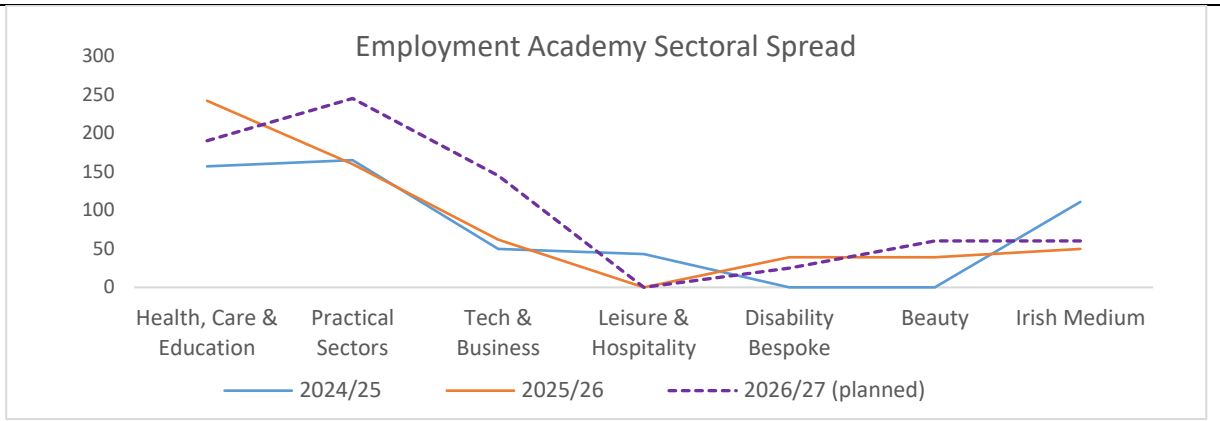




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| Subject:  | Employability and Skills – update and forward workplan              |
| Date:   | 15 April 2026   |
| Reporting Officer:  | Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development                     |
| Contact Officer:  | Sinéad O'Regan, Employability & Skills Manager                      |
| <b>Restricted Reports</b>   |   |
| Is this report restricted?  | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b>  |   |
| Insert number <input type="checkbox"/>  |   |
| <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> |   |
| <b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>  |   |
| After Committee Decision  | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| After Council Decision  | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| Sometime in the future  | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| Never   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <b>Call-in</b>  |   |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-in?   | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |

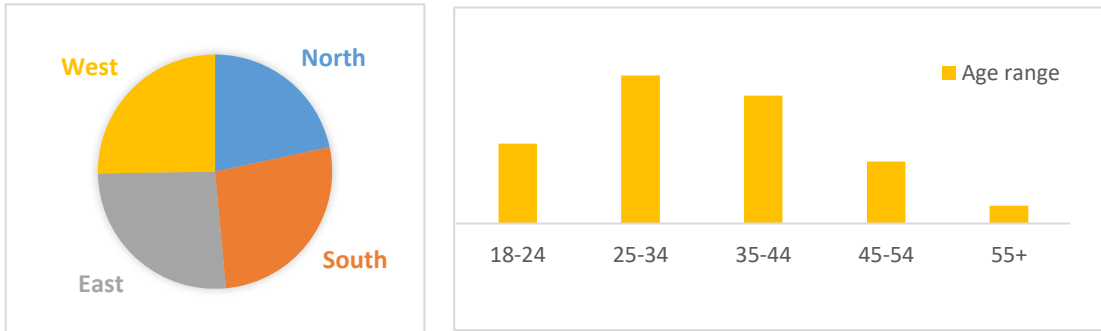
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| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues</b>  |
| 1.1        | <p>The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in 2025/26 to support skills development, economic engagement and job outcomes for key target groups and to set out the proposed workplans for the 2026/27 financial year. The work programme supports the inclusive growth ambitions of the Council by targeting interventions on key cohorts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residents out of work and experiencing barriers to employment/self-employment, including those who are long-term unemployed and economically inactive</li> <li>• Residents with low skills levels such as a baseline Level 2 equivalent qualification.</li> <li>• In work, low earning residents.</li> <li>• Those living in areas of highest multiple deprivation.</li> </ul> |
| <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 and outputs delivered in the financial year to date</li> <li>• Note and endorse the priority interventions and approach for the 2026/27 financial year.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>  |
| 3.1        | <p><b><u>2025/26 Update</u></b></p> <p>Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership (LMP) is an intervention supported by DfC within all eleven council areas within the region. The LMP 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. In addition to LMP resources, the Council also commits resources in each year to support employability and skills interventions focused on those furthest from the labour market.</p>   |
| 3.2        | <p><b><u>Employment &amp; Upskilling Academies</u></b></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 job or a better job. Employment Academies vary depending on employer need but they generally have 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-driven content in relation to vocations and employability skills, qualifications, licences etc. related to the specific job role</li> </ul>  |

