelity scales being modified in their language for different population groups beyond severe mental health (e.g. substance misuse, primary care – see Further Resources below). Of importance in the IPS community has been the shift towards emphasising the importance of addressing the spirit and intent of the fidelity items, not obsessing about the precise letter (i.e. language) of the fidelity items. In general terms IPS fidelity was felt by interviewees to map well onto diverse population groups, in line with wider research that highlights the successful use of IPS in diverse groups (Whitworth et al., 2024).

However, our research did highlight some areas where there were still substantive challenges in using IPS in groups and settings beyond severe mental health. Commissioners and providers should pay especial attention to developing these areas in their IPS services. Key IPS beyond severe mental health challenge areas include:

- Clinical integration, especially for IPS services for groups with no clear health integration point (e.g. individuals with health issues but not receiving (long enough) formal healthcare support) or where support for a target population group is fragmented across services;
- Client reluctance to disclose health conditions, especially where they fear stigma and bias from employers – disclosure seems a particular challenge amongst IPS services for clients with substance issues. This undermines the ability of IPS services to effectively mediate with employers, to support clients and employers in development work accommodations, and to deliver on-going in-work support to clients and employers;
- The role of digital in IPS services compared to the language around face-to-face written into the IPS fidelity scales for several fidelity items. Our interviews suggest that this remains something of an issue in the revised IPS fidelity scales (see Further Resources) and that flexibility to the preferences of clients and employers is appropriate. Interviewees made clear however that physical presence in host co-location teams is important in order to drive effective awareness, cultural acceptance and understanding in key co-location teams and hence to support referrals and integration.

Both IPS and SEQF services faced the following shared challenges, though these are not the result of fidelity fit:

- Employer engagement, driven by employment specialists typically being less confident and expert around employer engagement as compared with supporting clients. IPS beyond severe mental health services in the UK typically also noted challenges to employer engagement due to caseload/capacity pressures;

- Gatekeeping of clients by health and other referral partners: an on-going journey of education and culture change for health and other referral partners about the place-then-train model, the role of employment support, and the aspiration and viability of paid work as a positive part of health and wellbeing recovery for individuals.

Fidelity and Values

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the research brought into view a deeper focus on the underlying values that sit beneath and infuse the formal IPS or SEQF fidelity scales (indeed, values are an explicit part of the SEQF model). Particularly amongst better performing and more established services, values were described and understood as at the heart of the distinctiveness and effectiveness of Supported Employment fidelity and of their service success.

High performing services (both IPS and SEQF) described how fidelity for them was not just about the formal fidelity scale/score. Instead, it was at least as much about the set of values and day-to-day practices that underpinned what they understood the spirit and performance success of the Supported Employment model to be – really listening to and valuing client's wishes and needs, empowerment, co-production, genuine care and commitment to all clients and employers, proactivity, non-judgemental, ambitious, appropriately challenging. And it is regards these values that clients of these services described the distinctiveness, positivity and power of their Supported Employment experiences. The values were about how the Supported Employment service thinks, feels and behaves in its every action and interaction. And they were exemplified in provider staff who it is clear saw their work as a vocation not a job:

'we do a lot around explaining what the model is, and the quality that sits behind it, and the values and the ethos'

'As long as you're aligning with the IPS principles and you're doing those you find yourself meeting the aspects of the fidelity scale without actually realising it'

'it just becomes your way of working'

These high performing services did talk about the fidelity scale and score of course, but they moved seamlessly and fairly rapidly into thinking and talking about the extent to which these progressive values that underpin fidelity flowed through the DNA of their service – its culture, management, staff recruitment and development, daily interactions with clients and employers, and so on – and what they were actively doing to seek to strengthen those values and collective culture.

In summary, fidelity and values should not be seen as two separate things but instead as intimately connected: strong fidelity providing the structure, skeleton and core building blocks of a Supported Employment service and the progressive values of Supported Employment filling those in with their form, feel and function.

Recommendations for policy makers and commissioners

- IPS is the right model for clients where clinical (or other) integration is needed/ possible and where clients have a moderate to high level of need. Individuals with mental health, physical health and/or substance issues are common examples. SEQF is the right model for adults with learning disabilities and/or autism. SEQF might also be considered for other groups with high levels of need and where integration with clinical (or other) teams is not necessary or possible.
- Use appropriate, evidence-based, cohort and model specific values to build specifications. A general guide for an IPS service in a population group other than severe mental health would be as follows: maximum advisor caseload of 25; unit cost of around £2000; job start target of 40%; 13 weeks job sustainment rate of at least 60%. A general guide for an SEQF service supporting adults with learning disabilities or autism would be as follows: maximum advisor caseload of 15; unit cost of around £5000; job start target of 40%; 26 weeks job sustainment rate of at least 70%.
- As part of the procurement process, consider the capacity of providers to really understand Supported Employment values and fidelity and to deliver both at high quality. This might include a track record of previous delivery of high fidelity and high values services, evidence of a detailed understanding of fidelity standards and processes to develop and measure them, and demonstration of progressive, person-centered Supported Employment values in line with the social model of disability.
- Set expectations from the outset that providers will participate in external fidelity reviews as well as development of a set of internal training, supervision and assessment activities in order to continually monitor, strengthen and reflect on fidelity and values within the service.
- Local commissioners and relevant wider local partners should expect to be actively involved in the development and improvement of the service, helping providers access key referral partners, integrate with key teams (if IPS), troubleshoot issues, and gradually strengthen fidelity and values, referrals and outcomes in the service. Commissioners should expect to invest time, energy and potential resource to support newer services to embed into the local service ecosystem to set up strong referral pathways and (if IPS) integration. Commissioners should expect services to require training and development around Supported Employment fidelity and values for several months and on an on-going basis thereafter. Commissioners can expect a new service to take around 12 months to reach good quality, depth and appropriately balanced focus across Supported Employment understanding, fidelity, values and outcomes performance.
- Commissioners should monitor and evaluate Supported Employment services holistically looking at outcomes, fidelity, and the processes to support these.

Recommendations for providers

- Important as they are, providers should go beyond attending to fidelity scales and scores alone. Rather, providers should understand Supported Employment fidelity and values as intimately intertwined and should embed continual strengthening and deepening of both into the DNA and daily ways of working of the service. This is likely to require active leadership and innovation by service managers and senior leaders around service culture, management practices, recruitment, staff development and learning infrastructure (e.g. regional communities of practice).
- Develop a culture of inquiry, learning and adaptation. As services learn about what works best for their population groups, partner stakeholders and local employers expect the operational process to shift and evolve over time.
- Invest resource into data collection and analysis so that services can use data to inform on-going service improvement and can evidence impacts and potential savings.
- Stick to the spirit rather than the letter of fidelity scales and remain focused on doing best by clients and employers as key partners.
- Consider the different referral routes for different cohorts, different levels of sensitivity around disclosure, different employment goals, and in-work support needs.

References

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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

Check out the Resources page of the project website for a range of wider project resources including webinars, briefings, academic publications, IPS cost-benefit resources, and illustrations: www.ipsbeyondbeyondsmi.org/resources

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Further resources:

- [Supported Employment: why does model fidelity matter? IEP article](#)
- [IPS fidelity scales for different population groups](#)
- [SEQF fidelity scale and resources](#)

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