One Parent Families Scotland
*changing lives, challenging poverty*

# Thriving, Not Just Surviving

## Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and Carers in Scotland

Research Report

Funded and supported by OXFAM SCOTLAND WE WON'T LIVE WITH POVERTY

April 2021

## One Parent Families Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland is the leading charity working with single parent families in Scotland. OPFS provides expert information, advice, and support for one parent families, along with training activities, employability programmes and flexible childcare. OPFS campaigns with parents to make their voices heard to change the systems, policies and attitudes that disadvantage single parent families. Our vision is of a Scotland in which single parents and their children are valued and treated equally and fairly. Our mission is to work with and for single parent families, providing support services that enable them to achieve their potential and help create lasting solutions to the poverty and barriers they face.

One Parent Families Scotland
2 York Place, Edinburgh EH1 3EP
Tel: 0131 556 3899

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Tel: 0141 285 8854

www.oxfam.org.uk/scotland

## Foreword

It is often claimed that work is the best route out of poverty. The reality can be starkly different. For too many people, particularly women who are responsible for looking after a child or loved one, it simply isn't.

This report aims to unpick some of the roadblocks that people who have caring responsibilities find in their way. It also reminds policy makers that getting people into low-paid dead-end jobs isn't a viable solution to poverty.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it's that our entire society and economy depends on care: the nation's carers have been critical to Scotland's ability to navigate the biggest health, social and economic crisis in living memory. Yet, just as they were before COVID-19, too many carers – including single parents and those who support people with additional support needs – continue to face the injustice of poverty because of the long-standing undervaluation of care, fuelled by deep gender injustices.

This report acknowledges that not all carers are able to pursue paid work: there simply aren't enough hours in the day; but it seeks to show what is needed to support those who can and do want to find paid work, either alongside their unpaid caring or once their caring responsibilities have ended.

The need to offer better support to people with caring responsibilities to access and sustain decent work is urgent and growing. Even before the pandemic, nearly four out of 10 carers in Scotland reported having to give up work to care and a further two out of 10 said they have had to reduce their paid working hours to fulfil care needs. Around 270,000 people in Scotland – around one in eight – were combining paid work with caring; a figure which will grow as the country's population ages and people work longer.

Encouragingly, following the devolution of employability to the Scottish Parliament in 2017, there are signs of progress towards a more dignified and personalised approach, including by ensuring participation in devolved employability programmes is voluntary. But while investment in the Parental Employability Support Fund and the expansion of childcare entitlement is welcome, Scotland's journey towards a fundamentally distinct approach is unfinished.

We must now seize the opportunity created by a surge in solidarity with single parents and people with caring responsibilities during the pandemic to drive faster progress, now and throughout the next Scottish Parliament. We must realise existing commitments to a flexible, tailored, and 'whole-person' approach to employability, and recognise that doing so will support wider commitments to boost gender equality and to support delivery of Scotland's legal target to reduce child poverty to 18% by 2023/24 and less than 10% by 2030.

To achieve this, we must better understand and address the barriers which too often curtail opportunities for those who care to secure paid work by building a programme of support built on the key principles identified within this report, gleaned by learning from previous employability programmes and by talking directly with unpaid carers.

In doing so, we must acknowledge that efforts to support single parents and people with caring responsibilities towards and into work will be meaningless if that employment is poor quality: no longer can work fail to provide a sustainable livelihood for so many people amid low pay and poor contractual protections. Alongside enhancing support to individuals, our expectations of employers must therefore also grow, with those accessing public funding and support required to do more.

Support for unpaid carers to enter paid work must be accompanied by significantly enhanced investment in social care in Scotland to ensure high quality care is available to all those who need it while reducing pressure on unpaid carers. Likewise, single parents need access to high quality, affordable, flexible childcare and out of school care services to enter, sustain and advance in paid work.

The timing of this research is massively opportune, as political parties finalise their promises to the people of Scotland ahead of the Scottish Parliamentary election. Now is the time for politicians – from all parties – to act to prevent a predicted surge in unemployment from pushing those with caring responsibilities further to the back of the employment queue.

They must listen to the call made by the Social Renewal Advisory Board, and built upon by this research, for targeted specialist programmes for women, disabled people, minority ethnic communities and single parents while recognising that enhanced employability support is far from a silver bullet.

Ultimately, they must demonstrate their solidarity with Scotland's carers, as OPFS, Oxfam Scotland, and leading care and gender organisations in Scotland, are calling for them to do, by creating a new National Outcome dedicated to better valuing care and all those who provide it in Scotland, whether unpaid or paid. This generation defining commitment must be placed at the heart of the next Scottish Government's National Performance Framework and enhancing the support given to carers to move towards work must become a key indicator of progress.

Getting this right will not only benefit carers and their families but help to ensure Scotland's labour market is fit for the future. It will help individual carers, and Scotland, not just to survive, but to thrive.

Satwat Rehman

Director of One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)

Jamie Livingstone

Head of Oxfam Scotland

# Executive Summary

## Key Points

- This report calls for a new approach to employability for single parents and people with caring responsibilities that puts access to good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations – an approach which would support single parents and carers not only into work, but to progress within it.
- Fair Start Scotland, the Scottish Government's flagship employability programme, has taken a number of welcome and important steps towards a more effective and fairer model. However, there is more to do to establish a distinct Scottish approach to employability. Furthermore, there is evidence that some positive elements are not being routinely implemented, and qualitative research has found a reluctance to invest in more intensive interventions owing to the programme's payment structures.[1]
- The Scottish Government should continue to use its powers to significantly accelerate delivery of a distinctive Scottish approach to employability, drawing on the effective and innovative approaches considered within this report.
- There are numerous models for effective employability support. Our research has identified the following 10-point framework of key criteria that best meet the needs of single parents and carers.

## A Framework of Best Practice

1. **Specialist third sector organisations should be part of broad partnerships, rooted in and expert in their local communities.** Partnerships are central to providing high-quality, comprehensive support. Specialist third sector organisations bring exceptional expertise, as well as trained and empathetic staff, strong reputations and credibility with service-users.
2. **Wrap-around personal development should be integral to the model.** Any programme for single parents and people with caring responsibilities needs to tackle low confidence, isolation, and mental health and wellbeing, while flexible training and skills-acquisition are central to achieving high-quality, sustainable employment outcomes.
3. **Flexible, user-centred service-delivery must be at the centre**. Voluntary participation coupled with flexibility around the pace, place, delivery, and end-goal enables parents and carers to balance effective participation with caring responsibilities.
4. **Personalised, holistic and joined-up services tailored for single parents and carers are essential.** Single parents and carers often face complex barriers, personal circumstances, and caring responsibilities. Many face multiple disadvantages that compound these barriers, not least gendered discrimination and pay differentials.
5. **Single Parents and carers should be actively involved in the design and delivery of employability services.** Single parents and carers know their own needs better than anybody else and should have opportunities to shape the content and delivery of programmes accordingly. True personalisation should surpass having a mere 'menu' of options to choose from and should instead offer real opportunities for co-production of services.
6. **'Demand-led' training and employer-facing activities should be rooted within the local labour market to maximise the additionality of programmes**. Tailoring training to local gaps and opportunities, and/or crafting suitable employment terms and patterns with employers makes employment outcomes more suitable and sustainable.
7. **Employment outcomes should be assessed qualitatively as well as quantitatively**. Jobs should be well-paid, sustainable, and should offer opportunities for progression. Employment should not be seen as an end in itself, but a means by which to derive an adequate income and a sustainable livelihood.

[1] (Scottish Government 2019b)

8. **Ongoing support – both regular and *ad hoc* – is vital for sustaining and progressing within employment**. Parents' and carers' complex barriers do not dissipate upon entering employment but may in fact become more pronounced.
9. **Transparency, accessibility and proactive engagement are essential**. Confusion persists among potential participants over eligibility and access to the services. A highly complex landscape with multiple, often competing, providers can prevent effective engagement with services.
10. **Achieving this at street-level requires complementary funding and governance models**. Funding models are crucial to collaborative partnership-working at 'street-level'. Competitive tendering and payment by results are seen as largely incompatible with the collaborative partnership-working needed by those facing especial labour market disadvantages.

## Purpose

This research report, delivered by One Parent Families Scotland, with funding and input from Oxfam Scotland, seeks to identify best practice within the field of employability for single parents and people with caring responsibilities. In so doing, it devises a framework of the key ingredients needed in any effective employability programme for single parent sand carers, and advances recommendations and conclusions specific to the Scottish context relative to these indicators.

It is hoped that this research and its findings will inform debate and planning on the replacement for Fair Start Scotland in 2023.[2] This will be important for three main reasons: firstly, the devolved offer has been in place for a number of years now, and shows mixed signs of promise and progress, though with room for improvement; secondly, in the run-up to this year's Scottish Parliament elections, we believe there is an opportunity to inject new energy and ideas into this debate; and thirdly, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed the urgency of this report, amid significant and enduring upheaval to the labour market that has and will continue to hit single parents and carers disproportionately. While the research was conceived of and commissioned prior to the pandemic, it has taken on a profound importance as a result of it. As such, it is a highly timely and pressing report.

## Background & Rationale

One in six Scottish adults provides care for someone with a mental or physical illness, old age, or a physical or learning disability.[3] Unpaid carers experience a 10 percentage point employment gap compared to the national average,[4] and suffer a heightened risk of poverty.[5]

Single parents head almost a quarter (22.6%) of all households with children in Scotland.[6] Their employment rates have risen steadily over recent decades, from 43.8% in 1996 to almost 69% in late 2019. Nevertheless, they continue to lag behind the equivalent figures for cohabiting mothers and fathers: 77.6% and 93.8% respectively.[7]

Even prior to the pandemic, over a third (37%) of those providing more than 20 hours of care per week were living in poverty,[8] as were 43% of lone parent households.[9] This situation has only deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic.[10] There is therefore no route to poverty elimination that does not tackle the structural labour market barriers faced by these groups.

[2] Fair Start Scotland | StartScotland
[3] (Carers Scotland, 2020)
[4] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[5] (Scottish Government, 2020)
[6] (Gingerbread, 2019; Scottish Government, 2019)
[7] (ONS, 2020a)
[8] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[9] (DWP Stat-Xplore, 2020)
[10] (IPPR 2020)(Gingerbread, 2020)

The barriers faced by single parents and carers are well-documented. Despite this, seven in 10 unpaid carers (69%) in the UK reported receiving no financial or professional support, including 40% of those providing over 35 hours care per week.[11] Despite their numerical significance and heightened risks of poverty, single parents and carers have been described as largely "invisible" on employability programmes, with advisors and wider programme-design often unaware of their specific circumstances, needs and responsibilities.[12] As a result, most mainstream interventions fail to provide the intensive and tailored support that these groups need to tackle to their multiple and/or complex barriers.[13]

### Policy context

Previous studies have typically placed employability interventions on a spectrum from 'work first' to 'human capital' approaches: the former relies on negative (financial) incentives and prioritises immediate (re-)entry into employment; the latter invests in training and skills-acquisition.[14]

'Work first' approaches have dominated in the United Kingdom in recent decades, with recent intensifications in the scope and severity of job-search conditionality. These are seen as cost-effective approaches, but are also associated with financial destitution, heightened stress and anxiety, and poor-quality, often unsustainable, employment outcomes.[15] Previous research has also found that they can exacerbate rather than alleviate tensions with caring responsibilities.[16] In general terms, this approach is seen to poorly serve those facing multiple (or) complex barriers to employment.

'Human capital' approaches are associated with improved and more sustainable outcomes and greater progression prospects, especially in 'loose' labour markets with spare capacity.[17] However, both approaches demonstrate an individualist, competitive, rational conception of the labour market that may overlook external and structural barriers to employment.

### The Scottish Context:

Owing to staggered devolution, the Scottish employability landscape is a complex patchwork of local, regional, and national initiatives, each with different target groups, funding streams and methods.

Multi-agency Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) (often comprising the local authority, local health services, third sector organisations, and others) are run in local authority areas, and Fair Start Scotland is the Scottish Government's flagship national employability programme, for which single parents and those with certain other caring responsibilities are amongst the identified priority groups.

In 2017, employability became a fully devolved competency, meaning control moved to sit with the Scottish Parliament. This offers welcome potential to integrate and streamline local and national programmes, and to dovetail their operations with wider Scottish Government frameworks, including the Fair Work Agenda[18] to improve the quality of paid work and the Scottish Child Poverty Delivery Plan.[19]

## Barriers & Employability

An individual's employability can be seen as composed of 3 main elements, each with their own associated barriers[20]:

- **Individual Factors**: skills, qualifications, health, literacy, confidence, and motivation.
- **Personal Circumstances**: caring roles, household circumstances, finance, debt, and social capital.
- **External Factors**: jobs market, transport, benefits, childcare, services, prejudice/stigma, etc.

[11] (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 44)
[12] (Whitworth, 2013, p. 4)
[13] e.g. (Whitworth, 2013, p. 4)
[14] (Jones, 2012; Bonoli, 2012)
[15] (Hotz, et al., 2006; Dyke, et al., 2006; Card, et al., 2010; Whitworth, 2013)
[16] (Campbell, et al., 2016)
[17] (Sol & Hoogtanders, 2005; Wilson, 2018)
[18] (Fair Start Scotland n.d.)
[19] (Scottish Government 2018)
[20] (McQuaid and Lindsay, The Concept of Employability 2005)

Taking a similar logic, Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach[21] goes beyond simple problem-oriented interventions to consider the holistic improvements that are within an individual or family's reach. It starts by looking at the day-to-day experiences of people's lives and draws on individuals' assets. External government policies often focus only upon a single aspect of someone's life, such as their income or earnings. Other factors that also impact, such as family and caring responsibilities, are often not considered. Policies which recognise the benefits of a "holistic" approach would be more effective in supporting people to make positive changes in their lives.

## Methodologies

This research used a combination of desk-based and qualitative research. We conducted a series of focus groups with a diverse and representative sample of single parent carers, to hear about their experiences of employability programmes. These helped to identify the report's 'key principles' or evaluative criteria, against which we evaluated five previous employability interventions aimed at or largely serving single parents and/or carers. These were identified in consultation with an advisory group of experts in employability and parents and carers on the grounds of their effectiveness and/or innovation.

