

Kickstart: Extend, Expand and Empower!

The case from the Employment Support Sector

The Government's Kickstart Scheme: A report, produced by the ERSA Policy Team
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Summary

This paper brings together the views of ERSA's members from the employment support sector on the UK's Kickstart Scheme.

In September 2020, ERSA launched a Kickstart Forum. This has since emerged into a genuine Community of Good Practice. 434 organisations, both Gateways and employers, have taken active part in the forum. There has been a focus on sharing experiences, problem-solving and highlighting success. However, problem-solving has been the driving focus of the forum.

Those ERSA members active on the Kickstart Forum are committed to making Kickstart a success for young people. Kickstart has enormous potential, but it has been beset by a number of problems in its administration and management. ERSA members believe there are aspects of Kickstart that need fixing so that Kickstart can fulfil its promise. This must happen immediately.

This paper and the forum want greater responsibility given to Gateways to deliver Kickstart jobs. This will require better interaction between the DWP, its' Jobcentres and local organisations like Gateways and Youth Hubs.

Using both a survey of ERSA's members and one-on-one interviews, this report sees the views of the employment support sector, capitalising on ERSA's unique vantage point of being the membership organisation for the sector, crystallised into some proposals to make Kickstart the success it needs to be.

Proposals in Brief

1. **Extend**

The extension of Kickstart beyond the end of December 2021 is welcome, but it needs to be longer than the 3 months announced in October. There are a number of changes that are needed, and more time is required to achieve these and the government's own target of 250,000 Kickstart placements.

2. **Expand**

Kickstart needs to be *expanded*, not just extended, so it can be accessed by all young people that are vulnerable to long term unemployment, and not just those receiving Universal Credit.

3. **Empower**

Prospective "Kickstarters" must be empowered. Job Centres and Work Coaches should continue to play a role, but active job seeking and researching of Kickstart vacancies should be encouraged and all Kickstart vacancies should be advertised on Find a Job. Potential applicants should be allowed to engage with employers and Gateways directly to access Kickstart jobs if they choose to.

4. **Stop "capping" and instead review the opportunities**

In administering Kickstart, the Department for Work and Pensions must work more closely with organisations that have created Kickstart jobs. There should be an evaluation of the jobs created and offered based on local labour market needs and sustainability of employment. There must also be a consideration whether the jobs will set people on a career path. Maximising the opportunities created should be the priority not "capping" jobs that the Jobcentres (and Work Coached) perceive that they cannot fill.

Contents

1. The experiences of ERSA members: The views of Gateways, Employers and ‘Kickstarters’

1.1. Case studies: Kickstart’s potential

1.2. Accounts of ERSA members & other stakeholders: the Kickstart Survey

1.3. Accounts of ERSA members & other stakeholders: interviews

2. Proposal Recommendations: Extend, Expand and Empower

2.1. An outline of ERSA’s proposals

2.2. Research from other organisations and developing ERSA’s proposals

3. Looking to the Future

Section 1

The experiences of ERSA members: The views of Gateways, Employers and ‘Kickstarters’

This section synthesises those accounts provided by employers, Gateways, “Kickstarters” and other interested parties drawn from two main sources: one-on-one interviews with Gateways and Employers over August and September and a survey distributed in October. Prior to this however, drawn from the interviews carried out with ERSA members and other stakeholders, some case studies are first raised to underline Kickstart’s huge potential. This also includes some useful conversations with Kickstarters themselves.

1.1. Cases studies: Kickstart’s potential

A small manufacturer in the food sector based in Bedford took on nine Kickstarters through a Gateway. This wasn’t just a story of social value created by unemployed young people being given jobs, nor a story of an employer with a social conscience hiring young people struggling to access work opportunities, but a powerful *business* case for Kickstart’s extension. In short, this business expanded because of Kickstart. The extra production capacity enabled this company to grow, buy a second building and plan an increase in long-term production. “90% of my Kickstarters will be kept on” this employer said, meaning these young people will not just get six months of valuable work experience, *but will keep this work*. With a reluctance to use agencies, this employer found local Job Centres to be very useful, but the Gateway was essential. “Nothing was possible” without the Gateway as they “could fix things I couldn’t and fast”. With the expansion of his business, this employer also noted the benefit to the taxpayer looking for a return on the Kickstart investment, as capital gains and other taxes will grow with the growing businesses that will pay these taxes. This is a powerful example of what happens when everything goes right: Gateways, good Job Centres, good candidates – an efficient process all in place. When this happens there is, not just a strong *social* case for Kickstart’s extension, but also a *business* case as well as a *fiscal* case.

The following case studies come from Kickstarters themselves and are provided by The Salvation Army who have engaged with Kickstart as part of their own employment programme.

