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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Vulnerable Work Programme customers need greater protection

New findings suggest that many unemployed Londoners on the Work Programme are not getting the support they need. London Voluntary Service Council's (LVSC) report *Fair Chance to Work 2* reveals that some harder to help customers in the capital are being given minimal support or pressured into 'non jobs'.

The report finds that most charities subcontracted to provide specialist support for disadvantaged jobseekers have had few or no customer referrals. Meanwhile other charities without contracts have been supporting Work Programme customers on an unpaid basis, in response to the growing needs of those who have been overlooked.

LVSC's report features a number of worrying case studies of customers with high needs receiving inadequate support from Work Programme providers.

A disability charity in South London has seen its customers with learning disabilities assigned to Work Programme advisors with no specialist expertise, and exposed to ridicule from other jobseekers at a generic job search session.

Another organisation describes a migrant customer who was pressured by her caseworker to become self-employed and sign off, but received no business support. The customer is now living most weeks only on the income she gets from child benefit and tax credits.

Finally, a homeless customer was sent to work in a hotel chain. Despite assurances from her Work Programme advisor that she would be paid minimum wage, she received £1.40 per room cleaned. As a result of this she went into rent arrears and received notice at her hostel, which was only retracted after intervention by charity Cardinal Hume Centre (who are not a Work Programme subcontractor).

'Unlike customers of other services, Work Programme "customers" have no choice of provider,' says LVSC Chief Executive Eithne Rynne, 'they are often given little or no information about the level of service they are entitled to, the track record of the provider they have been assigned to, and have no right of reply if they are assigned to the wrong customer payment group.'

'Individuals know more than anyone else about their capabilities and the barriers they face. If Work Programme customers were more empowered through this process, we would see the quality of support improve, and with it overall programme performance and accountability.'

One of the core problems with the Work Programme, identified in the report, is the pricing mechanism, which allocates support based on the benefits a customer claims, rather than

the particular barriers they face. This means many customers with serious barriers are not getting adequate support.

These concerns are echoed in the Department for Work and Pension's own evaluation report, released yesterday, which concludes that 'the differential pricing model [is] not sufficiently encouraging providers to support the most disadvantaged customers.'

LVSC's report also finds examples of good practice within the Work Programme and urges such practice to be highlighted and spread more widely.

The report recommends various measures to empower Work Programme customers: DWP and providers should publicise in plain English minimum service standards; providers should commit to transparent customer satisfaction reporting; customers should be able to challenge which payment group they have been assigned to; and voluntary customers should have the right to choose which provider supports them.

NOTES

- LVSC supports the voluntary and community sector in London. This report describes the impact of the Work Programme on London's voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, and on disadvantaged unemployed people. The full report can be downloaded from the LVSC website: www.lvsc.org.uk
- DWP Work Programme evaluation report: <http://www.cesi.org.uk/publications/work-programme-evaluation-procurement-supply-chains-and-implementation-commissioning-mo>
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