A relationship- based approach to tackling unemployment in disadvantaged communities

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Research article

A relationship-based approach to tackling unemployment in disadvantaged communities

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Abstract

As social pedagogues we have a keen interest in initiatives benefiting groups that are often overlooked or groups that suffer from multiple disadvantages. The Wellbeing Jobs Club is one such initiative. Set up by a community trust, this club takes a holistic approach to supporting those trapped within the negative cycle of unemployment, recognising the effects that this can have on mental health and overall well-being. Our evaluation of the service collected survey and interview data from both club participants and job coaches. All participants were free to attend under their own volition and were always met with unconditional positive regard. This service provided a source of care and support with everyday challenges that caused attendees high levels of anxiety, and unique needs of a very diverse group were catered for. This club was clearly a lifeline for some of the most vulnerable in our communities and we call for increased funding for this and similar initiatives.

Keywords unemployment; well-being; relationships; social pedagogue

Introduction

In 2025 the annual unemployment rate in the UK rose significantly. Today 11 million people of working age (16 to 64) are unemployed, amounting to 25 per cent of that demographic (Cuffe and Georgieva, 2025). As the current unemployment rate is costing £1 billion in unemployment benefits per year (Clark, 2025), it is therefore no surprise that the UK government has recently announced a series of measures to cut the welfare bill, making it more difficult for people to claim certain benefits, in the hope that this will incentivise some of those not working to rejoin the labour force (Clark, 2025).

There is a strong link between unemployment and poor mental health. This relationship is bi-directional: good mental health improves employability, while unemployment can cause stress and negatively impact on mental health, leading to conditions such as depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem (Wilson, 2021). Recognising the key role that mental health plays, the Community Trust that this study focuses on used Lottery funding to set up a Wellbeing Jobs Club service in 2021. This service aims to enhance confidence, improve mental health and support local residents within areas of multiple deprivation securing employment. The programme currently serves 150 participants who are referred by a variety of local agencies.

In 2024 the Community Trust requested that our university carry out an external assessment of their Wellbeing Jobs Club's quality and effectiveness, as well as a comparison with similar statutory services. Social pedagogy is where care and education meet (Cameron and Moss, 2011), and as education researchers with an interest in the relationship and community-focused values of social pedagogy, we were particularly interested in the social impact of this club on the local community that it served. Our remit was to gather data that could inform potential improvements to the service in order to feed into its monitoring processes. The findings from this evaluation were shared with stakeholders in the form of a report, but we also felt that there was much of value to be learned by any professionals who provide support to those who are most vulnerable within our communities.

Literature review

Whose responsibility is unemployment anyway?

The question of who is responsible for unemployment – the individual or the state – is not a new one. Beveridge (1944) argued that the development of modern society had caused unemployment, and therefore it was society's responsibility to deal with it appropriately. Likewise, Marshall and Bottomore (1987) described how 'the pattern of the old order' of self-sustaining communities was 'dissolved under the blows of a competitive economy' (pp. 13–14). Both argued that the social and economic autonomy of individuals was destroyed by the monopolising power, and wealth, of a few; it then stands to reason that those who have grasped the power have also grasped full responsibility for the other.

With the development of welfare support systems, the arguments over more recent decades have become more nuanced. For example, Selbourne (1994) argues that rights (to financial support from the government) without responsibility have caused 'egalitarian entitlement' (p. 60), while Giddens (1994) and White (2000) both stress that all citizens have a *responsibility* to work. However, even HM Treasury (1999, pp. 30–3) acknowledged that the opportunities for suitable employment available for individuals were determined far more by their lineage and socio-economic status than by their own skills.

There is insufficient space in this article to fully explore the topic of responsibility in a philosophical or socio-economic sense; therefore, we simplify our attitude towards unemployment as encompassed within the sense of *community*, which implies that within local communities we all have responsibility for one another. Although, admittedly, somewhat at odds with our neoliberal, competitive society, we come to this discussion with the values of Ubuntu in mind, underpinned by 'relational ethics that prizes relationships of interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, relationality, community friendliness, harmonious relationships and other-regarding actions' (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019, p. 101). Our research is positioned on the stance that individual and community are co-dependent: 'we are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are'; the success of one depends on the success of the other, just as the well-being of one depends on the well-being of the other (Gade, 2012). In more pedagogical terms we all exist within a relational and interdependent universe (Thempra, n.d.), our actions will impact on others, and as social pedagogues it is our responsibility to make our impact a positive one.