Josh from Wrexham: *“I must have applied for 40 or 50 jobs, possibly even more. I got a couple of interviews – one at a supermarket and one at a takeaway but neither of those worked out. It was quite difficult. It starts getting you down when you apply for so many and don’t hear back. You see it as you’re not good enough to do that job. I heard about the Kickstart scheme through the Job Centre. With not much experience in interviews, I found it a bit stressful. I didn’t know if I was saying the right or wrong things, but after a week or two I found out I got it! My role includes helping the community manager. I think the Kickstart scheme has been fantastic, it pushed me out of my comfort zone, and helped me develop skills that I wouldn’t have done otherwise. Even though I did not have experience in this area, I was given a chance to do something new. Without the Kickstart, I think I would still be struggling to find work.*

Jordan from Scotland: *“When travel and work restrictions began to ease, my Work Coach contacted me, and I began to job hunt again. I tried to apply for many positions. When I was finally contacted it would usually be to state that due to inadequate experience my application had not made it to final stage interviews. Disheartened but trying to be positive I carried on. After a couple months of searching my Work Coach contacted me again for my usual appointment and introduced me to the Kickstart Scheme. I thought it was brilliant and my coach said he would let me know about potential Kickstarts that I may be interested in. Having been given the opportunity to work with such an amazing organisation with some of the most kind-hearted people I have ever met has been one of the most memorable moments of my life. Seeing their day-to-day efforts to help homeless people and those dealing with addiction with such passion and enthusiasm makes each day a fantastic learning experience. I couldn’t be more grateful for being able to witness each resident’s story and see how the staff handle each person with care and sincerity.”*

Charlie from Sheerness: *“Just before the pandemic, I started new job in marketing and development. I did the training, and it was going well but then Covid came. I was put on furlough and then they let me go. I was then out of work for a whole year. “While I was out of*

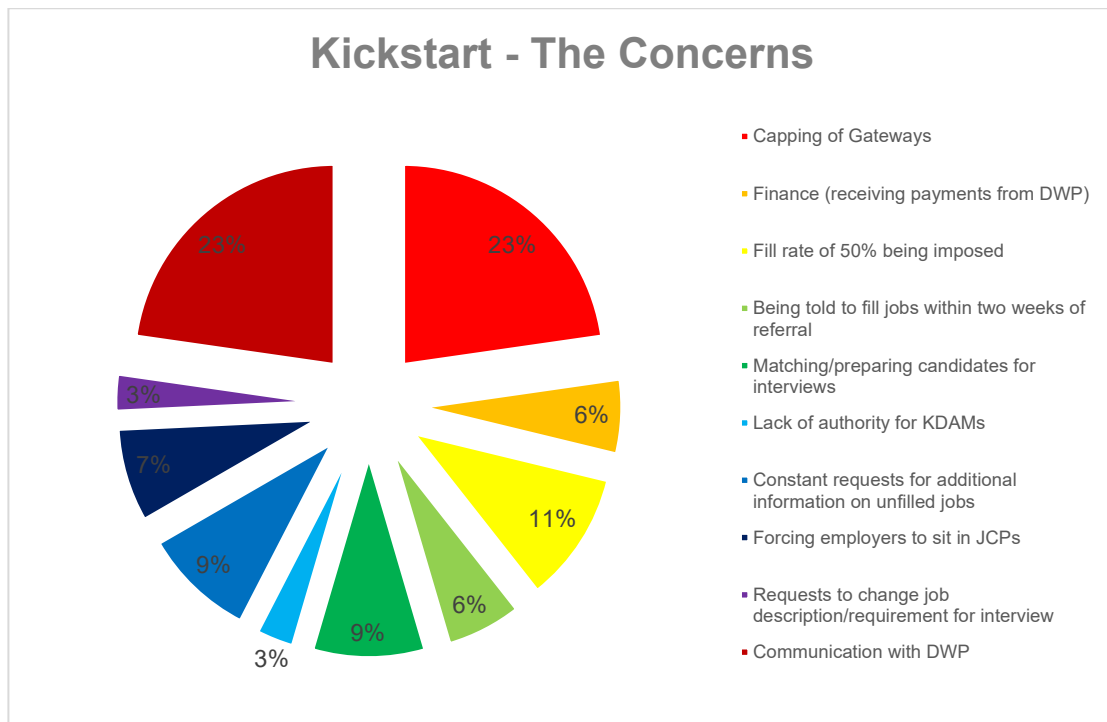
work, my work coach at the Job Centre kept sending me job details and I applied for loads and loads of things. I considered anything, even if it didn't interest me, as I knew I had to support my family. I don't know how many I applied for, but it was loads. But nothing ever came through. It's really bad in our area. There were 900 applicants for one role at the Aldi distribution centre here. That's how difficult it is round here to get a job." At the start of 2021, Charlie's work coach sent him details of some kickstart placements. He says: "None of them appealed to me but the one with The Salvation Army jumped out at me. It was completely different to anything I had ever done before. In fact, you could say it was the complete opposite to anything I had ever done before. I took a gamble and got it and I absolutely love it. It is the best job I have ever had."

These best-case examples are however just that: best case examples of what can be achieved with Kickstart. These cannot, unfortunately, be suggested to be the norm. The accounts of other employers and Gateways points overwhelmingly to a story of frustration. At last count, not even half of the 250,000 initial target for the scheme had been filled, a disappointing outcome that results in the main – as reported below – from bureaucratic delays from the DWP. We reiterate again however, as these above case studies testify, that remedying Kickstart's problems are indeed possible as well as necessary for Kickstart's enormous potential to be realised.