These five case studies each demonstrated innovative and effective elements of employability support for single parents and carers from which we might draw examples of good practice. Each case study drew on the relevant programme's evaluative outputs, complemented with qualitative research with expert academics with direct experience of these programmes. Effective practices common across these case studies were identified, highlighted, and used to outline a framework of the key ingredients for a successful employability programme for single parents and carers.

The interventions examined included:

- Working for Families (2004-06).
- Marks & Start (2004-18).
- Making It Work (2013-17).
- Carers in Employment (2015-17).
- Health 4 Work (2016-19).

## Findings

Our findings relate to both best practice at 'street-level' (i.e. at the level of service-delivery) as well as offering recommendations for the overarching design and/or content of employability programmes. A number of different approaches can be taken to boosting the employability of single parents and carers. Aspects of common effective practice and/or particular innovation include locally rooted partnership-based approaches; offering personal development and flexible skills acquisition through 'asset-based' and 'demand-led' training; tailored and holistic support; and strong employer-facing activities within the local labour market. These are explored in more detail below.

### Effective Partnerships

Partnerships including the public, private and third sectors are central to providing the high-quality, personalised, wraparound support that single parents and carers need. Common aims, coupled with consensus-building on methods, is a highly effective way of designing services. This breadth of perspectives is better able to map existing provision, identify gaps and deliver a range of services. Specialist third sector organisations run expressly for single parents and carers bring particular expertise, as well as strong reputations and familiarity with local service-users.

### Engagement & Outreach

Proactive engagement should widen access routes to services: co-location with partner agencies (e.g. health centres) and/or in community-level venues (e.g. nurseries and community hubs) allows for informal outreach to share information and raise awareness. Many parents and carers who have focused

[21] (Oxfam Wales 2013)

on their caring responsibilities will lack the confidence to immediately attend a formal meeting. An exclusive reliance on Jobcentre Plus for referrals will likely miss those facing the greatest disadvantage.

### Personal Development & Flexible Training

Personal and work-focused development are both key ingredients: low confidence and low skills/qualifications are common barriers faced by single parents and carers. Programmes should offer emotional and personal support (through both keyworkers and peer support) to tackle low confidence and isolation, followed by real investment in skills-acquisition. This training should be designed and packaged in response to individuals' aspirations and local labour market opportunities and delivered flexibly (including part-time for those already in paid work). Work placements and voluntary work can be hugely effective, especially for those furthest from the labour market, with positive effects for not only skills and experience, but also confidence and metal health.

### Personalisation

'Personalisation' is often cited in mainstream employability programmes, but rarely explained. Here we break down this generic term into its practical enablers:

#### *Tailored support*

Single parents and carers face complex circumstances that require a unique combination of services and supports, of which employability support may be just one. Keyworkers must have a comprehensive knowledge of both participants' circumstances and of local service-provision to tackle their specific barriers and to refer them to partners/services accordingly.

#### *Empathetic & Expert Staffing*

Empathetic staff must have the appropriate skills and experiences to understand and draw out participants' specific barriers, and to support vulnerable individuals. Time must be taken to get to know participants fully before devising a personalised plan. Staff drawn from the voluntary sector, childcare, social care, and counselling may be particularly suitable.

#### *Flexibility*

Participants should have control over the pace and end-goal of their participation. For those without recent work experience or with particularly complex circumstances, immediate entry into work may be neither feasible nor desirable. Single parents' and carers' employability journeys are rarely simple or linear; programmes should take account of this, and arbitrary timelines should be avoided.

#### *Distance & End-Goals*

Employability programmes should work for individuals at all distances from the labour market, with reasonable expectations of them at all stages. They should also respect and encourage all end-goals, including those of individuals who are not currently in a position to enter employment, but would like to move closer to the labour market. Programmes must not lose sight of the fact that full-time employment may not be optimal, feasible or desirable for all.

#### *User-Centred Services & Co-Production*

'User-centred' services – including practices such as co-location and warm handovers – tailor programme-delivery to parents' and carers' needs, commitments and schedules, and help to secure buy-in given the respect that they show participants.

Real opportunities for active co-production with participants makes for more effective, innovative, and tailored services. This in turn requires opportunities for voice, receptive keyworkers, and responsive flexible funding streams.

### Holistic Support

Wraparound support should address all the constituent parts of parents' and carers' employability, surpassing purely individual factors (e.g. confidence, motivation, skills) to include personal circumstance factors such as the accessibility and affordability of childcare and the households' financial situation.

Broad partnerships allow for a range of services to be delivered at a high standard, each by a specialist in that field. This can include one to one support, group support, arranging and paying for childcare; financial and welfare rights advice; and support with transport and mobility. However, the exact range of

services should be tailored to local and individual needs, and more specialist services should not be side-lined. In addition to being holistic, services must be joined-up to ensure effective and accurate referrals.

Childcare and transport are often 'gateway' supports that enable participants to engage more fully with services.

### Longitudinal Perspective

Programmes should take a long-term view that sees the benefit in 'distance travelled' indicators. For those facing the greatest disadvantage, incremental steps towards employment are important, and evaluation should not focus solely on employment outcomes.

### Employer Engagement

Employer-facing activities can help to maximise the impact of programmes. Brokerage, 'job-crafting' and job-shares can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to parents and carers' wider responsibilities and arrangements, to make outcomes more sustainable.

In parallel, longer-term engagement can spur changes in organisational attitudes and practices, raise awareness of single parents' and carers' needs, and challenge prejudices.

Programmes should also build a portfolio of local placement opportunities . This is often an afterthought, but early engagement is central to effective incorporation into programme-design and to building momentum and interest.

Employer-facing activities benefit from an employer-friendly language (e.g. reduced turnover, improved morale, and productivity) and staff with relevant business experience.

### In-Work Support

Single parents' and carers' complex needs do not dissipate on entering employment; if anything, they may become more pronounced. This necessitates ongoing support to sustain employment and to progress within work. Furthermore, the proliferation of in-work poverty in recent decades has foregrounded the need for support with in-work progression. The rhetoric of work as a 'stepping stone' to better jobs is empirically dubious, especially in light of the recent proliferation of precarious work, often resulting in a 'low-pay, no pay' cycle. Concerted effort is needed to support in-work progression and secure a decent and stable income.[22]

In-work support should couple regular sessions to plan ahead with *ad hoc* support in case of emergency. In-work support should, like pre-employment support, be conceived of as a package covering personal finance, access to education, provision and affordability of childcare and more, recognising that these all contribute to a sustainable livelihood. This support should be delivered flexibly, including outside of standard work-hours, and through a variety of channels (e.g. via social media, phone, or text).

### Funding & Governance

These practices on the ground also require complementary funding and governance models, and they should be clearly incorporated into programmes' evaluative frameworks. Competitive and efficiency-oriented funding models exhibit a bias towards 'work first' approaches and can constrain efforts to establish more intensive interventions. The marketisation of employability has demonstrably led to increasingly homogenous services, while competitive tendering processes can set a tone and establish structures that might fundamentally compromise efforts to build tailored, wraparound services. Payment by results transfers financial risk to providers, limiting up-front investment in intensive interventions, and excluding small specialist partners.

In contrast, co-managed and co-governed partnerships, based on shared aims, consensus-building and mutual respect benefit from pooled expertise and resources and generate better collaboration. Co-produced and responsive services require flexible funding streams and are stymied by rigid legal-contractual arrangements. Furthermore, long-term funding guarantees offer providers – especially those in the third sector – the security to invest in effective interventions.

[22] (D'Arcy & Hurrell, 2014)

### Demand-Side Action

In the absence of good jobs, the effectiveness of any employability programme is fundamentally compromised. While the specific details are beyond the parameters of this report, it would be remiss to not note the need for complementary demand-side interventions, especially amid current and predicted turbulence.

## Key Recommendations for Scotland

The devolution of employability powers has seen a more dignified and personalised approach emerge in Scotland, with the welcome eradication of conditionality and improved flexibilities, among others. However, on the basis of our findings on best practice and our framework of key 'ingredients', we have identified certain gaps and areas for improvement in the Scottish offer. The Scottish Government should:

**1. Embed our key principles within Scottish employability:**

The five key principles and priorities for employability programmes, developed from our research and with the direct input of service-users, should be used to guide Scottish Government employability programmes. These are:

- **Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach**: No parent or carer should be forced to choose between destitution and the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person. Programmes should use proactive and positive incentives rather than damaging disciplinarian approaches.
- **Empowerment**: Asset-based approaches should work with the individual's skills and aspirations through intensive investment in personal and professional support and development to ensure that parents and carers can thrive, not just survive.
- **Personalisation**: Employability programmes should tailor their content and services to the unique combination of barriers unique to each individual. Furthermore, nobody can recognise, report, or resolve these barriers better than service-users themselves.
- **Holistic Support**: Programmes should address every facet of an individual's employability, including structural and external barriers. An individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link.
- **Good jobs, not any job**; A job should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to a flourishing and sustainable livelihood. Any employment outcome should promise dignity, progression, and an adequate wage.

**2. Enrich and improve measures of success:**

- **Single parents' and carers' outcomes must be transparent and fully disaggregated.**
  Outcomes and results must be transparently disaggregated for programmes, practitioners, and stakeholders to assess the programme's adequacy for single parents, carers, and women beyond a headline level, and to ensure that programmes embody the principle of continuous improvement. Single parents and carers are not homogenous and should not be treated as such in evaluative outputs.
- **Employment outcomes should be assessed on their quality, pay and progression prospects.**
  Employability programmes should put good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations as part of efforts to ensure people secure a sustainable livelihood. Employability interventions must be scrutinised not only on whether they achieve employment, but also on the quality and sustainability of these employment outcomes.
- **Fair Start Scotland should adopt a more longitudinal perspective and embrace 'distance travelled' indicators.**
  Rewarded outcomes and evaluative outputs remain myopically focused on employment outcomes. It remains unclear what incentives there are for providers to support those furthest from the labour market to move closer to employment.

**3. Simplify and integrate the Scottish employability landscape:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should be better integrated with local provision.**
  The staggered devolution of employability powers has left a complex patchwork of local and national initiatives that are off-putting and difficult to navigate, align poorly with one another or, at times, explicitly compete against each other. Nested partnerships and integrated funding streams would make sure that programmes work in the interests of their participants rather than those delivering them.

**4. Strengthen partnership-working within Fair Start Scotland:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should strengthen and widen its practices around partnership-formation and partnership-working.**
  Partnerships of experts – in their fields and in their communities – are central to delivering the holistic, specialist, intensive support needed by single parents and carers. Consortia of relevant partners can better deliver high-quality wraparound support than a supply-chain model. Dedicated single parent and carer specialist organisations bring indispensable expertise, credibility, and trust to programmes, but are often excluded by large-scale tendering processes.
- **To this end, tendering processes should prioritise and incentivise partnership-working and high-quality services, rather than efficiencies.**
  Competitive tendering can foster adversarial rather than collaborative relationships between providers, with participants suffering as a result. Instead, we would like to see a funding and governance model that incentivises collaboration and constructive deliberation in lieu of a 'supply chain' mentality. Clearly articulated aims, expectations, and end-goals from funders, with discretion and deliberation from partners on design and implementation appears a winning combination.

**5. Boost awareness and engagement of employability programmes:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should work proactively at community-level to build awareness, trust and participation.**
  Awareness of mainstream employability programmes remains low among eligible individuals. FSS should surpass statutory bodies and mechanisms for recruitment and accept that specialist third sector organisations and community-level venues have a vital role to play in this, as trusted and reputable sources of information, but require active inclusion and real incentives to do so.

**6. Invest in participants' assets and skills through intensive interventions and concerted upskilling:**

- **Funding models should be reformed to ensure adequate investment in participants. Payment by results should be avoided.**
  Previous scholarship has found efficiency-oriented tendering and payment by results to be associated with increasingly homogenous services and under-investment in those facing significant or multiple barriers. Flexible, generous and up-front funding streams, co-managed by partners, and deliberative programme-design are central to providing the tailored, responsive and intensive interventions necessary.
- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue a fully-fledged 'human capital' approach to employability.**
  The UK's historic under-investment in skills-provision is a direct cause of the current preponderance of low-skilled, low-paid work, and the 'low pay, no pay' cycle that characterises many individuals' employment trajectories. Human capital approaches that invest in upskilling and training demonstrate higher success, especially for those facing multiple barriers to employment and during economic downturns. They are also associated with more sustainable outcomes, higher employment conditions and better progression-prospects. The use of training,

work experience and voluntary work should be expanded, and opportunities to pursue higher and further education should be backed up with effective financial support.

**7. Co-produce and tailor employability support with participants:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should offer real opportunities for co-production.**
  FSS has demonstrated a sincere commitment to the principles of co-production, though opportunities for effective voice are limited. Single parents and carers know better than anyone else their own barriers and needs. By granting participants ownership over their journey, FSS can secure not only greater commitment but also more effective outcomes. Co-production should be core to the design and delivery of employability programmes, with participants actively involved in shaping the support they receive, not merely offered a 'menu' of options. In addition to an appropriate organisational culture, the practical realisation of co-production rests on organisational factors, including partnership-working and the availability of flexible funding needed to provide such responsiveness.
- **Fair Start Scotland should build on the flexibilities granted to participants.**
  Exercising control over the pace, timing and end-goal of their participation is essential for single parents and carers to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. Arbitrary timelines are incompatible with this, especially amid ongoing uncertainty and turbulence of home-schooling, lockdown and labour market disruption.

**8. Provide holistic support to help a deliver a sustainable livelihood:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should employ a sustainable livelihoods approach to ensure that all facets of an individual's employability are being resolved**
  Following the success of Oxfam's 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' with DWP staff in Wales,[23] we believe that Fair Start Scotland should institutionalise this holistic approach to personalised support. This model relies on relationship-building and a comprehensive understanding of participants' circumstances to ensure tailored, wraparound support.
- **Scottish employability should support financial resilience through both educational and practical routes.**
  Better-off calculations as well as budgeting and welfare rights advice are highly effective interventions that help to smooth entry into employment and ensure sustainable outcomes. In addition to these established educational measures, practical financial (or, at least, 'in-kind') support should help to tackle the costs associated with entering employment. The implicit assumption that parents and carers have savings or a secondary wage to fall back on defies the reality. The Scottish Government should therefore create new payments or extend eligibility to the Job Start Payment.
- **To provide truly holistic services, childcare and transport will require much greater attention**
  These policy fields in their own right are inextricably linked to employability. In the absence of accessible, affordable care and/or transport, sustained entry into employment remains unlikely. The (paused) roll-out of funded early learning and childcare should be a stepping-stone towards greater provision, not an end-goal in itself, and the Scottish Government should build on its promising out of school care consultation.