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Unemployment and mental health

Research consistently links unemployment with mental health issues. According to The Health Foundation (2021), common effects of unemployment include depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. This then causes a negative spiral, as the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) found. Their research indicates that mental ill-health can hinder the ability to find and keep employment, often resulting in lower-than-average income. Gedikli et al. (2022) also identified a reverse causal link, whereby poor health and well-being reduced the probability of employment. It is important to remember that the benefits of employment extend beyond simple financial gain; a professional role can also bring with it social status, routine, socialisation and a sense of purpose (Gedikli et al., 2022). Ryan and Deci (2001) go as far as to say that it gives a sense of purpose to life, which is 'essential for psychological growth'.

Statutory unemployment services

In the UK, statutory benefits for people who are unemployed include Jobseekers Allowance and Universal Credit (Gov.uk, 2023). The new style Jobseekers' Allowance is a contribution-based benefit, based on National Insurance contributions over the past two years. It is for people who are actively seeking work and can be claimed alongside Universal Credit, a payment for people on a low income or who are not working. Since 2018, Universal Credit has replaced Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, and Working Tax Credit, making clear the governments' expectations that all should be in some form of paid employment.

A Work and Health Programme, which was launched by the government in 2017 and included personalised support and coaching, was cancelled in 2024. This decision has been criticised, particularly for its impact on disabled people. For example, Tapper (2024) reported the concerns of Elizabeth Taylor, chief executive of Employment Related Services Association, that disbanding the Work Health Programme would cause 'a big gap in provision'. She added that the new programmes being introduced would not be as accessible for disabled people, and that it was likely that those in some geographical areas would have no support at all for a year. Interestingly, an access-to-work scheme has been developed by the government, which provides communication support for job interviews for people with a disability, learning difficulty or health condition, as well as support for people with physical or mental health conditions while at work. However, this scheme is available only to people who are already employed (Gov.uk, 2023).

Mental well-being support

In the UK, mental health and well-being are primarily supported through the National Health Service (NHS), with key initiatives, including: talking therapies (for example, cognitive behaviour therapy, or CBT) for common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (accessible through GP referrals or self-referral); community mental health teams providing support in various settings; crisis response services; and a focus on integrating mental health support within primary care practices, alongside increased funding and awareness campaigns to promote overall mental well-being (NHS England, 2025). It is essential to distinguish between mental health and mental well-being, as the two are not synonymous. An individual may live with a diagnosed mental illness while simultaneously experiencing a sense of mental well-being. Conversely, the absence of a clinical diagnosis does not necessarily equate to positive mental well-being. As Huppert (2009, p. 138) argues, mental well-being encompasses more than the mere absence of mental illness; it reflects a broader state of psychological functioning and resilience. Recognition – being seen, heard and acknowledged – is a fundamental component of mental well-being. Within social pedagogy, a *recognising approach*, grounded in Honneth's (2001) theory of recognition, serves as a foundational principle. It emphasises the importance of creating relational and structural conditions that enable individuals to feel valued and respected. This approach is particularly important when supporting those who have experienced rejection in their lives, whether through barriers to employment, stigmatisation related to mental health or broader social exclusion.

According to the mental health charity Mind (2020), one in four people will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year in England, and one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety or depression) in any given week. In Worcestershire,

Mental Health Matters (2023), a charity working in partnership with Worcestershire NHS, aims to provide pre-employment and employment support to people who are already accessing talking therapies. The NHS target for its anxiety and depression programme is that 75 per cent of people access services within six weeks, and 95 per cent within 18 weeks (NHS England, 2024). These talking therapies are provided by qualified counsellors and therapists; however, in 2022, the NHS reported a shortage of 2,000 qualified therapists (McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2024), resulting in significantly increased waiting times.

Although this research has been conducted with individuals in community contexts, many of whom have received a mental health diagnosis, its principal focus remains on mental well-being. The overarching objective is to support individuals in cultivating a sense of wellness, strengthening functional capacity and promoting psychological resilience.

Job coaching

Rogers (1967) defined a helping relationship as a type of relationship in which at least one party has the intent of promoting the growth, development or improved functioning and coping skills of the other person. The parallels between this and social pedagogical approaches to supporting development are clear: the social pedagogical term *Haltung* is based on 'an emotional connectedness to other people and a profound respect for their human dignity' (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011, p. 36); it has respect and nurture at its heart. The essential elements of the helping relationship, according to research by Sinai-Glazer (2020), are 'love and support; trust and feeling safe; listening and feeling understood; making an effort to help; humanness, compassion, and sensitivity; availability, continuity, and being there when needed; and chemistry' (p. 245). Discussions relating to this helping relationship are often related to Rogers's (1967, p. 304) *Core Conditions* to enable positive development in an individual, which include empathic understanding, the ability to relate and unconditional positive regard. The job-coaching relationship encompasses all these features, as the coach helps their client by inspiring them to maximise their personal and professional potential (Passmore and Sinclair, 2020, p. 19).

