Launched on 15 January 2002, Belfast GEMS (Gasworks Employment Matching Service) is a pilot employability initiative aimed at creating greater access to jobs arising in the Gasworks site and Laganside area. The service aims to provide a network of support services including career mentoring, job brokerage and a job matching service targeted specifically at unemployed people from areas of social need in South and East Belfast.

This article summarises the development & achievements of the service, combining findings from an evaluation undertaken in 2003 with published information from the GEMS website and elsewhere.

Laganside Regeneration and the Creation of GEMS

Established by the Government in 1989, the Laganside Corporation had by 2004 secured £800 million of investment monies into and around its designated area. The opening of the Lagan Weir in 1994 put in motion events which have led to the development of offices & restaurants on the banks of the Lagan, the revitalisation of the Cathedral Quarter area and the Gasworks and Odyssey sites, to name but a few. With regeneration came employment (the Corporation’s 2004 Annual Report highlights an inflow of 12,000 new jobs) and with employment came an opportunity to assist local jobseekers into new employment.

The impetus for Belfast GEMS came during early 1998 when Belfast City Council (BCC) wished to promote a strategic response to tackle the high levels of unemployment and long-term unemployment within the communities comprising and adjacent to the Gasworks/ Laganside economic regeneration sites. BCC believed that people living close to these major developments would be highly unlikely to benefit from the development going on around them without targeted intervention measures. Accordingly they commissioned a PriceWaterhouseCoopers study, ‘Belfast City Council Gasworks Employment Initiative’ (July 1998) and subsequently established a Steering Group to drive the recommended initiative forward.

The Steering Group undertook a number of steps to drive the initiative forward including action planning and economic appraisals. Finally the South Belfast Partnership Board, with the support of East Belfast Partnership Board, agreed to take on the responsibility for the operation of Belfast GEMS Project. The Steering Group was restructured to become Belfast GEMS Advisory Group (see Box 1) bringing on a range of other key stakeholders from the public, community, voluntary and private sectors to support the strategic direction of the project.

**Box 1 GEMS Advisory Group Organisations**

- Belfast City Council;
- South Belfast Partnership Board and East Belfast Partnership Board;
- Laganside Corporation;
- Belfast Regeneration Office;
- Department for Employment & Learning (Employment Service and Research and Evaluation Branch);
- Representatives from the local communities;
- Business in the Community;
- Belfast Local Strategy Partnership.
The Impact of the Gasworks Employment Matching Service (GEMS)
Darren McKinstry, Darren McKinstry Consulting

The Belfast GEMS Labour Market Intermediary Service, which is largely public sector financed - 28% EU funding (ERDF); 69% other public sources - and 3% private sector funding, became operational in January 2002 with a mission to “provide a high quality, impartial, 1:1 information, advice and guidance service which enhances the employability and supports the career, education and personal development choices of long-term unemployed people”.

It was envisaged that GEMS would achieve this mission by providing services such as career mentoring, job brokerage and job matching, targeted specifically at unemployed people from areas of social need in South and East Belfast. The service would be supported by the development of training linked to the specific sectors known to be locating on the Laganside and Gasworks Site, as well as the provision of job fairs and links between local schools and the businesses that locate on the site.

Policy Relevance & Remit

The GEMS Mission statement highlights employability as a core policy component. In this regard the service, now a DEL Labour Market Intermediary (LMI) for South Belfast (awarded 2004), is one of a number of employability initiatives which represent a means of bridging the gap between economic progress and individuals who experience disadvantage in the field of employment. At a regional level, policies such as New Targeting Social Need (NTSN) and Promoting Social Inclusion provide a further overarching policy backdrop against which activities are set.

The GEMS project rationale is founded in economic policy with regard to the concentration on job creation and up-skilling of individuals. However, the project also seeks to address barriers to employment, providing opportunities for better communication between prospective employers and the long-term unemployed and offering mentoring to individuals. The principal aims of the Belfast GEMS local employment initiative are:

- To provide an effective network of employment support services which meet the needs of local long-term unemployed people to return to work;
- To provide specially targeted information, guidance, training and personal development support; and
- To be proactive in designing, implementing and managing innovative outreach, which provide a bespoke response to the needs of target groups in the area.

Evaluating Progress & Success

In 2003 South Belfast Partnership Board established a Steering Group comprising members of the advisory board and myself (providing input as an independent consultant/researcher) to commission an evaluation of the Belfast GEMS project.

The evaluation, undertaken by Williamson Consulting, sought to consider the extent to which the project had fulfilled the objectives set for it and to consider the wider economic and social benefit to the target area. The evaluation sought to obtain information from a range of sources including the project’s staff, project records, clients, participating employers, statutory bodies and other stakeholders.