**9. Embed employability interventions and practices within local labour markets:**

- **Employer-facing activities should occupy a central role within Fair Start Scotland.**
  Job-crafting and brokerage, with ongoing revision, can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to suit caring responsibilities. Effective employer-facing activities require a specific suite of skills, tools and arguments that we herein delineate.

[23] (Scullion, et al. 2017)

- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue 'Demand-led' training in consultation with participants and local employers to maximise additionality.**
  Training opportunities should be offered in response to individuals' aspirations and local labour market gaps and opportunities. This requires early and ongoing partnerships with local employers. At present, such opportunities appear to often be an afterthought or under-utilised.
- **The Scottish employability landscape would benefit from a 'middle ground' that better maps onto local labour markets.**
  Scholarship has previously noted that arbitrary administrative boundaries map poorly onto local labour markets. At the other end of the scale, FSS' regions appear unwieldy, especially for those who lack mobility or transport. A nested system that integrates national, regional and local initiatives would enjoy greater additionality.

**10. Continue to instil the principles of fairness in the Scottish labour market:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should maintain and expand its selective approach to job-search activities.**
  'Work first' approaches to employability may have fed the proliferation of low-paid work. Under the Scottish offer, service-users used should be encouraged to apply selectively to vacancies that satisfy their financial, personal and familial requirements. This will likely be compromised as long as payment by results remains in place.
- **A revitalised approach to employability should be complemented with activities and incentives that encourage employers to improve their own standards.**
  Long-term ideational activities through the Fair Work Agenda, as well as more immediate financial mechanisms of procurement, conditional business support and financial incentives, are promising tools in the Scottish Government's arsenal by which to instil fair employment practices in workplaces across Scotland. Female-dominated sectors such as hospitality and retail, and publicly funded sectors like childcare and social care are prime candidates for such efforts.

**11. Remember that employability is just one side of the coin:**

- **Effective and high-quality employability programmes are an essential complement to, not a substitute for, bold and ambitious demand-side interventions.**
  As supply-side interventions, the success of employability programmes inevitably hinges on the availability of real, good-quality employment opportunities, in the absence of such jobs, supply-side interventions risk undermining wages and employment conditions. The Scottish Government should use its procurement processes and conditional business support to drive up employment standards, in addition to more direct job-creation and industrial strategies. These must not neglect women-dominated sectors.

# Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and Carers in Scotland

Full Report

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## Purpose of the Research

Even prior to the pandemic, it was evident that decisive action was needed in the field of employability. Single parents and those with caring responsibilities face particular challenges to entering and maintaining employment, due to their competing caring and work responsibilities, and the inadequate support they receive to balance these. Their above-average poverty rates are a direct result of this, inflicting damage on not only their own material and psychological wellbeing, but that of their children and cared-for individuals, as well as their long-term life-chances.[24] There is, however, a general shortage of employability programmes specifically aimed at and designed for these groups, and existing programmes routinely fail to take account of their specific needs.

After its original commissioning, this report took on an even more pronounced relevance and significance: COVID-19 has thrown the British labour market into turmoil, with single parents and carers especially hard hit by the pandemic. With schools and other services shut, caring responsibilities have been intensified. Analysis from the Institute for Public Policy Research (Scotland) has highlighted that even before the pandemic, single parent households faced higher financial vulnerability and were more likely to report struggling financially and being behind on bills.[25] As One Parent Families Scotland has shown, this has only intensified under lockdown: single parents and their families have faced increases in food and fuel poverty, as well as mental health issues related to isolation and stress.[26]

81% of unpaid carers report spending more under lockdown, with 38% worried about their financial situation.[27] This comes despite unpaid carers performing £135 billion worth of vital unpaid care in the first 8 months of the pandemic. 81% of unpaid carers report taking on more care work during lockdown, with 63% worried about how they will manage this in the longer-term.[28] On top of this, they face considerable stress and anxiety over who would care for their cared-for person if they should catch Coronavirus.[29]

The Centre for Mental Health has suggested that the pandemic is the largest threat to mental health since the Second World War, and its impacts will be felt for years to come.[30] It appears highly likely that single parents and carers will be especially exposed to anxiety and stress, both personal and financial.

Gingerbread analysis has shown that single parents are more likely to have been furloughed and lost work-hours or jobs.[31] We can expect this to continue, especially given single parents' and carers' overrepresentation in sectors such as retail and hospitality[32]: a fifth (660,000) of hospitality jobs were lost in 2020, with further losses expected;[33] long-term declines in retail jobs[34] have accelerated, and the Centre for Retail Research expects at least 200,000 jobs in the sector to be lost in the coming year.[35] Women more generally are more likely to have lost their jobs,[36] and have experienced a sharper drop in earnings under lockdown (26%) than men (18%).[37] BAME workers were a staggering 26 times more likely to lose their job than white workers,[38] and the areas most likely to see a rise in unemployment are those

[24] (DWP Stat-Xplore, 2020) (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[25] (IPPR 2020)
[26] (OPFS 2020)
[27] (SCIE 2021)
[28] (Carers UK 2020)
[29] (SCIE 2021)
[30] (Centre for Mental Health 2020)
[31] (Gingerbread, 2020)
[32] (Scottish Government, 2020)
[33] (News 2020)
[34] (Edinburgh Evening News 2020)
[35] (CRR 2020)
[36] (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020)
[37] (Turn2Us, 2020)
[38] (The Gurdian 2021)

that already demonstrated higher levels of economic strain.[39] Thus the pandemic appears to be replicating and entrenching multiple gendered, racial and class-based disadvantages.

For single parents and carers unfortunate enough to lose their jobs, it appears likely that they will also face further barriers to returning to paid employment owing to their caring responsibilities; parents and carers may, for instance, struggle to negotiate the same hours and flexibilities that they previously had. Furthermore, employability programmes are likely to see their numbers balloon, and 'demand management' risks parking those facing greater disadvantage – including single parents and carers – in favour of 'easier' cases. The pandemic and its fall-out will thus have hit single parents and carers disproportionately in the past, present and future.

The pandemic therefore presents an opportunity and an urgent need to use devolved employability powers. 2017 saw the devolution of employability powers to the Scottish Government, and in 2018 the Scottish Government launched its flagship employability programme, Fair Start Scotland. This voluntary programme laudably broke with the UK's prevailing trajectory towards ever-greater conditionality which, as we will show in this report, not only deals huge and lasting damage – both financial and psychological – to participants and their families, but also leads to unsuitable and unsustainable employment outcomes under coercive threat of destitution. The eradication of conditionality in the Scottish system is therefore hugely welcome. Other particularly positive achievements include increased flexibility and evidence of an increasingly 'holistic' approach. It has also demonstrated a sincere commitment to a number of positive principles, such as co-production, asset-based approaches and partnership-working, though with less clarity on their practical application or requirements.

However, after these early signs of positive progress, we worry that the Scottish employability landscape may be beginning to lose momentum. This more human face of employability is undoubtedly welcome but remains insufficient on its own. For valid reasons of expediency and feasibility, the transfer of powers saw a relatively wholesale 'copy and paste' of service-design and delivery, where change has been primarily, though not exclusively, procedural rather than foundational.

The Scottish offer continues to operate according to orthodox logics of efficiencies, outsourcing and contractualism. As long as this persists, it is unlikely that Fair Start Scotland will achieve radically different outcomes from what came before it, especially for those with more complex circumstances or facing multiple barriers to employment. As this report will show, more innovative delivery-mechanisms through highly localised, deliberative partnerships are a much more effective way of delivering user-centred services, especially for those facing multiple barriers to employment. In lieu of efficiencies, employability should centre on investment in service-users' assets, interests and aspirations, through high-quality training, personalised and user-directed services and wraparound support to achieve lasting and positive outcomes with decent pay, conditions and progression prospects.

Employability has clear links and interactions with a number of Scottish Government agendas, priorities and policies: it is evident that there is no route to eliminating child poverty that does not include tackling single parents' and carers' employment-related barriers; the Fair Work agenda should be fully integrated into employability support through concerted and rigorous employer-facing activities; and the rollout of funded early learning and childcare will play a vital role in tackling the childcare-related barriers faced by parents and carers, though concerns persist over its adequacy and that of out-of-school care. It is not always clear, however, how or whether policymakers have joined-up these various policy fields and agendas.

In light of the forthcoming Scottish Parliament elections, we hope to stimulate reflection and debate on this complex policy field, to explore new and innovative approaches to design and delivery, and to encourage policymakers to draw a more holistic view of employability and its complex interactions across

[39] (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2020)

policy-boundaries. With renewed debate, we believe there is a promising opportunity to build on Fair Start Scotland's strengths, to achieve a distinctive, effective and fair Scottish approach to employability.

This report is timely, not only in relation to parliamentary cycles, but also with regards to current labour market upheaval as well as a renewed political and academic interest in 'work', its meaning and its purposes. In recent years, we have seen a growing focus on the *quality* of work, including from the Scottish Government itself. The proliferation of precarious work and 'new social risks' has prompted greater reflection and engagement from academics, think tanks and charities, including Oxfam Scotland's own research and analysis on the undervaluation of unpaid care work, and their 'sustainable livelihoods approach' to employability support that aims to provide sustainable and rewarding employment. This intersectional, gendered lens has informed much of our research given the consistent undervaluation of unpaid care and women's work more generally. It is hoped that this report will sit alongside this wider body of rich literature and research to identify best practice within the fields of employment and employability.

This report was devised and commissioned as an enquiry into 'what works' in employability for those with caring responsibilities. However, in so doing we have also identified gaps in the current Scottish provision of employability support and have advanced recommendations accordingly. It should also be noted that while this report is framed and phrased with particular regard to single parents and carers, the recommendations we make would have huge benefits for service-users more broadly, especially those facing multiple barriers to employment.

# Introduction

The Scottish Government defines 'employability' as "the combination of factors and processes which enable people to progress towards employment, to stay in employment and to move on in the workplace."[40] The policy context in Scotland is characterised by the recent devolution of all employability powers to the Scottish Parliament, and a complex patchwork of new and established, national and local service provision, through a mix of UK, Scottish, EU and Local Authority funding. The public, private and third sectors act independently and jointly to deliver programmes aimed at preparing, assisting and supporting people into and within paid employment.

## Background

Before designing or evaluating any employability intervention for single parents and carers, it is essential to understand the specific barriers they face and the routes their employment takes. This section will explore these considerations, as well as the policy context and the main gaps and weaknesses in recent mainstream provision.

## Single parents' and carers' employment, employability, and poverty

### Unpaid Carers

Prior to the pandemic, 729,000 adults in Scotland provided care to someone due to a mental or physical illness, old age, or a physical or learning disability,[41] equivalent to one in six Scottish adults. An estimated three in five individuals are likely to become a carer at some point in their lives; [42] 40% care for a parent (in-law), 26% for a spouse or partner, 8% for disabled children and 5% for adult children.[43] These figures have only grown during the pandemic, with an estimated 1.1 million people in Scotland providing unpaid care.[44]

Main caring duties include:[45]

- cooking, cleaning and shopping for the cared-for (82%);
- looking after them generally (76%);
- keeping them company (68%);
- personal and physical care (38%);
- financial support (49%).

There are 3 million unpaid carers in the UK, and 270,000 in Scotland who balance their caring responsibilities with paid employment. This is equivalent to one eighth of the Scottish workforce. These numbers are forecast to rise given underlying demographic changes.[46]

Difficulties reconciling their caring responsibilities, travel and employment lead many to reduce their hours or withdraw entirely from the labour market, leading to higher rates of poverty – a fact acknowledged by the Scottish Government.[47] Caring work, including unpaid household and caring work, is an essential social good that helps human capabilities thrive and contributes to a prosperous society and economy: it has been estimated that if this work were paid the rates of pay in equivalent sectors, its monetary value would be equivalent to around £36 billion in Scotland, and £451 billion for the UK as a

[40] (Employability In Scotland, 2020)
[41] (Carers Scotland, 2020)
[42] (Carers UK, 2019)
[43] (Carers UK, 2019)
[44] (Carers Scotland 2020)
[45] (Carers UK, 2019)
[46] (Scottish Government, 2019)
[47] (Scottish Government, 2020)

whole.[48] In practice, however, it remains largely unremunerated and consistently economically unrecognised. Critically, the provision of unpaid care often precludes carers from undertaking paid work, sapping both their own earnings potential and economic activity.

While poverty rates among carers vary according to various factors, in 2014/15, 37% of carers providing over 20 hours of support per week were living in poverty, compared to a national average of 21%.[49] While caring work can be extremely rewarding and fulfilling, the Scottish Government has acknowledged that it is correlated with a higher exposure to poverty.[50]

Nevertheless, concrete, decisive steps to tackle this are currently lacking, and carers continue to face difficulties reconciling care with paid work. This has negative implications not only for individual carers and members of their household but also for: the economy through lost output; society at large, particularly as our population continues to age; and for employers as productivity in the workplace is sapped by inadequate support for working carers.[51]

Carers face an employment gap of 10 percentage points, with 64% of working-age carers in employment compared to 74% across the working-age population as a whole.[52] This falls further to only 40% among working-age carers providing over 35 hours of care per week. This corresponds to above-average incidence of poverty: relative to poverty rates of 20% among non-carers, those caring for less than 20 hours a week have poverty rates of 21%, but this soars to 37% for those performing more than 20 hours of care per week. This varies further still according to other criteria. Working-age carers face poverty rates of 25%, higher than working-age non-carers at 21%.[53]

### Single parents

Single parents face their own particular needs and exceptional challenges in the labour market. Single-earner families have, by their nature, reduced earning potential compared to couple-households. On top of this, they are solely charged with all childcare arrangements, logistical needs (such as pick-ups and drop-offs) and are answerable (often at very short notice) in the case of illness, school closures and holidays, among others. This – and other barriers outlined below – make paid employment extremely hard to maintain. Single parents arguably face the most complex 'jigsaw' of arrangements and requirements in the labour market.