1.2. Accounts from the Employment Support sector: The Kickstart Survey

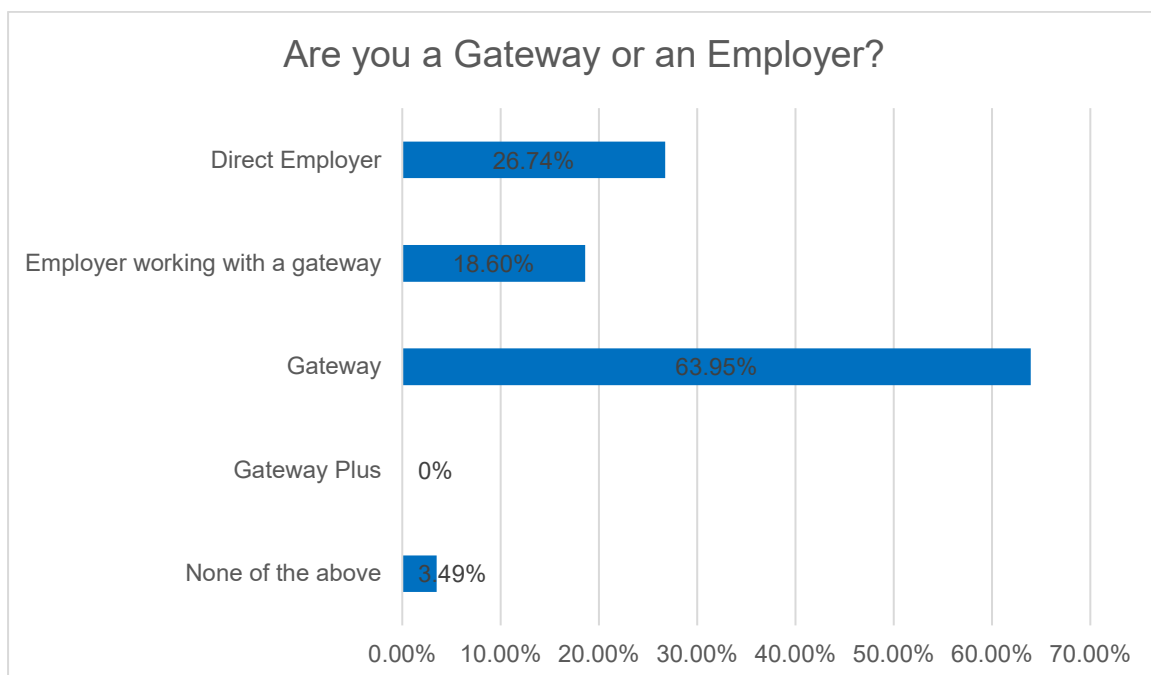
The ERSA Kickstart Survey was distributed to ERSA members and other interested parties in October 2021. Initially this intended to capture raw numbers of remaining vacancies and 'fill rate'. It became clear however that more serious (and new) problems were emerging with the Kickstart scheme that also needed addressing in the survey. These centred upon claims that Gateways were having their total number of potential Kickstart placements capped and new and restrictive "performance standards" being imposed on Gateways, as well as problems with the pre-existing issues of delays and communication.

Graphic 1: Kickstart – The Concerns



Top-line numbers starts, potential new starts & vacancies: Just under two-thirds of the respondents to the survey were organisations acting as Gateways, with the rest being employers recruiting directly or employers recruiting through a Gateway.

Graphic 2: Kickstart – Are you a Gateway or an Employer?

