



Subject:	Employability and Skills – update and workplan
Date:	8 th March 2023
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
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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 or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in 2022/23 to support skills development, economic engagement and job outcomes for key target groups and to set out the proposed workplan for the 2023/24 financial year.
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 inactive • Residents with low skills levels • 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
2.1	<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 this work • Approve the priority interventions for the 2023/2024 financial year.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p><u>Labour market context</u></p> <p>Having emerged from a period of significant volatility within the labour market due to the pandemic, ongoing challenges remain as a result of macroeconomic incidents and the associated cost of living crisis. Demand is hugely outstripping supply across a range of sectors such as tech and digital, logistics, business services as well as health and social care. On a more positive note, employers are now demonstrating a willingness to consider innovative and inclusive pathways to employment, particularly in strong growth sectors.</p>
3.2	<p>In terms of the wider employability and skills ecosystem in the city, Council interventions – particularly Employment Academies – are largely reliant on localised provision that can engage, support and prepare people to become ready for the final step into work that an Employment Academy can offer. The impending withdrawal of ESF funds will have a significant impact on the provision in this space, potentially reducing the “pipeline” of candidates coming through.</p>
3.3	<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 better 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>

- Pre-academy matching and selection to ensure all individuals who participate have a meaningful chance of securing employment after successful completion
- Employer-led vocational skills, qualifications, licences and training related to the specific job role
- In-situ work sampling/work placements
- Provision of additional supports to undergo and complete the academy, from equipment and clothing through to childcare, travel and subsistence
- Employability support particularly focused on the final employment interview (all candidates are guaranteed a job interview).

3.4

Given the volatility in the labour market – and the limited financial resources available to undertake the work – our recommendations around the priority work plan have been driven by a number of factors including:

- The 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 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 – supporting individuals to improve salary levels by progressing to a better job and thereby embedding a skills-escalator by creating additional entry-level roles.

3.5

Stakeholder and partner engagement

A vital element of our work is our engagement with employability and skills providers across the city. This underpins the ability of Employment Academies to successfully match people to the opportunities on offer. Officers have engaged with organisations such as EBM, GEMS,

USDT, Shankill JAC, Ashton Centre, Women's TEC, Action Mental Health, JBOs, GLOW, NOW Group, Community Sports Network, Harmoni Homeless Hostel, Shankill Women's Centre, Walkways, City Life Projects, Revolution Youth, African Caribbean Society, Start 360, Orchardville, NIACRO, Disability Action etc. We have also engaged with and worked through existing networks such as Migrants' Forum and NIUSE.

3.6

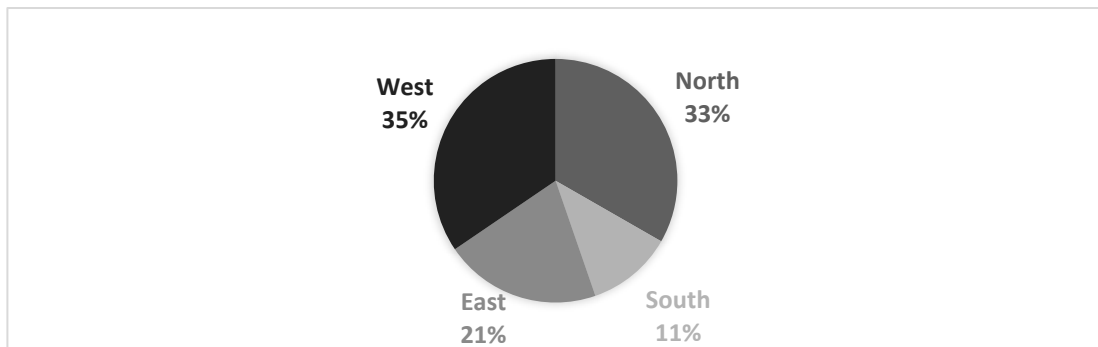
In addition to this, officers have continued to expand and consolidate the Employability and Skills Provider Network, with 209 members from all across the city covering key target groups (disability, women, young people, justice leavers, care leavers etc.). The team has regular engagement and provides updates on future plans for Employment Academies, setting out details of employers, jobs, eligibility, pre-requisites, programme content, duration, additional support offered (childcare, sign-language interpreters, travel, subsistence etc.). We are also working closely with the Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP), facilitating continuous improvement and raising standards within the ecosystem in the city. We have provided access to IEP membership, shared learning and benchmarking, and the delivery of vocationally specific employability training for those working in the sector.

