



Subject:	Employability and Skills workplan – mid-year update
Date:	11 October 2023
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
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<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
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<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Information relating to any individual</li><li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li><li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li><li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li><li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li><li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li><li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li></ol>	
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<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in since April 2023 to support skills development, economic engagement and job outcomes for key target groups.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the work undertaken in the financial year to date and the positive employability and jobs outcomes associated with this work</li> <li>• Approve the allocation of Labour Market Partnership (LMP) resources for Bridges to Progression and note the proposals to seek proposals from delivery partners to provide targeted support that can improve outcomes for participants.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p><u>Employment Academies</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that Employment Academies are one of the key instruments that the Council’s Employability and Skills team utilises to support residents to secure a new job or a better job. While the content of Employment Academies varies from programme to programme, there are a number of consistent components, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-academy matching and selection to ensure all individuals who participate have a meaningful chance of securing employment after successful completion</li> <li>• Employer-led vocational skills, qualifications, licences and training related to the specific job role</li> <li>• In-situ work sampling/work placements</li> <li>• Provision of additional supports to undergo and complete the academy, from equipment and clothing through to childcare, travel and subsistence</li> <li>• Employability support particularly focused on the final employment interview (all candidates are guaranteed a job interview).</li> </ul>
3.2	<p>Given the volatility in the labour market – and the limited financial resources available to undertake the work – our work plan is driven by a range of factors including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The opportunity presented by a number of growth sectors to support participants into roles with higher earning potential. In recognition of the additional skills support work required, these interventions tend to have a higher per capita cost but offer a positive</li> </ul>

return on investment in terms of salary levels for those successful in finding work following programme completion

- Ongoing need to work with employers to convince them of the value of alternative approaches to finding talent other than pre-existing qualifications and/or experience. This is particularly the case for our work in new sectors – specifically those that have tended to think “degree first” and have not considered alternative routes
- Employers with entry level and lower paid jobs – particularly in sectors such as hospitality and social care – continue to experience significant challenges in finding workers. Officers are working with these employers to consider issues such as terms and conditions and payment of the real living wage in order to attract and retain talent, aligned with the implementation of the Belfast Business Promise
- Opportunities to support existing employees who are in low-paid work and/or underemployed through upskilling interventions – and thereby embedding a skills escalator by creating additional entry-level roles.

3.3

In the course of this financial year, we expect that the Employment Academies will engage around 500 participants with at least 70% expected to gain employment/self-employment across a range of sectors – see additional details below:

<b>Employment Academy</b>	<b>Participants started up to mid-Sept 23</b>	<b>Places to allocate Oct 23-Mar 24</b>
Working at Sea	10	40
Tech	24	11
Business Services	23	-
Fibre	-	12
Transport	110	12
Health & Social Care/Working with Children	21	69
Working with Children – Irish Medium	12	28
Health & Social Care/Working with Children Upskilling	86	94
Construction	12	12
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>278</b>

3.4

Key insights on the relevant academies identified include:

- **Transport:** Over 250 people expressed an interest in participating and 140 made it through following the relevant eligibility checks, information days and preliminary interviews and from this 110 people have been offered a place on a Transport Employment Academy. Given that the average timescale to fully complete the Transport Academy can be up to nine months, we expect that most participants will be ready for employment by early Spring. As this is the fifth year of the Transport Academy work, we are building strong working partnerships with employers that have repeatedly recruited previous programme participants. At a recent information day, employers updated on live opportunities including starting salaries with Category C Licence of £40k plus per annum, moving to £50k plus after upskilling to Category C+E licence (which are mainly resourced by the employer). We are working closely with Transport Academy employers as well as Logistics UK and the Road Haulage Authority (RHA) to conduct a survey of employers in order to build a profile of future employment opportunities
- **Fibre Optics Academy:** this has been another very popular initiative, with delivery planned in late 2023 and more than 100 people have already expressed an interest in engaging. This sector offers great earning potential: one recent participant moved from unemployment to a Fibre Technician role then Project Manager within nine months, now earning over £50k per annum
- **Tech and Digital Academy:** Two academies are completing with 12 in each which takes the form of a 16-week bootcamp at the end of September 2023. One cohort undertook a pathway in Product Management and the other in Cyber Security. There are a number of employer sponsors engaged including Allstate and Belfast City Council where three of the pilot cohort (from 2022/23) are now working in Digital Services. Subject to employer support, we plan to run a further Tech Academy later in 2023. Running alongside employer engagement, we have been in liaison with a number of the representative bodies including the Software Alliance and the Cyber Security Forum. Our Academies have been promoted extensively amongst their members and employers as we seek to build a sustainable pipeline of demand for subsequent cohorts
- **Business Services Academy:** we are working with Queen's University to deliver bespoke Employment Academies for administration. Following the first programme, 12 people have been offered employment. In addition to the offer of a job, Queen's have committed to providing a Level 2 qualification once they are in post. We are working closely with the university to build the evidence for how a major employer

can adapt their recruitment processes and remove qualification criteria as a means of creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce

