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RETURN TO WORK
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE *RESTART* SCHEME

Anthea Zeman

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Anthea Zeman was educated at the Hendetta Barnet School, London, and at Stoverville College, Oxford. She is the author of *Pragmatism: Ciba* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977) and *Back to Work* with Peter Cunniff (1983). She has worked in

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Foreword

Restart was introduced in 1986 by the Manpower Services Commission, during Lord Young's term as Secretary of State for Employment. The purpose of the scheme (which now comes under the Employment Service)¹ is to reduce long-term unemployment: by providing information, individual counselling, and help with making new beginnings.

It is bordered by the social security system; the employment market; the national network of training and education; and the aspirations and vicissitudes of private lives. Restart links these; yet, for those not directly concerned, it is a dimly lit area.

Two adjustments to procedure and one addition to the present scheme will be proposed in this paper, designed to make it more attractive to both claimants and outside bodies -- helping to reduce the national wastage of manpower.

The author's own, first hand experience of Restart was gained as a freelance fieldworker with Restart from July 1988-November 1989. Some of those still working with the scheme have been consulted, and confirm that the problems raised in this paper are indeed still problems; and that the solutions proposed here would be welcome.

1. For this and many other terms, which may not always be familiar to all readers, see the glossary at the end of this paper.

How Restart works

After six months of drawing benefit on the grounds of unemployment, sometimes earlier, claimants enter the Restart system. They are first seen by a New Client Adviser; and subsequently, if their unemployment is protracted, at regular periods by a Restart Interviewer.

The interviewer asks the claimant about his efforts to secure work (or training for work) and, if necessary, gives him access to a Claimant Adviser trained to deal in detail with benefit queries -- their calculation and any change which may be appropriate. (When the roles of Restart Interviewer and Claimant Adviser are combined, the officer is known as an Employment Counsellor.)² Time allotted for these interviews averages twenty to thirty minutes and the interviewer has often to contend with anxiety and reserve.

Nevertheless, a good deal of success is achieved. Claimants ineligible for benefit may sign off after the interview, or transfer to a more appropriate benefit; claimants with disabilities may be referred to Disablement Resettlement Officers for help; many find the talk useful in their search for a job or training.

The Restart Interviewer, if a claimant has no plans of his own, will suggest that he consider adopting one of Restart's several options -- 'menu items', as they are called in the language of the scheme. These items (see the glossary) form the foundation of Restart's work; and it is important to keep them in mind in all that follows.

The claimant's first choice is whether to seek *work*; this can be either a full-time job which, if low-waged, may attract a government top-up to the weekly wage; or part-time, which might produce little increase of income for the claimant. If his earnings are below benefit level, they will be deducted from his benefit after the first five pounds, and even if above, may reduce his housing benefit; but part-time work may still be an attractive option -- offering experience and references in a particular field, for example.

A second 'menu item' offers him the option to join a *Job Club*. He may attend this for up to six months, drawing benefit. His first fortnight is spent under instruction in ways to find vacancies, write letters of application, use telephones, attend interviews, and compose and make use of a curriculum vitae. The facilities are valuable; free use of telephone, stationery and stamps and relevant specialised newspapers and magazines -- as well as copies of Job Centre vacancies and notices provided by the Employment Service from employers willing to consider the long-term unemployed. There is also coffee and companionship.

2. This combination will soon become the usual arrangement and the officer will then be known as Claimant Adviser.

The next 'menu item' is *Training*, and the interviewer will propose Employment Training³. Then there is *Education*; if this is his option, a claimant will, while still on benefit, be given time to try to find a place at college, university or polytechnic, and a grant. Alternatively (where, say, the end of his schooling had been ragged), he may study part-time for up to twenty-one hours a week on benefit -- thereby, perhaps, securing GCSE or A-Levels. In theory the claimant must be ready to give up his study if full-time work can be found; in practice a Restart Interviewer is likely to protect the course if it is seriously under way.

There is next on offer the *Enterprise Allowance Scheme*; this is of course designed to help in the setting up of small businesses. The claimant must show £1,000, although banks and bodies such as The Prince's Trust may help with this. He will get advice about business methods and, instead of benefit of £35 a week, receive an Enterprise Allowance of £40 a week for a year.

Then there is the 'menu item' of *Voluntary Work*, now limited to those who have completed an Employment Training Course and are unable to find paid employment immediately.

Thus, a claimant may be asked to choose between looking for a job; undertaking training or education; running his own business or taking up voluntary work. And if he is taken aback at such a variety of options and cannot make a decision on the spot, he will be offered the last 'item', a *Restart Week* (or fortnight). There he can consider the options in greater detail.

3. Employment Training is the government scheme for vocational training, normally combining work experience with instruction in theory, the latter often at a College of Further Education. Tuition in literacy, numeracy and a small component of English as a Second Language may be included in the course. Other forms of training do not retain full benefit for the trainee.

Restart Weeks

Although these can be very rewarding, they are not always appealing to claimants at first sight. The groups who attended the Restart weeks between July 1988 and November 1989 described here frequently consisted of less than ten claimants each; but the size of the group, and the rather shabby atmosphere in which work was conducted -- odd rooms in Community Centres, which nobody else happened to be using -- created a very relaxed atmosphere. Disparate people got on well with each other; and differences -- sometimes very wide -- of class and education tended to be acknowledged as matters of fact in the first session, and thereafter accepted simply as adding interest to general conversations.

Typically, on Wednesday or Thursday of the week one of the group would recall that it had been said at the outset that conversation, and incidentally revelation, during the week would be confidential. These were the days when the talk would turn to the background, and the real reason for joblessness would emerge.

Examples of successful Restart Weeks

In Inner London, a spirited, energetic lady had stayed in the group, she said, because it 'made a bit of a change', although she had no wish to alter her way of life. She collected grandchildren from school, cooked, cleaned and gardened and her style of life enabled her two daughters-in-law to work. On Wednesday, however, she decided to speak in private. She had watched some promising beginnings towards job searches and free courses and she was tantalised: her sons' wives could doubtless make other arrangements. But, so she thought, no good would come from any course or job interview because in her youth she had had a conviction; if she applied for work she would have to declare this. Her secret had been carefully guarded and was the real reason why she had *never* worked. A single telephone call confirmed that her brief conviction had been spent⁴ for years. Like other women with grown-up children, she was free to follow her girlhood fancy which, in her case, had been arithmetic. She applied for a course in bookkeeping.