Whereas the relationship described above assumes one-to-one interaction, job coaching can sometimes be delivered to groups rather than individuals. According to Leszcz (2024), groups can be more effective than individual therapy, thanks to the stigma reduction and solidarity that people experience in the presence of their peers. However, in contrast, Baldelli and Givati (2024) suggest that the advantages of individual coaching far outweigh those experienced in groups and include more safety and intimacy; a stronger connection; greater customisation to individual needs; increased accountability when individual advice has been given; and more flexibility. Individualised attention is likely to help people to feel *seen*, a vital human need, as feeling invisible is damaging to people's self-esteem (Honneth, 2001, p. 112). For these reasons, individualised support provided by job coaches has been shown to be the key to success (Kim, 2024); however, individual coaching is far more time-consuming and far more expensive.

Job coaches generally provide a range of personalised services to individuals, both before and after they attain a job position. Kim's (2024) research highlights the particular benefits of this approach for people with disabilities and communication difficulties, such as autism. Although job coaches are typically involved in career counselling, identifying job-related strengths and weaknesses, teaching job search strategies and supporting people with applications and interviews, another key skill which is central to success is confidence building. Confidence impacts on our motivation and ability to communicate effectively, and it is a skill that can be learned. Confidence is developed by increasing awareness of one's strengths and skills, being assertive and developing a positive mindset (King's Trust, n.d.). But in order to develop, as all social pedagogues will recognise, individuals must be gently helped out of their comfort zone and into the learning zone (Senninger, 2000), a slightly more disconcerting place to be. The job of the coach is to hold them there and prevent them from moving into the panic zone 'wherein learning is impossible, as it is blocked by a sense of fear, and all energy is used up for managing/controlling our anxiety' (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2015, p. 57). As such the job coach must demonstrate sensitivity and empathy towards their clients.

Job coaching is far more than the learning and development of specific, work-related skills; it is about the development of individuals' belief that they are worthy of and capable of a job. It is also about the whole person. And this came through clearly in the data we collected.

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Methodology

Research approach

Although this evaluation had the aim of 'measuring the success' of the Jobs Club, the ultimate goal for all social research is to 'find new ways for positive change, which support human flourishing and well-being' (Bergmark and Kostenius, 2018, p. 624). A social pedagogical approach to research emphasises a holistic, relationship-centred and values-driven approach to understanding and addressing social issues, focusing on well-being, learning and social inclusion (Thempra, 2025). These positive values were central to our research approaches.

The intention for this research was to 'bring about good' (Bloor, 2010, p. 17) through identifying the aspects of this club that are working well, enabling those to be built on further to maximise their potential for the service user, but also by acknowledging weaker areas that might need development. However, in line with Bloor's (2010) thoughts about research, the process was just as important as the outcomes, and it was important to us that no one was made to feel uncomfortable during the process. We sought to have a positive impact *throughout* the course of the research by taking a respectful, caring and sensitive approach to those with whom we interacted. All aspects of the research were carried out within the guidelines for ethical research set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) and all documents were scrutinised by the ethics panel at the University of Worcester before full approval was given for the research to go ahead.

The research took a case study approach, focusing on the voices of Jobs Club participants and coaches to paint a multi-faceted picture of the service. A case study research methodology can provide an in-depth examination of a service in its real-world context, producing 'a detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences' (Rahman, 2017, p. 103). Through such an approach we could gain a fully rounded understanding of the Jobs Club and how it was perceived through a range of stakeholder lenses.

With this research we aimed to better understand the 'rich and contextually situated understandings' (McChesney and Aldridge, 2019, p. 227) of service users and coaches. As such, we took an interpretivist approach. Beyond the statistics of uptake, it was important for us to gain a glimpse of 'the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221). There are areas of human experience that we cannot measure through numbers alone (Silverman, 2001, p. 32), and we were interested in how people *felt* about their involvement in, or with, the service, rather than simply knowing how many accessed it.

Data collection methods

Two different approaches were used to collect data; therefore, our analysis might be referred to as using a *mixed-methods* approach. The first was anonymous surveys. Data was collected from Wellbeing Jobs Club service users who clicked on a link to an electronic survey. This link was contained within an email composed by the researchers and sent out through the Jobs Club manager. This method had a number of advantages, including it being a cost-effective and fast method of data collection (Singh and Sagar, 2021). But perhaps more important was the fact that it offered respondents the advantage of total anonymity; we would not know which of the 150 participants of the Jobs Club had responded, or who any of the comments made belonged to. This was made clear in the participant information sheet that preceded the survey.

The survey offered a range of both quantitative and qualitative questions, meaning that some quick responses could still be gained even by those pressed for time, or those who did not want to elaborate on their experience. Where an absence of access to technology or problems with literacy were an issue, the job coaches supported individuals in accessing and completing the survey. The data from the surveys (there were 22 responses) were reviewed prior to the interviews (n = 3) that followed.

