



Subject:	Feedback on outcomes of Belfast Health and Work Steering Group
Date:	10 September 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Lisa Toland, Senior Manager, Economy Sinéad O'Regan, E&S Manager

Restricted Reports	
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<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	
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Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

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No

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1.0	Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues
1.1	<p>The purpose of this report is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Update members on the work of the Belfast Health & Work Steering Group, established through the Belfast Labour Market Partnership• Identify the key recommendations of the group, the likely next steps and implications for Belfast City Council and our partners.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Note the key recommendations of the Belfast Health and Work Steering Group• Note the next steps and implications for the work of the council and partners.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>A key focus of the Belfast Labour Market Partnership (BLMP) has been to consider how we can improve outcomes for our residents by meaningfully tackling inter-connected issues such as health, skills levels and employability in a more integrated way. As wider government policy in this space evolves, and in the context of a changing funding landscape, the LMP agreed to undertake a time-bound piece of work to focus on the interplay between health and work. In Belfast, around 40% of economic inactivity is due to health-related issues.</p>
3.2	<p>A steering group was established under the auspices of the BLMP. It included senior representation from Department for Communities, Department for the Economy, Department of Finance, Public Health Agency (and through this the Department of Health), Belfast H&SC Trust, Belfast City Council, Belfast Metropolitan College, NICVA, CBI and Belfast Works Connect. The group worked together over a period of six months, supported by independent research and analysis and informed by good practice visits to other locations that have been trying to address this challenge. While the initiative is Belfast-focused, its findings and solutions are intended to inform and benefit other areas across the region. Regular updates have been shared with LMPs regionally to encourage broader engagement and collaboration and the involvement of the regional government departments means that the wider application of these lessons has been considered from the outset.</p>

3.3	<p>With a limited time-bound lifespan, the aims have been to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify health and work-related challenges affecting economically inactive residents • Define target groups within the economically inactive population for inclusion • Develop and promote approaches and proposals that support people along their health and employability journey • Make recommendations to the successor of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – the Local Growth Fund (LGF) – to avoid past funding disruptions such as that during the transition from ESF to UKSPF and to shape future employability, skills and health services through a more collaborative, cohesive and joined up approach both within LGF projects and with the wider employability, health and skills systems • Longer-term recommendations to influence policy decisions at a regional level, creating greater integration and proactive collaboration across employability, health and skills systems. Beyond funding, this involves structural reform across public services to reduce economic inactivity through shaping future government policy and embed joined-up service delivery across the region.
3.4	<p>The Steering Group has engaged with key stakeholders – including those with lived experience, government departments, employability and skills providers, community and voluntary sector organisations and employers to generate innovative ideas, proposals and identify ‘what works’ (or does not). This has ensured broad and inclusive participation into the design of how we support those who are ‘economically inactive’ and experiencing socio-economic exclusion to improve health and wellbeing; develop employability skills and secure meaningful and sustainable work.</p>
3.5	<p><u>Health & Work Steering Group Recommendations</u></p> <p>An overview of the key recommendations from the Health & Work Steering Group is attached as Appendix 1. These reflect the need for a twin-track strategy to address immediate funding needs and maximise the impact of investment (Phase 1) while driving long-term reform across health, employment, and skills systems (Phase 2).</p>
3.6	<p>For Phase 1 (2026-2029), the proposed model integrates Work & Health Coaches and Multi-Disciplinary Teams within Health to deliver personalised, holistic support. Structured outreach and referral pathways connect individuals to financial, health, education, and community services. This integrated, trauma-informed approach ensures tailored interventions that promote wellbeing, confidence, and sustained employment. In parallel, there is a very deliberate focus on priority target groups including young people, women and carers and those</p>

