



Subject:	Jobs and Skills update
Date:	13 October 2021
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Sinéad O'Regan, Employability & Skills Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update members on a number of existing and planned interventions to improve skills and help people find a new or better job, focusing on key target groups and those furthest from the labour market.
2.0	Recommendations
	The Members of the Committee are asked to, <ul style="list-style-type: none">Note the range of existing and planned interventions to improve skills and help people find a new or better job, focusing on key target groups and those furthest from the labour market

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the job outcomes delivered by some of the key interventions • Note the planned activity for the coming months • Agree to join the RSA Cities of Learning network, making a financial contribution of £30,000 towards the programme of activity from November 2021.
3.0	Main report
3.1	Members will be aware that the pandemic has had a significant on the economy of the city. At its peak, more than 20,000 people in Belfast were on furlough and the claimant count numbers in the city more than doubled following the initial lockdown in March 2020.
3.2	As we emerge from the series of lockdowns and the remaining restrictions are gradually moved, the labour market is slowly improving. However there is significant volatility with demand hugely outstripping supply in a number of sectors (tech and digital; logistics and health and social care) while other sectors are much more vulnerable (hospitality; retail). This is borne out in the recent Belfast Business Survey which is covered in more detail in a separate report to the committee.
3.3	A number of research reports have identified the fact that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on those who were already most vulnerable prior to COVID-19. In labour market terms, this has meant that those who were already having difficulty in finding work slipped further back as those who had more recent experience or transferable skills moved into an already competitive jobs market.
3.4	Despite the volatility, council officers have been working closely with our stakeholder partners and with employers in key sectors to support the delivery of a range of interventions to help those furthest from the labour market to find sustainable employment in those sectors where demand has remained strong or is beginning to recover. This work has meant that, since April 2021, we have been able to bring 381 people on to our Employment Academy programmes across a range of sectors. This level of demand – both from employers as well as those looking for a job or a better job – represents a significant increase on figures from previous years. By way of example, in 2018/19, we supported around 500 people through Employment Academies over a full year – in a very buoyant economic climate. A number of recent changes including an expansion of the Employability and Skills team and the introduction of a new, more flexible commissioning framework, means that we have been much better placed to respond to opportunities, meeting employer demand and bringing forward solutions that benefit local businesses and residents.

3.5	<p>The procurement framework covers four broad areas (lots). These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot 1: Care Sectors: Health Care; Social Care; Education; and Childcare/Playwork – delivery partner is People 1st • Lot 2: Customer Service Sectors: Leisure; Hospitality; Tourism; and Retail: delivery partner is Workforce Training Services • Lot 3: Practical Sectors: Transport & Logistics; Construction; Green Economy; and Manufacturing: delivery partner is Workforce Training Services • Lot 4: Office Based Sectors: Administration; Financial; and Digital: delivery partners are BMC in conjunction with LEMIS+ partners (Ashton Community Trust; GEMS NI; East Belfast Mission; Upper Springfield Development Trust and Impact Training).
3.6	<p>The lots will remain in place for up to four years. They provide the council with significant flexibility in developing and delivering targeted interventions within the relevant sectors. This flexibility has already been invaluable in enabling us to scale up at pace to support the increased number of participants as detailed above and will be an important resource to have access to as we seek to build our reach in new areas such as tech, digital and green skills.</p>
3.7	<p>As a complement to the four lots set out above, we have created an additional mechanism called a DPS (Dynamic Purchasing System). This provides the Council with access to additional alternative market capacity and capability in the areas covered by existing Employment Academies (e.g. if the existing provider cannot meet our needs). It also provides an opportunity to bring on new organisations in order to test out innovative approaches, to respond to specific employer/participant needs not covered within the framework or to provide specialist interventions (e.g. activities to ensure that specific target groups can access the job opportunities on offer, such as English language support or assistance for those with additional learning needs). The DPS will remain open for five years and organisations can register at any time.</p>
3.8	<p>Of those who started an Employment Academy since April 2021, 174 people have completed and 122 have secured employment so far. This represents an into-work rate of 70%. Of the 224 people still going through a programme, 90 are already in work and are receiving support, qualifications or licences needed to access a better job. These include Level 3-5 qualifications (e.g. in childcare sector, allowing staff to move to supervisory roles) and specific vehicle licences to help existing drivers progress to better-paid driving roles, including those within public sector organisations.</p>

3.9	<p>In terms of volume, the most popular Employment Academies are within logistics, leisure and social care sectors, although childcare and playwork strongly feature, particularly for those wanting a better job. A Nursing Assistant Employment Academy has also recently completed, with 17 people applying for Nursing Assistant posts within Belfast HSC Trust. Construction is another sector that has been in high demand, with both generic and female-targeted Employment Academies delivered over the last few months. The into-employment rate for these programmes has been in excess of 80%.</p>
3.10	<p>Over the coming months, a full programme of Employment Academies is being scheduled, with a significant volume of activity planned for the post-Christmas period. In order to raise awareness of the opportunities, a Meet the Employer event will take place in St George's Market on 9 November. This will give potential participants a chance to find out more about the upcoming academies and to register interest to participate as well being able to apply directly for vacancies. Employers across a range of sectors with workforce demand will be in attendance, and they will be able to provide an insight into emerging roles within their business as well as current vacancies for people who can apply directly for on the day. Additional information on the event will be circulated to all members in advance in order to ensure that it can be promoted as widely as possible to all interested parties.</p>
3.11	<p>While the Academies represent short, employer-focused, into-employment interventions, the team has also been engaged in a wider range of jobs and skills-related activities – always with the aim of supporting inclusive growth. Although the increase in unemployment as a result of COVID-19 has not been as significant as might have previously been expected, the claimant count is still more than double the pre-pandemic levels, at around 5.7%. In recognition of the increased volume of claimants that may find it relatively easy to get back to work but that may need some light-touch support, such as interview preparation or advice on job search, officers are working on the introduction of a targeted intervention. This will be delivered by our existing partners through the new commissioning framework. It will focus on linking those who are more recently unemployed to existing opportunities in sectors such as hospitality, construction, logistics and social care through to attracting back, for example taxi-drivers who may require some additional support to return to this sector. This will mean much shorter (and therefore less resource intensive) interventions as well as providing exposure to employers who are currently recruiting, such as the event on 9 November.</p>

