Subject:	Employability NI – Belfast Labour Market Partnership Action Plan
Date:	11th August 2021
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Sinéad O'Regan, Employability & Skills Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? **Yes**   **No** **X**

   If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

      After Committee Decision
      After Council Decision
      Some time in the future
      Never

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?   **Yes** X   **No**

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the Strategic Assessment & Action Plan developed by the Belfast Labour Market Partnership (LMP).
2.0	**Recommendations**
2.1	The Members of the Committee are asked to recommend that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to: • Note the outline Action Plan which will be used as a basis for engagement with the Department for Communities (DfC) in the coming weeks, in order to support delivery

	of activity from September 2021. If approved, the action plan will run from September 2021-March 2023.
3.0	**Main report**
3.1	Members have recently received a number of reports on Employability NI and the emerging work of the Belfast Labour Market Partnership. At the June meeting of this committee, it was noted that the LMP action plan was under development and would be submitted to DfC in the coming months. Since that time, officers have undertaken further consultation with the interim partnership and are currently working with DfC with a view to formally submitting the action plan for review and approval in early August.
3.2	<u>Strategic Assessment & Action Planning Process</u> Between February and June this year, the interim Belfast LMP undertook a Strategic Assessment of employability, skills, provision and local labour market conditions in Belfast. This exercise was undertaken to inform the priority areas of investment within the action plan.
3.3	The LMP action plan is based on: • A statistical assessment of labour market data and insights relating to both supply (those seeking work) and demand (nature/scale/type of job opportunities), with very local level data generated by Queen's University, Belfast • Consideration of key policy documents including the Draft Programme for Government Outcomes Framework, the Belfast Agenda, Belfast City Council's Inclusive Growth Strategy and the draft skills strategy, in order to ensure alignment • Input from the interim Belfast Labour Market Partnership members to shape and tailor emerging interventions.
3.4	The action plan is for an initial period of 18 months from September 2021 until March 2023 with a subsequent 3-year action plan to be submitted for the period from April 2023 onwards. The current draft structure of the plan is focused on four priority areas of intervention. As previously noted, these are: • **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 employed, especially as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on helping people to move quickly back into employment and/or training (with a view to future employment);

		• **Increasing Opportunities:** Empowering those furthest from the labour market to succeed through quality support, especially those who will be considered long-term unemployed as a consequence of COVID-19, 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; and
		• **Catching Up:** Supporting access to careers pathways, re-skilling and upskilling for those unemployed as well as those on low incomes.
3.5		The Labour Market Partnership also identified a number of cross-cutting issues which are considered to be essential in order to improve the performance of the proposed active labour market programmes. These are: • Need for a strong and effective Belfast Labour Market Partnership, including operational arrangements to deliver Action Plan initiatives, in particular between Belfast City Council and Belfast's Jobs and Benefits Offices • Priorities and actions to be intelligence-led: our work to date has identified significant limitations with the existing labour market data, particularly when focusing on local geographies. • Need to support employers to build back better following the interruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdown. Providing flexible responses to employer requirements to recruit and train staff and supporting the aims of inclusive growth • Need to create an integrated framework of provision in Belfast. There needs to be improved information about existing provision and help for individuals and employers to navigate the range of services on offer and make informed choices. In the longer term, there is a need to ensure that new interventions are more coherent and better aligned than in currently the case • Need to ensure co-ordination with other Departments, particularly Department for Health (DoH) and Department for the Economy (DfE).
3.6		The LMP action plan seeks to target provision on those priority groups identified in section 3.4, recognising that not all interventions need be new 'provision' or 'programmes'; sometimes it is equally important to profile and/or promote existing interventions. The headline programme of work within the action plan at present is as follows:

3.7	• **Gateway to Choice:** 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 to Choice** will support 1,000 people, engaging on a voluntary basis, over the 18 month period. Subject to DfC endorsement, it is proposed that the delivery model will be co-designed in the coming months, working with key stakeholders such as the JBO Network, Careers Service, VCSE sector etc. with a view to procuring the service following intensive pre-market engagement in early 2022.

