



Subject:	Employability & Skills update
Date:	7 December 2022
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 range of activity undertaken so far in 2022/23 to support skills development, economic engagement and job outcomes for key target groups.
1.2	The work programme supports the inclusive growth ambitions of the Council by targeting interventions on key cohorts, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Residents out of work and experiencing barriers to employment/self-employment, including those who are long-term unemployed and economically inactiveResidents with low skills levels

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people who do not have a baseline Level 2 equivalent qualification and/or at risk of dropping out of (or not in) education, employment or training • In work, low earning residents • Those living in areas of highest multiple deprivation.
2.0	Recommendations
	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the work undertaken in the financial year to date and the positive employability and jobs outcomes associated with the work • Approve the allocation of £40,000 from the existing E&S Revenue budget to continue to work in partnership with RSA Cities of Learning to progress Digital Badging in the city.
3.0	Main report
<p>3.1</p> <p>3.2</p>	<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 help people into work. 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"> • Employer-led skills training related to the specific job role • In-situ work sampling/work placements • Employability support particularly focused on the final employment interview (all candidates are guaranteed a job interview). <p>Given the volatility in the labour market – and the limited financial resources available to undertake the work – our decisions around the priority work plan have been driven by a number of factors including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity presented by a number of growth sectors (particularly tech and fibre) 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 engagement in the programme • 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 jobs – particularly in sectors such as hospitality – continue to experience significant challenges in finding workers and officers are working with them to consider issues such as terms and conditions and payment of the real living wage in order to attract and retain talent
- Opportunities to support existing employees through 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.

3.3 In this year, we have allocated over 700 places to our Employment Academy interventions. A breakdown of the sectoral engagement is detailed below:

Employment Academy	Participant Numbers
HSC, Childcare & Playwork Upskilling Academy	119
Transport Academy	110
Construction Sector Academy	99
Retrofit Academy*	97
Classroom Assistant Employment & Upskilling Academies	55
Tech Academy	55
Business Services/Administration Academy	50
Customer Service Sectors Academies	40
Fibre Academy	40
Childcare and Health and Social Care Academy	35
BCC General Operative & Business Support Academy	23
TOTAL	723
*The purpose of this Academy is to create the skills infrastructure needed when job demand occurs and as such this will not be measured in terms of job/better job outcomes.	

3.4 Given seasonal variations, most Belfast Employment Academies go live in September and then January of each year. However, we delivered a number of Academies over the summer months as outlined below with some significant job outcomes. Of the places allocated above across the 2022/23 financial year, from April 2022, 409 people have started an Employment Academy with 191 completing to date and 138 job outcomes, representing an into-work rate of 72% of those completing.

3.5 The September roadshows this year were held in Girdwood, St Comgall's, Crescent Arts Centre and Banana Block. In addition to this, officers promoted Employment Academies at

jobs fairs in Duncairn Arts Centre, Kennedy Centre, Park Centre and St George's Market. As a result, over 400 people have applied for the Autumn suite of Belfast Employment Academies and are currently going through pre-academy screening and selection. An insight into current activity in the variety of sectors is detailed below.

3.6 Tech Employment Academy

Members will be aware that the tech sector is one of the largest employers in the city at present. It also remains a key focus for Invest NI in terms of future investment and support for existing businesses and is identified in the draft 10x vision as a priority area for future government support. To date, it has been challenging to secure employer support for exploring alternative engagement mechanisms, particularly those that set aside the requirement for a degree qualification – even for entry-level roles.

3.7 Following extensive research and engagement with employers, the first Tech Employment Academy was launched in June 2022. The programme had over 100 applicants for this ground-breaking 16-week programme supported by Allstate and Citi. Screening and selection included aptitude assessments and interview with 17 starting for jobs the programme, focused on Software Development and Product Management. The programme ran for 16 weeks and concluded in October 2022. To date, 12 participants (71%) have progressed into immediate employment with starting salaries for the above roles range £23k-£28k. Further employability support is being provided to remaining participants including job applications, CV support, interview preparation etc. All participants were deemed employable by the participating employers, who were restricted only by the number of roles on offer.