Single parents' employment rates have risen steadily over recent decades, from 43.8% in 1996 to almost 69% in late 2019. Nevertheless, they continue to lag behind the equivalent figures for cohabiting mothers and fathers: 77.6% and 93.8% respectively.[54] Single parents' employment has positive implications for financial health, as well as children's psychological and physiological health, and their emotional development.[55]

Despite positive steps in single parents' employment rates, they and their children are still at much higher risk of poverty than the national average: in the United Kingdom, 43% of single parent households live in poverty, relative to a national average of 29.8% with attendant negative implications for parents and children alike.[56] In Scotland, at 18% – a rate which is double the Scottish average – single parent households are among the two most likely groups to report struggling financially.[57] In late 2019, 3.4% of children nationally were living in households where no one was in paid work, compared to 32.1% of

[48] (Oxfam Scotland, 2020)
[49] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[50] (Scottish Government, 2019)
[51] (Simplyhealth, 2018)
[52] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[53] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[54] (ONS, 2020a)
[55] (Taulbut, et al., 2016a; Taulbut, et al., 2016b; Fiori, 2020)
[56] (DWP Stat-Xplore, 2020)
[57] (Scottish Government, 2019)

children in single parent households; and single parent households account for over two-thirds of all children living in households where no-one is in paid work.[58]

Single parents head almost a quarter of all households with children in both the UK (22.7%) and Scotland (22.6%).[59] It therefore appears evident that there is no route to tackling child poverty, as per Scotland's legal targets, that does not address the structural barriers faced by single parents in the labour market.[60]

### Gender and the Labour Market

A gendered lens is highly important and useful in this line of enquiry. 58% of unpaid carers and a staggering 91% of single parents are women.[61] Caring and household work are routinely under-valued and unrewarded owing to sexist perceptions of them as less valuable forms of work, despite their centrality to a healthy society. Furthermore, aside from the challenge of reconciling paid work with caring responsibilities, and any other number of barriers, carers and single parents suffer further disadvantage in the form of gendered discrimination.

Engender have argued that owing to their gender, women have vastly different personal, educational and professional experiences and circumstances that affect their employability and that these gendered considerations should be taken into account in employability programmes' design. They point to educational and occupational segregation along gendered lines, caring responsibilities, and ongoing sexual harassment and other safety concerns in the workplace as drivers of gendered inequalities. Despite this, they find disappointingly little refence to women or disaggregation within the Scottish Government's employability outputs.[62]

Even when successful in attaining employment, the hours single parents and carers can work are constrained by their caring responsibilities, and they continue to suffer from the gender pay gap which in 2019 stood at 17.3%.[63] 64% of Scottish workers paid below the living wage are women; when this applies to a sole-earner household, escaping poverty becomes almost impossible.[64] Furthermore, a shortage of flexible jobs that would allow single parents and carers to balance paid work with caring responsibilities means that women are also more likely to suffer from underemployment: women represent 78% of the part-time workforce in Scotland, and 40% of all low-paid workers are women working part-time.[65] Single parents and carers are over-represented in certain sectors associated with female employment – namely, retail, hospitality and elementary sectors – where wages tend to be low, and progression prospects are limited.[66]

### Barriers to entering and sustaining paid work

There is a strong degree of consistency across the literature in terms of the barriers to entering and sustaining employment faced by single parents and carers: despite consistent evidence of strong motivation, a combination of personal factors – low confidence, a lack of skills and qualifications, limited work experience – and external factors – a lack of affordable and/or accessible childcare or social care, a shortage of flexible jobs, stigmatisation and stereotyping – act as barriers to employment and progression.

[58] (ONS, 2020b)
[59] (Gingerbread, 2019; Scottish Government, 2019)
[60] (Government, Poverty and Social Justice 2019)
[61] (Carers UK, 2017)
[62] (Engender, 2016)
[63] (ONS, 2019)
[64] (Engender, 2020)
[65] (Engender, 2020)
[66] (Carers UK, 2017)

The barriers faced by single parents and carers have been widely documented and are subject to considerable academic attention[67], but they arguably receive less consideration from policymakers. Seven in 10 unpaid carers (69%) in the UK reported receiving no financial or professional support, including 40% of those providing over 35 hours care per week.[68] Despite their numerical significance and heightened risk of poverty, few employability interventions in the UK – and fewer-still mainstream, government-run ones – explicitly target these groups. Programmes that include single parents or carers merely by dint of facing multiple barriers, rather than targeting them specifically on the grounds of their particular familial status, risk neglecting the specific needs of this group in the early stages of programme design. It has been suggested, for instance, that single parents are largely "invisible" on employability programmes, with advisors and wider programme-design often ignorant of their specific circumstances, needs and responsibilities, with the resultant lack of personalisation leading to job outcomes below the average.[69] In many instances, programme outputs do not even disaggregate outcomes for single parents or carers,[70] obscuring their adequacy for these groups and inhibiting programme-learning. In addition to deficiencies in programme-content, it is also feared that in the absence of specific targeting and proactive engagement, interventions may fail to recruit individuals further from the labour market and therefore less accessible through usual channels such as Jobcentre Plus.[71]

As supply-side interventions, employability programmes will largely concern themselves with the more personal, individual factors impeding labour market integration – and will almost certainly, therefore, be insufficient in isolation – but good-quality 'holistic' interventions may help, for instance, with finding and funding childcare or brokering negotiations with employers over flexible working patterns. Despite the importance of personal factors, it remains essential to not overly 'responsibilise' single parents and carers for their own employability and financial health given the considerable structural challenges they face. [72]

### Sustaining well-paid employment

Even when single parents and carers are successful in finding paid employment, they continue to face specific challenges. There is evidence that employers do not understand the need among carers and single parents for flexibility to reconcile paid work with care (especially in the case of unforeseen emergencies of illness). 43% of working carers reported that managers and colleagues did not understand the implications of caring responsibilities; their top priorities for workplace support were greater managerial awareness (37%) and greater flexibility in leave arrangements owing to their caring responsibilities (37%).[73]

Furthermore, the time dedicated to caring can often preclude full-time work. Work is often premised as the best route out of poverty, and indeed a household's risk of poverty falls as working hours increase.[74] However, the unpaid labour and time lost to caring responsibilities reduces the earnings potential of carers and single parents. 32% of carers dedicate up to 4 hours per week to their caring responsibilities, 34% between 5-19 hours, and 17% over 50 hours per week.[75] Only a third of carers (36%) live within walking distanced of their cared-for individual; 45% live up to half an hour away, and over a quarter live over an hour away, with obvious logistical challenges for undertaking paid employment.[76] One in five carers has had to turn down or leave a job due to difficulty reconciling paid work and their caring

[67] E.g. (Garven, et al., 2016) (Whitworth, 2016)
[68] (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 44)
[69] (Whitworth, 2013, p. 4)
[70] E.g. (DWP, 2019)
[71] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b)
[72] Ruth Cain used this term to describe the rhetorical and policy-based apportioning of responsibility to the individual under Universal Credit, which fails to adequately conceive of labour market barriers beyond personal shortcomings such as low motivation (Cain, 2016).
[73] (Carer Positive, 2020)
[74] (Child Poverty Action Group, 2015)
[75] (Scottish Government, 2020)
[76] (Carers UK, 2019)

responsibilities; 44% of carers have altered or reduced their hours, and 35% have had to accept a step down at work.[77]

For single parents, similar logistical issues around school drop-offs and collections often clash with standard working hours. This may render full time work impossible, with reduced opportunities to boost earnings or escape poverty; working-age carers are less likely to be in full-time work (38% compared to a non-carer average of 51%),[78] and 55% of carers cited their reduced capacity to work as a major challenge they face.[79] For both groups an emergency or illness can cause unexpected disruption and necessitate time-off at short notice in inadequately flexible jobs.

A lack of (higher-skilled, higher-paid) part-time or flexible jobs means that single parents and carers must often, of necessity, accept lower-paid and lower-skilled jobs to suit their caring responsibilities, often below the individual's skill-set. This has generated an underemployment rate of 22% among single parents, far in excess of the 9.3% recorded across the economically active population.[80] While the scarring effects on future earnings of unemployment are very real, so too are the scarring effects of underemployment.[81]

Single parents and carers are disproportionately likely to enter the labour market in certain sectors associated with low pay:[82]

- 24% of single parents work in caring, leisure or service occupations, compared to a national average of 9%.
- 12% work in customer services, double the average of 6%.
- 9% work in elementary occupations, relative to an average of 6%.

Carers, similarly, are over-represented in caring, service and administrative roles, and under-represented in professional roles, with these disparities especially pronounced among female carers.[83] These sectors all exhibit wage growth below the national average.[84] The wage gap between single parents and secondary earners in couples increased sevenfold from £0.31 per hour in 2001/2 to £2.14 in 2018/19, and the equivalent gap with the main earner in couple households has widened from £3.59 to £5.68 per hour over the same period.[85] This slow sectoral wage growth may go some way to explaining the proliferation of in-work poverty among single parent households.

Furthermore, single parents' and carers' income packages tend to be not only low, but complex, volatile, and hard to sustain.[86] Volatility in pay packages is increasingly common across the population, but is especially frequent and pronounced among the low-paid: among those earning less than £10,000 per annum, 80% experienced at least one pay packet that fluctuated by more than 5% relative to the preceding one; 90% of these fluctuations were downwards, with an average monthly fall in income of £180 per month, equivalent to 15% of their pay.[87]

Static (un)employment figures can also mask the unstable trajectories of single parents when a more longitudinal perspective is adopted. 'Cycling' in and out of employment is common.[88] Indeed, half of single mothers in the UK were found to have had unstable employment trajectories over 15 years

[77] (Simplyhealth, 2018)
[78] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[79] (Oxfam Scotland, 2020)
[80] (Gingerbread, 2019)
[81] (Reynolds & Myers, 2012) (McTier & McGregor, 2018)
[82] (Clery, et al., 2020, p. 21)
[83] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[84] (Wilson, et al., 2013)
[85] (Gingerbread, 2019)
[86] (Millar, 2011)
[87]. Recent Universal Credit reforms aimed at establishing a more responsive system may in fact exacerbate this. Analysis from the Resolution Foundation finds that monthly assessment periods that do not align with recipients' pay schedules can heighten volatility rather than smoothing it (Resolution Foundation, 2018)
[88] (McQuaid, et al., 2010)

(though greater stability was enjoyed by those with qualifications beyond secondary education).[89] Faster exits from unemployment may reduce skills degradation,[90] but when job outcomes are unsustainable, recent empirical evidence points to the damaging effects of 'cycling' between precarious work and unemployment on career prospects: it has been suggested that underemployment limits the opportunities for skills-acquisition and a fragmented employment history may be off-putting to prospective employers.[91]

Such factors may begin to explain why despite consistent growth in single parents' employment rates, health outcomes, financial insecurity and poverty rates have remained largely static,[92] and point to the pertinence of qualitative, rather than purely quantitative, metrics in measuring employment outcomes. With the above in mind, employability interventions must be scrutinised not only on whether they achieve employment, but also on the quality and sustainability of these employment outcomes. This is in keeping with a gradual but consistent trend in labour market literature towards a greater focus on the quality of jobs rather than just their number.[93] Sustainability, as per the National Audit Office definition, refers not only to the ability to maintain employment, but also to opportunities for wage growth and professional progression.[94] In reality, 41% of single parents find themselves stuck in low pay, and are 19% more likely to cycle in and out of low paid employment.[95] Despite this, according to research by Gingerbread and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, few employability initiatives to aid single parents' in-work progression have been implemented, and among the few examples, there is limited evidence of sustained success.[96]

As a final note, single parents are far from a homogenous group, and neglecting their diversity of outcomes risks not only entrenching damaging stereotypes, but also misdiagnosing their barriers to employment. Moreover, a fuller understanding of their trajectories might help identify the relevant factors and enablers of their success in the labour market. There are certain factors that affect employment rates, which may in turn help identify promising avenues.

Firstly, the feasibility of single parent's employment changes at certain junctures in their children's lives; most notably when they start primary or secondary school. This trend is in keeping with general maternal employment, but especially pronounced in single parents. Among single parents with a youngest child aged 3-4, only 3 in 10 are in employment, rising to 7 in 10 when the youngest child is aged 16-18.[97] This appears to highlight the relevance of school and/or childcare in facilitating employment/This points to the tensions between employment and caring responsibilities, and suggests more could be done to alleviate the pressures on single parents.

Secondly, the age at which single parents had their first child correlates strongly with their employment rates. While this factor is immutable and no policy can change this, it is likely related to a third (lurking) variable; namely, their educational attainment. In 2014, 91% of single parents with a university degree were economically active, falling to 67% for those with GCSE-level qualifications, and further still to 39% among those with no formal qualifications. The qualifications single parents can gain appear to be largely a function of the age at which they had their first child: of those who did so aged 16-19, only 6% hold university-level qualifications and 24% no qualifications at all. For those who had their first child in their thirties, 31% hold degree-level qualifications.[98]

[89] (Stewart, 2009)
[90] (CSJ, 2017)
[91] (McCollum, 2012a; McCollum, 2012b)
[92] (Taulbut, et al., 2016b)
[93] E.g. (Pochet, 2010; Bell & Blanchflower, 2013; Piasna, 2017)
[94] (National Audit Office, 2007)
[95] (Wilson, et al., 2013)
[96] (Clery, et al., 2020, p. 12; Green, et al., 2016)
[97] (Gingerbread, 2019)
[98] (Tinsley, 2014)

## Policy Context

Employability and social security have traditionally been reserved matters for the Westminster Government, with the exception of a few complementary and discretionary initiatives implemented at the devolved and local level in Scotland. From 2017, however, some social security powers and all employability and activation powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. This offers welcome potential to link up already devolved powers, such as those relating to education, and existing local employability provision, to dovetail with the Scottish Government's wider employability and Fair Work agendas, as well as efforts to enhance support for those with caring responsibilities through, for instance, the Carer's Allowance Supplement.