Secondly, there was the case of the kitchen porter. He was being treated for depression. His longest employer had moved to new offices and, as he did not know the new address, he could not get hold of his best, and essential, reference. He was living since his redundancy in a men's hostel and, a non-drinker himself, was afraid of the alcoholics there. He was a Catholic and had lost touch with the Church. Using the telephone at the hostel was difficult; and he was glad of some help in making use of ours. His ex-employers new address was

4. A conviction is said to be spent when sufficient time, calculated in relation to length of sentence and nature of offence, has elapsed to give the convicted person the legal right to omit mention of it when seeking work. Some convictions are never spent.

found, the reference was secured. The residential job for which the reference was so essential was still vacant and became his. And the parish priest invited him to Mass and coffee afterwards.

Another example. A young man had absented himself from college just before his final examinations, distracted by the breaking up of a love affair. He had now recovered from that, but considered his career prospects, after two years of drifting, as wrecked. The idea that his case was not unique, and that his college might like to be consulted, had not crossed his mind. He made an appointment with his old tutor and was restored, a little further behind, to his former path.

What is common to all these successful cases is that they depended on exchange of *information*. Claimants who were fit to work, but prevented by what they saw as insuperable impediments, were in effect set free. And they were all willing to discuss their aspirations and impediments because they were neither embroiled in immediate difficulties with their benefit payments, nor troubled about why they had come to a Restart Week at all.

Difficulties with benefits

If, however, a claimant arrives complaining of suspension of benefit since he made his appointment for a Restart Week, it is a different matter. As benefit is generally a claimant's sole means of support, the problem is pressing. If benefit is not received or available, the claimant has first to find out whether this was by error (not infrequent) or intent. If the former, authority for its issue will have to be sought, and collection attempted again from the claimant's usual Unemployment Benefit Office. If the latter, (because, say, he has failed to attend a Restart interview), his arrival at a Restart Week suggests that there has been a misunderstanding -- he may have confused the interview and the week -- and he will have to make a new appointment to gain restitution. Then, again, a claimant may find that his benefit has been suspended shortly after he *has* attended his interview and filled in the required form -- but filled it in badly. He probably will not know where he has gone wrong; since he needs money to live on, he will be very worried. In spite of all the help that can be gained from Interviewer, Claimant Adviser and fieldworker, the week is effectively wasted. All the information collected and used is concerned only with the benefit system. No new doors are opened and even when things are clarified the claimant may well want no more help from the system which he sees as having led him into such bother.

One common mistake is where the claimant fills in a wage for which he has previously worked, or thinks he might obtain, or would like; instead of the lowest wage for which he would consider working. This mistake is often made because, for all the claimant knows, the Interviewer may mean to find him a job; so it may as well be a good one. Without discussion on such points, the filled-up form may suggest that the claimant is setting up obstacles to work, the interviewer passes the form to the Adjudication Officer and the benefit is suspended.

If a claimant has filled in the form to his disadvantage and also engaged to join a Restart Week, he will be the more confused at losing his benefit if he thought that accepting a 'menu item' was enough to protect his benefit, and that declining one was enough to endanger it. (Certainly, this is wrong; choosing a 'menu item' is 'voluntary'. 'Activity' is proven in other ways. Nor does declining a 'menu item' affect benefit.)

Difficulties with instructions

Many claimants, however, over this period, thought that they had been told otherwise. Of course, it is easy to confuse injunction and permission, and many people feel unable to decline official invitations; but that was not the trouble here -- the sheer volume of misunderstandings was too large to attribute to these traits in human nature. When early in 1989 this point was discussed with Restart Interviewers and Claimant Advisers, much became clear. Employment Service personnel explained that they were often under pressure to work, as it were, ahead of the game. That is, once a measure was decided upon their instructions were to change course as though it had already become law. Sometimes a claimant might complain that an imminent new rule (relating say to 'active search for work') was not in fact yet in force. Nevertheless, people in authority had told him that he must produce evidence of such 'active search' at once, or else lose benefit. By an extension of this administrative convenience, if a change of regulation was *not* in fact in train but its fruits were thought desirable, a degree of obfuscation was sometimes called in aid.

This explained the frequent voluntary/compulsory misunderstandings; increased attendance at 'menu items' was wanted. Expedients such as these were not popular among Restart Interviewers and Claimant Advisers. Nor did they escape the notice of sharper claimants. Altogether, they gave rise to rumours and resentment and brought the Restart system into disrepute.

Examples of fieldworkers' instruction and training

Further examples of this administrative practice surfaced at periods during 1988 and 1989 when the Employment Service executive held meetings to brief fieldworkers -- both external and internal -- who ran Restart Weeks and Job Clubs.

The executive were firm that the fact of insufficient numbers of people failing to attend these 'menu items' constituted a problem. Despite occasional ambiguities at interviews, the figures were not good enough. During 1988 it was decided that staff at Benefit Offices were to be instructed to mention these facilities, as 'people are used to believing that what they hear at Benefit Offices is mandatory'.

At a subsequent briefing, some fieldworkers sought guidance about the considerable numbers of people arriving at Job Clubs who, because of frail health or inability to speak

English, were not likely to be presently employable or to accept Employment Training.

This was a problem insofar as it affected the comparative statistical success of Job Clubs -- which was measured by numbers of jobs secured and Employment training places taken up. It worried the 'providers' (private firms who employ fieldworkers) who were concerned for the renewal of their contracts with the Employment Service. And it worried the Employment Service who ran internal courses.

Job Club leaders themselves were happy enough to explain to a newcomer where he could find classes in English as a Second Language, or to a hostel dweller where he could find a GP who would take him on his list. They took the view that such advice was good in itself and helped towards future employability, but such counselling, the executive maintained, was not the purpose of Job Clubs. Fieldworkers were 'not social workers' and their proper course, if such people arrived, was to send them away, the Employment Service offering help in the case of any who might refuse to leave. But the problem of numbers remained.

