



## Summary 10: A proposal to tackle worklessness – an environmental Intermediate Labour Market programme

'The target of increasing the Northwest's employment rate to a level of 80% is highly ambitious. The task is daunting: 9% of the working age population are on incapacity benefit, the highest percentage of any region. In order to succeed, innovative initiatives are required.'

### Key messages

- Despite considerable efforts in recent years, little improvement has been seen in the region's employment rate.
- The global economic crisis is likely to increase unemployment significantly.
- The environment has proved a vital resource in helping 'harder to reach' groups back into full time work.
- A new initiative that builds on the cumulative assets, knowledge and skills of the region's environmental bodies would provide an innovative means of helping people return to work. It would also help to refurbish the region's green infrastructure.
- With additional support from national and regional agencies, the programme could be expanded as an additional regional response to current economic problems, given that 100,000 extra jobseekers are forecast in the Northwest by 2011.

### The context

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) report<sup>1</sup>, *Moving towards full employment in the North West* (2007), states that an additional 320,000 people need to move into work to meet the regional target of an 80% employment rate. Many of these would be from disadvantaged groups.

Such people are often characterised as being 'not work ready'. Becoming work ready is no mean task. Job entry rates from New Deal programmes are levelling off or declining, reflecting the need to tackle worklessness among groups of benefit claimants who are hardest to help.

The task remains a challenge – in 2000 the employment rate stood at 72.3%. Eight years on it has barely changed at 72.5%.

Helping the economically inactive back to work can provide many associated social benefits. But the

challenge of achieving an 80% employment rate is likely to become much harder as the global recession produces steep increases in joblessness.

In this context, the environment provides a reason for optimism. There is good evidence to show that when people are exposed to natural environments, hospital patients' recovery rates improve, stress is reduced and performance enhanced. People, it seems, are genetically programmed to respond positively to green infrastructure.

This helps to explain the high rates of volunteering within regional environmental programmes, as well as the success of Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) schemes based on the environment (see NENW research summary 8). Environmental programmes working with disaffected and truanting schoolchildren have also proved remarkably successful.

### The proposed project

A regional consortium of environmental bodies, meeting as the Natural Economy Northwest Investment Forum (NENW IF), has produced proposals for a programme to tackle rising unemployment in a paper entitled *Tackling Worklessness*<sup>2</sup>.

These organisations are responsible for managing and protecting natural environment assets and/or exist to use those assets to deliver maximum public benefit.

The process of environmental asset management provides the two key building blocks required by a skills and employment programme: genuine work that needs to be done and the funding resources required to undertake it. Asset managers require a steady, reliable, consistent service from worklessness support programmes. The socio-economic outputs from such programmes could be achieved within their core business aims.

A significant strength of the NENW IF consortium is that it also contains several partners who are very

experienced at developing and delivering skills and employment programmes. They use the natural environment to engage people who are furthest from the labour market. Experience from previous ILM programmes indicates that between 45% and 65% of participants can be expected to go into jobs.

The proposal is to create a joint venture, perhaps in the form of a Community Interest Company, to provide a vehicle through which the NENW IF partners can formally deliver environmental ILM programmes.

Organised in this way, the service providers would manage the intake of clients, guarantee a competitive rate for the work, manage procurement obstacles, ensure a continuity of resource provision and income, ensure consistent quality, and deliver appropriate interventions.

The structure would provide training and real work for a wide range of beneficiaries, including incapacity benefit claimants, jobseekers, ex-offenders, young people not in education, employment or training, probation service clients and so on. The critical mass of the programme could attract funding from a wide array of organisations that wish to support its social, economic and environmental outputs.

The programme could be run at a regional scale with local delivery addressing the requirements of sub-regional strategies, multi area agreements and individual asset holders.

Putting asset holders and service providers together in this way provides the basis of an exciting programme that can help to address worklessness and can readily be targeted at the most critical areas of the region.

## Potential outputs

The Northwest already has a substantial amount of green infrastructure. This needs enhancing and maintaining in order to deliver the region's environmental targets on climate change adaptation, flood management, biodiversity, and sustainable communities, and to underpin future sustainable economic development.

In its most basic form, this asset base of green infrastructure would comfortably sustain a programme to assist 100 participants in the first year, rising to 400 in year three and beyond. This programme could be funded entirely from commercial and public sources by the end of year three, but will need some further development and pump priming.

Because the current global economic crisis is likely to increase unemployment in the region by over 100,000 by 2011, there is the opportunity to expand this proposal. This would not only reduce worklessness, obviate potential social disruption, and target regional spend on the worst hit communities, but also create valuable green infrastructure to underpin sustainable economic recovery.

However, further work is needed to review a range of options and alternative social, commercial and public sector delivery models to scale up this proposal, leading to a detailed business plan. Such a plan would take into account key issues such as the possible displacement of contractors, state aid, and synergy with other current opportunities.

NENW commends this proposal to NWDA, GONW, 4NW, Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency to consider. If this gains regional support the next stage would be the establishment of a regional task group, followed by urgent funding to produce an options report and then a detailed business plan. This would establish the investment required and the resulting benefits – for the unemployed, for reviving the economy and for the Northwest's environment and wellbeing.

## Find out more

Natural Economy Northwest  
[www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk)

Northwest Regional Development Agency  
[www.nwda.co.uk](http://www.nwda.co.uk)

<sup>1</sup> *Moving towards full employment in the North West* is available at:  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2007/northwest/index.asp>

<sup>2</sup> *Tackling Worklessness* is available at:  
[www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php)