In general the evaluation found that Belfast GEMS had been ‘very successful’ and had achieved substantially more than may have been expected during its first 18 months of operation. The consultants however felt it important to note that the difficulty of targeting individuals from a specific geographical area was not adequately reflected in some of the objectives and targets, and adhering rigidly to these targets to assess the project could do it a considerable injustice. Consequently, the consultants believed that Belfast GEMS would “demonstrate its value, even if it proves inappropriate to
The Impact of the Gasworks Employment Matching Service (GEMS)
Darren McKinstry, Darren McKinstry Consulting

measure the project strictly by its [original] objectives”.

The evaluation found that GEMS had been particularly successful in the following areas:

• It has been very successful in attracting and retaining clients, who have been overwhelmingly positive about the support provided.

• The project is on target to achieve its 3 year employment outcomes (if we ignore the strict geographical target). To date 195 clients (38%) have got jobs. 57 of these people have been resident in core target wards. Of those who got jobs, 91 (47%) have obtained jobs with Laganside employers.

• Where the project has worked intensively with employers, this work has produced substantial employment outcomes and employers are very positive about this.

• The project has brought together a range of innovative approaches and has built on best practice from many sources, providing a holistic service which meets the needs of many in ways not offered by other local organisations.

To build on the ‘effective, efficient and professional service’, they highlighted some minor areas that could benefit from changes. These included:

• Work which employers might seek to reduce in breadth (number of employers) but increase in depth (interaction with specific employers).

• Further work could seek to build on the GEMS experience and inform how statutory programmes or services might be delivered.

• Spatial targets for recruitment of clients might be amended to reflect the unexpectedly wide spatial impact of the project over the first 18 months, particularly where the vast majority of participants are unemployed and have clearly benefited from involvement with GEMS. Additionally the project may wish to reinforce its focus on the longer term unemployed, whatever the spatial area.

• Belfast GEMS’ core purpose of providing an ‘Employment Matching Service’ may benefit from a specific focus to produce greater dividends amongst the range of other programmes (e.g. business education) that the service is also promoting.

Finally, Belfast GEMS was compared with similar other projects and while a detailed comparison was not possible due to data limitations the comparison found that while “many of the elements of Belfast GEMS’ provision are offered elsewhere, this project is perhaps one of the most comprehensive offered within NI”.

In concluding, the evaluation made key recommendations with regard to remit and coverage as follows:

• Funding for Belfast GEMS should continue. The project clearly offers a service which is valued by those who are unemployed and has made a demonstrable impact.

• Belfast GEMS should focus its effort and resources more closely on its core activities, i.e. the Employment Matching Service.

• Work with employers should be clearly defined. Some might involve more concentrated work with a much smaller group of employers while more general promotional type work with a wider range of employers may seek to change attitudes and create job opportunities.

• Relationships with the voluntary and community sector should be further developed and this is key to successful recruitment of the most needy clients.

Summary
The Belfast GEMS approach, given its focus on employability, is centred on helping people to gain key skills to enable them to find and maintain employment rather than simply wishing to place them in short-term or low value jobs.
The Impact of the Gasworks Employment Matching Service (GEMS)
Darren McKinstry, Darren McKinstry Consulting

It is evident Belfast GEMS has successfully assisted individuals to secure a wide variety of jobs within the Gasworks and Laganside area ranging from clerical and administrative posts to customer service advisors and production managers.

Importantly however, while placing individuals into worthwhile employment may be the long-term goal the service also recognises that individuals are located at different positions along an ‘employability spectrum’ and that for many an interaction with GEMS forms only part of a journey toward meaningful employment. For those who are long-term unemployed; experience multiple barriers to employment and who require intensive support - the “employability” journey is both a longer and slower process. GEMS is responsive to this need and has developed a range of employability skills programmes which equip long-term unemployed people with both generic and eventually sector-specific skills.

In terms of wider benefits, GEMS initial success has helped reinforce the benefits of a more flexible, needs-based approach to the issue of employability and has informed the development of Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs) in Belfast. In this regard it has been argued that GEMS has played a influential role in government policy which is now increasingly focused on methods and apporaches intent on engaging and benefitting those who are furthest away from integrating into the labour market.

In closing it is encouraging to note that recent figures (April 2004) indicate that 348 clients have been assisted to find work while 347 have commenced training activities. In total 804 clients have been registered in just over 2 years – a figure which exceeds GEMS’ initial 3-year target of 700 clients.

An electronic version of the full 2003 GEMS evaluation is available from Belfast GEMS. Darren McKinstry can be contacted at darren@darrenmckinstry.com

SOURCES/REFERENCES
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