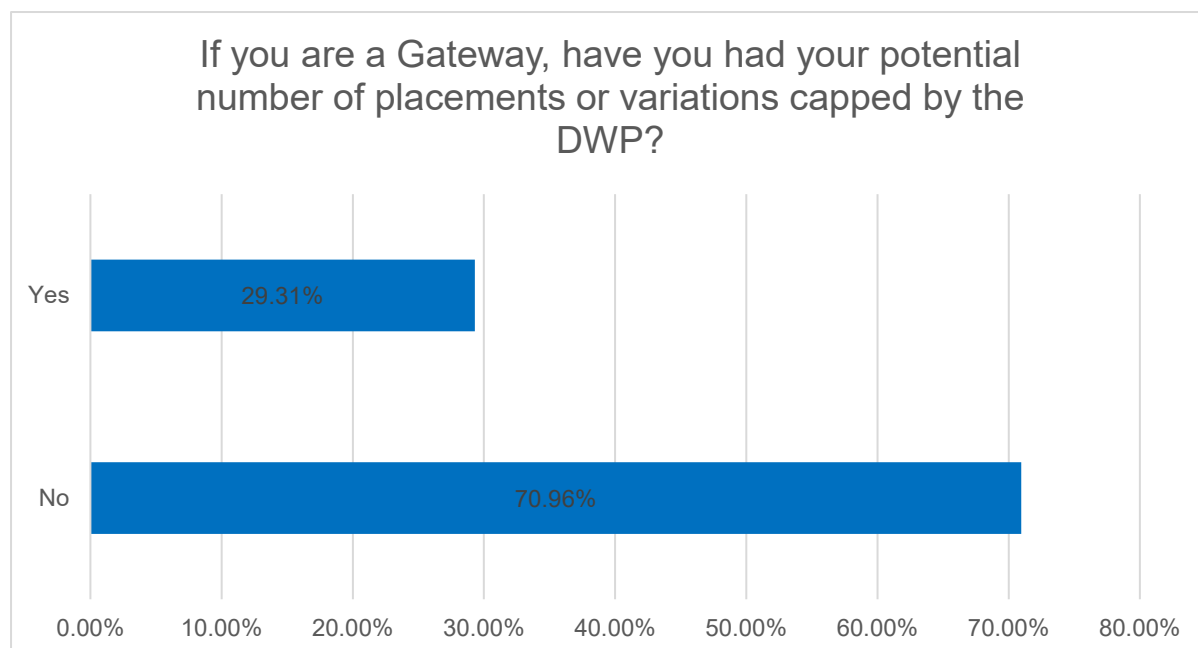


The number of job-starts reported by respondents ranged from as little as 1 to as many as 1,199. The numbers of unfilled jobs varied from zero to 962. Nearly all Gateways still had unfilled Kickstart roles. When questioned on the number of unfilled jobs to date, respondents reported a total of 7,151 unfilled jobs. When put into the broader context which brings in the rest of the sector engaged in Kickstart, this results in thousands of missing life-changing roles for unemployed young people. If Kickstart was to end with these opportunities remaining unfilled, this would constitute a huge, wasted opportunity. Nearly all Gateways have had employers withdraw from the scheme.

When asked about the young people placed using Kickstart and the success of these placements, it was collectively claimed that a total of 633 young people would be kept on by their new employer. A small number (7) went on to external apprenticeships, presenting one key problem area raised further on where Kickstart needs to be better linked up with longer term training opportunities like apprenticeships. When Gateways were asked if they could employ more young people through Kickstart, the overwhelming majority said yes; this included 95% saying they could do so with current employers and 86% saying they could with new employers as well. This should underline the point that Gateways continue to see the enormous potential of the Kickstart programme even amidst the multitude of problems they faced in delivering it.

Capping and Performance standards: From the survey, just under 30% reported having their intended Kickstart placements capped by the DWP; an alarmingly high figure given that such a policy only began to be implemented this past summer and indicates a shift in government policy.

Graphic 3: Capping



Qualitative detail also indicates a serious problem in terms of how this has been carried out. In one example, a very clearly successful Gateway that has placed over 400 Kickstart applicants was subject to this capping policy with very little explanation or reasoning. In fact, this Gateway received very positive reviews from its employers with one providing the instructive case study above. In another example of the problems caused by the sudden introduction of capping, one respondent said: “we were not warned that we were in danger of being capped. In fact, we had been told two weeks prior to this by the DWP that we were doing well”.

The inconsistencies reported did not merely refer to how rules were *implemented* versus what was *said*, but also concern what DWP leadership *say* versus what Kickstart District Account Managers (KDAMs) were *doing*. A similar point of such consistency is raised in regard to Job Centres and Work Coaches in both ERSA’s survey and interviews. When survey respondents were asked to provide details of the sudden performance standards that the DWP imposed upon them, most reported an demand that a 50% fill rate figure had to be hit, but other requests included a requirement to attend job fairs and “Super Saturdays” at local Job Centres as well as demands that any remaining Kickstart jobs had be filled within two weeks.

The survey responses here again raised troubling inconsistencies in DWP policy implementation. In another example, the DWP withdrew vacancies from an employer and would not let the Gateway inform the employer that it was the DWP's decision to do this. These attached concerns of capping and performance standards are elaborated on further below, as are a number of other problems which were reported at the ERSA forum. These included Gateways having financial problems as a result of delays in information and payments as well as frayed relations with employers waiting for Kickstart placements.

1.3. Accounts from the Employment Support Sector: Interviews

A very clear thread of problems emerge across those responses from the survey and from interviews. Unsurprisingly, these did not depart a great deal from those complaints shared at the ERSA Forum. The principal observations raised are listed in brief below.

- ***Gateways have been a critically important organisational feature.***
- ***ERSA's Kickstart Forum was hugely valuable to those who experienced problems with the scheme.***
- ***Gratitude to Nick Riddle of the DWP and his willingness to participate in the Forum was repeatedly voiced, despite deep frustration with the DWP itself.***
- ***This above point, serious problems with the DWP's administration of the Kickstart programme. Lengthy delays, little transparency and inconsistency in applying Kickstart's rules.***
- ***The latter inconsistency problems, towards the end of the summer of 2021, were compounded by the sudden imposition of poorly reasoned "capping" and "performance standards" (only vaguely referred to in Kickstart's rules) and the sudden heavy-handed capping of Gateways' total placement numbers (not mentioned in the rules Kickstart).***
- ***Inconsistency in the usefulness of Job Centres¹ and its Work Coaches in particular.***
- ***The reliance on JCP Work Coaches to put forward applicants to Kickstart jobs, but the Gateway and employer being "blamed" if the jobs aren't filled.***

¹ Although most reported good experiences with Job Centres.

- *Too often there are **problems with recruitment and matching** and this was only in part due to the pandemic.*

These are developed in more descriptive detail. The **problems with the DWP's administration of the Kickstart programme** were overwhelmingly the most common concern and complaint, with the length of the **delays** for approvals (templates, variations, acceptance onto the scheme), payments and delivering basic communications being particular problems. Many ERSA members reported waits of around eight weeks and some as long as twelve.