The executive naturally wanted to meet attendance targets. Jobs and careers were at stake. So it was decided to tackle the problem in a way consistent with the non social-worker role of Job Club Leaders. As many claimants as possible were to be encouraged into arriving at Job Clubs on Monday mornings. All were to be registered, to make an impressive total. While registering them, leaders were to inspect them cursorily and send away those who, they guessed, would not swell the figures of those entering jobs or training within a few weeks. The mathematics looked good. The flaw was that, statistically, the number of 'early leavers' would be on the high side; but this figure, though recorded, was of less importance than the three target figures for high initial attendance, numbers of jobs secured, and training places accepted.

Some fieldworkers queried the real usefulness of this procedure. Some questioned the propriety of bringing people from, as might be, Kilburn to Camden Town under threat, as they thought, of loss of income, early in the morning, only to send them away empty-handed. (Some had been asked by their providers not to demur at anything suggested at the meetings.) Nevertheless the procedure was adopted.

The executive was not unaware of the importance of public opinion. One point which was raised by fieldworkers at a briefing in 1989 was the proliferation of interviewing. In theory, a claimant could work in a Job Club for up to six months and he was told so initially; but Job Club Leaders were in some cases instructed that they should exercise some pressure on a claimant after six weeks, and told that he would thereafter be expected to accept offers of

less-preferred⁵ jobs from his Restart Interviewer or Claimant Adviser. In addition to interviews with them he was required to report to other bodies of job finders, in other parts of town. Leaders asked for clarification of the obligations of someone installed (as he thought) in a Job Club for up to six months and exploiting its procedures: curriculum vitae prepared, trade magazines to hand, busy with letters and telephone calls to employers etc. This harrying worried the executive. 'Think what the Press would make of this', was the comment, 'we shall see that it stops forthwith'. But it seemed the executive were not able to check this plethora of interviewing; in any case it continued.

The patchwork solutions to problems that formed instructions at briefings were in sharp contrast to training courses which fieldworkers were required to undertake, which were psychologically inspired. The courses provided tuition in ice-breaking exercises, in listening-skills, in body-language, in welcoming-techniques, in objection-handling and individual-handling, in introduction-making, in group-discussion-leading, in brainstorming, in role playing. When the fieldworkers had been trained in these things, other independent teams of psychologists were employed to retrieve their impressions of the training. Perhaps there was too much emphasis on overcoming apathy and lack of motivation (which are less typical characteristics of the unemployed than some psychologists believe), but the general tenor was, sensibly enough, directed towards making claimants feel better, clarify their minds and make their own plans. Quite as much energy was put into the courses dedicated to improving fieldworkers' social skills as into the meetings to brief them on expedients to meet attendance and placement targets.

And at both meetings and training courses the air was charged, as if someone somewhere were about to ask, or were in the habit of asking, why in the midst of all this effort the system did not work better, was not more popular, more universally used, when no holds were barred in getting people to come, and no blandishments lacking when they had done so?

So how to make Restart work better?

It was striking that not even lip service was paid to market methods. What is on offer -- beyond the obligatory Restart interview -- is a free service and a good one. Free services are likely to be taken up by people to whom they would be useful if they have heard good reports of them and nothing to their discredit. (They are not made free on the grounds that no one would dream of paying for them. Private companies pay a good deal for such services in stress management and relocation counselling for their personnel in times of change; redundant executives pay highly for confidential counselling and help in producing curricula vitae). What would normally come to mind if interest in a good, new product or service is slow? Surely,

5. 'Less-preferred jobs' may tend also to be lower paid jobs. In practice it is best to match these to people who regard them as stepping-stones.

market research based on the study of the reactions of its clients, in this case the claimants. What was needed to boost sales (because the product was certainly worth marketing), was to combine the techniques of listening-skills and objection-handling in a novel way, by listening to the objections and handling them, with a view to improving and marketing the service. Hence the three proposals of this paper.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of listening to the objections of clients. The initial interview should clearly understand and do all in his power to make a claimant understand before he enters on a 'mean team' -

a) which parts of the team are 'company' - that is, where declining to participate will lead to loss of benefit;

b) that if the benefit is to be cut he - in fact, because of the 'mean team' - will have to pay more for the benefit;

c) how long he may stay in a 'mean team'.

d) when additional interviews and assessments he may be required to attend during the time on a 'mean team'.

These very clear points would follow from the adjustment:

i) the team must be engaged in the interests of participation in matters beyond the benefit system. To ensure this, the team must be given the most thorough training available before 'mean' work can start. It is necessary to ensure that the team would diminish this risk.

ii) Claimants looking for exact information in dealing with official bodies often consult the team. The team must be given the most thorough training available before 'mean' work can start. It is necessary to ensure that the team would diminish this risk.

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The importance of being clear

-- proposals for adjusting procedures

It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of being clear, especially when dealing with those in unfortunate situations. The initial interviewer should clearly understand and do all in his power to make a claimant understand before he embarks on a Restart 'menu item':-

- a) which parts of Restart are 'compulsory' -- that is, where declining to participate will lead to loss of benefit;
- b) that if his benefit *is* to be cut he will have precise notice of it, together with information about how to appeal against the decision;
- c) how long he may stay in a Job Club;
- d) what additional interviews and assessments he may be required to attend during his time on a 'menu item'.

Three very clear gains would follow from this adjustment:-

i) Restart aims to engage the interest of participants in matters beyond the benefit system. To create new benefit problems which must then receive whole-hearted attention before 'item' work can start, is wrong. The proposal would diminish this risk.

ii) Claimants looking for exact information in dealings with official bodies often consult Citizens Advice Bureaux in order to discover where they stand in the Restart system. It is most undesirable that Restart be seen as harassing, confusing, and on the official side -- with Citizens Advice Bureaux as clarifying and protective. The proposal would help to rectify this.

iii) Whether claimants are resourceful enough to seek outside advice or not, most have heard stories of difficulties and ambiguities which militate against attempts to increase uptake of 'items'. The proposal is designed to clear away ambiguities. Restart Interviewers and Claimant Advisers will be more than willing to pass on precise information, if they are not instructed that it is part of their duties to blur it.