### Typologies of Active Labour Market Policies

Various typologies of active labour market policy (ALMP) have been delineated, on a continuum from 'human resources' – based on upskilling and human-capital investment – to 'work first' initiatives which prioritise cost-efficient job-search programmes and negative incentives to secure work quickly, with the assumption of in-work advancement.[99] Both domestically and in an international context, under conditions of austerity and long-term economic changes, a transition towards the latter has been observed,[100] and international convergence has moved towards disciplinary job-search conditionality and eliminating barriers to work in lieu of training and human-capital investment.[101]

The United Kingdom is considered somewhat exemplar of the Liberal typology welfare state with an attendant 'work first' approach to employability.[102] This approach highlights the scarring effects of unemployment and prioritises the fast reintegration of the unemployed into the labour force. 'Work first' employability programmes are characterised by a heavy reliance on 'public employment services' (PES), such as Jobcentre Plus, and mandatory job-search activities to facilitate the fast allocation of workers to vacancies. The UK's low ALMP-spending and its disproportionate spending on PES[103] are taken as evidence of a 'work-first' attitude.

Instead of direct provision of training to the unemployed, the UK has, in contrast to many European countries, traditionally followed a market-oriented logic of employer-led skills development.[104] 'Work first' approaches typically paint low-paid jobs as a stepping-stone to better jobs, through in-work progression and training.[105] There is, however, mixed evidence of the effectiveness of such practices: while the UK's flexible labour market was credited with the low unemployment rates of the early 21st century,[106] Resolution Foundation analysis found that three quarters of low-paid workers failed to sustainably escape low-pay over the course of a decade.[107] There is general agreement that 'work first' approaches serve as a relatively cost-effective way of securing employment outcomes, but that they may prove less effective and/or lead to less sustainable outcomes for individuals with more complex barriers, who require more bespoke and intensive interventions.[108] They therefore face specific criticisms from single parents and their advocates on the grounds of their generic support that fails to address their complex and multiple barriers. Beyond employment outcomes, qualitative research has found that 'work first' approaches and the compulsion they entail can exacerbate tensions between work and childcare, and have harmful implications for stress and mental health, though there is evidence of improved self-worth among some participants.[109]

[99] (Jones, 2012; Bonoli, 2012)
[100] (Dwyer, 2004; Whitworth & Griggs, 2013)
[101] (Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008; Jones, 2012; Larkin, 2018)
[102] E.g. (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[103] (OECD, 2018)
[104] (Page & Hillage, 2006) (McQuaid, 2017)
[105] (Vosko, 2010; Schnabel, 2016)
[106] (Gregg & Wadsworth, 2010)
[107] (D'Arcy & Hurrell, 2014)
[108] (Hotz, et al., 2006; Dyke, et al., 2006; Card, et al., 2010; Whitworth, 2013)
[109] (Campbell, et al., 2016)

## Single Parents & Conditionality in the UK

Employability programmes, and 'work first' approaches in particular, increasingly function in tandem with social security, as the latter, traditionally classified as a 'passive' labour market policy, has been increasingly 'activated'.[110] The introduction of in-work benefits and, more latterly, Universal Credit reforms have aimed at re-gearing welfare towards work. Alongside efforts to 'make work pay', central to this development has been the intensification of conditionality across the board, but especially with regards to single parents.

Since 2001, single parents have gone from being entirely exempt from conditionality to being eligible for work-search requirements as soon as their youngest child turns 3 years old. [111] Under current Department for Work and Pensions advice, single parents in receipt of UC move into the 'all work-related requirements' at this point, and may be required to spend up to 16 hours per week looking for work and be available for up to 16 hours of work per week, or have earnings equivalent to 16 hours per week at the national minimum wage. If their child is above school age but below 13, the equivalent requirements relate to 25 hours.[112] While single parents are entitled to certain 'easements' relative to coupled-parents, there is some evidence that awareness of this is low among claimants and administrators alike, and that they are not being routinely implemented.[113] By February of 2020, over 850,000 UK single parents had migrated to Universal Credit,[114] with the expectation that 90% will have done so by 2024.[115]

Policymakers have argued that this increased compulsion has been balanced fairly with the promise of greater and more personalised interventions for single parents. Some, however, have disputed the veracity of these claims. [116] Indeed, we find little evidence of more bespoke support from the UK Government. The Scottish picture is more mixed, with some promising but inconsistent improvements.

## Recent UK Interventions and Approaches

This section will briefly review recent mainstream interventions in the United Kingdom, the frameworks underpinning them, and their adequacy for single parents and carers. These will serve as benchmarks for situating this research in a policy context and identifying areas for improvement and/or scrutiny.

### *The Work Programme (2011-17)*

Prior to devolution, UK-wide employability programmes were implemented by the UK Government, the most prominent recent example being the Work Programme between 2011-17. The Programme was delivered in 18 Contract Package Areas, each with 2 or 3 Prime Contractors, who in turn commissioned services from subcontractors. Its novel, hands-off 'black box' funding was a response to some of the perceived failings of previous interventions that were deemed inflexible, by granting full autonomy and flexibility over programme-content.[117] Unlike the preceding Flexible New Deal programmes of the New Labour Government, the Work Programme had no obligatory minimum service components, and contractors could stipulate their own minimum standards in their bids.[118] Its 'payment-by-results'

[110] (Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Vlandas, 2013)
[111] Traditionally exempt from conditionality, single parents of children aged over 5 in receipt of Income Support (IS) first became subject to mandatory 'Work-Focused Interviews' from 2001. This was subsequently widened to all single parent IS-claimants regardless of their youngest child's age from 2004 (Johnsen, 2014). From 2008, Single Parent Obligations saw single parents in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance and deemed 'able to work' subjected to the same job-search requirements as other claimants. Work ability was usually a function of their youngest child's age, though the threshold was lowered from 16 in 2008 to 5 by 2012 (Graham & McQuaid, 2014).
[112] (Turn2Us, 2019)
[113] (Etherington & Jeffrey, 2018)
[114] (DWP Stat-Xplore, 2020)
[115] (Clery, et al., 2020)
[116] (Kozek & Kubisa, 2016)
[117] (Jonhson, 2012)
[118] (Considine, et al., 2018) (Lane, et al., 2013)

mechanism offered small up-front 'attachment payments', gradually and incrementally lowered to zero by the fourth year of its operation. While payment-by-results had been used since the 1980s, the Work Programme intensified their usage – in line with the Freud Report's recommendations[119] – to an unprecedented extent. It was thought that this mechanism would serve the dual-purposes of incentivising providers to secure better outcomes, while also reducing financial risk to the government.[120]

The Work Programme was subject to much academic and evaluative attention. According to Sainsbury, it represented a sharp uptake in the marketization of employability services,[121] leading Fuertes and Lindsay to suggest that what began as an activation agenda had morphed into an activation *industry* given the prominence of multiple large for-profit providers.[122] Low up-front payments and payments-by-results transferred risk to (largely profit-seeking) providers,[123] with various implications for service-delivery: firstly, it has been suggested that low up-front payments failed to provide adequate resources to invest in more intensive interventions for those further from the labour market.[124] With payments indexed to results, individuals with more complex needs, including single parents and carers, became a more risky investment, leading to accusations of 'creaming' – of prospective participants closer to the labour market – and 'parking' – of those requiring more intensive support.[125] It has also been suggested that in order to drive down costs and maximise profits, service-provision became increasingly generic, largely focusing on low-cost job-search programmes.[126] It was suggested that in such regards, the Work Programme failed to learn the lessons of previous interventions regarding the specific needs of single parents[127] – namely, their need for personalised and holistic support – and qualitative research found frustration from single parents themselves at the perceived prioritisation of short-term results over suitable or sustainable job-matches.[128] There is some empirical evidence within the literature of 'creaming' and 'parking',[129] and below-average outcomes for single parents.[130]

### *The Pipeline and "Creating a Fairer Scotland"*

The Work Programme operated in Scotland until the devolution of employability programmes in 2017. Prior to this, the Scottish Government had used its powers and discretionary funds to support Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) in Local Authority Areas from 2006. While relatively small-scale, these exhibited innovative aspects including the 'Pipeline' approach and elements of co-delivery from multiple stakeholders to better serve those with more complex needs (though to a somewhat inconsistent extent across different locales).[131]

The pipeline model is the key framework underpinning Scottish employability. The pipeline was introduced to provide a conceptual framework by which to better support those further from the labour market in a structured manner. It provides a planned route towards employment through five stages, from 'referral and engagement' through to 'in-work support'. Its advantages include improved clarity around designing and delivering local services, more efficient resource-use and reduced replication, and greater consistency in standards and programme-content.

The framework is intended to help design and deliver programmes in partnerships. In some LEPs it appears to have secured the buy-in of more third-sector organisations, though to a highly inconsistent degree and still predominantly in the delivery stages rather than in earlier programme-design where the

[119] (Freud, 2007)
[120] (Finn, 2012; Lane, et al., 2013)
[121] (Sainsbury, 2017)
[122] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016, p. 527)
[123] (Lane, et al., 2013)
[124] (Rees, et al., 2014)
[125] (Considine, et al., 2018)
[126] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[127] (Whitworth, 2013)
[128] (Dewar, 2013; Skills Network, 2014)
[129] (Considine, et al., 2018)
[130] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b)
[131] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)

needs of specific groups – including single parents and carers – can be fully integrated into the programme. In this and other senses, concerns have been raised that the framework remains somewhat under-conceptualised and lacking in clarity: the intended 'co-production' of services has been rarely achieved in practice, the same services fall under different stages across locales, the 'pipeline' metaphor risks inflexibility or 'pigeon-holing' of participants at certain stages, and fragmented delivery across partners can be frustrating for participants. It has also been suggested that local pipeline approaches map poorly onto national interventions, leading to complexity, opacity and inefficient service-replication.[132]

Following 2017's devolution of further powers, the Scottish Government ran 1-year transitional programmes Work First Scotland and Work Able Scotland. During this time, the Scottish Government opened a consultation on the design of employability services, culminating in its employability framework *Creating a Fairer Scotland: A new future for employability support in Scotland*.[133] The framework's three key values of dignity and respect, fairness and equality, and continuous improvement underpinned FSS' programme-design. A further six principles for employability programmes were outlined. Employability programmes should :

- be designed nationally but adapted and delivered locally.
- be designed and delivered in partnership.
- offer a flexible, tailored, 'whole person' approach.
- be responsive to those with high needs.
- involve a drive towards real jobs.
- be funded to support job outcomes and progression towards work.

### *Fair Start Scotland (2018-Present)*

Evaluations of the above-mentioned transitional programmes and these guiding principles informed the design of Scotland's first fully devolved employability programme, Fair Start Scotland (FSS), launched in April 2018. With a budget of £96 million per year and a target of supporting 38,000 people, and delivered by a mix of public, private and third sector partners – though with funding mainly allocated to private companies – FSS offers 12-18 months of pre-work support, and 12 months of in-work support. Its main break with the UK's preceding approach and trajectory is its entirely voluntary participation. Individuals become eligible after 2 years of unemployment, but early entry is granted after 6 months to those facing multiple barriers, including single parents, individuals with certain caring responsibilities,[134] minority ethnic individuals, and people from deprived communities, among others.

In its first year, single parents had employment outcomes below the average: a fifth of all participants successfully completed 13 weeks in employment, compared to less than 14% of single parent participants. While single parents face notable barriers to work that might explain this, it merits attention nonetheless, and points to the importance of intensive interventions and high-quality support. Beyond these figures, however, there is disappointingly little reference to single parents or carers in the evaluative outputs.[135] This was remarked upon in a number of our interviews with academics and stakeholders as a cause for concern, and recurred across the literature from groups including Engender and Close the Gap (and OPFS).[136] In the absence of disaggregated metrics, we cannot be confident that the needs of single parents and carers are being adequately met, nor that the principle of 'continuous improvement' is being satisfied, given the latter's need for rigorous monitoring and ongoing evaluation.

[132] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)
[133] (Scottish Government, 2016)
[134] The Scottish Government's Every Child, Every Chance report (Scottish Government 2018) identified families with a child or adult with disabilities as a priority group
[135] (Scottish Government, 2019b)
[136] (Engender, 2016)

The Scottish Government's published principles favour a 'whole person' approach and 'services designed and delivered in partnership'.[137] These principles accord with much of the single parent literature, in which tailored support and stakeholders' expertise are seen as key enablers of success.[138] In practice, there is some evidence of relatively strong tailoring of services to users' needs, including the widespread use of keyworkers in supporting participants' journeys. 80% of participants felt they had some control over the types of support they received, and 81% felt that this support took account of their needs and circumstances. The latter sentiment was not universal however, with 16% of early leavers citing support "not relevant to their needs" as the main reason.[139]

There is also evidence that some of the positive elements are not being universally implemented or offered: regarding in-work support – of particular importance to single parents and carers – 40% were not offered an in-work keyworker, and 65% were not offered an in-work action plan. For individuals requiring more intensive interventions, the programme's outputs find evidence of low awareness of work 'tasters', experience or apprenticeships, offered to only half of participants.[140] Qualitative evaluation also found reluctance on the part of providers to invest in training, owing to FSS' funding arrangements and the financial risk of doing so, with resultant ongoing reliance on employer-led skills development. This mirrors some of the concerns levied at the Work Programme, wherein inadequate upfront funding constrained investment in upskilling, and the transfer of financial risk to providers disincentivised more intensive interventions.

It has been suggested that Fair Start Scotland (FSS) exhibits a "strong degree of continuity with the UK model's payment-by-results contractualism"[141] with attendant risks of generic services[142] and/or creaming and parking. FSS' payment and outcomes framework does not recognise voluntary work, training, education or work below 16 hours per week as rewarded outcomes despite the value these may have – either professionally or logistically – for individuals further from the labour market, including single parents and carers. Our qualitative enquiries with stakeholders and academics noted a perception that FSS has made very positive steps away from damaging compulsion, but a broad consensus maintained that it could not reasonably be described as a fully-fledged "human capital" approach.

Regarding stakeholder partnerships and collaboration, outputs find evidence of widespread collaborative practices overall,[143] though with more mixed results in specific localities.[144] Issues of ill-defined organisation roles, service-replication, and competitive rather than collaborative behaviour are cited,[145] though these are somewhat commonplace with regards to partnership-working. More broadly, however, FSS' conceptualisation of partnerships retains a somewhat 'top-down' logic that continues to filter collaboration through prime contractors and subcontractors. It has been suggested that individuals with more complex needs might be better served through processes of 'co-production' as opposed to 'co-delivery'.[146] The latter describes the shared provision of services, while the former denotes a greater deliberative and pluralist approach to early programme-formulation and design, and is associated with more extensive collaborative mechanisms of co-governance and co-management.[147] It has been previously suggested that the Scottish Government has demonstrated a strong and sincere commitment to the principle of co-production, but with sometimes ill-defined and/or ill-understood notions of its implementation.[148] This lens could prove instructive in facilitating the Scottish Government's principle of 'services designed and delivered in partnership'.