Some Gateways reported reputational damage and frayed relationships with clients and customers as many needed to be convinced that it was the DWP and not the Gateway that were the reason for the delays.

In some cases, these delays produced very serious pressures on organisations' finances, particularly those from the third sector. Several reported being under such pressure that salaries had to be deferred whilst they waited for money. Some of these problems have also been reported over this summer, when others have reported a smoothing out of the process. Even when payments were delivered, other very basic administrative problems emerged (and were far too common) where these payments were sent without an identifier or remittance advice.

These problems were compounded by a reported **lack of transparency and consistency** in how the DWP applied Kickstart's rules and how these were **communicated**. These two problems came together for some Gateways who were both rejected as well as accepted for different but seemingly identical, or at least very similar, applications without adequate (or any) explanation. Poor communication also came from inconsistent performance from KDAMs, particularly when compared to what was being said by more senior DWP colleagues. It is important to note that KDAMs, like Job Centres, were often identified as useful, but across the DWP and its' Job Centre network inconsistency has clearly been a problem. This criticism of poor communication has tellingly come from both those respondents that were more forgiving and positive about the DWP's management of Kickstart as well as those who were more clearly critical. Problems with the DWP's IT operation was

also the subject of very heated complaints. For example, uploading vacancies to the DWP website that would not be updated for weeks was a major source of the delays above.

These consistency and communication problems were compounded by more recent and concerning developments reported by Gateways in the form of performance reviews by the DWP, only vaguely referred to in the Kickstart regulations, and caps imposed on the Kickstart numbers of particular Gateways. Besides the obvious concern of the 250,000 target not likely being reached with such restrictions, this recent shift in policy by the DWP underlines a problem of excessive control, an inability to manage the policy and poor communication. To give an early pointer to one key recommendation below, several Gateways, whilst really wanting an extension to Kickstart, demanded that the DWP “relinquish more control” as, to quote another respondent, “the DWP had simply assumed too much responsibility” with Kickstart.

The performance of **Gateways and Job Centres** were reported by ERSA members as being among Kickstart’s most positive aspects, with Gateways in particular emerging as a critically important institutional feature of Kickstart. Even when the minimum 30-applicants requirement, which was initially part of Kickstart’s rules was removed, Gateways were identified as critical sources of information, guidance and wrap-around support. Gateways offer a great deal of support for employers and to smaller businesses in particular. The focus on the employer’s needs, and upon facilitation, have demonstrated why Gateways are so important. Again, as with KDAMs and Job Centres, some Gateways are better than others, but the energy and organisational impetus that Gateways provided make them crucial to Kickstart. Given the problems the DWP have had in administering and managing the Kickstart scheme, it makes sense to co-manage the scheme with Gateways, local government (when not acting as Gateways), Youth Hubs and Job Centres.

Job Centres have become important venues through which to reach young people and Work Coaches, especially over the summer months of this year. Although the views of ERSA members are broadly positive about Job Centres, there were some issues raised about their effectiveness and consistency. This was truer of Work Coaches, however, rather than Job Centres more broadly.

Interestingly, this was a view endorsed by the Kickstarters we spoke to. The reliance placed on Work Coaches in Kickstart's referral process was not always appreciated by employers, many of whom often wanted to see the whole range of candidates without Work Coaches filtering these (although some did appreciate this filtering role). Similarly, some Kickstarters were grateful for their Work Coach, although some did claim they were denied the opportunity to approach employers directly because of the rules which hardwired the referral role of the Work Coach into the process. Two Kickstarters interviewed made this very point stating that this "middleman" should be "got out of the way". One of these Kickstarters was offered a unique insight having joined their company as a Kickstarter but was then taken on permanently to work on their Kickstart programme², so was able to speak from the employer perspective as well. They expressed concerns about the nature of the role of Work Coaches and the nature of their role ("Work Coaches are not doing what they should be doing"). Making the rules on referrals more flexible, making the use of a Work Coach optional for example, would have the benefit of empowering young people and employers and freeing up Work Coaches to work with all job seekers that require the guidance they can provide.

Some interesting differences between the types of provider emerged from these interviews. Firstly, larger organisations such as charities with a national profile and local councils, were far less likely to have problems with the process or could get any problems fixed with the DWP quickly. Smaller Gateways were much more likely to have persistent problems and unfortunately were much less likely to have access to remedies either by a formal route (i.e., through a KDAM) or through a more informal avenue such as having pre-existing relationships with DWP officials.

This raises one important feature of Kickstart for ERSA members: the value of the **ERSA Kickstart Forum**. The Forum became a critical venue to share and solve common problems and being able to engage directly with Nick Riddle of the DWP. One Gateway provider described the ERSA Kickstart Forum as the "most positive aspect of the Kickstart experience", whilst another called it "the rod of Kickstart". An unhealthy part of this sentiment clearly stems from these numerous problems reported in this document and elsewhere. With this

² This was part of this company's youth development programme, the name of which is not shared to preserve anonymity.

however, the commitment and consideration of Nick Riddle of the DWP to attend and address concerns was welcomed by many ERSA members. More fundamentally, the ERSA Kickstart Forum was a powerful demonstration of the commitment and energy in the employment support sector to deliver employment opportunities for young people.