3.12	<p>In addition to the delivery, there is also significant development work underway to scope out new interventions that can contribute to the inclusive growth commitments. One key area of work at present is focusing on creating new pathways into the tech and digital sectors. While this sector has remained largely resilient throughout the pandemic, our research shows that there are limited pathways into the sector for those that do not have a degree. This challenge was identified through the work of the Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission and the relevant government departments have committed to work with the council and with employers in the city to explore potential solutions. New pathways are also being scoped for emerging sectors, including the green sector. Work is at an advanced stage in developing a retrofitting qualification at level 3 and level 5. This will offer opportunities for new entrants to access opportunities in a future growth area. It will also present significant reskilling opportunities for companies in the construction sector, helping them to future-proof their business and look towards new opportunities for future growth.</p>
3.13	<p>While a significant proportion of the work that we have been engaged in to date has focused on those already in the labour market or trying to find a job or move to a better job, we have a number of interventions in place for young people, both in the formal education setting and outside of the school environment. Our GCSE support programme was significantly disrupted over the last two years given the challenges faced by schools during the pandemic and the limited face-to-face time with students over that period. Delivery for the current academic year is planned to be both school-based and community-based with places for at least 365 young people, focusing on those not currently predicted to achieve at least Grade C in English and Maths GCSE, with the objective of helping them achieve a pass. In recognition of the extraordinary challenges of the last two academic years and the impact that this has had on educational attainment – particularly of those who are already vulnerable – additional activities are currently being planned, for example, mid-term intensive learning programmes during the Halloween break.</p>
3.14	<p>We are also supporting 186 young people who either already have or are at risk of dropping out of the education system, employment or training through our Youth Support Programme. To date, 109 young people have progressed into positive outcomes with 40 into employment and 69 into further education/training. While this programme has not completed, this currently represents a positive outcome rate of 58%. This programme is also an important feeder as we develop additional skills development initiatives, particularly in the digital sector.</p>

<p>3.15</p> <p>3.16</p> <p>3.17</p> <p>3.18</p>	<p><u>RSA Digital Skills project</u></p> <p>To add value to our work, Belfast has recently been engaging with a number of external networks and partnerships. One of those networks is the RSA. The RSA operates globally with the aim of seeking ideas and solutions to resolve some of the most significant societal challenges. Through their Cities of Learning work, they provide technical support and expertise to network members to help them bring forward innovative approaches to learning within each of their locations, and also support learning across all of the network members. As part of this work, they have been successful in attracting funding from the Garfield Weston Foundation and have been engaging with cities that they identify as having the potential and commitment to bring forward new learning solutions in a way that can meet their criteria for a City of Learning – and they approached Belfast as part of this work. Emerging from our initial engagement with the RSA, we are proposing to bring forward a project to develop bespoke Digital Badges for our employability interventions. These badges will be used to recognise and validate the work undertaken through our programmes as an alternative to the standard practice of asking for qualifications/experience. The RSA Cities of Learning will also work alongside officers to challenge how some current practices are excluding those that may not have the formal qualifications but that have aptitudes and strengths that could make a valuable contribution to the workforce.</p> <p>Officers will also offer employability and skills providers across the city with access to digital badging for their own organisations. These badges will recognise the ‘hidden’ skills of their participants by creating a digital portfolio of their achievements and skills to use alongside CVs. This will further develop collaboration with providers in the city whilst addressing the disproportionate levels of those recorded as having “no or low” skills. We will also engage with employers to ensure that there is buy-in to and recognition of the model and that they can see the merits of this approach to talent acquisition and development.</p> <p>The funding from Garfield Weston Foundation will cover 50% of the costs associated with this project and partners are asked to bring forward the remaining 50%. It is proposed that the council agrees to allocate £30,000 towards this project for a 12-month period from November 2021, with the remaining £30,000 being provided by the Garfield Weston Foundation (coming via the RSA).</p> <p><u>Financial and resource implications</u></p> <p>The RSA Digital Badges project will require an allocation of £30,000. This funding has been set aside in the Employability and Skills budget for this year that was previously agreed</p>
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3.19	<p>through the estimates process. Funding for all other activities set out in this update has also previously been approved through the estimates process.</p> <p><u>Equality implications/rural needs assessment</u></p> <p>One of the key advantages of this approach is that it will enable us to target resources on specific groups, including those with particular access issues and barriers that currently prevent them from accessing training and employment opportunities. Our participation data is regularly reviewed to ensure that we are making a positive impact on key target groups.</p>
4.0	Appendices -Documents attached
	N/A