3.8 As we move forward, the intention is to continue to offer Employment Academies in this area. Strategic employer engagement has been ongoing throughout the Autumn to build awareness of the offer and seek involvement. We have allocated an additional 38 places for people to commence in early 2023 once employer demand is secured. It is interesting to note that, of those who did not secure a place on this first Tech Employment Academy, a large number of the (unsuccessful) applicants to the pilot cohort remain engaged and interested in participating as we move forward.

3.9 Retrofit Academy

The Reset for Growth report completed by the Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission (IIGC) in June 2021 identified the need for a retrofit programme of scale in Belfast to create employment opportunities in this new sector, while supporting the city's zero carbon

commitments. Following our initial scoping work, it became apparent that a significant stumbling block was the lack of a curriculum in this space. Officers were successful in securing funding through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) Community Renewal Fund to develop a pilot intervention that would help build a curriculum for the vocational skills in this sector while also providing skills support for a number of individuals – thereby providing the “building blocks” for a larger-scale intervention in partnership with key organisations including NIHE.

3.10 To date, almost 100 participants have taken part in the training as follows:

- Level 2 – Understanding Domestic Retrofit – 57 Participants
- Level 3 – Retrofit Adviser – 20 Participants
- Level 4 - Retrofit Assessor – 5 Participants
- Level 5 – Retrofit Coordinator – 15 Participants

3.11 Moving forward from this pilot, the intention is to expand the level of uptake in order to build the supply chain so that government commitments in this space can be met. In parallel, the Climate Commissioner has led on the establishment of a local Retrofit Hub. This brings together a range of work strands related to retrofitting including skills development; building regulations; academic research and government incentives in order to take a more strategic view of the opportunities and challenges within this sector and to develop more coherent responses that can support the drive to zero carbon while also creating employment; improving housing stock and supporting new business development opportunities.

3.12 Fibre Employment Academy

Research undertaken by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (EPC) identified the utilities sector as having significant potential for future growth and one that could help improve both median salary levels and business competitiveness and productivity. Based on these insights, officers last year brought forward a Fibre Academy. Working with the delivery partners, we developed an intervention covering a number of roles including fibre installers, splicers and groundwork teams. Based on 2021/22 delivery, employment outcomes were very positive (90% into-employment) and starting salaries for successful applicants averaged at £29k. Some of those who completed the programme last year have already moved into management positions, including an individual who was out of work due to Covid, and who has moved into a project management role with a local fibre company earning a salary of £50k pa.

3.13	<p>Based on the early success of the initial cohorts, we have just commenced delivery of a new programme in November this year and will engage 40 people before the end of the year. Demand from employers remains high and we expect that this will continue.</p>
3.14	<p><u>Business Services</u></p> <p>In addition to tech and digital roles, the wider professional and business services sectors have witnessed significant employment growth over the last decade. Our research indicates the potential for further growth. As a result, we developed a number of interventions this year – including a Business Services Academy that focused specifically on Business Support and Administration roles within Belfast City Council as well as other employers. A particular success of this Academy has the engagement with the disability sector, which has led to a high number of people with disabilities participating in the training and securing employment.</p>
3.15	<p><u>Care Sectors</u></p> <p>Since April 2022 we have supported 35 people through an Employment Academy with 19 people having already moved into paid employment within a care sector job. In addition to this we have also enabled 119 Belfast residents to develop their existing knowledge by offering them the opportunity to upskill for a better job in a care sector role, from Health and Social Care to Childcare and Playwork.</p>
3.16	<p>Our upskilling programmes support participants to achieve their Level 3 and/or Level 5 qualifications within their chosen profession. This then qualifies them to progress into more senior roles within their organisation. It also improves their earning potential and creates further entry-level positions for new entrants into the sector thereby enabling a skills-escalator model in the city. Finally, these upskilling academies also help to fill the skills gaps within these industries and ensure the provision of health and social care services across the city – particularly important for those who are more vulnerable.</p>
3.17	<p>In September 2022, officers also developed an upskilling programme for Classroom Assistants. This will support residents to achieve Level 3 in Supporting Teaching and Learning in School, enabling employees to move from precarious temporary employment to permanent roles within the education sector. We are also working on a pilot academy for new entrants to the Classroom Assistant role which is due to begin in early 2023.</p>
3.18	<p><u>Construction</u></p>

The Employability and Skills teams has been working in the construction sector for a number of years. More recently, our work has focused on supporting the development of major construction schemes, including Weaver's Court. Since April 2022, 99 participants have engaged with our support programmes and 78 having moved into paid employment to date. In addition to this, officers have delivered a General Operative Employment Academy for BCC posts ringfenced for long-term unemployed and all seven who completed secured employment with BCC. Another new intervention in the construction sector has been to focus on key roles that have specialist technical skills. Some examples of additional training that we have provided includes digger/dumper driving and telescopic forklift operation. Staff that have these specialist licences and training can potentially move from minimum wage to earning between a £16ph-£24ph.