- **Health and Social Care Academy:** We have responded to changes within the sector by developing a number of new employment academies and upskilling programmes. These include the Classroom Assistant Employment Academy with a Level 3 qualification in Special Educational Needs, Level 3 and Level 5 Classroom Assistant Diplomas in Irish Medium, delivered by Gaelchursaí, and the Level 4 Classroom Assistant qualification delivered in partnership with Stranmillis University College. We will continue to work with key employers including Belfast Health & Social Care Trust, Triangle Housing, Inspire Wellbeing, Sure Start, Sleepy Hollow and a wide variety of educational settings including primary, secondary, grammar, Special Educational Needs and Irish Medium Schools. Offering the Upskilling Academies is a huge benefit to the sector as it encourages new entrants and helps to sustain and develop a highly skilled workforce while increasing capacity to support the most vulnerable in our society.

3.5

#### Improving employability outcomes for young people

While a significant proportion of activity has focused on those already in the labour market or trying to find a job or move to a better job, we are delivering a number of smaller interventions for young people with a focus has been on improving educational attainment and helping young people at risk to find positive employment and training outcomes.

3.6

As members are aware, we have undertaken a review of our delivery within this workstream and, while the outcomes from our interventions in this space have been positive, there are a number of factors at play in recommending a reduced level of activity going forward, not least being the dynamic policy environment in this space. The Fair Start and Reducing Education Disadvantage (RED) policy initiatives led by Department for Education are progressing, with new interventions currently being developed. We are working closely with both EA and DE to share the learning from our successful pilot activity with the expectation that Council delivery can be 'lifted and shifted' within the context of these new initiatives.

3.7

As agreed, our work in this space is prioritised on two key areas, namely:

- Continued support for the GCSE Support Programme for a final interim year, using this time to work with the Area Partnership Boards (who deliver this programme) as well as the Education Inequalities sub-group under the Jobs, Skills & Education Board to secure a longer-term future within the context of Community Planning and Fair

Start/Reducing Educational Disadvantage policy initiatives. Between September 2022 and June 2023, 434 young people were engaged, against a target of 365. These young people have been identified as being unlikely to achieve at least Grade C in GCSE English and Maths, without the additional support of the programme.

- Continuing the 'Bridges to Progression' programme within the Labour Market Partnership as outlined below, providing tailored wrap around support for those young people at risk of disengaging from the mainstream Skills for Life & Work programmes.

#### Labour Market Partnership

3.8 Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership is an intervention supported by DfC within all 11 council areas. Resources from the Labour Market Partnership enable the Council to increase the range and scope of employability and skills activity. The LMP also provides a platform for engagement with government departments, community partners and business organisations as a means of refocusing regional programmes more effectively within the Belfast area. The LMP action plan recognises that, while there are gaps that have been identified that will necessitate the creation of new interventions, not all activity need be new 'provision' or 'programmes'; sometimes it is equally important to profile and/or promote existing interventions.

3.9 In addition to the extra support for Employment Academy places, the headline programme of work within the action plan includes the following:

- **Gateway to Choices Service:** a key issue that emerged in our engagement with the LMP partners was the need for independent advice and guidance for those who are out of work and non-job ready outside of mainstream JBO support. Partners considered that these groups (mainly long-term unemployed and economically inactive) required enhanced support to navigate the existing provision and identify the right support, at the right time, to help move them towards positive job, skills and qualification outcomes. So far this year, over 400 people have received support through Gateway to Choices. We are beginning to build good insights into participants' "back stories" of how and why they are accessing the support; what type of support they need; what the key support resources are and where there may be gaps in the system. This presents critical learning for all advice and guidance partners and will be shared with relevant partners as the insights become more detailed

- **Digital badges:** one of the most significant skills-related challenges is the relatively high proportion of Belfast residents that have low qualifications (below level 2). We have been working alongside the RSA Cities of Learning initiative to explore how a Digital Badge could help recognise the non-accredited skills of these individuals. All Employment Academies are now digitally badged as an alternative validation of achievement, with over 1000 badges issued to participants. In addition to this, the Council has offered 24 organisations in the city access to Digital Badging for their own participants/employees
- **Belfast Jobs Fair:** The Belfast Jobs Fair has attracted considerable interest with 70 exhibitors anticipated to exhibit on October 10<sup>th</sup>. More than 65 employers will be present and, collectively, there will be more than 1800 job available for those seeking work or a better job. The event is taking place in St George's Market
- **Inclusive Employment conference:** given the commitments identified through the Belfast Agenda to promote inclusive employment practices, officers are currently working on a large scale conference to share learning and encourage additional partner engagement in this work. To date, we have secured a number of keynote speakers for the event which is scheduled to take place in Ulster University's Belfast campus on 22 January 2024. Additional information on the event will be brought back to the committee and shared with all elected members in advance.

3.10

Bridges to Progression

Bridges to Progression is an intervention to support young people aged 16-17 years who are at risk of disengaging from Skills for Life & Work due to their personal circumstances. Participants can access intensive personal support to help them progress in and complete their formal training, with the ambition of improving the levels of progression into employment or further training. Previous analysis had flagged a very high level of drop out from these programmes, particularly in Belfast. It showed that the reasons behind participants no longer engaging with the programme related to wider social challenges – rather than the programme content itself.