Precise information about possible adjustment to benefit is not, certainly, so simple as it may sound, and would require some determination at high levels to put right; schedules of Restart Interviewers and Adjudication Officers would need to be reorganised (and possibly more of the former might be needed).

The difficulties which arise when forms are filled in to claimants' disadvantage, have already been described. They are sent to the Adjudication Officer, and benefit is suspended. Unless the claimant can immediately turn to friends or family, he will need to apply to the Department of Social Security to receive a 'hardship' benefit of Income Support: which will, however, still mean that his weekly benefit will be £22 instead of £36.70. If he wishes to appeal against disallowance of benefit he will have to prepare his case; 17% of those who appeal do have their benefit restored. All this is a distraction from 'menu item' work.

A competent claimant may indeed deal with it quickly. But an incompetent one may never deal with it at all -- and the benefit system embraces people whose competence is very slight. No one intends that those who are mentally handicapped or mentally ill or illiterate or without friends or social worker should be the ones most prone to abandon the struggle to retain or regain benefit. But this is an effect; statistically they will not be distinguishable from those who are content to leave the benefit system because they have other support or prospects.

Could not appeals be heard within, say, four weeks? And the procedure be modified accordingly? In cases of doubt the Restart Interviewer would consult the Adjudication Officer and arrange a further meeting with the claimant.⁶ There, misunderstandings, if that is all that was wrong, could be sorted out. This would, in itself, reduce the number of appeals. If at that point it is clear that benefit will be reduced, the claimant should be told that it will cease in four weeks unless, during that time, he appeals and wins his case.⁷

A ruling that benefit should not be cut before appeal is heard would encourage government to look urgently at the appeal system. The matter, together with others concerning Restart was raised in the House of Lords in Committee on the Social Security Bill in 1989.⁸ Fourteen days had been suggested as a reasonable period to elapse before an appeal was heard. Lord Skelmersdale, in replying that that was too short a period in which to complete legal requirements, went on to agree with Baroness Sear that two to three months

6. It may be that Restart Weeks will be soon made compulsory where at the beginning more time is felt to be needed. That is not ideal. Where a claimant wants to consider options, why should he not attend voluntarily? And if unresolved preoccupations remain after his first Restart interview then what is likely to be needed is individual discussion on a confidential basis rather than a compulsory Week. For example, an ex-offender will generally be happy to make an appointment at NACRO (National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders). He may well choose a 'menu item' after such an appointment.

If a Restart Week is to become compulsory, then at least confidentiality must be emphasised, and a suitable system for private talking devised.

7. Much awkwardness arises from the polite fiction that suspension of benefit stems from the Adjudication Officer. Violence is feared if it is understood that it is suspended after a Restart interview. (The Adjudication Officer never meets the claimant.) Four weeks in hand might help to defuse any explosive situation.

8. *Hansard*, House of Lords, 22 June 1989, Social Security Bill.

was too long for a claimant to wait:

'I am advised that on average the period is 17 weeks. That is not very good, but it is slightly better -'

Noble Lords: 'That is more than four months!'

Lord Skelmersdale: 'I am as horrified as the noble Baroness and other members of the Committee are to learn that.'

Lord Skelmersdale went on to explain that Appeals Tribunals come under the auspices of the Lord Chancellor's office. He corrected a previous answer -- that benefit is continued until the decision of the Adjudication Officer⁹ -- and suggested that he should write on the question whether (in cases where the Adjudication Officer decides finally in the claimant's favour) benefit was restored for the period between the Restart Interviewer's doubts and the Adjudication Officer's ruling. He answered a question on hardship by replying:

'... it is not true that if people fail to satisfy the new condition (actively seeking work) they face destitution. Hardship payments of Income Support will be made where appropriate'.

Lord Skelmersdale's point about Appeals Tribunals suggests that consultation is desirable between the two Departments. His second point on the continuation and restoration of benefit suggests that either the details of procedure on benefit reduction are so complex that in charity to all who have to administer them, they should be simplified; or that the chain of communication upwards is in disrepair. Both explanations are possible. His point on destitution is perfectly true. But it, too, suggests consultation between the two Departments concerned.

An example. A young man arrived at a Restart Week sick of being unemployed and anxious to explore the prospects of both Employment Training and of employment. But he was out of food at home. Before he could get any, he was told he would have to spend the day at the Department of Social Security to get his hardship benefit. The blow had fallen unexpectedly and left him confused. If the matter had been approached with more time in hand, the need to suspend his benefit, his lack of other resources, his resulting eligibility for hardship support and his transfer to such support could all have been established without the consequence that followed. For he did not return to complete his Week, but departed to talk

9. In fact it is so continued where the doubt is about 'availability'; not where it is about 'activity'.

about his unfortunate experience of Restart.

Further clarification necessary

Lack of precise information among those at the top, exacerbated by inadequate communication between Departments, goes hand in hand with apparent scarcity of precise information among the lower echelons of the Employment Service. No one benefits. Claimants who face the necessity of precision as far as their income and obligations are concerned, are confused and bewildered.

New legislation about 'actively seeking work' is now in place. Although it caused initial anxiety, it is not too harsh in itself -- and useful in that it has thrown up demand for further clarification. The vast majority of people on benefit income hope for more money, and therefore *are* actively seeking work. Some will take longer to find it and need advice, which is where Restart helps most. Some people cannot yet be thinking about work, and the new rules have set in train discussions about 'special circumstances' exemption. As Earl Russell put the case for the bereaved and others:-

'...it is a little unreasonable to expect people to go straight from the graveside to the job centre. This amendment makes it possible to allow discretion for a small pause to recover breath in that journey where it is necessary to do so. It allows scope to exercise discretion about, for example, the effects of marital breakdown or, in the case of someone recovering from drugs dependence or alcohol abuse or recovering from the common situation of having to care for a dying relative'.¹⁰

The circumstances of the over-fifties also need consideration. Especially in manual work, they have particular problems. Yet so strong is the desire of many over-fifties to work that specialist agencies are setting themselves up to help them. Restart should engage in this work also, with those who want its help.

The more closely Restart works with training and industry, the clearer it becomes that it is useless to induce people into work or training when they are not in a state in which employers and tutors would want them. It is in everyone's interest to sort out 'special circumstances', sickness and invalidity benefit as smoothly as possible. This is one reason why another important adjustment to procedure and clarification is necessary -- the medical one.