3.19 Social Value

The Employability and Skills team continues to support colleagues in Corporate Procurement Service (CPS) in the implementation of the social value toolkit. Our contribution focuses on the employability and skills elements of the toolkit. We have recently produced explanatory materials for employers to outline the types of support that we can provide them with in meeting their social value obligations.

3.20 We also provide advice and guidance to colleagues across the council on social value and supported delivery on several projects such as City Cemetery, redevelopment of St Comgall's, redevelopment of Millennium Park, Templemore Baths Restoration and Shankill Shared Women's Centre project. The work done as part of the creation of visitor's centre at City Cemetery recently won the Social Value Project of the Year award at the Construction Employer's Federation's Construction Excellence Awards 2022.

3.21 Digital Badging

Digital Badging is a relatively new area of work for the Council over the last year. We explored this area of work given the disproportionately high numbers of individuals in the city that have no or low skills. Working with the RSA through a pilot phase in which they provided match funding to the council, we have issued 435 Digital Badges to people completing an Employment Academy. Moving beyond the Council, we have signed up 19 of our partners and they are now working on creating their own digital badges.

3.22 Building on the success of the first year in operation, it is proposed that we extend our partnership with RSA Cities of Learning, Badge Nation and Navigatr by way of a community

membership licence. This will enable the Council to continue to write, issue and support providers and employers with access to Digital Badging memberships. It will also offer participants access to a live jobs feed on the Navigatr platform, linking them to local job opportunities connected to the skills they have developed through their badges. The partnership with RSA going forward will also provide the Council with scoping, intelligence and research in line with our priorities. Year 2 of the project will cost the Council £40,000. This allocation has been set aside within the existing budget for this financial year.

3.23 Stakeholder Engagement

The Employment Academy work relies heavily of a range of employability organisations to engage and support participants and to communicate and share information on planned activities. At present, we have a network of almost 200 employability practitioners that we engage with on a regular basis and is open to all employability organisations in the city. Over the last year, the communication has largely been through monthly online meetings. However the plan from next year is to move towards more in-person events and engagements.

3.24 Members will be aware of the significant funding challenges for this sector in the coming year, particularly relating to the end of European Social Fund (ESF) support and the lack of clarity around Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) implementation. While the Council has limited authority in this regard, we recognise the importance of having a strong employability sector that can engage and support individuals that are furthest from the labour market.

3.25 One mechanism that we have identified to provide support to the sector is that we have recently become a corporate affiliate partner of the Institute for Employability Professionals (IEP). Through this partnership, we have been able to offer membership places to 100 employability practitioners in the city. The IEP will provide participants with development and upskilling support for their staff. This should be beneficial for those organisations seeking to secure funding or win new business in the future and will also provide access to the most recent thinking in this area of work. The IEP will also provide us with access to a range of expertise and we will use the network to organise events that can benefit the wider sector across the city. The first event is planned for January 2023 and will focus on mental health training and working with those who are neurodivergent. Attendance will be open to all those who are IEP members in the city.

3.26 Financial and resource implications

3.27	<p>The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2022/23 budget for the Employability & Skills section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was included as part of the estimates that were approved by this Committee on 12 January 2022. The allocation of £40,000 to RSA Cities of Learning to progress Digital Badging in the city will be taken from this existing budget.</p> <p><u>Equality implications/rural needs assessment</u></p> <p>The team has created a CRM system that allows them to track participant data across all engagement activity. This information is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that all equality implications are considered. Officers also use this information to address under-performance in specific areas and then put in place targeted actions to redress the balance in future engagements.</p>
4.0	Appendices -Documents attached
	N/A