The same email that invited service users to take part in the survey also included an invitation to take part in an interview (or a 'conversation with a purpose'; Burgess, 1984) with one of the researchers to explore some of the questions in more depth. The interviews were offered in person at the Wellbeing Jobs Club or online, and Jobs Club coaches made themselves available to accompany respondents if they so wished. Interviews were semi-structured, based on the key aspects emerging from the analysis

of the online survey data. The two current job coaches were also invited to interview, as was the service manager.

Job seekers are referred to the Wellbeing Jobs Club from a wide range of agencies, including schools, mental health teams and the Department for Work and Pensions. The Jobs Club manager provided the researchers with a list of referral contacts to invite for an informal interview, but unfortunately, we had no respondents for this aspect of the research.

Before all interviews participants were given a participant information sheet that outlined the parameters of their involvement. This included the right to withdraw, confidentiality and what would be done with their data. They signed a consent sheet as a record that they were happy with the detail that the information sheet outlined. Interviews were recorded by Microsoft Teams and transcribed as soon as possible thereafter, anonymising the data and deleting the recording. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcription and make any changes they wished.

Data analysis

As was mentioned above, data analysis began once the surveys were completed, but after the interviews the data were considered again as a whole. The researchers immersed themselves in the data before taking some time to reflect on what appeared to be the key messages that it contained (Naseem et al., 2023). Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify conceptual groupings from the data, to 'reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of "reality"' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). This approach is particularly useful when identifying typologies of experience to inform future planning and policy. Data corresponding to each of the themes that the researchers identified were extracted from the data as a whole and triangulated with similar data. This process provided the opportunity to assess whether there were strong data to support the theme that was identified, or whether our claim lacked supporting evidence. The most compelling messages that were identified in the data are explored below. These include:

- the multi-faceted motivations for attendance
- the wide range of support provided – employment, mental health and practical support
- job coaches' ability to see the *bigger picture*
- high satisfaction and the positive and holistic impact on people's lives
- the value of the relationship between service user and job coach.

Results

An overview of some key quantitative data:

- Twenty-two service users completed the survey, a response rate of 15 per cent.
- At the time of completion, 50 per cent were unemployed, 14 per cent were working as volunteers and 36 per cent were employed.
- Sixty-four per cent had been told about the club by a professional, 9 per cent by a friend, and 14 per cent had seen an advertisement.
- Fifty per cent of the respondents had previously accessed other services through the Community Trust.
- Twenty-four per cent of people have been attending for under three months, 14 per cent for three to six months, 38 per cent for seven to 12 months and 24 per cent for over a year.

In the data that follow, each survey response is given an individual code. Those that were interviewed have been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity and any names mentioned have been replaced.

Our data suggest that this Wellbeing Jobs Club provides a unique, people-centred service that is different from anything else available in the area – an individualised provision that aims to meet people's specific needs. Service manager Treena explained:

> There are various welfare-to-work providers that provide welfare support, job-coaching support, but just not on this level. It's supportive, rather than 'get yourself into work for 16 hours or you're not having your benefits', that doesn't work, we know it doesn't.

This sensitive and responsive approach was evidenced throughout the data.

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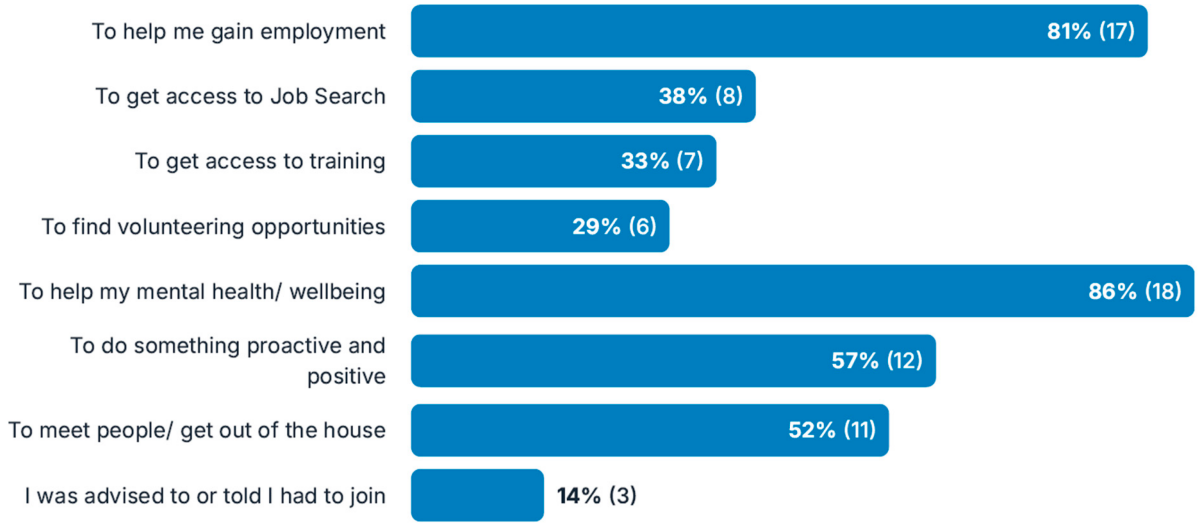
Individuals' motivation for attending