The initial interviewer should routinely ask whether a claimant is registered with a doctor and/or would like to consult one.

¹⁰ Hansard, House of Lords, 22 June 1989, Social Security Bill.

Most of those who arrive at a Restart Week or Job Club are eager to benefit from them. But they are often disconcerted or dismayed if many of those who arrive with them are pathetically frail, drunk or drugged or clearly psychotic. They wonder whether they have become members of an appropriate group. Where medical help is clearly going to be needed, it should be proposed at once.

This is not to say that Restart should wash its hands of the sick. It must be made plain that the Restart system remains available and, with medical agreement, may soon be able to open doors for them. (This would be true too for 'special circumstances' claimants.)

Restart working better

The plea for clarity, clearer understanding of benefits and their possible withdrawal, clearer guidelines for interviews, clearer cooperation between departments -- we hope that all this may lead to Restart working better. The initial encounters of claimant and interviewer should be longer, certainly, but more rewarding. The interviewer should take his time about establishing all the facts that relate to 'actively seeking work'; and be able to call into play 'special circumstances' as well as sickness and invalidity benefits.

When a change of benefit is found appropriate, it would be made with the facts understood on all sides -- and would include any advice the claimant might have taken between interviews, medical or otherwise -- whether it be towards reduction of benefit or to changing to a benefit which exempts for a time from the need to seek work. This would reduce calls on the Lord Chancellor's office, and if benefit were retained until the achievement of clarity, much of the aura of anxiety and uncertainty surrounding Restart would be dispelled.

Those who select a 'menu item' would proceed without ado. They would be clear about their 'permitted period' for seeking 'preferred' work, and about whom to appeal to if circumstances changed and the period needed to be extended. Their work at a 'menu item' would much more rarely be disturbed by an array of uncertainties, and by the distractions provided by those who, for medical or other reasons, should not be of their company.

The Employment Service would no longer give initial interviewers credit for the quick despatch of their work, but rather criticise them if too many benefit decisions went to appeal or had to be reconsidered. Such a change of emphasis would both increase effectiveness and save money throughout the Restart system.

At present, a 'bad' referral is in some ways as good as a 'good' one. Here is a paradox, and this is how it can work. A 'good' referral to an Employment Training Course in carpentry might be one where a young man likes woodwork; did not know that he was eligible for a free

full-time course with allowances; is glad to hear it; discusses the matter with family and friends for a day or two; finds that they have no objection to his spending a year learning; and reckons to enjoy making a living out of it afterwards. The 'bad' referral is the young man beside him who says he will go along too, to avoid discussing his housing problem, or the drugs, or the learning difficulties at school, or his wish to take A-Levels in Physics and Chemistry. He will drop out at an early stage. However, along the way, he will have scored a lot of credit points for his referral -- for his Restart Interviewer, Claimant Adviser, Restart Week fieldworker, fieldworker's provider, Training Agent and Training Manager (and fees for the two latter will have been paid).

What harm flows from such a monitoring technique? Unfortunately, it is the case that easy, quick referrals (sometimes with the emphasis changed by directive from week to week) do great mischief. For example, if the carpentry course is going to fold without the second youth (and many are like him) the sooner this fact is accepted the better. Colleges of Further Education in particular complain of planning difficulties in their part of Employment Training provision, as bad referrals drop out. And the young man himself will not have come any closer to planning for his working future.

Job Clubs, Restart Weeks and Employment Training courses should succeed because of demand, through a steady increase of good publicity put about by those who have benefited from them, rather than be filled by panic measures where the demand flags. A revised monitoring system should change emphasis from credit for maximum number of referrals to credit for successful referrals.

Proposal for a new 'menu item'

Financial incentives and 'menu items'

A Job Club offers very valuable facilities and holds out the hope of work. 'Therapeutic disregard' allows claimants on invalidity benefit to earn up to £35 a week on top of benefit. Ten pounds on top of benefit and help with fares and child care, as well as free tuition, is already offered by Employment Training. On the Enterprise Allowance Scheme benefit is replaced by a larger allowance, free financial counselling is provided and profit-making is encouraged. A pilot scheme is in place, allowing those who complete Employment Training to keep earnings from part-time work¹¹. If a claimant chooses education, there is no bar to his earnings in vacation. So the system is full of financial incentives to encourage claimants to become independent.

Nevertheless a minority in every Restart Week and Job Club fails to find incentives within the options.

Where Restart does not meet the need to work

Some, though not all, of this minority would have benefited under the old Community Programme. It is not that they are unwilling or unfit to engage in activity, nor that they are content with benefit income; it is that when they have carefully considered the choices none of the 'items' meets their needs as they see them.

Their archetype would be a 50-year old casual labourer who was picked for work regularly by foremen until one or two years ago; and who then tried, but failed, to get taken on by the Council.

Training has no appeal; he already knows how to do his own brand of work. Education may interest him but has nothing to do with paid employment. Running his own business suggests unfamiliar dealings with banks and books. Such people dislike their impoverished idleness, but have come to see it as the price they must pay for benefit; now that Restart is telling them that they have still more to pay, they are at a loss. What would suit their needs is a new 'item' that would cost the state nothing in incentives and very little in administration -- and fit easily into the present system of interviewing.

11. Such incentives and disregards recognise and begin to alleviate the anomaly which exists when those on a small private income, family support, pension etc. can improve their position as best they can, but those on equivalent state support cannot.

The small earnings option

This is a proposal for a menu item which would permit claimants on benefit to earn up to the tax threshold for a specified period, the Restart system giving every encouragement to their efforts and reviewing their progress at intervals. If their activities raised them above the threshold their tax would be assessed with their benefit income (which would be considered an allowance as in the Enterprise Allowance scheme) counting as the first £1,908 of income.

The option could indeed be regarded as an introduction to Enterprise Allowance. It represents permission to re-enter the world of familiar tasks without the demand to undergo training (and so without any Employment Training Allowance). In some cases, as the examples below will show, it could be looked on as an adjunct to the therapeutic earnings disregard, although the item should not be limited to certain categories.