Section 2

Proposal Recommendations: Extend, Expand and Empower

Here we develop some proposals drawn upon the first section, but this will be situated within those proposals already published from within the YEG. ERSA's proposals operate from two set principles: **Extend and Expand** and **Empowerment & Devolution**.

2.1. An Outline of ERSA's Proposals

- **Extension:**
 - *The extension must be longer than the 3 months the government outlined on 3 October and must be more than the 'time-only' extension.*
 - *There are still far too many vacancies left outstanding to end starts on Kickstart at the end of March 2022. Also, too much investment (time as well as money) has been put into this scheme from the employment sector to now waste it. This can still be used to make Kickstart a success.*
 - *There is enormous potential for Kickstart to tackle youth unemployment, a problem that isn't going anywhere in post-pandemic Britain. This can also link up with agendas to develop skills and employment policies in areas which need investment, such as social care and the 'green economy'.*
- **Expand: Focus on young people's needs and a longer-term development**
 - **Remove Universal Credit requirement** and forge better targeting of those particularly vulnerable to long-term unemployment and discrimination in the labour market (due to ill health, underrepresented and minority groups)
 - **Kickstart as a pathway and youth transitions:** Focus on what happens when the six-month Kickstart placement ends and the longer-term development concerns of young people, inclusive of training and skilling opportunities.
 - **Make the role of Work Coaches optional** so to allow young people and employers to engage directly without referral. If necessary to enable this Work coaches should give young jobseekers a Kickstart pass (that means they are Kickstart eligible).

- **Empowerment and Devolution**

- ***Shared due diligence role between Gateways and the DWP (from hierarchy to ‘partnership’)***
- ***Develop local infrastructures built of Gateways, Youth Hubs, local government (either as Gateways or not) and local Job Centres***
- ***Gateways would be central to this local infrastructure as they are uniquely well placed to bring together local and regional government, employers, local charities, Youth Hubs and Job Centres.***
- ***Extra resources to develop fledgling Youth Hubs and build links with Job Centres, Gateways and employers.***
- ***Streamline the process: remove bureaucratic barriers, make the rules and process transparent, make communication clear.***
- ***The DWP must desist from “capping” and imposing restrictive performance standards as part of this reorganisation.***

2.2. Research from other organisations and developing ERSA’s proposals

These proposals are now situated within research produced by other organisations. These come in the main from organisations that make up the *Youth Employment Group (YEG)*³ and are listed below.

- *Five Reasons to Extend Kickstart* – YEG (Feb 2021)
- *Levelling up for Young People: Building an Opportunity Guarantee* – YEG (July 2021)
- *Making Sure Kickstart Works* - Learning & Work Institute (October 2020)
- *Facing the Future - Employment Prospects for Young People After Coronavirus* - Learning & Work Institute (March 2021)
- *Work Local*, Tony Wilson, Adam Crews, Kashif Mirza. Published by the Learning & Work Institute (March 2017)
- *An Unequal Crisis: The Impact of the Pandemic on the Youth Labour Market* – IES, Youth Futures Foundation, Blagrove Trust. (2021)

³ Youth Employment UK, The Youth Futures Foundation (YFF), Impetus, The Prince’s Trust, the Institute Employment Studies (IES) and the Learning & Work Institute (LWI)

This begins by endorsing the YEG's recommendations in the *Five Reasons to Extend Kickstart* report (Feb 2021). Extending Kickstart for at least a further six months could ensure a legacy that it won't have if its ends with final starts in March 2022 (*Reason #2*). Again, only about two-fifths of the 250,000 target originally intended for the policy has been achieved (at the time of writing) (*Reason #3*) and will scarcely be sufficiently closed before March. With this additional post-pandemic time more data and evidence about what has worked and has not can be developed.

Extending the time will also give employers the opportunity to deliver more 'cycles' or 'cohorts' of Kickstarts (*Reason #4*) and give them, and Gateways, greater certainty to plan and help more young people. (*Reason #5*) argues that Kickstart "will only reach its potential if it can become a pipeline for disadvantaged young people to start apprenticeships or higher-level training". These "crucial links" between education and employment have not been applied to Kickstart with much joined up thinking, leaving the responsibility to Gateways and Employers to aid young peoples' next steps (and not all having the resources to do so). The YEG's *Levelling Up* report recommended that Kickstart can be improved into some form of *Kickstart-Plus*, an adaptation of Kickstart that would be re-orientated around ALL long-term and disadvantaged unemployed young people (not just UC recipients).