3.8	• **Employment Pathways**: members will be aware that the Employment Academies model has been successful in helping an average of 350 people a year into employment over the last 4-5 years. The academies focus on those furthest from the labour market. Their success is due, to a significant extent, to the partnerships with local organisations that undertake the early engagement and outreach activity to identify those individuals that may be interested in taking part and ready to do so. The volatility of the labour market at present means that there are certain groups – such as people on furlough or at risk of redundancy – that could benefit from an abridged version of the Employment Academy model in order to help them find a more sustainable job role. Likewise, there are sectors where the levels of demand are significant and where there are opportunities to target those further back in the labour market as well as those impacted by COVID-19. These include:
	   o Logistics & transport
	   o Health & social care
	   o Anchor institutions/CPP partners
	   o Technical & professional services, including digital sectors
	   o Tourism and hospitality.
	The proposal in the action plan is – in addition to those supported by Council's resources to deliver Employment Academies - to support a minimum of 300 individuals through these interventions, helping at least 225 of those to find a new or better job. One of the new areas of work for this calendar year is a significant investment in curriculum development to create skills interventions at all levels in the green sector – particularly focusing on retrofitting and opportunities arising from the growth of electric

		vehicles and the associated infrastructure. We have established a strong partnership with BMC and NIHE in particular to support the development and delivery of these interventions and propose to be delivering employment pathways and academies at scale within 18 months.
3.9	•	**Enterprise Pathway**: following an economic downturn, many of those who lose their job or risk doing so take the opportunity to become self-employed. Last year, we piloted a targeted enterprise pathway intervention for LTU individuals seeking to set up their own business. Given the uptake and the appetite for additional support, the action plan includes a proposal to support 40 people on out-of-work benefits, who are ready for self-employment but require intensive wrap-around support to do this.
3.10	•	**Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) Pilot**: ILMs are paid employment interventions in specifically created posts. They are focused on specific individuals that are far from the labour market and generally operate on the basis of dedicated support alongside the time-bound role. The objective is to help the individual towards a permanent role – either within that position or within another post, following the period of labour market engagement. ILMs have previously been used in Belfast as part of wider labour market support interventions. It is proposed that scoping work is undertaken to develop a pilot ILM for up to 30 people, focusing on those aged over 25 with significant barriers to employment.
3.11	•	**Digital Badges project**: The number of people in Belfast with no or low skills is significantly above the NI and UK average. This is based on formally recognised skills. Officers have recently been working with the RSA to explore how a Digital Badges scheme could be used to help recognise the non-accredited skills of these individuals, as well as working with employers to help them think about 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. The RSA has supported a number of pilots in other cities so we are reviewing the initial learning in order to shape the Belfast-based intervention, focusing on how the employability and skills providers within the city might create a collaborative approach and have access to digital badging that recognises the "hidden" skills of their participants.

3.12	While the initial delivery will focus on the Gateway, the Employment Pathways, the ILM and the Digital Badges work, there will also be a significant programme of development work to explore the potential for large-scale interventions in 2022/23. Initial areas of focus include: • **Coordination of the employer-facing support services**: this has loosely been referenced as an "employer navigation service". It acknowledges that Belfast is predominantly a micro and small business economy and that those businesses need support and guidance to navigate the wide range of employability and skills support interventions in place, focusing on the right solution for their business and helping them access the relevant support
3.13	• **Bridges to progression**: over the coming years, the training environment for level 1 and level 2 skills is changing. We know that, at present, up to 1000 young people in Belfast are entering these training interventions and that, in many cases, the outcomes (into employment, education or training) are very poor. This proposal will look at how the positive outcomes for these young people can be enhanced, through additional support and more structured exposure to the work of work – particularly in new growth sectors
3.14	• **Targeted interventions for key groups/locations**: 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, justice system leavers, older people, lone parents, those living with health issues (including mental health), ethnic minorities. 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. The development work on these interventions will take place until April 2022, with delivery coming forward after that time.
3.15	In order to support delivery of these priority interventions and to raise awareness of the opportunities for both job seekers and for businesses, it is proposed that a campaign loosely around the theme of "Belfast: Back to Work" will be developed as well as supports for those on furlough who have no other access to employability advice and guidance within the city. This will be timed to coincide with the planned end of the furlough period, when the real impact on the employment numbers is likely to become clearer.

3.16	**<u>Financial and resource implications</u>** No specific additional financial contribution required from council at this point. The resourcing plan for delivery of the agreed interventions will be agreed with DfC and funding will be allocated to Council through a funding agreement.
3.17	**<u>Equality implications/rural needs assessment</u>** 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.
3.18	DfC proposes to establish Local Inclusive Labour Market Partnerships in all council areas in the course of the coming financial year.
4.0	**Appendices – Documents attached**
	None.