The option would be a way for some 'special circumstances' people to begin again; would allow those who have done unskilled or semi-skilled labour all their working lives to retain status and supplement income by a diminishing quantity of perhaps lighter work in their later years; could be of use to a young person whose career is still in the balance; and would enable people who have done voluntary work to see if they can turn their experience into paid work, little by little.

People adopting the option should be offered the chance to combine it with part-time training in skills or small business management.

The option would remove the heavy disadvantage under which the scrupulous claimant labours. The level of honesty about small sums is extraordinarily high; at least until one remembers the fear claimants have of being accused of infringing benefit rules. A habit of meticulous adherence to them develops. No claimant with regular work, or who used an agency to get casual work, was ever seen by the author at Restart Weeks and Job Clubs. Certainly such people cannot be only the stuff of legend; but Restart screening does seem effective in inducing them to sign off rather than pursue an 'item'. Very occasionally somebody mentioned having earned small sums in the construction industry or other local work; far more could have earned such sums but conscientiously abstained.

The frustration described by such people does not point to apathy as a root cause of their inactivity. This type of claimant has learned to manage as he is on benefit; but what he would like is part-time or intermittent work which produces additional income, can be obtained by himself to suit his state of health and any family responsibilities he has, whose pay can be negotiated, which does not lead him into commitments he is uncertain of fulfilling, and which is free of red tape. It may be called a village viewpoint. And most people live in villages, even in the inner cities.

We are looking here at a wide assortment who have, some only for a time, impediments to regular work. Very many people have minor or intermittent ailments, often related to aging, or have intermittently sick dependents. They live in the shadowy area between the benefit level and the tax threshold, forming part of our underclass, and prevented from leaving it. Removing the bar to efforts which they can envisage making, rather than urging them towards efforts which they cannot envisage, would fill a need which other, potentially higher-earning 'items' do not attend to.

Examples of people who could have made use of a Small Earnings Option, from Job Clubs and Restart Weeks.

Mr C, 57, had not worked since the death of his wife three years previously. An unusually agreeable and dependable man, he expected it to take him some time to find regular work at his age as a painter/decorator. And it did take him nearly five months, attending a Job Club and scanning press advertisements etc. While so doing, he was offered several well-paid 'odd jobs' and was affronted that the employers all assumed he would work without declaring the access of income. The money would have made a big difference to him and the episodes of work would not have disturbed his steady job search; in fact, one or other of the 'odd job' employers would probably have taken him on permanently.

Mr O, 54, had not worked for six years. He had some minor health problems and had led an isolated life. Work on his CV revealed a friend in whose firm he had worked in the past, who might be prepared to act as a referee. He got in touch with him and was offered some weekends' work on a house renovation out of London for a total fee of £200. He badly wanted to go, but would not accept, as he would have forfeited benefit for the weeks concerned. He felt that to work for no (or very little) increase of income would make him look foolish -- he preferred to risk the reduced benefit which he knew might result from declining the offer of work of a suitable nature. The job would probably have led to more work intermittently (which was all he felt up to).

Mr P, 27, had applied after a Restart interview for full-time work as a milkman. After an unsuccessful interview with the dairy, he explained at his Job Club that he had had physical and psychiatric problems and agreed that he would find the work too much. He was likable and intelligent and very anxious to improve his finances. He quickly found work within his £5 disregard delivering papers, turning down a higher wage. Soon afterwards he joined a therapeutic community scheme to benefit from the therapeutic earnings disregard. But this scheme could not yet offer the full permitted earnings; and in any case he was very disappointed at having had to re-enter the world of

invalidity which he had been trying to put behind him.

Mr B, 30, had been persuaded at Restart interview to apply to the Post Office and had failed the entry test. He was referred to a Job Club and explained that he had been suffering from a mental illness and was still on medication. He chose the same solution as Mr P with the same reservations.

Dr T, a Physics lecturer, had fully recovered from a breakdown but had had no work experience since, and was set on financial recovery. He was applying for academic jobs but would have benefited from part-time tutoring work first. He felt he could earn more than the therapeutic disregard allowed; and, in any case, did not want to apply for invalidity benefit.

Ms S, 35, had cared abroad for her grandmother until her death, and had been offered part-time work caring for an elderly woman. She had no experience of such work outside the family and would have liked to accept it for a trial period. She had no other work experience except as a children's cook on a kibbutz. She was uncertain about her ability to work for a stranger. In addition, she would have to arrange to have her benefit adjusted to take account of her pay, or else sign off -- in which case she would not be able to resume full benefit unless she stayed at the work for six weeks. The prospect was too daunting for her. She felt she could not manage both the work and the benefit arrangements. Had it not been for that complication, and with the financial incentive of keeping her pay, she would have tried the job. As her confidence grew, she would have earned enough as a carer to take her out of the benefit system.

None of the above was quite fit enough for full-time work. Mr C meant to stick to it as long as he could. Mr O was never going to manage it. Both looked forward to intermittent work when they reached pensionable age¹². The convalescents hoped to become strong enough for full-time work; in the immediate future they needed as much part-time work in the outside world as they could manage, to help both their medical and financial rehabilitation. Ms S was unsure of her capabilities and needed to start slowly. Two further examples, among younger people:

Mr A, 24, a full-time self-taught artist had been offered the chance of exhibition and sales at a reputable London gallery; and was hoping not to have his benefit reduced during the final two months' preparation.

¹² State pensioners have no bar to earnings.

Mr S, 21, had frightened himself by selling two of his designs at £50 each, painted onto jackets, while on benefit. He was deciding between Employment Training and College. Meanwhile he would have liked to have sold some more designs -- though he was ashamed of having sold any.

All these people could obtain work which they were able to do, and for which there was a market. None could rely on the work as a permanent source of income. All wanted to try it and to see where it would lead. None could risk prejudicing benefit.

Pilot scheme for Small Earnings Option

Implementation of this 'item' would have an effect equivalent to that of setting a disregard of about £21 p.w. -- the difference between benefit level and the tax threshold. Earnings, however, because they would tend to be irregular, could not conveniently be looked at weekly, but rather be reviewed at recalls to Restart interviews, or at the end of a person's participation, or at the end of a period of say a year. Thereafter, some people might be able to envisage full- or part-time regular employment. Those close to pensionable age, however, might never progress beyond this option.