[137] (Scottish Government, 2019b, p. 67)
[138] E.g. (Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)
[139] (Scottish Government, 2019b, p. 38)
[140] (Scottish Government, 2019b, p. 34)
[141] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b, p. 38)
[142] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[143] (Scottish Government, 2019a)
[144] (Scottish Government, 2019b, pp. 31-32)
[145] Ibid.
[146] E.g. (Lindsay, et al., 2018b)
[147] (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Pestoff, 2012)
[148] (Garven, et al., 2016)

This report welcomes the aforementioned principles guiding employability programmes in Scotland but maintains some concerns over the practical application and implementation of these and their adequacy for single parents and carers. The failure to publish disaggregated metrics means that we cannot draw firm conclusions, but we might reasonably expect that a broadly similar model to what came before is unlikely to provide markedly different results – a sentiment echoed by the majority of our interviewees.

At the time of writing, FSS contracts were renewed for another 2 years owing to the pandemic. [149]

[149] (STF 2020)

## Methodology & Structure

This report represents a small-scale, qualitative comparative study into the effectiveness of employability programmes for lone parents and carers, with an especial focus on identifying 'what works' for these specific groups. We couple desk-based and primary, qualitative research to identify broad priorities and then evaluate previous interventions for the degree to which they satisfy these criteria. The interventions to be evaluated were identified and mapped in consultation with our steering group of experts in the field. Our analysis draws certain lessons of 'best practice' from these findings, and advances recommendations to inform the design of future employability interventions to ensure their adequacy for lone parents and carers. We draw inferences related to both street-level practice and higher-level organisational factors.

We began by undertaking desk-based and primary qualitative research to conduct a review of employability as a concept and of the specific barriers faced by lone parents and carers. We organised and ran focus groups with service-users to hear their experiences of and priorities for employability programmes. On the basis of this, we identified 5 key principles and priorities for employability programmes by which to assess previous interventions. Each priority entails certain questions and challenges, which are laid out in turn, and subsequently addressed and/or explored by our analysis.

Each intervention was evaluated on the basis of desk-based research of programme outputs, supplemented with primary, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders to add depth and insight. Interviews relied on purposive sampling, with attendant risks of sample bias owing to selective and/or voluntary participation. Qualitative methods are suited to this line of enquiry for various reasons: qualitative methods have an instrumental strength in identifying *mechanisms* and are therefore central to ascertaining 'best practice';[150] the degree of personalisation and flexibility afforded by each intervention is arguably best assessed by qualitative research with practitioners[151] given the wide body of 'street-level bureaucracy' literature;[152] and insights from practitioners and stakeholders can offer detail, nuance, and insights into lessons and challenges, that broad project-level outputs may overlook. These interviews shared common questions, whilst also allowing us to explore certain elements specific to each intervention in greater depth.

A summary of each intervention is presented within the body of the text, with a full description of empirical practice and learnings to be found in the appendix. We then discuss our findings and relate these to the context in addition to relevant debates and findings within previous research and the literature. We looked for commonalities across programmes as well as areas of innovation that proved effective and/or helpful in single parents' and carers' experiences of employability.

Our findings were then used to formulate certain key learnings and advance recommendations for future programme-design. Preliminary recommendations were presented to further focus groups of service-users as well as the project's advisory group of experts, and subsequently refined according to their feedback.

[150] (Gerring, 2009; Golden, 2005)
[151] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[152] (Rice, 2013)

## Employability and Barriers

Defining employability should go hand-in-hand with delineating the barriers to employment faced by single parents and carers. There is a strong degree of consistency across the literature in terms of the barriers faced by single parents, carers and, more generally, those facing exceptional barriers. Nevertheless, these barriers are routinely overlooked and marginalised by mainstream employability interventions.

In this section, we conduct a desk-review of the main findings within existing literature – both qualitative and quantitative – supplemented with insights from our focus groups, to review the main challenges faced by carers and single parents, and to identify broad priorities by which to evaluate previous interventions.

We do not intend to outline a structured, rigorous evaluative framework as the abstract nature of the guiding principles identified make it difficult to apply them empirically, and any attempt to do so risks excluding relevant information. Secondly, the breadth and variety of interventions examined means not all interventions will relate to all criteria or all stages of an individual's employability journey. Rather, we will take a more organic approach, appraising each intervention on the basis of certain values and principles. Whether and how these priorities are satisfied will then form the basis of the learnings we identify.

### Defining 'Employability'

Before exploring the specifics of how best to boost individuals' employability, we must first clarify how best to describe this concept. This report will borrow McQuaid and Lindsay's incisive framework.[153] They offer a tripartite conceptualisation, wherein an individual's employability is determined by:

1. **Individual Factors**: skills, qualifications, health, literacy, confidence, motivation, etc.
2. **Personal Circumstances**: caring roles, household circumstances, finance, social capital, etc.
3. **External Factors**: jobs, transport, benefits, services, prejudice/stigma, etc.

Any good, effective employability programme should therefore seek to tackle (in a joined-up manner) all three facets of employability. However, despite this, in practice employability is often used interchangeably with only the first category.

Regarding **individual factors**, single parents and carers are likely to have low qualifications, a lack of experience, and low confidence, among others. Work-first approaches will typically override low confidence or motivation by mandating obligatory job-search activity, while 'human capital' approaches will seek to tackle low skills or a lack of qualifications. However, while 'work first' versus 'human capital' debates have come to dominate the policy-discourse, such a narrow focus risks crowding out discussion of wider needs. As McQuaid and Lindsay's framework shows, individual factors represent only one dimension of an individual's employability: by way of example, even the most intensive training interventions for single parents will prove inadequate in the absence of suitable childcare or of good, flexible jobs. A sole focus on this first category risks individualising responsibility and is will likely fail for those with more complex needs.

'**Personal circumstance**' factors – most obviously, but not exclusively, caring responsibilities – are of especial relevance to single parents and carers. They face competing demands on their time, logistical difficulties reconciling their caring responsibilities with paid work, and must grapple with inflexible jobs and often insensitive employers in the case of an illness or emergency. One Parent Families Scotland has repeatedly highlighted that single parents cannot 'shift parent' in the same way as couple households,

[153] (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005)

whereby, for instance, one parent manages school drop-offs and the other collects the child at the end of the day. For these reasons, affordable and reliable provision of childcare and social care are essential enablers of work for single parents and carers. These, and other 'personal circumstance' barriers, might be resolved through holistic services and support, complementary to the more obvious (individual) employability interventions.

**External factors** and demand-side considerations have historically been largely side-lined, perhaps owing to the extra costs associated with remedying these. The UK's approach has been previously characterised as 'supply-side fundamentalism' with growing awareness of the constraints this imposes on successful labour market integration.[154] Most obviously, success is ultimately dependent on the availability of actual jobs.[155] It should not be ignored that in one intervention looked at, a staggering 87% of participants lived in a depressed local labour market.[156] From a 'supply-side' perspective, these factors might fall largely outside the remit of an employability intervention (and will indeed be less central to our analysis), but still demand concerted effort from government and policymakers. Nevertheless, we do find some highly innovative approaches to overcoming some of these shortcomings worthy of replication. We cannot stress enough however, that these should not prompt complacency, but rather might help bridge certain gaps and deficiencies until government resolves them.

Single parents and carers find themselves facing multiple, and multi-dimensional hurdles to their employability. It is for precisely this reason, that generic job-search activities are largely inadequate for these groups. Human capital approaches demonstrate considerable merits – not least a strong empirical correlation between qualifications, employment, and earnings[157] – but are no panacea either. They will also prove insufficient in the absence of adequate social infrastructure, personal assistance, and decent job opportunities, among other factors. In short, an individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link.

Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) is a participatory, asset-based approach that works with service-users to build holistic and sustainable strategies to tackle their various barriers. It functions at the level of the individual rather than of services, adopting a whole-life perspective to understand and address each person's unique barriers.[158] This approach represents an innovative and effective strategy, and has informed much of this report's ethos.

For a fuller list and explanation of the main barriers faced by single parents and carers, categorised as per McQuaid and Lindsay's framework, see below.

## Barriers to entering and/or sustaining work for single parents and carers:

### Individual Factors

- **Low skills, qualifications and experience**: There is a consensus across the literature that that low qualifications and long periods out of the labour market correlate with a lower likelihood to work.[159] In one single parent-targeted intervention we looked at, 63% of participants had been out of work for over 2 years, and 46% reported lacking work experience; 77.4% of participants had qualifications at or below SVQ Level 2, with 34% holding no qualifications at all.[160] This varies by the age at which a parent had their first child, but for young parents especially, parental responsibilities often preclude further education or training. Similarly, among carers, 70% of those who care for 20 hours or more per week have no or low qualifications, owing presumably

[154] (Peck & Theodore, 2007)
[155] (Lawton, 2009)
[156] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[157] (Simmons & Bivand, 2008)
[158] (Oxfam Wales 2013)
[159] (McQuaid, et al., 2010)
[160] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)

to time-constraints.[161] It often proves hard to undertake training given the high costs of (child)care and the fact that most employability programmes do not provide care for training purposes.

- **Low confidence and/or motivation**: Owing to time out of the labour market, and often exacerbated by the isolation and mental ill-health all too common to single parents and carers, many lack the confidence to meet new people or attend interviews, to successfully integrate themselves into a new workplace, or even to apply for a job.
- **Other personal issues**: other barriers include substance abuse, domestic abuse, and wider personal traumas requiring specialist support and intervention.

### Personal Circumstances

- **Caring responsibilities**: These can impact on employment and work in various ways:
    - *Logistically* – Parents and carers face competing demands on time. Parents and carers will often – understandably and rightly – prioritise the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person over their employment. Thus, we can expect to see challenges around returning to work without adequate and reliable care arrangements in place. This is further complicated by limited provision: most childcare facilities operate during relatively 'standard' weekday work hours, clashing with shift patterns at nights or weekends; there is generally poor childcare provision during school holidays; and childcare tends to be inflexible and often proves incompatible with the volatile shift patterns associated with 21st century employment. Finding care that fits around working patterns, is affordable, has spaces, and is flexible when needed, is a hugely complex jigsaw.
    - *Workwise* – Emergencies or illness can necessitate work-absence at short notice. Tensions can build up within inflexible jobs and gradually push individuals out of employment or into more junior roles; carers and single parents widely report low awareness or sensitivity from employers of their particular needs and responsibilities.
    - *Financially* – There are considerable costs associated with childcare or social care that might make employment economically unviable. Up-front costs act as an especial barrier to entering paid work, and complexity claiming back care costs in arrears serves as a further disincentive.
    - *Personally* – An often-overlooked element is the understandable reluctance of some parents or carers to leave their child or cared-for person in the care of someone else and/or to have an over-reliance on family and friends.[162]

- **Family Budget**: Dealing with finances can prove immensely difficult, especially when moving into paid employment. Extra costs associated with entering employment – childcare, travel, uniforms, lunches, etc – can increase financial strain. This means that it is not always financially viable to enter work. Furthermore, the complex interaction between remuneration and benefits can muddy the potential gains. Despite recent reforms to improve financial work incentives, complexity and uncertainty persist and it is often not clear to individuals whether they will be better off in work.[163] The difficulties of adjusting to new budgeting habits, and the difficulty of accessing timely financial support often prove highly challenging.
- **Debt**: Financial challenges can be compounded by problems associated with debt: some forms of arrears can be reactivated upon entering work;[164] extra costs associated with entering work might be financed through borrowing; and debt is facilitated by greater access to credit when in work.

[161] (Aldridge & Hughes, 2016)
[162] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[163] (Gardiner & Finch, 2020)
[164] (Fuertes, 2010)

### External Factors

- **Jobs**: A shortage of flexible jobs (especially in entry-level jobs) and a lack of higher-skilled part-time jobs make it difficult to reconcile paid work and caring responsibilities. Increasingly atypical contractual arrangements (e.g. zero-hours contracts or juggling multiple part-time jobs) and volatility in shift-patterns can exacerbate these challenges, and single parents and carers are more likely to take up jobs in certain sectors associated with low-pay and limited progression. We should also note ongoing prejudices and poor managerial understanding of single parents' and carers' needs and responsibilities. Ultimately, as a supply-side intervention, employability is still contingent on demand-side factors and employability is largely irrelevant without (realistic and suitable) employment opportunities.[165]
- **Prejudice/Stigma**: In the course of our research we found multiple references to ongoing stigmatisation of unemployed individuals, and of single parents and carers in particular. This varied from more mild forms of ignorance – such as employers not fully grasping or accounting for the needs and commitments of single parents and carers – to more explicit discrimination – some previous interventions we looked at found that employers were less likely to hire an individual if they know them to be a single parent.
- **Transport**: The costs associated with owning a car and attaining a driving license make many reliant on public transport. However public transport, especially in rural areas, is often irregular, inaccessible, unreliable, or expensive. This is of especial relevance to the Scottish context, where swathes of the country are poorly connected.[166]
- **Social Security**: While recent reforms appear to have made progress on alleviating the 'cliff edge' scenarios associated with legacy benefits, the promise of more responsive, reliable benefits has met more mixed reception: the 5-week wait for a first payment can entail huge financial stress that can derail entry into employment, and research from both Citizens Advice and the Resolution Foundation find that Universal Credit can in fact increase volatility in pay packets, and in some instances a quirk of its monthly assessment window can lead to a total cessation of payments (when two or more pay packages fall within one month).[167] This raises many challenges for sustaining work. Other serious areas of concern include the benefit cap, the two-child Tax Credit limit, and recurrent deficiencies with Universal Credit's childcare payment.