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|     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-situ work sampling</li> <li>• Provision of additional supports, from equipment and clothing through to childcare, travel and subsistence</li> <li>• Employability support particularly focused on the final employment interview.</li> </ul>  |
| 3.3 | <p>Given the volatility in the labour market – and the limited financial resources available to undertake the work – delivery has been driven by a number of factors including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The opportunity presented by a number of growth sectors (such as tech, green economy and business services) 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 for participants but offer a positive return on investment in terms of salary levels for those successful in finding work following programme completion</li> <li>• 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 higher paid sectors – where employers have tended to recruit using an unnecessary ‘degree first’ approach without considering alternative routes to recruiting the skills they need</li> <li>• Opportunities to support existing employees who are in low-paid work and/or underemployed by means of upskilling interventions – supporting individuals to improve salary levels by progressing to a better job and thereby embedding a skills-escalator by creating additional entry-level roles. These Upskilling Academies are limited to low paid sectors such as working with children and other caring professions and only triggered when existing mainstream provision is not suitable or accessible.</li> </ul> |
| 3.4 | <p>Across 2025/26 we have made investments in over 850 places for Employment and Upskilling Academies, utilising both council and LMP resources. The availability of these resources as well as having an agile, responsive commissioning model, means that we have been able to respond to opportunities, meeting employer demand and bringing forward solutions that benefit local businesses and residents. The pattern of participation by sector is outlined below over the last number of years as well as projected 2026/27 activity.</p>  |



3.5 It is important to note that differences in volume across sectors above is not an indicator of investment levels. Academies targeting higher paid roles are significantly more expensive to deliver due to the skills levels required for the role. For example, a Tech Employment Academy can cost over £4,000 per person, while a Health & Social Care Employment Academy costs under £1,000 per person. Additionally, employment outcomes are continuously monitored and investments subject to review to ensure residents receive the best service possible. All work is underpinned by the implementation of a Quality Assurance Framework.

3.6 While it is too early to report on outcomes due to the fact that academies are still being delivered, of those who completed participant surveys in 2025/26 so far, 22% of participants reported having a disability while 30% were from an ethnic minority. Details of both the age and geographical spread are below.



3.7 While officers can update members on the outcomes of this investment in a future report, the pattern of outcomes tend to remain stable across the last number of years: attrition rates tend to be low with an average of over 90% successfully completing and with an average into-work rate of 75% for those who complete. The level of demand and supply – both from employers as well as those looking for a job or a better job – remains high, although is much more challenging in higher paid sectors such as Tech.

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| 3.8  | <p><b><u>Provider Engagement</u></b></p> <p>A vital element of our work is our engagement with groups and providers across the city. This underpins the ability of our interventions such as Employment Academies to successfully match people to the opportunities on offer. Officers have continued to expand the E&amp;S Provider Network, with over 150 organisations and groups from across the city covering key target groups (disability, women, young people, justice leavers, care leavers etc.). Members will no doubt be aware of the likely changes to the community-based employability infrastructure due to the reduction in available funding from the Local Growth Fund. We will need to keep the network membership under review in light of the changes. However we consider that the need for that coordination and information sharing will be even greater in the context of reduced resources.</p> |
| 3.9  | <p><b><u>Digital Badging</u></b></p> <p>Through RSA Cities of Learning, officers continue to expand micro-credentialing through Digital Badges. These badges help recognise the skills and competencies of those who are at risk of being left behind – a significant challenge in Belfast where there is a disproportionately high percentage of people with no or low skills. All Employment Academies are now digitally badged as an alternative validation of achievement. In addition to this, the Council has offered 60 organisations across the city access to Digital Badging for their own participants and/or employees across the lifetime of the project. In total, 484 credentials have been created through Digital Badging with 90% claim rates across managed programmes.</p>   |
| 3.10 | <p><b><u>2026/27 Business Plan</u></b></p> <p>Building on the work undertaken in 2025/26 as well as learning from previous engagement, the indicative plans for 2026/27 are set out below. Priority areas of work will include:</p>  |
| 3.11 | <p><b><u>Labour Market Partnership</u></b></p> <p>While it will take a number of months to fully know the extent and impact of the reduction of funding available through Local Growth Fund (LGF), one new development may mitigate such a steep reduction of support for those experiencing economic inactivity. A Commission for Work and Wellbeing is being established and is resourced through an NI Executive ‘Transformation Bid’ for those experiencing economic inactivity – using innovative approaches within the ‘health and work’ agenda as recommended by the Health &amp; Work Steering Group convened by the Belfast LMP in 2025.</p>  |
| 3.12 | <p>Belfast LMP’s approach to 2026/27 includes a focus on the following:</p>  |