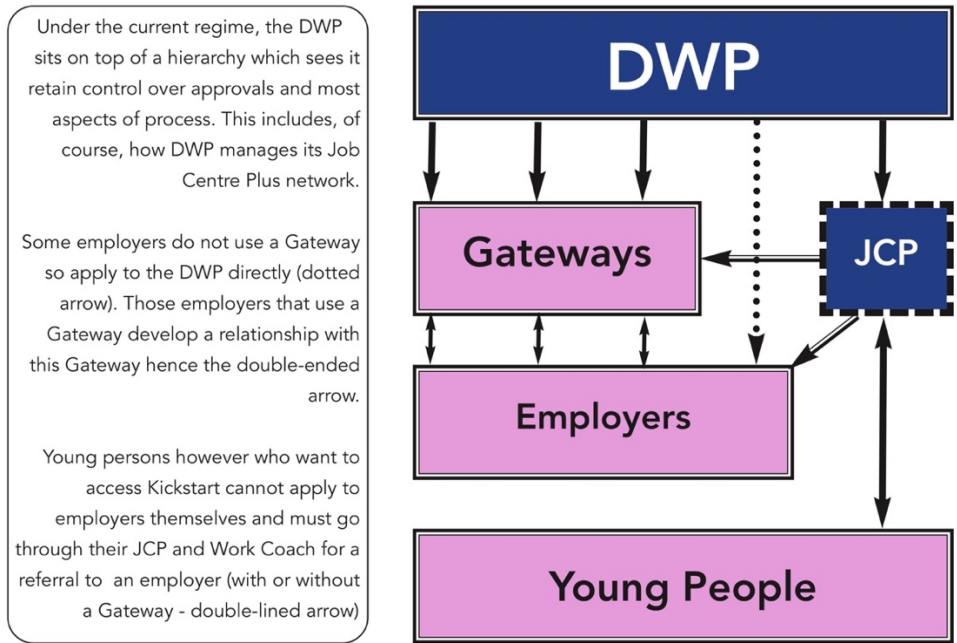
A focus must be placed upon the unemployed young person and their employment *transitions*. Throughout the research of this report, it became clear a 'cliff-edge problem' emerged where Kickstarters would simply disappear back into unemployment after their 6-month Kickstart placement had ended. Joined up thinking about **young person's long-term development and 'youth transitions' is critical to correct such a problem and connect them with employment and training opportunities**. Some local authorities who engaged with Kickstart as employers have already taken on their Kickstarters as apprentices. With the national minimum wage for apprenticeships being much lower than the national minimum wage Kickstarters are paid, this required the pay differential to be covered by these employers. Trafford Council for example have done this, but not every employer can. Therefore a **"Kick-On" component should form part of a renewed Kickstart** and cater for those post-Kickstart-possibilities like apprenticeships. Others have noted that the DWP's

attention to apprenticeships has dropped over the last year because of Kickstart. If Kickstart or similar policies are to be truly useful, they must address these longer-term transitions and pathways of young people including apprenticeships and other training opportunities. They must be part of the same joined-up broader policy agenda, not an ‘either-or’ equation.

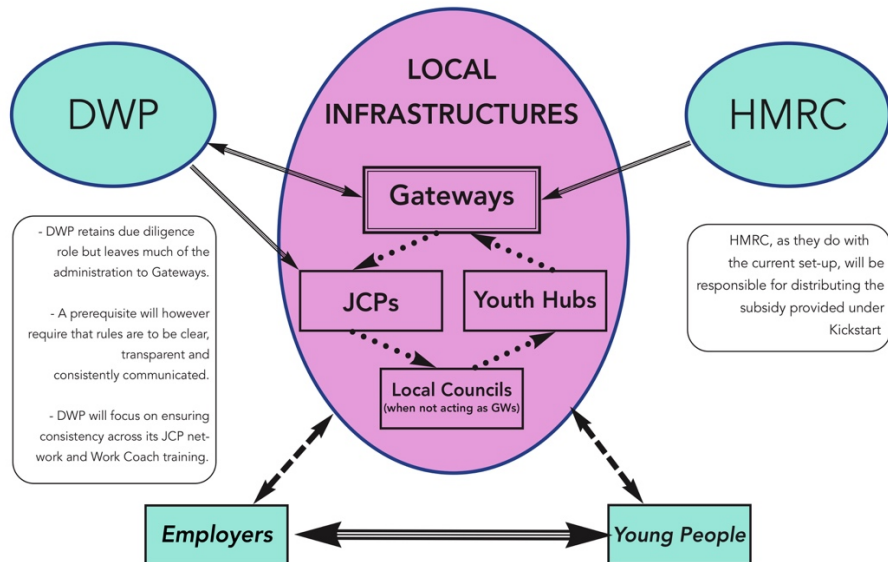
Among the recommendations in the LWI’s *Making Sure Kickstart Works* was the suggestion that Kickstart should be organised according to a more **decentralised and localised model**⁴ where local councils and local businesses took the lead in providing “sufficient volume, geographical range and sectoral spread of Kickstart jobs”. This can include roles for devolved administrations and combined authorities as well as local councils. The case for sharing the responsibilities for managing Kickstart is also reinforced in the YEG’s *Levelling Up* report (March 2021) that championed the role of Youth Hubs in becoming “the focal point of local coordination” alongside local councils. Again, the most common problems encountered by ERSA members was an over-reliance on the DWP for information, processing and approval (and subsequent delays), so relieving the DWP of some of this burden would also help the DWP to concentrate on managing its KDAMs and Job Centre network. Job Centres were frequently identified as important local partners, particularly in identifying and directly accessing young people (more recently as Job Centres have physically re-opened) as well as gathering information on the local labour market. There was however, to reiterate a point from section 1, a number of instances where KDAMs and Job Centres were not helpful meaning the DWP should concentrate on improving its KDAM and Job Centre network across the board.