This is not an exhaustive list, but hopefully points to the breadth of obstacles that single parents and those with other caring responsibilities face. Crucially, any one of these can undermine all other efforts and in many cases, individuals face several of these obstacles simultaneously

[165] (Lawton, 2009)
[166] (Poverty & Inequality Commission 2019)
[167] (Citizens Advice, 2018b) (Resolution Foundation, 2018)

## Principles and Priorities

In this section we delineate our main priorities and principles for any single parent or carer-oriented employability programme, taking account of the factors and barriers outlined above. Some of these are based on principles, while others reflect more practical considerations.

These were identified through background desk-based research and in consultation with single parents and carers sharing their experiences, needs and preferences regarding employability programmes. We organised and ran a series of focus groups with diverse and representative service-users from Edinburgh, Glasgow and North and South Lanarkshire, where participants were invited to share their priorities for programme-design. These conversations have been distilled into five key principles against which to evaluate previous interventions.

We are not seeking here to devise a detailed roadmap, but to identify guiding principles for employability programmes, and the questions and challenges these might entail. How to practically achieve these end-goals will be the subject of subsequent sections.

The principles we identify are:

- **Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach.**
- **Empowerment.**
- **Personalisation.**
- **Holistic Support.**
- **Good jobs, not any job.**

The rationale and evidence behind these priorities is laid out more fully below.

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

All participants on employability programmes should be treated with dignity and respect throughout. It has too often been the case in mainstream UK interventions that participants have reported feeling judged, policed and belittled by programme-staff.[168] Such mistreatment can lead participants to disengage either emotionally or formally from programmes, frustrating and undermining efforts to boost their employability, and in too many cases prompting financial damage if disconnection leads to sanctions. Mistreatment is not only an ineffective tool, but also highly unethical given the vulnerability of many participants, and the already-high incidence of isolation and mental ill-health among unemployed single parents and carers. In the interests of effective support as well as common decency, programmes should ensure that employability support offers a truly supportive environment.

A number of respondents reported being treated with suspicion, maligned for perceived lack of effort, and adversely impacted by the more unsavoury elements of benefit discourse. All the parents and carers we spoke to were keen to work, but just needed support to make this feasible and realistic.

*"It all comes down to somebody's needs, it's not really [a question of] what somebody wants, it's what they need."* – Focus group participant

The 'carrot and stick' of mandatory participation with the promise of personalised support has long dominated the UK's employability landscape. Mandatory participation treats people with suspicion as its default setting, fundamentally compromising its ability to offer a supportive or empowering environment. In our focus groups and across the literature, we found consistent and compelling evidence

[168] (Skills Network, 2014; Campbell, et al., 2016)

that single parents and carers are driven and motivated to enter paid employment but need proactive support to do so.

*"We don't want to rely on that help from government. I want to be able to pay my way, I want what's best for my son and to be a role model to him."* – Focus group participant

Far from being intransigent or resistant to work, parents and carers provide an essential social good and have commitments that we cannot reasonably expect them to simply put on the backburner. They will often, understandably and rightly, prioritise their familial and caring responsibilities over employment and avoid any risks to their children's security and wellbeing. Employability programmes must accept this fact, and seek to work *with* it, rather than *against* it.

Conditionality and the threat of financial sanctions for non-compliance are not only a source of stress and anxiety for participants, but also force them to accept unsuitable and unsustainable jobs. The constant threat of financial damage can prompt unrelenting anxiety in participants, severely hampering their efforts to enter or sustain employment. Previous research has found that directive or pressurising behaviour served to exacerbate barriers to work.[169]

*"It actual stresses me out. They text me all the time saying, 'check your journal, check your journal'. I've got four different advisors, that all mail me the same stuff […] all these courses and stuff even though I'm working now."* – Focus group participant

Voluntary, supportive schemes, in contrast, were widely seen by respondents to secure greater commitment from participants and avoids the stress and anxiety occasioned by mandatory programmes.

*"If someone is more approachable, you have a few laughs with them, and you commit more, you get better results."* – Focus group participant

However, it should be noted that voluntary participation also presents challenges around engagement and recruitment.

A number of parents reported feeling left behind on account of their circumstances, and we heard the shocking testimony of a parent advised to simply give up on finding work owing to their complex barriers.

*"I'm a single parent trying to better my prospects and they seem to be doing everything they can to put me off."* – Focus group participant

Well-documented issues of 'creaming' and 'parking' see participants further from the labour market denied the assistance or intensive intervention they need. However, a less blatant but equally damaging form of 'parking' refers to the recruitment and engagement processes of mainstream employability programmes. An almost-exclusive reliance on referrals from public employment services risks perpetuating the exclusion of those further from the labour market.

Employability programmes should seek to provide particular support to those facing the greatest labour market disadvantage, rather than entrenching inequalities and poverty.

## Empowerment

It is the firm conviction of this report that any employability programme should support the empowerment of individuals: to capitalise on their assets, to realise their aspirations, to take control of their lives, and to better their financial, professional and personal circumstances.

[169] (Campbell, et al., 2016)

Empowerment should not be conceived, in a purely 'negative' sense, as relating to the removal of barriers, but should adopt a positive approach and follow a logic of 'assets' and 'capabilities'.[170] Campbell *et al* employ an incisive lens of 'conflict and control', within which autonomy and self-efficacy foster positive empirical outcomes. [171] We take 'empowerment' to refer to both of its professional and personal dimensions.

In a personal sense, many of the parents and carers we spoke to suffered from low confidence, poor mental health and/or feelings of isolation. Building their confidence, self-efficacy and emotional resilience was widely seen as the first step toward employment, and one that was frequently skipped in mainstream services.

*"[Third sector organisation] helps you with the steps beforehand. The Jobcentre expect you to just be ready to go."* – Focus group participant

*"The thought terrified me […] Going into work and being in new surroundings, with all these people I've never met before. It would have really difficult."* – Focus group participant

Peer support was valued highly by participants and support workers alike for its positive effects on self-confidence and self-efficacy.

*"The wee hub groups, it's great when you've got the support of the other parents who are in the same mind-frame as you, the same place as you. It's not just [third sector organisation] that are supporting you, it's the other parents as well. They understand exactly what you're going through."* – Focus group participant

Empowerment should also have a professional dimension. In our qualitative research with parents and carers, our respondents were able to identify assets that they held but expressed frustration at not being able to build or capitalise on these. Owing to the time lost to caring responsibilities, single parents and carers are more likely to hold low or no qualifications or experience, and these frequently came up as self-reported barriers.

*"My biggest barrier was obviously being out of work for years. It's like where do you start. I was applying for jobs with skills or qualities that [I didn't have]."* – Focus group participant

*"I left school and had a baby. I'd never worked. I didn't have the experience. I went to college but that's no work experience. That's no real life."* – Focus group participant

Some expressed frustration and a sense of futility at applying for jobs that they were unlikely to get purely out of compliance.

*"The Jobcentre expect you to be ready to go. They're like 'apply for this, apply for that'. And half of them, you don't even know what that job is, you don't have the skills they're asking for."* – Focus group participant

Everybody that we spoke to had aspirations, for themselves and for their families, and many saw training, studying and work experience as routes to achieving these:

*"I wanted to study to access better-paid jobs. I didn't want to work in cleaning jobs all my life. I wanted more for myself and my son. And I loved my son watching me studying because to him that became a part of life, something to take example from. Now he takes that with him in his own life."* – Focus group participant

[170] It has been suggested that purely 'negative' routes risk transferring responsibility from the state to the individual, rather than actively supporting them to progress (Dean, et al., 2005; Zimmerman, 2006)
[171] (Campbell, et al., 2016)

*"Writing a CV or getting tips on how to pass an interview is alright. But having actual experience would be amazing. Experience or training's the only way you're going to get that technical knowledge."* – Focus group participant

Voluntary work was identified by some respondents as an especially useful step, whether personally or professionally.

*"I could come and go because it was voluntary work. It was all up to me what hours I done, what days I done. It was really good; it did help in the sense of building my confidence."* – Focus group participant

Nevertheless, voluntary work must be truly voluntary. One respondent reported being put onto placements of little relevance or interest to them, and in sectors that they had no desire to work in. Placements and voluntary work should be used to add value and experience, not simply to keep somebody occupied.

Despite the very positive effects of education and training, all too often such opportunities aren't there, or entail significant trade-offs. Many expressed frustration at the complexity and opacity of the system, the complex interaction of studying with their benefits, and its implications for their financial health.

Many of our respondents had plans or aspirations to undertake education or training but faced multiple hurdles to doing so in practice. There was general approval for the suggestion that training and education, rather than forming their own distinct policy field, should dovetail better with social security and employability services.

The following sections will look for ways to grant participants greater control over their lives and employment, and to pursue a career that is of personal and professional value to them.

## Personalisation (Single Parent & Carer-Tailored)

Known variously as 'tailored' or 'person-centred' approaches, personalisation reflects an acknowledgement that each participant will have a mix of barriers unique to that individual, and that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Personalisation refers to the tailoring of programme-content to an individual's needs and barriers, to better support their employability. It is associated with both more effective outcomes, and more efficient service-delivery. Given their usually more complex set of barriers, personalisation is seen as essential for single parents and carers.[172]

Given the highly complicated employability landscape, and its complex interactions with wider policy fields, personalised support should help participants to navigate this uncertainty.

*"If you asked the Jobcentre for advice on that, they would nae be able to help you. They'd just tell you to go research it yourself. Whereas [third sector support worker] helped you research it, helped you work out your costs. 'Here's what'll happen with your benefits, that childminder's too dear'. Without them I would have been clueless"* – Focus group participant

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, there is some evidence that mainstream programmes have become more generic in recent years owing to cost considerations.[173] Our respondents reported ignorance among programme staff of their specific needs and barriers. It is imperative that programme-design and staff should also be understanding of, and empathetic to, the specific needs and responsibilities of single parents and carers.

[172] (Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)
[173] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)

*"If you've never been in that position, how can you support somebody? If you've got no understanding, never gone through that. Some of the people in these jobcentres, they've never had kids, never had to look for childcare."* – Focus group participant

Not only are generic, impersonal services less effective, especially for those with more complex circumstances, but they also prompt feelings of frustration from participants who feel inadequately supported and may therefore prompt disengagement or anxiety.[174]

The value of a good advisor and a supportive environment were widely remarked upon and seen as pivotal to the success of employability interventions, but keyworker-assignation was widely seen as a lottery.

*"I'd had a great advisor and she was great, and then she went on leave, so I got put onto another advisor […] It was this dreaded advisor who everyone had spoken about and who was horrible. There's nothing worse."* – Focus group participant

*"The minute I got changed over to a different advisor I'd be walking down the road like 'oh my god, what is she gonna do, what is she gonna be like?'"* – Focus group participant

Third sector organisations were seen by single parents and carers as much better-equipped to provide this personalised service. There was a perception among respondents that third sector staff were there out of vocation, in contrast with larger providers, and that they had greater expertise and specialism as regards these particular groups. Our respondents were generally understanding of the resource-constraints faced by mainstream services and therefore forgiving, but this nevertheless negatively influenced their opinion of them.

*"It's the wee groups like [third sector organisation] that actually help you out with the information. At the Jobcentre, they're like robots just reading these scripts off a screen. My advisor had no idea, and that made me nervous."* – Focus group participant

*"When you talk about Jobcentre – obviously it depends on the advisor – but the scale is big and might not address the needs of single parents in the way smaller organisations like [local third sector organisation] do"* – Focus group participant

*"It's a small group and [third sector support worker's] personality – it really engages you. It's not generic, she really wanted to help. She had one-to-ones with you which I found really, really useful. You feel valued. A small group, a small organisation, tending to your needs, your barriers. It's a more human approach."* – Focus group participant

*"With [third sector organisation] it's a lot more personal. It's not like 'can you tick these boxes, have you done these things? That's you sorted, done.' There's a level of care given that you don't necessarily get when you're sat across a desk from someone who does nae know you, does nae know your circumstances, how you are as a person."* – Focus group participant

An often-overlooked facet of personalisation relates to the pace and end-goal of employability interventions. Our qualitative research found a sense of frustration at arbitrary and inflexible timelines. According to one respondent, even when conditionality is removed, informal deadlines and pressures still apply, often at a pace that is not realistic or desirable. Our respondents wanted to progress at a comfortable pace that allowed them to carry out their caring responsibilities to the best of their abilities and acknowledged that entering employment as soon as possible was not necessarily feasible or desirable. Given the diversity of circumstances and starting-points, having a uniform end-goal of paid employment was perceived as illogical. For certain individuals – those with little experience or with very

[174] (Skills Network, 2014)

young children, for instance – training, voluntary work or work experience might be more effective or desirable in the long-term.

*"[Local third sector organisation] are 100% less pressure on you, they're dead supportive. And they know how far [from the labour market] you are, and where you're at, what you need to work on – confidence, or training or whatever."* – Focus group participant

*"Even if you were like 'I'm 100% ready to go to work', they'd check 'Are you sure? Let's run through a lot of things' just to make sure."* – Focus group participant

This extra effort and patience were valued very highly by our respondents and was widely described as more 'human'.

We will, in the following sections, seek to address how services can be better tailored to individuals' needs, and single parents and carers in particular and find ways to extend this practice into new areas.

## Holistic Support

Holistic, also known as 'wrap-around' or 'joined-up' support is often used interchangeably with personalisation. We take the view that it is a related but distinct concept: if personalisation as a process relates to how programme-content is assigned to individuals, holistic support concerns the breadth of supports made available to the them. Given its significance for personal circumstances and environmental factors, 'holistic' will be taken to refer to complementary services beyond individual employability factors (this is an admittedly imperfect distinction and there are areas of overlap, but for the sake of convenience and clarity we will maintain this distinction where possible).

Mainstream programmes in the UK have relied largely – if not exclusively – on job-search activity and CV support. For those with more complex and multi-faceted needs this is simply not enough.