The data demonstrate that service users access the Jobs Club for a range of reasons, the main reasons being job search support and mental health support. Responses showed equal numbers of people joining for employment support and mental health support. Figure 1 shows responses to the multiple-choice question 'Why did you decide to use the wellbeing jobs club?'.

Figure 1. Responses to 'Why did you decide to join the Well-being Jobs Club'?



Some people referred themselves to the club after seeing an advertisement or hearing about it from a friend, but referrals also came from a range of professionals and organisations (for example, Sight Concern, a social worker, a psychiatrist, a GP or the Autistic Society). Of service users completing the survey, 64 per cent said they were referred by a professional, and 23 per cent were self-referrals. The Community Trust organises many other services and support groups, and 68 per cent of survey respondents were also currently accessing other services (for example, a women's project and domestic abuse support). This suggests that service users' general satisfaction with the services prompts them to attend several simultaneously, increasing the potential for impact on their social interaction, increasing opportunities for positive communication and supporting their mental health.

The popularity of the Wellbeing Jobs Club is partly because the Community Trust is well established and well known in the area. Service manager Treena explained that their visibility is something that they continue to work on:

> We attend quite a lot of events in the local area. We're very well known. I've been in this industry 20 years and been in the area for over 20 years. Todd has been a youth worker, so he's very well known in the area and again social media. Vicky did an amazing video with a client about her journey and that was posted out on social media and LinkedIn and all over the place … our coaches go out into the community.

The service appears to be of particular help to those with multiple and complex needs that are beyond the scope of other organisations. Treena explained the complexity of some of their clients' challenges, and that even achieving contact with them at the Wellbeing Jobs Club might have been a long and challenging journey for the client, as we discuss in the next section. Treena referred to one client who had 'been round the block a little bit and they've attended various things that haven't worked out for them until they finally come to us'.

What shines clearly through all the data gathered is that although the staff are called job coaches, they are much more than that. The support provided by the service is multi-faceted. Treena indicated this expansiveness when she said, 'we say job coach; it isn't just that … we are literally everything'. In her

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interview, job coach Vicky reflected: 'It's not just jobs, jobs, jobs, it's actually reducing their barriers and increasing their confidence.'

Support provided

Employment support

Of survey respondents, 72 per cent reported feeling more confident about their chances of gaining employment since attending the Wellbeing Jobs Club. They spoke about having built the skills to search for a job and feeling more confident about gaining employment. One respondent said that she had felt unworthy of employment because of her disability, and that the jobs club had made her value herself and see her own worth.

Job coach Vicky explained that the club runs some sessions as group sessions, mostly for generic subjects like CV building and interview skills, which work well in a group. However, the survey data make clear that service users prefer 1-on-1 sessions with their job coach. Of respondents, 86 per cent said they preferred such sessions, with the remaining 14 per cent finding the 1-on-1 sessions and group sessions equally useful. This has significant implications for the continued funding of this support.

Looking at 'the bigger picture'

Interestingly, achieving paid employment is not always the ultimate aim of the support given. One service user explained: 'I have now been recognised as limited capability to work, when I first joined the club, I wasn't even aware that this was a thing and was stressed and depressed because of pressure being applied by the job centre to look for work' (SW3). This exemplifies how support provided by the Wellbeing Jobs Club is carefully tailored to the individual. It is not possible to offer a 'one size fits all' service that results in everyone gaining employment within a fixed period, as people's lives are complex. The service user's choice of the word 'recognised' is particularly noteworthy. As Honneth (cited in Baum, 2022) argues, recognition plays a fundamental role in the formation and development of personal identity.

Responses indicated that many people arrive at the jobs club feeling hopeless after perpetual setbacks, and that it can take time for them to build the skills and confidence needed to eventually find employment. These examples demonstrate the nurturing environment that the club is able to provide for those in such situations:

> When I started, I was depressed and thought there was no hope due to my age now I'm 60. My skills had died due to technology and my health, but with time and the right people around me it built my hopes that I could be useful to someone in a job of some kind. For now, I have a small job, not many hours but it's a start and I get satisfaction I'm helping someone. (CX9)

> If you need baby steps, they'll let you take those baby steps. (Mandy, service user, during interview)

Job coach Vicky recalled a client who took 16 attempts to be brave enough to even attend the appointments that they had made. She explained that for them, 'That's an achievement, that they come to the appointment … and then they go away a bit more positive if we sort one thing out at a time'. The priority of the job coaches was to enable clients to experience success. They recognised that however insignificant that achievement might appear to others, it could be hugely impactful for the client.