⁴ Points one and two on *Context* and *Volumes*.

Graphic 4: The CURRENT Kickstart Regime: 'Hierarchy'



Graphic 5: The NEW proposed Kickstart Regime: 'Partnership'



The role of Youth Hubs, still not off the ground in many places, can complement Job Centres and Gateways particularly in the targeting of vulnerable and hard-to-reach young

people. In some cases, however, advanced local infrastructures have been forged. In Greater Manchester for example, with the added benefit of a Combined Authority and individual councils being present, a Kickstart board has been created to coordinate activity and provide support. In other areas, however local council support is near non-existent, with local level coordination also lacking. **Developing these local infrastructures** would see the DWP being relieved of much (but not all) of the administrative burden and taking advantage of the enormous energy that exists in the employment sector and at the local level. However, this must be combined with **the removal of many administrative barriers and improving the clarity of those rules that remain and a requirement that the communication of these are clear and transparent**. The DWP should still have a key due diligence and scrutiny role of Gateways, not least of all of how they are selected, and the fees that Gateways may charge through the scheme, concentrating on improving the consistency and resources of Job Centres and Work Coaches. Job Centres and Work Coaches should continue to play a role, but active job seeking and researching of Kickstart vacancies should be encouraged and all Kickstart vacancies should be advertised on the 'Find a Job' web portal. Once Gateways are approved however, they would assume more of partnership role with the DWP. More locally (or regionally) set organisations will be more responsive to local needs and, with this, can assist in the needed development of local Youth Hubs, and still-to-be-developed innovation that become critical element of these local infrastructures alongside Job Centres, Gateways and local employers.

The theme of **empowerment** is the one principle that runs through each of the proposals here. Empowerment of Gateway's and employers are certainly central to the proposals here, but it is ***the focus on young people and their empowerment that is paramount***. The interviews included a number of Kickstarters directed to us by various ERSA members. In dealing with the front end of the Kickstart process (i.e., in learning about the scheme in the first place and applying through a Job Centre), these interviews revealed a good deal, namely **reviewing the role of Work Coaches and Job Centres. Although Job Centres and Work Coaches should retain a role, their referral role should be optional for young people looking to access Kickstart. This role also should be centred around partnerships with local actors (councils, employers, youth hubs) so they can be responsive to these rather than merely to the diktat of their DWP masters. This means Job Centres can take their necessary**

place within the local infrastructures proposed here (as they do in those best-case examples). As noted above, this would also serve to free up Work Coaches to give more time and attention to those jobseekers who need more guidance. In administering Kickstart, the DWP must allow Job Centres to work to more closely with organisations that have created Kickstart jobs, there should be an evaluation of the jobs created and offered based on local labour market needs, sustainability of employment, and whether the jobs will set people on a career path. Maximising the opportunities created should be the priority not “capping” jobs that the Job Centres (and Work Coaches) perceive that they cannot fill.

As made clear in section one, the introduction of capping and ‘performance standards’ by the DWP, with only the latter vaguely addressed in Kickstart rules set by the DWP, was a sudden and more recent development that actually emerged as the research for this document was starting. The emergence of this heavy handed and poorly communicated shift in DWP policy on Kickstart is perhaps the most troubling complaint from the many reported by ERSA members and the employment support sector. There were two, to be plain, false narratives that also emerged with shift in policy. The first, as indicated above at the end of the preceding paragraph, was the perception that Job Centres and their Work Coaches could not fill the Kickstart posts in front of them. As the government’s *Plan for Jobs* made clear in August, many more Work Coaches have been (and are being) recruited, so emphasis should be on filling these posts and making Kickstart a success. Secondly, and more troublingly, a narrative emerged that it was Gateways that were too often the problem. This second narrative is simply false. Gateways have been critically important to Kickstart and one of its main successes. They bring together local knowledge and energy and offer information for employers – even amidst the multitude of problems with the scheme as it is.

The heavy-handed capping and imposition of restrictive performance standards is clearly incompatible with the principle of central government sharing responsibilities with those organisations better placed to deliver Kickstart jobs for young people. We argue however that this has to happen – alongside ERSA’s other proposals - if Kickstart is to be the success it can be.

3. Looking to the Future

Programmes like Kickstart have massive potential, especially if well targeted jobs and training opportunities that can support sustainable economic growth. This can include not only jobs in the emerging 'green economy', but also in areas like social care where labour supply, retention and adequate training have long been a problem. Besides these prospects of linking Kickstart with areas where there are employment gaps and potential employment growth, programmes designed to tackle youth unemployment must become a key plank of a *Levelling Up* agenda if this is to be serious about addressing deep-rooted social deprivation in the UK. Wage subsidy programmes like Kickstart, in conjuncture with an intermediate labour market (ILM) arrangement, are central to meaningful policy attempts to tackle youth unemployment. It is important to remember that wage subsidy programmes, however counterintuitive to some, exist in many forms already in this country (by design or not). More fundamentally, whatever 'current account' cost such a policy might entail will be paid back over the longer-term with the reduction in long-term unemployment and the benefits to business growth this can create.

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