It should therefore be decided at the very outset whether additional time on the 'item' should be at the discretion of Restart officers, or involve some loss of benefit or some obligatory element of training. In the former case, the claimant should have a right of appeal.

The proportion of claimants interested in resuming work via this option might be as high as thirty per cent of those at present looking for help from Restart.¹³ For example, in a take-up of ten people to a Restart Week or Job Club, three might be interested in Employment Training, one in Further or Higher Education, two might need medical advice, two might be ready to seek work in a Job Club, one might be interested in Enterprise Allowance and one in voluntary work. Of these, one might change his mind about Employment Training or be rejected for it, the Enterprise Allowance candidate might find the formalities beyond him, and one of the unfit might turn out to be ready for limited activity; making three in all who might benefit from the small earnings option.

It might be hoped that earnings might match those obtainable under the old Community Programme -- with the advantages that people would be obtaining work on the open market (using Restart Weeks and Job Clubs initially if they so wished) and that there would be no

13. It would be interesting to discover whether income tax which the successful participants paid exceeded the financial return of benefit deducted in consequence of declared part-time work. In answer to a parliamentary question on 20 April 1990 it was stated that 85,000 claimants had declared earnings above the level of the disregard, and 28,000 of their partners, out of the total of the unemployed.

limit set to their earnings, and therefore no bar to their endeavours.

Public opinion

The Small Earnings option has a further advantage. It could contribute to an improvement in Restart's image among all those who have anything to do with the unemployed including, in the view of some senior staff in the Employment Service, Restart Interviewers and Claimant Advisers. Community support for it could be enlisted; the part-time or occasional help it provided would be of use to many employers. Reaction among the 'client-group', too, should be favourable: groups gauge shrewdly who will quickly find work; who would benefit from training; who is over-pricing himself; who must learn not to sell himself short; and they know that at present a percentage is being offered nothing useful. The word would soon get round that Restart can now help far more of the people whose hopes it raises. Finally, it would be welcomed by those interested in getting the nation's work done. The CBI in its evidence to the House of Commons on Part-Time Employment said of the present position:

'... the CBI regards the current highly restrictive arrangements as counter-productive. Part-time work is an effective means by which the unemployed can re-enter the labour market. In many areas, part-time work is more readily available than full-time work. Part-time work enables the unemployed to remain in touch with the disciplines of work and can provide an effective springboard into full-time work. Furthermore, it improves the financial position of the unemployed while possibly reducing demands on Government resources...

'At present, the majority of the unemployed can take little advantage of the growth in part-time work. This is because the benefit regulations mean that the vast majority of claimants still lose their benefit entitlements or have the benefits drastically reduced if they enter part-time employment. This deterrent also applies to the wives of unemployed men who have been on Income Support for less than two years, as their earnings count against benefit entitlement...

'Whilst the CBI welcomed the increased disregard introduced in April 1988, it recommends that the higher disregard should be applied as soon as possible to all those unemployed for over one year (around 43% of the unemployed) and their spouses and, as resources allow, extended to all the unemployed. In reply to a parliamentary question on 23 June 1988, it was stated that the Government had no plans at the present time to allow other categories of unemployed to benefit from the higher disregard.

'If it is determined to maintain this position the CBI suggests that the Government should consider other ways of enabling unemployed people to take advantage of the part-time work which is available.' (my italics)¹⁴

A Small Earnings Option is one such way. Nor would it open floodgates. It would be limited to those whose length of unemployment results in Restart procedures. It could be carefully monitored using Restart's existing machinery. (As Small Earnings Option candidates would get less technical advice than the Enterprise Allowance group, care should be taken to see that housing benefit did not present difficulties.)¹⁵

If the regulations which permit Enterprise Allowance profits to be retained, and those receiving Enterprise Allowance to be removed from the unemployment count, are not sufficiently flexible to embrace the combination of employed and self-employed earnings (which would arise with a Small Earnings Option) then legislation could enable these ends to be met.

If, however, a Small Earnings Option were to be adopted merely by the use of an increased disregard, then the objection must be squarely faced that claimants who chose this option would still be counted as unemployed. It would do the statistics no good. But such an objection is very narrowly political -- and could partly be met by publishing the numbers who chose this option in a special category.

A second objection -- that those who chose this option might be much better off if (say) they were to opt for full-time training instead -- is obviously paternalistic, running against the grain of Thatcherism. The potentially higher-earning options would in any case have been carefully explained to and considered by a claimant before he opted for the Small Earning Option. Let those who choose, choose.

14. CBI's *Evidence to the House of Commons on Part Time Employment*, 3 May 1989.

15. Housing benefit is calculated in advance, and if overpaid in the light of subsequent income is repaid by the beneficiary over an agreed period. To avoid disincentive, Small Earnings Option candidates should be exempted from (or anyway helped with) these repayments where they resulted from participation in a pilot scheme.

Conclusion

The future for Restart

Restart should set its sights on achieving much wider success than hitherto. It should rationalise its internal systems and its relations with the different Departments concerned; and above all operate with the utmost openness and clarity. The importance of achieving such clarity, in dealing with situations where there is much ill fortune, cannot be emphasised enough, if Restart is to command general confidence and respect.

The key element of the individual interview, the high calibre of most Employment Service personnel who work directly with claimants, and their links with existing infrastructures concerned with health, disability, welfare, education and training, have by and large protected Restart from grave error -- but not from internal strains, ineffectiveness, delays and waste of money, and a corresponding degree of anxiety, cynicism and disappointment among its clients.

Perhaps it was hoped, at the experimental stage of Restart some four years ago, that a sudden onslaught on unemployment -- a short, sharp shock which did not shrink from being confrontational -- would do something startling in the way of redeployment. And the experiment was worth making. It was well designed and well conducted. Although no miracle has occurred success of a very valuable kind has been achieved: a nationwide network of information has been set up which facilitates employment, education and training -- and been proved, incidentally, to be of service to many of those not at present playing any active part in the economy¹⁶.

Working under pressure was a deliberate policy at an early stage of the original scheme. Both claimants and the Employment Service personnel endured it. But it has been shown to lead to faulty referrals. And it has led to an unpopularity which mars the usefulness of Restart. The policy should be abandoned.