	with specific health conditions. From a funding perspective, the primary focus is the emerging Local Growth Fund (replacement for Shared Prosperity Fund).
3.4	<p>Short-term recommendations (2026-2029) include:</p> <p>Recognition of Complex Needs in Commissioning Approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economically inactive individuals face multifaceted challenges that require long-term, personalised support including health issues, low skills and caring duties.. Current commissioning models often prioritise cost-efficiency and rapid job outcomes, leading to exclusion of those with deeper barriers. The report calls for inclusive, flexible systems that reward progress along the employability continuum (not just measuring “into employment”) and enable meaningful, person-centred interventions <p>Tiered Funding Model</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An evidenced-based tiered funding model is proposed to reflect varying support needs among economically inactive groups. Categories range from light-touch to intensive support, ensuring resources match complexity, with differentiated participant funding (low, medium, high support bands). This approach incentivises providers to engage those furthest from the labour market and supports flexible, co-designed delivery tailored to evolving individual circumstances. <p>Focus on Quality Assurance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering high quality services requires a focus on building and using robust data and insights, including gathering participant feedback. Providers should be accountable to agreed local governance structures, with risk management protocols and quality assurance in place. A robust framework combining differentiated funding, clear targets, and strong accountability will ensure LGF and comparable interventions deliver equitable, impactful support and that there is no duplication of investment. <p>Integrated Programme Delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align health and employability services with Local Growth Fund (LGF) projects through coordinated leadership at a local level – including through LMPs <p>Programme Design and Delivery</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transform how and where service delivery happens – including co-location of services (health; employment support) enabling warm referrals, and normalising employability as part of holistic wellbeing conversations • Employ qualified specialists as Work & Health Coaches to deliver personalised support, maintain manageable caseloads, and promote continuity. Frame all activities as steps toward paid work, enabling sustainable employment for those furthest from the labour market • Embed employment as a core goal from day one, providing tailored job support and promote access to good jobs. Prioritisation of fair pay, progression, and inclusive workplaces will enhance wellbeing and long-term stability when in employment • Provide ongoing, personalised aftercare to ensure job retention and progression. <p>Strategic Employer Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Steering Group acknowledged the need for more coherent employer-facing services to address business concerns (among SMEs in particular) about their ability to navigate the complex employability support offer. There is an opportunity to work towards the creation of Employer Hubs as a one-stop shop for employer-facing services. In the context of Belfast City Council, this could include our employability and skills support as well as interventions such as Go Succeed.
3.5	<p>In the short term, Steering Group members are undertaking targeted engagement to influence early discussions on the new Local Growth Fund where possible. It remains difficult to understand where these key points of influence are located, given the ongoing uncertainty around lead roles on the new funding. What has been particularly encouraging is that those partners that are likely to be involved to some extent at least in the development of the new approaches under Local Growth Fund can see how these recommendations can enhance delivery and are keen to use the insights generated to inform and shape what comes next. Officers understand that, in parallel, a number of key government departments are looking at a more collaborative approach to addressing economic inactivity and are receptive to considering how these findings can direct their work (which remains subject to funding). In the interim, the Belfast LMP is exploring some practical ways in which it can “walk the walk” – including widening access to its quality assurance framework to support service improvements and consistency of approach.</p>
3.6	<p>With regard to longer-term changes (2029 onwards), key recommendations focus on the systems changes required to address health-related economic inactivity, aligning services,</p>

	<p>funding, and accountability across sectors, laying the groundwork for coordinated, person-centred delivery through strategic reforms, workforce development, and long-term planning. Key recommendations for this phase include:</p> <p>Better Aligned Policy Framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for a new strategy to be jointly led by DoH, DfC, and DfE, feeding into the next Programme for Government, with a 5-10 year vision of making a real and lasting impact on economic inactivity <p>Integrated Service Delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flowing from the joint strategic framework, employability, health and skills services should be integrated at a local level. Place-based pilots should co-locate support services in trusted community settings. Sustainable delivery requires formal referral protocols, shared digital infrastructure, and vocational training access for underserved individuals. These are critical foundation pillars required to make these commitments work in practice <p>Co-commissioning and Shared Funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting funding mechanisms from short-term, siloed models to long-term, outcome-based frameworks. Over time, commissioning should evolve into a co-commissioning framework, with shared responsibility across government, health trusts, councils, and the voluntary sector. This integrated approach will align resources and embed employment support within a broader ecosystem of support services such as mental health, housing, childcare, and skills. <p>Consolidating the Employer Hubs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidifying a cohesive single access-point for employers that navigates through a complex range of supports on offer. Integrated and cohesive employer-facing services will include training, incentives and practical support for inclusive practices, ensuring workplaces are accessible and supportive, both for the employer and their employee.
3.7	<p>To take forward Phase 2 of the report, NI Executive Departments are utilising the evidence-base, intelligence and recommendations generated and are already beginning to seek to have a better aligned policy framework. While the opportunity to align these activities to a likely focus through the next Programme for Government, the departments are actively exploring other opportunities to work together in a much more meaningful way and there is senior-level</p>

	commitment to this approach. If possible, we expect that the work of the Health & Work Steering Group will be submerged into this new approach, offering the opportunity to test new approaches as a 'proof of concept' and consideration of mechanisms such as LMP as a conduit for place-based solutions as a means of improving outcomes.
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
	No specific financial considerations at this point. This work is supported by the Department under the auspices of the Belfast Labour Market Partnership.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
	No specific equality or good relations implications. If successful, this approach can improve the outcomes for specific target/under-represented groups.
6.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	Appendix 1: Bridging Employability, Health & Skills Systems – Overview of key proposals