Vicky explained in depth how overwhelmed clients could be with the multiple challenges that they are facing, and how identifying one aspect of need at a time is a strategy that works well. She elaborated:

> Break it down, make it easier, don't overwhelm people, especially for people like from domestic abuse, they might also have social services and have to go to loads of meetings. It's very overwhelming. Sometimes I'll take one of their goals we're like, OK, so this is how we're going to do this one, and we'll break it down, make it a little bit simpler. And if they fail, we break it down again. We can obviously break it down further as they've got time.

The benefit of the fact that this support was not time-bound was notable throughout the feedback. The Wellbeing Jobs Club service enables clients to take as long as they need, meaning that they do not

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experience the same pressures that might be experienced through other employment support services where they 'have to get everything done in six weeks and then kick them to the curb' (job coach Vicky). In addition, the fact that respondents were not forced to attend, and that they were not sanctioned if they did not attend, was also deemed significant by respondents.

As well as recognising the smaller steps needed by many, there was also an appreciation, and an acceptance, that things might not always go according to plan, and that success is not always linear. Job coach Vicky explained that 'Sometimes they don't improve, sometimes they go a bit backwards … because they've gone out of their comfort zone', but that did not mean that improvements would not be seen further down the line when the client had 'done whatever they need to do'. There would be peaks and troughs as clients struggled through, and overcame, new challenges, and as they stepped in and out of their comfort zone.

Mental health and well-being support

The data reinforce the symbiosis found in the literature between employment and mental health and well-being. Improvements in people's mental health, and their opinion of their own self-efficacy, can significantly impact on their work opportunities. A client explained:

> As a disabled person, I never thought someone would see past my disability, I assumed it would always hold me back and lower my worth in others' eyes. [The Wellbeing Jobs Club] helped me to recognise myself, the skills I have and my own knowledge. I now have the experience, alongside my knowledge and education. I see my worth. (SW3)

The data in Table 1 suggest that mental health, confidence and self-esteem had all been improved among the survey respondents that had accessed the jobs club. A significant 86 per cent of service users reported an improvement in their mental health since attending.

Table 1. Improvements in mental health and well-being (survey)

	Improved a little (%)	**Improved a lot (%)**
Mental health improvement	27	59
Confidence improved	29	62
Socialisation improved	58	29
Feeling less anxious	45	40
Feel better about self	42	47

Job coach Vicky gave an example of how this could happen, and the opportunities that could be opened up through their supportive approach:

> One of the best cases that I ever had was a client who couldn't read and write. She had no confidence she was going through a really difficult time with her husband and it took me about 8 weeks to get her to come to this course. I said 'what course do you want to do?' Because at the time the WI [Women's Institute] would put on any course which had 10 people, she said she'd like to do sewing. And I said 'OK, we'll do sewing' and she said, 'but I can't, I can't do the writing' and I said 'we'll do that for you. We'll write what you say and we'll fill in the application' and then she got her first certificate, and she was so blown away by it, she went on to do her English and her maths.

What is also clear through this comment is the emotional investment of the job coaches in this work. It was these small but significant successes that motivated them to continue.

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Practical support/dealing with life's challenges

Examples of practical support provided by the Wellbeing Jobs Club are extensive. There were examples in the data of job coaches helping service users with housing applications, benefits advice and debt management. All these things, although not directly related to employability, can significantly impact on an individual's confidence, stress and ability to focus on finding work. Clients' experience of being overwhelmed by a multitude of problems, and being supported to tackle these problems, is illustrated clearly in this example from a survey respondent:

> I always come away from our meetings feeling so much lighter. I have more confidence now knowing that even on days I don't see her she's only on the other end of a phone call. I feel she [job coach] really understands not just me but my whole situation. She's helped me fill in forms, add to my universal credit journal and locate things my children need within my budget, which in itself was such a weight off my shoulders. She has helped me create a budget I can stick to as well as helping me start saving money, she's helped me find other local clubs that have the same interests as me, she's been someone I can just rant to when life feels too much and then she gives me a fresh perspective on things. She really has kept me going. (O20)

Service manager Treena explained how the services provided by the Community Trust work together to provide holistic support for people. As well as managing the Wellbeing Jobs Club she also managed two other support groups, and the three of them focused on:

> Supporting people to break down complex barriers and move forward to either get into work or training, improve mental health, well-being and improve their financial situation. We are moving people gently towards their goals and it's around that sustainable outcome.