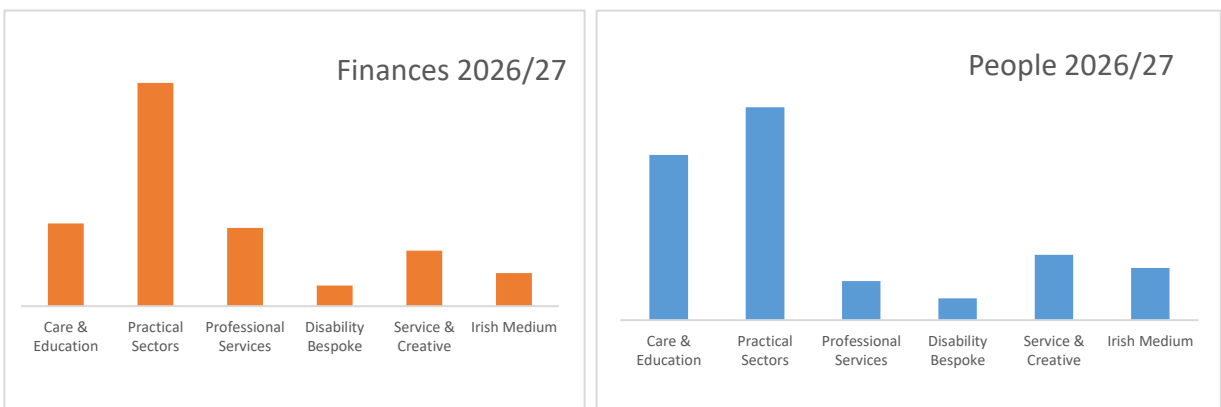
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|      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. System leadership: the Partnership has matured over time and has a strategic enabling role. This leadership input will be particularly important in the coming year, given the radical reduction in support services. The focus will need to be on integration rather than expansion, acting as the convenor of a Belfast-wide employability and economic inactivity ecosystem and influencing the LGF Investment Plan in line with the recommendations of the Health &amp; Work Steering Group; principally that a health-first approach is critical to resolving long-standing barriers along the journey to employment experienced by those who are economically inactive</li> <li>2. Given the limited LMP resources, it is important to position direct delivery where we can best make the most impact, namely on demand-facing services. A key area of work in the coming year will be the development of an Employer Hub – creating a focal point for employer engagement and input. Our current thinking is that this work will be of immediate use for Local Growth Fund projects in particular – given the reductions in their resources. However it is our intention that this model will become a resource for all employer-facing engagement in order to create resource efficiencies and provide more effective service delivery to businesses</li> <li>3. While the more natural place for LMP to directly resource and deliver is in the ‘demand facing’ space, the significant reduction of engagement capacity within LGF leaves a gap in the number of people that can be supported. While LMP cannot provide a ‘match’ to LGF, there may be an ability to purchase additional ‘places’ for 2026/27 to be able to maintain some additional level of capacity. While this is a ‘Plan B’ and under consideration until more is known, it could only happen if it was predicated on an assurance that other funding/delivery streams come online in 2027 that mirror the capacity we seek to maintain. The Belfast LMP will keep a watching brief before considering this option, noting that underpinning any decision is the fact that LMP (and BCC) do not have the resources to sufficiently fill this gap beyond an ‘emergency measure’ in this financial year</li> <li>4. Given that there is a high likelihood of a reduction in skills interventions delivered within LGF projects, LMP will act as a convenor to ensure engagement between LGF and alternative skills delivery which could potentially fill this gap to some extent such as Belfast Met, Invest NI, DfE and DfC.</li> </ol> |
| 3.13 | <p>Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership has now evolved to incorporate the Local Economic Partnership (LEP). At the March 2026 meeting of this Committee, members agreed an outline workplan of priority projects to be supported using LEP resources. Aligning the LEP and the LMP provides an opportunity for a wider discussion around employability, skills, enterprise and economic growth. As the Partnership develops in the</p>   |

coming year, efforts will be made to ensure that resources are being maximised to support economic growth in the Belfast area – always with a focus on inclusive growth.