3.7

Participant engagement across the city

In addition to engaging directly with provision in local communities across the city, officers normally hold roadshows in a variety of venues to optimise engagement in every part of Belfast. Participation rates are tracked to ensure that they reflect geospatial disparities in relation to deprivation, unemployment and economic inactivity. Taking all of this into account, a working assumption would be that we would have one third of participants from North, one third from West and one third from South and East combined. While the geospatial balance is on track overall, the balance between East and South needs attention. This will be reflected in our engagement strategy for the coming year and, as a result, we expect to be able to see a correction of this over the course of the year.

Belfast City Council Employment Academies: % breakdown of participants



3.8 As an illustration of our commitment to ongoing evaluation of our work, officers have recently (since end 2022) taken a more nuanced engagement strategy to focus on targeting areas in South Belfast instead of traditional roadshows across the city. This has included building links with organisations working within Taughmonagh, Donegall Pass, Ormeau, the Markets etc. to ensure that residents here are aware of and prepared for the opportunities on offer, and to build stronger links with support organisations in those areas. Officers have also been undertaking more localised outreach in shopping centres in conjunction with JBOs, as well as collaborating on more localised jobfairs and roadshows.

3.9 Employment Academy 2022/23 Performance

Since April 2023, we have been able to make investments in over 700 places on Employment Academies, utilising our own resources and attracting additional resources through the Labour Market Partnership, Learning & Work Institute’s New Futures programme and the Community Renewal Fund. The availability of these additional resources as well as having a flexible, 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.

3.10 Due to the pre-academy matching, screening and selection, attrition rates tend to be low with an average of 93% of those who start an Employment Academy successfully completing and with an average into-work rate of 75% for those who complete. The level of demand – both from employers as well as those looking for a job or a better job – remains high.

Employment Academy	BCC resources	Other: LMP, LWI & CRF	Total
Logistics & Bus Driving	54	100	154
Retrofit Academy*		97	
Construction & General Operatives	7	65	72
Fibre		30	30
Tech		17	17
Business Services	16	39	55
Classroom Assistant	52		52
Social Care and Childcare	29		29
Childcare/HSC Upskilling: Level 3-5	68		68
Health & Social Care Upskilling: Level 3-5	65		65
Classroom Assistant Upskilling: Level 3	37		37
Customer Services: Leisure and Hospitality		40	40
TOTALS	328	388	716

*The purpose of this Academy is to create the skills infrastructure needed – numbers reflect training places.