This holistic approach was clearly working, with 95 per cent of clients saying that they were satisfied with the service they received. Perhaps most importantly, service users felt they could discuss with job coaches sensitive issues like mental health problems, food-bank use and domestic violence without being judged. There were some compelling statements from service users, demonstrating the impact of the club on their lives, including: 'it saved me' (0XE), 'I am so thankful' (O20), 'the sessions got me through a turbulent time' (CX9), 'I felt accepted' (2ZF) and 'it's an amazing service' (SW3). Many of these responses centred on the relationship that was developed between coach and client.

Supportive relationships

The data made clear that clients accessing the Wellbeing Jobs Club felt seen, listened to and cared for. They felt that someone was unconditionally on their side or in their corner. It is easy to forget the significance of this for adults. Below are two examples from service users, but many more were scattered throughout the responses:

> Having a job coach gave me the confidence and support I needed to be able to apply for jobs. I really struggled with my sense of self-worth and did not believe I had the skills or capabilities for employment. Vicky supported me through this and helped encourage me to try for positions that worked towards my skills. It was amazing to have someone who wants to work with me and never pressures me. (SW3)

> They're quite protective of their clients as well, which is really nice. They just want to look after you and do the best they can for you … you feel comfortable to be able to tell them anything really … to be honest, they just made you feel comfortable, relaxed. (Mandy, service user, during interview)

How could the service be improved?

Service users and coaches were asked how the Wellbeing Jobs Club might be improved. For service users, all responses to this related to the further marketing and expansion of the service. Appreciating the support that they had received, they felt that it should be made available to more people. Mandy, a

service user, suggested that social media would be the most appropriate approach for this, as it would convey 'a clearer view of what a job club is'.

For the coaches, they felt that a small budget for the clients that they worked with would make a significant difference. Job coaches commented on how difficult it was to see a client in need, and how they had taken to carrying certain items with them, such as sanitary products, because it was so difficult for a client to focus when they were hungry or suffering other basic discomforts. After some thought, job coach Vicky shared:

> I would like a budget for things that people might need … a budget for things, like, if they needed a birth certificate, if they needed a book for a course, or for interview clothes. If they needed to travel somewhere, they could get a bus ticket. We haven't got that … a budget per client of even if it was £30.

She added: 'How can they concentrate on what they need to concentrate on with me if they're hungry and they haven't eaten for two days?' A small funding pot had been provided for service users in the past, and job coaches really appreciated being able to purchase items such as bedding, coats, shoes and socks for the clients that needed them.

A survey comment from a service user emphasised the difference that it would make if this funding for necessities were made available:

> For me personally the only issue I have is the cost of attending appointments. Due to several factors I have to get a taxi there and back so each meeting costs £30 in travel funds. There have been occasions where I've had to cancel appointments because I've simply not been able to afford to get there which has several knock-on effects of my mental health. (TE5)

Service manager Treena added, 'there's no funding for things like courses, travel, and the therapy side of things as well because quite often we have people that are on a waiting list for 10 years for CBT'. Clearly, this is an organisation that would like to provide a holistic service while being significantly restricted by limited funding and resources. One objective of this research was to see whether any needs of service users were not being met, but the only *need* identified within the data was funds or means of travel to meetings.

The Wellbeing Jobs Club is providing a much-needed service to around 150 service users presently, but it is clear that with more funding and more staff, they could have an even greater impact within their community. Service manager Treena explained that they were using funding across projects to maximise the potential of their limited resources:

> I've got three projects, and they work in very similar ways, so there's no dual funding issue. The clients that we have can work across all three programmes. So that is how we cope with it, because yes, I could absolutely have another six to eight job coaches if I was allowed. But the funding doesn't allow … Lottery funding for us is great, but it's not as much as we have previously had in the past … funding is difficult so, yeah, it can be challenging sometimes.

Likewise, job coach Vicky joked that having extra staff was her 'dream'. She said, 'I could definitely deal with another couple of us, to be honest. Because my caseload is currently 36 and I've got another 5–6 people to ring and book in.' She also added that funding for two of the parallel groups running at the centre was due to expire in March. The value of this service to its users is encapsulated in this survey respondent's comment: 'just don't get rid of the service because it is vital for the community and users' (O1R).

Discussion

The data collected during this evaluation reflect the 'vicious cycle' described in the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) study and in Gedikli et al.'s (2022) research, with poor mental health reducing employability and unemployment adding further to poor mental health. The complex and multi-faceted needs of users of this Wellbeing Jobs Club add weight to the argument that unemployment cannot be *solved* in isolation, without supporting the development of the whole person. And this cannot be rushed or fitted within a rigid time frame; for each person the journey to well-being will

be very different. People who are struggling have complex and multiple needs that cannot be easily disentangled, and there is no obvious source of support for this complexity within England's siloed and diminishing services. Similar issues may have been tackled by the previous Work and Health Programme that was cancelled in 2024, but as yet nothing has replaced this on a national level.