3.14 Employment & Upskilling Academies  
 Across 2026/27, we expect that the Employment Academies will engage with at least 675 participants with 75% expected to gain employment/self-employment in sectors outlined below.

- Practical sectors such as logistics and construction as well as scoping opportunities within manufacturing and the green economy (heating, electrical etc.).
- Professional services such as administration, business and digital technology
- Care and education sectors including classroom assistants, health and social care, childcare, childminding and playwork
- Creative industries and service sectors, scoping meaningful opportunities to access good jobs as well as self-employment.

3.15 A breakdown of the sectoral spread planned for 2026/27 is outlined below, both in terms of places allocated as well as the financial investments. As previously noted, differences in volume across sectors above is not an indicator of investment levels and having these together shows this differential.



3.16 The delivery of Employment Academies is underpinned by:

- A focus on growth areas and good jobs – negotiating alternative routes with employers for residents who otherwise could not access due to experience/qualification levels – providing the assurance of aptitude and skills as an appropriate alternative.
- Strong relationships with employers and sectoral bodies who are at the centre of design, such as National House Building Council, CITB, NI Screen, Software Alliance, Logistics UK, NI Social Care Council etc.

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|      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing additional support and highly bespoke academies for those with disabilities and migrants (where gaps exist)</li> <li>• Designing academies such as childminding and beauty which specifically lead to self-employment opportunities with Go Succeed supports built in</li> <li>• Providing in-programme supports as needed so that barriers to participating are removed – childcare, travel, interpreters etc. as well as in-built aftercare.</li> </ul>   |
| 3.17 | Officers will continue to drive excellence through the implementation of the Quality Assurance Framework that underpins delivery and will undertake an external evaluation of Employment Academies in 2025/26 to consolidate and recognise the Belfast Employment Academy model as an evidenced-based and intelligence-led intervention.   |
| 3.18 | <p><u>Digital Badging</u></p> <p>In 2026/27 officers will continue to work to expand Digital Badging as a way to increase the currency of this inclusive recognition of skills and competence. This includes supporting DfC to roll out digital badging for all LMP delivery across the region. Alongside other RSA Cities of Learning, officers will also explore ways to increase the functionality of Digital Badging for such as the ability to generate CVs through badges, creating a 'marketplace' for recruitment and improving functionality by the development of an app-based solution.</p> |
| 3.19 | <p><u>Provider Engagement</u></p> <p>In 2026/27 we will continue to consolidate this work, reaching into, for example, local Neighbourhood Renewal infrastructure across the city and working closely with other anti-poverty measures within the council such as social supermarkets and advice services. This is even more vital given the significant funding reduction with LGF, which will leave a significant gap in provision for those most economically vulnerable across Belfast.</p>  |
| 3.20 | <p><u>Guidance on employability issues</u></p> <p>In addition to service delivery, the team will also continue to work with internal and external partners to maximise the benefits to be derived through other support mechanisms. This will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developer Contributions: supporting the Planning team with to ensure that relevant E&amp;S considerations are factored into major developments</li> <li>• Social Value: supporting Corporate Procurement Services with the implementation employability and skills measures.</li> </ul>            |

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| <b>4.0</b> | <b>Financial and Resource Implications</b>  |
| 4.1        | The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2026/27 budget for the Employability & Skills section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was approved as part of the 2026/27 estimates process as well as other sources such as DfC (through the LMP).   |
| <b>5.0</b> | <b>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</b>   |
| 5.1        | Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. Considerations given to equality and good relations impacts at the initial stages of project development and monitored throughout delivery. Officers will work closely with the Equality and Good Relations Team on this activity. |
| <b>6.0</b> | <b>Appendices</b>   |
|            | Appendix 1: Employability and Skills Business Plan 2026/27  |