3.11	<p>In terms of volume, the most popular Employment Academies are within logistics, education, construction as well as upskilling academies in traditionally low-paid sectors such as social care, childcare and education for those wanting a better job. Sectors that we struggle to recruit for include hospitality and social care, where pay and conditions play a large factor in sector attractiveness.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Employment Academy 2023/24 Workplan</u></p> <p>While LMP resources provided capacity to almost double Employment Academy participant numbers in 2022/23, this will reduce to 100 additional places in 2023/24 as the LMP begins to implement other interventions outlined in this report such as the Gateway Service and Bridges to Progression for Young People.</p>
3.13	<p>Across 2023/24, we expect that the Employment Academies – resourced through Council revenue as well as other sources – will engage around 500 participants with at least 70% expected to gain employment/self-employment in sectors such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical sectors such as logistics, construction, utilities, fibre etc. • Professional services such as administration, business and tech etc. • Care and education sectors including classroom assistants, health and social care, childcare and playwork, with a focus on including recognised vocational qualifications between Level 2 and Level 5 to enable people to not only gain employment but also progress to a better job within these occupations • Customer service sectors such as leisure and tourism.
3.14	<p>We will also continue to work with public sector bodies such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual schools and Education Authority to meet the increasing job demand for classroom assistants and, crucially, build in the Level 3 qualification required to secure permanent and better paid roles • Queen's University, where planning is underway to deliver a bespoke Employment Academies for hard-to-fill posts within administration, with an in-built Level 2 qualification when people are in work that will lead to job progression within QUB • Belfast HSC Trust, where planning is underway to deliver bespoke Employment Academies for nursing assistants and within health and social care roles • Belfast City Council, where planning is underway to deliver Employment Academies for hard-to-fill vacancies within community services as well as driver posts and, potentially, Digital Services.

3.15	<p>One growing area of work is our new pathways into the tech, digital and professional service 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, identified through the work of the Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission, has led to a pilot programme with 17 starters, two leaving early as they found employment and 11 of the 14 completers gaining a software development role with a starting salary range between £23,000-£28,000 per annum. We are now working intensively with these employers as well as across the tech sector to expand this in the coming year, bringing on additional employers and expanding the job roles. In expanding this activity, we propose to continue to work with the Learning and Work Institute through their New Futures programme. In recognition of the significant budget challenges, we are working with DfC to utilise Advisor Discretionary Fund (ADF) resources that blend with Employment Academy delivery – thereby making our resources go further and engaging more people.</p>
3.16	<p><u>Improving employability outcomes for young people</u></p> <p>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 have delivered a number of smaller interventions for young people, both in the formal education setting and outside of the school environment. Our focus has been on improving educational attainment and helping young people at risk to find positive employment and training outcomes.</p>
3.17	<p>Our GCSE support programme’s delivery within the current academic year has been back to pre-Covid engagement and participation rates, with learning workshops/classes and revision support being delivered in both school-based and community-based settings. Since September 2022, 281 young people have been engaged on the programme. 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. In the 2022/23 academic year, this programme is expected to support 365 young people, providing access to the learning and revision support on offer.</p>
3.18	<p>We are also supporting 170 young people through our Youth Support Programme. These participants either already have or are at risk of dropping out of the education system, employment or training. Of those young people currently participating, 87 have completed accredited training and 65 are undertaking essential skills qualifications. This programme is due to complete in summer 2024 with an expected 55% achieving a positive destination, either into training, education or employment.</p>

3.19	<p>A Summer Work Experience Programme was piloted in summer 2022 for young people aged 14-16 years at highest risk or who had already disengaged from the formal education system with 30 completing the programme and 28 moving into positive outcomes (14 continued in formal education at year 13 and the remainder moved into vocational training).</p>
3.20	<p>A review of our delivery within this workstream is currently concluding, 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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 • The reduced financial capacity within the team means that difficult decisions need to be made, with officers recommending that Belfast Employment Academies – as the flagship Council intervention in the employability space – are protected as far as possible.
3.21	<p>Taking account of these factors, it is proposed that our work on “Improving employability outcomes for young people” is prioritised on two key areas, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued support for the GCSE Support Programme for a final interim year, using this time to work with the Partnership Boards (who currently 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 • Working with the Education Inequalities sub-group to consider alternative provision for those young people at risk of disengaging from formal education once the Youth Support Programme comes to an end.
3.22	<p><u>Labour Market Partnership</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership is an intervention supported by DfC within all 11 council areas. Each LMP is required to submit an annual action plan for agreement. The Belfast Labour Market Partnership has met on a number of occasions recently to finalise the plan for 2023/24. Priority work areas are:</p>

- Quickly back to work: Ensuring a co-ordinated response to the substantial number of people in the city who have been or are risk of being made unemployed, especially as a consequence of the economic shocks
- Increasing Opportunities: Empowering those furthest from the labour market to succeed through quality support, especially those who will be considered long-term unemployed as well as the economically inactive
- No-one Left Behind: Targeting of those disadvantaged groups through the delivery of an integrated, comprehensive, inclusive, holistic and local employability approach
- Catching Up: Supporting access to careers pathways, re-skilling and upskilling for those unemployed as well as those on low incomes.