3.11

At the October 2022 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, it was agreed that officers would seek expressions of interest from organisations delivering these programmes, outlining how they would use resources to add value to the core activity with the objective of improving outcomes for participants. It was also agreed that officers would undertake assessment of the applications for funding in line with the approach detailed in

this report. As reported in March 2023 update, a number of organisations were awarded support, with a cumulative target of 120 young people to be engaged and 16 employers to be supported. Since that time 193 young people have been engaged and 173 completed the Bridges to Progression intervention. We also engaged with 29 employers over this period. Direct feedback and outcomes have demonstrated the impact this investment had on these individuals. Participants on the programme reported on the following outcomes:

<b>Destination</b>	<b>% of those completing</b>
Into employment	45%
Into further training/ education	31%
Progressed within SfL&W	18%
Unsure of next step	6%

3.12 Feedback from participants about the support offered through the Bridges to Progression included:

- Helped deal with past issues and stress
- Confidence to achieve qualification and interview
- Importance of having someone to turn to for support
- Importance of self-care – looking after mental health
- See the value of positive thinking instead of negative thinking
- Having someone to talk to was amazing and helped a lot.

3.13 The average financial allocation provided for the support services offered to programme participants is around £750 per person. While this is not an expensive cost per head, it does appear to have a very positive impact on participant outcomes. Previously, only 3% of those starting the programme had a positive destination after the two years. Evidence from the pilot suggests that, for the first year at least, the positive outcome rates on the programme have significantly increased as you see above with 75% progressing onto employment or training/education and 18% progressing within the programme. Based on these positive outcomes, it is proposed that we re-run this intervention for another round of funding (note – this funding has already been approved by the Labour Market Partnership). Officers will seek applications from SfL&W providers and review these against agreed criteria. Officers are also engaging with the Department for the Economy to seek to incorporate the flexibility offered within Bridges to Progression with future iterations of Skills for Life & Work with the aim of improving employability outcomes.

3.14

3.15

The LMP action plans are submitted on an annual basis at this point (due to the annual budget settlements in the government departments). However, as part of the strategic assessment that underpins the plan, officers have identified a number of developmental areas where we consider that there is a need to undertake additional scoping work in order to understand the issues at play and consider whether the council might play an active delivery role in the future, or lobby government partners to do more in this space in order to improve outcomes for Belfast residents. Two of these areas relate to place-based and people-based targeted interventions, with a focus on how these might improve outcomes for participants and what approaches are most appropriate for this. We are also proposing to undertake further engagement work with partners to understand how we can connect our employer-facing services more effectively, in order to make it easier for businesses to understand the support available and access it. Updates on these development pieces will be brought back to future meetings of the committee.

#### Collaboration with the Employability and Skills Providers

3.16

The employability ecosystem is complex and, with the end of ESF funding in March 2023, there have been significant changes across the network. Given that our model is based on building strong partnerships across delivery partners and support organisations, the council engages on a regular basis with the provider network and links into existing networks to ensure that we are reaching specific target groups and geographical parts of the city. We have recently engaged the projects that have been successful in attracting Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) resources. We have also established a partnership with the Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP), facilitating continuous improvement and raising standards through activities such as shared learning and benchmarking and the delivery of vocationally specific employability training for those working in the sector.

#### Partnership, policy influence and guidance

In addition to direct delivery, officers will also continue to work with internal and external partners to use all tools at our disposal to address the key employability and skills challenges, focusing on the council's inclusive growth ambitions. There are a number of key mechanisms through which this can be achieved:

- **Social Value:** officers are working closely with the Corporate Procurement Service to support the implementation of the policy, focusing on the employability and skills measures. This includes working with council contracts – as well as contractors across the city where Social Value applies – to achieve their Social Value

3.17	<p>requirements in a meaningful way. Officers have organised a number of workshops for VCSE providers – with 60 people attending – to build capacity in tendering for council contracts. We are also organising a ‘Meet the Broker’ workshop for contractors in the city to gain access to E&amp;S provision across the city</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Peace Plus funding:</b> we are currently engaging with partner organisations to develop project concepts for the Peace Plus 1.1 Local Action Plan. Ideas under development include ‘Language Up’: a project that will deliver community-based language classes for migrants and those from minority ethnic communities. This has been repeatedly identified as a barrier to engagement among those groups.</li> </ul>
3.18	<p><b><u>Finance and Resource Implications</u></b></p> <p>The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2023/24 budget for the Employability &amp; Skills section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was approved as part of the 2023/24 estimates.</p> <p><b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></b></p> <p>Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. New projects or service areas are equality screened and a rural needs assessment completed. Consideration is given to equality and good relation impacts at the initial stages of project development. A new CRM system has been established to enable officers to regularly review participant engagement and address any equality or good relations issues arising.</p>
4.0	<b>Appendices</b>
	None