Now is the time for Restart to learn from four years' experience. As Unemployment Benefit Offices and Restart services unite under one roof, it would be good to demonstrate an understanding of the usefulness of confidential individual counselling (where wanted). One move might be to invite Citizens Advice Bureaux to participate. If it could be shown that the

16. Where even the Opposition points out (in *Labour Market Briefing No 2*, July 1990) that Restart has sometimes guided appropriate claimants toward the more advantageous invalidity benefit -- a tax-free allowance and one which removes pressure to seek work -- surely Restart itself should publicise its willingness to be useful to the less fortunate, as well as to those who have been, and will be, placed in work, training or education. (The point being made in *Labour Market Briefing* was that some of the drop in employment figures reflects transfer to other benefits rather than real increase in employment.)

two services, though different, are not diametrically opposed, Restart would be transformed in the eyes of its potential users, to its great advantage.

For Restart finds itself at a dangerous corner. Its design is admirably comprehensive. It provides a convenient clearing-house to facilitate the efforts of those routinely seeking work, work change, education and training. And it is designed to use the same facilities, and the same solid principles of choice, encouragement of enterprise, advance of the individual -- principles which this administration so warmly espouses -- to return to the working community those of the unemployed whose problems are especially grave, or multiple.

Recently, however, Restart has shed the options of Voluntary Work and Community Programme -- both of which were of service to the least fortunate of the unemployed. At present, Restart is consolidating procedures which are to do with the obligations of claimants. It is tending to start these procedures at an earlier stage of unemployment. It is still working to set 'numbers' targets.

All in all, recent developments might lead to Restart using different principles, different facilities for the least fortunate; offering them only a very limited selection of work or training which they cannot decline, whatever the reason (other than ill health). If such a state of things is intended, a mechanism far less thoughtful and comprehensive than Restart would suffice. Unless such a dangerous course is eschewed Restart will fail to fulfil its potential.

Yet Restart's potential is really too good to waste. The country needs a scheme to which a school leaver, a returning housewife, an aging manual worker, even a redundant executive would be glad to turn -- or return -- to. And one that takes note, too, of modern trends in the management of people. Successful companies now offer their personnel counselling, and the time to profit by it -- at times of career change and development, at times of drugs or alcohol problems, at times of personal or company crisis. Restart 's job is to help people return to work; that is what its clients want. The machinery is there. It is time to adjust it.

actively seeking work; clause in Social Security Act 1989. To be eligible for full benefits claimants must show that as well being available for work they are actively seeking it.

Summary of recommendations

This paper principally recommends that:-

1. unemployed claimants be encouraged to make fuller use of Restart's facilities, and that the scheme itself be made more effective in returning large numbers to work;
2. procedures be modified to make matters clearer to claimants;
3. procedures be improved for dealing with those not immediately employable;
4. a pilot scheme be introduced, for a 'small earnings option', to return more claimants to work via profitable part-time or intermittent employment, enabling many to end dependency on benefit; and,
5. confidential counselling be made more freely available to claimants.

Glossary

Actively seeking work: clause in Social Security Act 1989. To be eligible for full benefits claimants must show that as well being available for work they are actively seeking it.

Adjudication Officer: Employment Service executive who rules whether benefit suspended at Restart interview shall be paid. His rulings may be reversed on appeal.

Claimant Adviser: Employment Service employee trained in benefit calculation and benefit law.

Disablement Resettlement Officer: Employment Service employee trained to provide employment advice to those with mental or physical disability.

Employment Counsellor: Employment Service employee combining rôles of Restart Interviewer and Claimant Adviser.

Employment Service: has agency status under contract to the Department of Employment.

Employment Training: a Restart 'menu item'. Government scheme of vocational training introduced in 1988.

Enterprise Allowance Scheme: a Restart 'menu item' to encourage self-employment in small businesses.

Fieldworker: tutor/counsellor at Restart weeks, and Job Club leader -- either employed by the Employment service or a freelance worker employed by private firms (providers).

Job Club: a Restart 'menu item'. Claimants may attend a Job Club on four mornings or afternoons a week, first learning how to apply, and then applying, for work. 'Internal' Job Clubs are run in Job Centres by Employment Service personnel; external ones are run by providers in rented accommodation.

Menu items: (soon to be known as options) are the headings of choices discussed at Restart interviews:- i) seeking work, full- or part-time; ii) attending a Job Club; iii) joining the Enterprise Allowance Scheme; iv) undertaking Employment Training or education; v) Voluntary Work (now limited to those who have completed Employment Training; vi) attending a Restart Week to explore the options more thoroughly.

The items are not mutually exclusive and claimants may change from one to another.

Until 1988 'Community Programme' was an item: varieties of useful part-time work which would otherwise have been left undone, paid at union rates and so providing wages in excess of benefit, and in excess of Employment Training allowance.

New Client Adviser: Interviewer who sees clients at the time of their first claim.

Permitted period: varying lengths of time on full benefit allowed to claimants while they are seeking work of a preferred type and/or at a hoped-for wage (maximum 13 weeks), after which claimants must apply for jobs suggested by Restart Interviewer or Claimant Adviser.

Provider: private firm working under contract to the Employment Service providing venues and fieldworkers for Restart Weeks and Job Clubs.

Referral: any transfer of a claimant within the Restart system e.g. a Restart Interviewer's referral to a Restart Week, or a Job Club Leader's referral to Employment Training. Such referrals are credited as successes on statistical forms used for monitoring personnel's performance. Outside referrals (such as to a G.P.) may not so count.

Restart Interviewer: interviewer who sees a claimant after six months' unemployment and thereafter at intervals.

Restart Week: itself a 'menu item' designed to explore all the other items, and help the claimant to devise a plan towards training or working.

Training Agent: firm under contract to the Training Agency, which is under the control of the Department of Employment, providing initial assessment and counselling of potential Employment Training trainees, and other training advice.

Training Manager: firm providing tuition in Employment Training subjects, and work placements, under contract to the Training Agency.

N.B. Of the above definitions *fieldworkers* is my own shorthand to avoid constant repetition of 'tutor/counsellors at Restart Weeks and Job Club Leaders'.

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