3.23

Resources from the Labour Market Partnership enable the Council to increase the range and scope of employability and skills activity. The Partnership 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. 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 outside of mainstream JBO support for those who are out of work and non-job ready such as long-term unemployed and the economically inactive. In our engagement with LMP members, they considered that these groups 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. It is proposed that the Gateway will support up to 1200 people in the coming year. Participants will engage on a voluntary basis and the delivery model is being co-designed with key stakeholders such as the JBO Network, Careers Service, VCSE sector etc. Delivery will commence in April 2023
- Labour Market Observatory: officers have completed scoping and preparatory work and secured additional resources from DfC to establish a Labour Market Observatory. When fully operational, this will provide the intelligence, data and evidence-base needed to underpin decision-making in through the prism of demand, supply,

provision and policy. DfC resources will ensure that the insights are available for all council areas

- RSA Cities of Learning: the number of people in Belfast with no or low formally-recognised skills is significantly above the NI and UK average. Officers have been working with the RSA to explore how a Digital Badges scheme could help recognise the non-accredited skills of these individuals. All Employment Academies are now digitally badged as an alternative validation of achievement, with 779 badges issued to participants. In addition to this, the Council has offered 22 organisations in the city access to Digital Badging for their own participants/employees. During 2023/24 officers will continue to work with RSA Cities of Learning, including their partners Badge Nation and Navigatr to expand Digital Badging to an additional 20 organisations/employers, including employability and skills providers – and support them in creating their own Digital Badges
- Bridges to Progression targets young people 16-17 years who are at risk of disengaging from Training for Success/Skills for Life & Work due to their personal circumstances. Through this intervention, 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. At the December 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....” and that “A report will be presented at a future meeting of this committee outlining the outcomes and learning from this approach.” Delivery partners were invited to submit applications outlining how they would use the resources. Following the application process, indicative funding awards have been issued to providers as detailed below. Officers will work with the organisations in the coming months to pick up on the learning from this pilot activity and to understand how the varying approaches across providers is making an impact on the young people. A more detailed report on findings will be shared with the Committee towards the end of the year.
 - Workforce Training Services - £20,000
 - Bryson - £18,750
 - Impact Training - £15,000
 - People 1st - £14,808

- Springboard Opportunities - £12,317
- Rutledge - £9,125.

3.24

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. The strategic assessment identified a number of key groups that were under-represented in the labour market or that faced significant barriers to finding work. These groups include (among others) those with a disability and migrants. Likewise, the research identified that there are specific parts of the city where levels of LTU and economic inactivity are more than twice the city average. Government programmes over many years have tried different approaches to support these groups. We propose to explore some new models that are either target group-based and/or location-based in order to support incremental improvements in employment outcomes among the target populations.

3.25

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 and to lever resources to support additional delivery, focusing on the council's inclusive growth ambitions. There are a number of key mechanisms through which this can be achieved:

- Developer Contributions: on a practical level, officers are supporting the Planning team in the development of the Developer Contributions Framework and are actively engaged with a number of emerging development schemes to ensure that relevant employability and skills interventions are incorporated and that compliance is ensured
- Social Value Procurement Policy: officers are working closely with Corporate Procurement Services 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 requirements in a meaningful way.

3.26	<p><u>Finance and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2023/24 budget for the Employability & Skills section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was included as part of the 2023/24 estimates.</p>
3.27	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></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. Considerations given to equality and good relation impacts at the initial stages of project development. Officers will work closely with the Equality and Good Relations Team on this activity. 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	Appendices
	None