The Wellbeing Jobs Club appears to be doing an excellent job of plugging the existing gap and in doing so is demonstrating significant 'value added' by this service. The support offered by these dedicated staff, some of whom have taken pay cuts when starting their role as jobs coach, is relieving caseloads for other stretched services; it is preventative. Just this small sample of data demonstrates some 20 individuals who may have gone on to require mental health support from the NHS had this Wellbeing Jobs Club not intervened. In a landscape where there is such a drastic shortage in qualified counselling therapists, this is a significant result from minimal financial input. And this is just one aspect. These job coaches are likewise relieving the workload of disability services, housing services and other government-funded interventions, at the same time as increasing the number of willing and able volunteers for the charitable sector.

Another aspect of the data that must be acknowledged is the dedication of the staff, despite low pay and high caseloads. These staff are going over and above to provide a lifeline for individuals who are struggling. The qualitative comments such as 'it saved me' (0XE), 'I am so thankful' (O20), 'the sessions got me through a turbulent time' (CX9), 'I felt accepted' (2ZF) and 'it's an amazing service' (SW3), as well as the palpable joy when coaches shared success stories, all signify a service that significantly impacts on those involved. These are not just job coaches, but life coaches. A growing body of research highlights the emotional and professional toll on caring professionals who consistently go beyond the duties for which they are formally employed and remunerated. White et al. (2024), in their study with carers, acknowledged the presence of job satisfaction but also drew attention to the adverse effects of sustained pressure, particularly when practitioners' skills are undervalued or inadequately recognised within institutional structures. The 'ethical orientation' of social pedagogy seeks 'to ensure that every person within society is treated with dignity and feels enabled to unfold their potential' (Thempra, 2023, p. 2).

The descriptions of coaches found throughout these data embody the essential elements of the helping relationship described by Sinai-Glazer (2020). Despite no formal training in this area, the job coaches intuitively provide their clients 'love and support; trust and feeling safe; listening and feeling understood; making an effort to help; humanness, compassion, and sensitivity; availability, continuity, and being there when needed' (2020, p. 245). Their care anchored their clients at those times that they found themselves in the panic zone, and the coaches' patience provided clients the time and the space to achieve small successes. Thempra (2023, p. 6) explain the importance of this:

> The power of experiencing something positive – something that makes someone happy, something they have achieved, a new skill they have learned, the caring support from someone else – has a double impact: it raises the individual's self-confidence and feeling of self-worth, so it reinforces their sense of well-being, of learning, of being able to form a strong relationship, or of feeling empowered; and by strengthening their positives the person also improves their weak sides so that negative notions about their self, fade away.

Conclusion and recommendations

In a landscape of financial instability and ever-increasing mental health needs, the Wellbeing Jobs Club provides an invaluable resource for a range of unique reasons, which include:

- Clients are under no pressure to attend.
- Clients are treated with unconditional positive regard, enabling them to be open and honest about their struggles and needs.
- Clients are offered support with life challenges that they would not find elsewhere.
- Clients are offered personalised support at a pace that suits them.
- The complex and unique needs of each client are taken into consideration.
- Job coaches foreground the general and holistic well-being of the client, acknowledging that clients will only be in a position to thrive when they feel safe and secure.
- Job coaches take on a preventative role where mental health is concerned and also take some of the weight from other support services.

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- Clients are given practical support that can help them find employment.

We have purposefully left the direct link to employment until last, as the data make clear that only when the holistic needs of each individual are attended to will they be in a position to take the substantial step into preparing for paid employment.

This club and, more importantly, the individuals providing this support are invaluable to local communities, where they are a *lifeline* to some of those who are most struggling, and for whom very little comparable support is available. The job coaches take on the role of carer, adviser, counsellor and trusted friend, lightening the load for other services – and all of this is taken on for a basic wage. Ensuring appropriate reward and genuine recognition for caring roles remains a central concern within social pedagogy (Thempra, 2023). The field actively challenges the systemic undervaluation of such work, advocating for greater visibility and respect for the expertise involved. It is therefore imperative that we acknowledge the nuanced skill sets of job coaches and actively promote the case for fairer pay and professional recognition across these vital roles.

It is clear that this service needs to not only remain but also grow. There is potential for this invaluable resource to help strengthen the local community. When so much difference has been achieved by so few coaches, one can only imagine the impact that the service could have should funding, and staffing, be increased. To do this, we reiterate those things that could make a significant difference to this service moving forward:

- consistent funding that enables improved continuity of the service
- a small budget for individual service users
- increased funding that enables the employment of more staff.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Worcester.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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