*"I mostly recall just getting advice of how to write a CV, or access [a job-search] website. Childcare? Benefits? Nothing."* – Focus group participant

Childcare was the most common barrier identified in our focus groups:

*"Having to pay for childcare was really tricky. I'd never paid for childcare before, it was new. Am I gonnae be able to afford it?"* – Focus group participant

*"A big barrier of mine was childcare. I was really stressed because I was on my own, just me and my son. I didn't want to send him to a childminder that I didn't know, and the idea of having to go to work and leave him with some stranger was really hard for me."* – Focus group participant

*"It's the reason I just ended up no working and just bringing my kids up. Every time you thought you were making progress there was another barrier around the childcare. Like a lot of them want a month up-front. If you've no worked, where are you getting a month up-front childcare cost?"* – Focus group participant

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation review of qualitative and quantitative data calls for support with personal circumstance factors including finance, debt and housing to be incorporated into employability services, to ease the transition into work and minimise any disruptions that could derail an individual's progress.[175]

[175] (Fuertes, 2010)

*"You need support from all angles, a package – not only employment – but benefits because they might change when you move into employment. People have no clue about Universal Credit and nothing is explained to them."* – Focus group participant

Such a range of services should, however, be tempered with simplicity, transparency and navigability. Many of our respondents reported feeling overwhelmed, frustrated at contradictory advice and poorly organised partnerships, and feeling 'palmed off' between organisations.

*"It can be confusing for people, if you're getting information from one organisation and then something else from another organisation."* – Focus group participant

*"There's a lack of communication between [mainstream services] and these [third sector] organisations. They'll maybe put a leaflet on the wall. It's not really thought through things like that."* – Focus group participant

Third sector organisations were especially highly valued for their expertise and sensitivity. Such organisations – run for, with and by single parents and carers – were trusted and credible sources of information owing to their specialist expertise.

In our focus groups, parents and carers pointed to a wide range of services that would benefit them, from obvious areas like childcare and financial advice, through to interview clothing and transport costs.

As we said above, an individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link, so comprehensive holistic services are imperative. The range of services that should be considered, and how they are chosen, commissioned and delivered will be explored in the following sections.

## Good jobs, not any job

Much of the UK Government's rhetoric cites work as the surest route out of poverty, but this is empirically dubious: Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysis found that three quarters of low-paid workers fail to sustainably escape low-pay over 10 years,[176] and much of the literature takes too static a view of employment that overlooks the lived reality of many; namely, recurrent movements between low-paid work and unemployment.[177]

Current approaches to employability do not seem to fully grasp this, and conditional work-first approaches are seen to undermine job sustainability by pushing claimants into ill-suited job roles.[178] This evokes a tension at the very heart of the activation agenda: namely, can activation encourage individuals into employment while also maintaining a degree of quality-control. Not only is this fiscally pointless – if movements off benefits are not sustained – but it also hampers the individual's future employment prospects: under-employment minimises opportunities for skills development, and an employment history comprising numerus short-term roles can be off-putting to prospective employers.[179]

We therefore believe that, from a practical perspective, work that is freely chosen is more likely to be suitable and sustainable, as well as supporting, from a normative perspective, the right of single parents and carers to pursue good-quality work. Research has found that the negative psychological and physiological effects of poor-quality employment are broadly equal to those of unemployment, underlining the importance of this often-neglected factor.[180]

[176] (D'Arcy & Hurrell, 2014)
[177] (Fuertes, 2010)
[178] (Wright & Patrick, 2019)
[179] (McCollum, 2012a; McCollum, 2012b)
[180] (Bailey, 2014)

'Good work' will mean different things to different people, so we undertook qualitative research to ascertain what 'good work' means with specific reference to single parents and carers. Previous large-scale research by Oxfam Scotland has found that men and women have different priorities: men's attention fell primarily on pecuniary and time-based preoccupations – a decent hourly wage and regular, reasonable hours – where women's concerns were largely logistical – they prioritised flexibility in work-hours, a job that is easy to get to, a supportive line manager and the right to return to work after leave or absence, all alluding to the caring responsibilities with which women are typically charged.[181]

Our own (smaller) enquiry found similar concerns from single parents and carers. A supportive and understanding manager was the most common priority.

*"Especially for someone that's got kids, [a manager] that understands that you can't just pack your kid off and go to work."* – Focus group participant

*"Even with the legal protections, there is a perception that it's risky to ask [for more flexibility or time-off]. The repercussions. You might get sacked or get given less hours."* – Focus group participant

Relatedly, we also heard about the importance of flexibility to parents and carers, a concept which appears across much of the literature as a potential solution. Many of our respondents, however, were sceptical and drew a distinction between employer-oriented and employee-oriented flexibility.

*"You're on all these jobs sites and the employer will say they're flexible but their [idea of] 'flexible' is not a working parent's [idea of] 'flexible' at all"* – Focus group participant

For many, and especially among parents of older children, progression prospects were a key consideration. If employability interventions are to truly reflect empowerment, single parents and carers should not be precluded from having professional aspirations by dint of their circumstances. In practice, the notion of a career too often applies exclusively to better-off, white-collar "professions",[182] but notions of career and progression are central to sustainable, good-quality work.

*"I want to have a job where I can progress still. I've got 20 years of employment ahead of me. I don't want to be stuck doing the same tasks."* – Focus group participant

*"I had always just been looking for part-time work, due to having the children, but now that's my youngest in Primary 7 now, so I just started looking for full-time work."* – Focus group participant

In practice, however, progression is hard to achieve. Some parents were sceptical of certain industries, which they did not consider amenable to the flexibility and progression required by single parents. This mirrors some of the findings across the literature, according to which employment in the retail and hospitality sectors often proves unsustainable.

*"Hospitality and retail, they just want to make a profit, and single parents – if you're needing to leave early to pick up your son – get in the way of that. It's ruthless."* – Focus group participant

Ultimately, as mentioned above, all employability programmes are inevitably constrained by demand-side factors in the local labour market. We believe, therefore, that employability programmes should engage with the reality of the local labour market, not in a work-first logic of allocating workers to vacancies, but rather, in a more constructive interventionist manner, rooting programmes in the local labour market, and identifying and shaping opportunities within it. The slight tension between demand-side realism and personal aspiration should not be ignored, and we will look for creative ways of reconciling these two, as well as wider methods to protect and encourage 'good work'.

[181] (Stuart, et al., 2016)
[182] (Hennequin, 2007)

There is a strong degree of overlap between our own principles and those outlined in the Scottish Government's *Creating a Fairer Scotland* framework.[183] Indeed we welcome these principles and values, though worry that at times they remain somewhat under-conceptualised or under-realised. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this report should help translate these principles into practice.

[183] (Scottish Government, 2016)

## Previous Interventions

This section will present a summary of each intervention examined, describing its main features and innovations. The discussion of findings will later synthesise the practices and learnings taken from each of these and situate them within a political and academic context. A fuller account of each case, evaluated relative to our key principles, can be found in the appendix.

### Working for Families (2004-2006)

The Working for Families (WFF) programme ran from 2004-8 with a budget of £50 million over 5 years and serviced 25,508 clients.[184] Administered and run by 20 local authorities, it targeted parents with significant barriers to work, and was aimed at supporting participants towards, into or continuing within employment, training or education. It represented 'disadvantaged parents' facing low incomes or other stressors. The programme was successful at attracting individuals at a variety of distances from the labour market and with varying barriers to employment, though remained entirely voluntary. This helped to grant participants a sense of ownership over their journeys and secured extra 'buy-in'.

Subsequent reviews and evaluations have suggested that WFF represented a significant step forward in employability: participation was entirely voluntary, and it was among the first projects to acknowledge the need for holistic, joined-up support, though the practicalities of this were somewhat under-realised and were refined in later programmes. The broad thrust of this programme informed numerous subsequent interventions and many of this report's more general findings.

WFF arguably popularised the use of a 'keyworker' model as a point of contact, continuity and consistency, to deliver personalised support. The diversity of clients that the programme attracted necessitated a tailored approach to employability to tackle each individual's particular barriers, with wide-ranging wraparound supports to tackle these through a personalised action plan and a 'staged' approach. Chief among these complementary supports was childcare – including help with the associated costs – though the programme also provided financial literacy support, welfare rights advice, and even supported some participants to attain a driving license, among others. 39% of participants accessed two to three programmes, and 26% accessed four or more services. Those who took on more than one project or outside service were significantly more likely to achieve a transition, at 62% and 53% respectively, compared to 44% among those accessing only one service. [185]

These supplementary supports were designed and provided through partnerships across public, private and third sector organisations. These partnerships brought on-board local expertise and experience – largely in the form of specialist third sector organisations – that allowed for the efficient and effective planning of services. Thorough context-mapping, informed by such organisations' local expertise, avoided inefficient service-duplication, while their knowledge of single parents' needs helped identify gaps in existing provision, with especial mention given to shortages in training and educational opportunities.[186]

WFF therefore undertook significant investment in personal and professional development: 30.3% of participants reported low self-confidence at the outset; and low skills, qualifications and experience were significant barriers to employment for a large majority of participants.[187] For those facing the largest barriers to employment, the programme offered training opportunities. This included training in childcare to allow parents to reconcile employment with their own caring responsibilities, while building capacity into the future for other parents.

[184] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[185] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[186] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[187] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

Other contributions to the field of employability included the concept of 'distance travelled'. This refers to successful incremental steps towards employment even without achieving a final transition into paid work, in order to reflect the diversity of participants' circumstances and their distance from the labour market. 75% of participants faced multiple and/or substantial barriers that rendered immediate entry into work neither feasible nor desirable.[188] The concept of distance travelled was incorporated into its ethos at street-level as well as its evaluative framework: in addition to 'hard' transitions into employment or training, 'soft' and 'other soft' transitions included undertaking personal development courses and improvements in confidence indicators.

## Marks and Start (2004-2018)

Marks and Spencer's 'Marks & Start' Programme ran between 2004-18 for single parents, and was the UK's largest company-led work experience programme.[189] The programme targeted various groups – including single parents, as well as unemployed young, disabled and homeless people – and was delivered in partnership with various organisations drawn from the third sector according to their specialisms. Gingerbread supported over 5,000 single parents through the programme from 2004, and One Parent Families Scotland led the Scottish single parent partnerships from 2012-16.[190]

In 2014/15 in Scotland, 94 single parents started and completed tailored training through the programme; 93 and started and 90 completed a two-week placement in a Marks & Spencer store. Over the same period, the programme saw 62 job-starts at below 16 hours per week, and 57 job-starts above 16 hours per week. The Scottish arm of the project saw 60% of participants successfully enter work in 2015/16.[191]

Participation in the programme primarily occurred voluntarily through third sector organisations, though the programme could also be undertaken as part of the Work Programme. These specialist partner organisations acted as gatekeepers to ensure that participants were in fact 'work ready', to flag any relevant health conditions and to safeguard against exploitation. These organisations also worked to negotiate and shape the placement and working patterns to suit caring responsibilities.

These organisations arranged and ran pre-programme personal and professional development sessions prior to the work experience itself. These were followed by a 2-week placement, during which time participants receive the same training as a new employee would in customer service and product knowledge. This accredited training was logged on cards, and a certificate of completion given at the end.

Travel costs for the programme were reimbursed and a small allowance was given for lunches. Uniforms were also provided to ensure that the participant did not find themselves out of pocket as a result of the programme.

Upon completion of the placement, if a participant had completed all relevant training to a satisfactory standard then they were deemed 'suitable to re-engage', entitling them to enter employment with Marks & Spencer if/when a vacancy became available, without the need to interview. Overall, 40% of participants went on to work with Marks & Spencer or elsewhere within 3 months, with the equivalent figure standing at 60% in Scotland.[192]

Even for participants who were not successful in this regard, ongoing support was offered: participants could access a telephone helpline offering one-to-one support for 13 weeks after completion; every

[188] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[189] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)
[190] (OPFS, 2018)
[191] (OPFS, 2018)
[192] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)

participant was supported to formulate an action plan when leaving and was provided with links to other agencies including Jobcentre Plus and further training opportunities.[193]

## Making It Work (2013-17)

The Making It Work programme ran from 2013-17 in five local partnership areas in Scotland (Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire & South Lanarkshire) and supported single parents furthest from the labour market who were under-served by pre-existing provision. The programme targeted single parents with 'complex needs' including disabilities, having a large family (of more than three children), living in a depressed local labour market, having little work experience or being out of work for over 2 years.[194] The majority of participants were women.

The model was run and funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) and enjoyed a budget of £7 million between 2013-17.[195] Its model was designed through wide-ranging consultations by BLF with varied stakeholders and experts in single parents, employability, childcare and more, and drew heavily on evidence of 'what works' from previous interventions.[196] Each of the 5 local area projects was designed, run and delivered by partnerships, composed of a lead partner and core partner projects. The funding model used by the Big Lottery involved bringing together local authorities, the third sector and regeneration companies appropriate to each local area to develop funding bids which met criteria set by the lottery. Specialist single parent organisations OPFS and Fife Gingerbread were involved in delivery of services in each of the areas. It pursued a 'not for profit 'model.

The evaluation found the programme to be highly effective on both a personal and professional level: 30% of participants moved into work, and quantitative analysis of self-reported subjective and 'distance travelled' indicators – self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the number of reported barriers – found marked improvements, especially after 6 months.[197] Qualitative evaluation also found highly positive reviews of the programme for its flexibility, holistic and tailored support, and the sense of empowerment that participants reported.[198]

The project was innovative in a number of ways, but chief among them was its proactive engagement. The programme situated outreach workers in local community, health, and early learning centres, as well as local childcare services (especially at times of new intakes and in disadvantaged areas).[199] Such proactive engagement strategies had two main positive effects: firstly, it allowed workers to spread information about the MIW programme and recruit individuals directly; secondly, doing so within the community and through familiar and trusted organisations lent the programme credibility. Development workers were staffed primarily from local third sector organisations that enjoyed positive reputations and goodwill, especially in comparison with Jobcentre Plus. These informal introductory meetings gave information very gently and stressed the entirely voluntary nature of the programme. Holding the meetings in familiar and trusted environments helped build a rapport and familiarity with prospective participants who lacked the confidence to attend a formal meeting in an unfamiliar office-type setting. The distance of many participants from the labour market meant that proactive engagement was essential; many of the programme's participants had not previously been in contact with public employability services.[200]

MIW devoted significant time and resources to boosting self-confidence and self-efficacy from a personal perspective, and low skills, qualifications and experience from a professional viewpoint. This was critical

[193] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)
[194] (CRESR, 2017)
[195] (CRESR, 2017)
[196] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[197] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[198] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[199] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[200] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)

given, on a personal level, most MIW participants reported suffering from low confidence at the outset.[201] Many participants also reported feelings of isolation, with two in five citing not having family or friends nearby/available as a barrier to employment.[202] Thus, peer-support helped to build a strong social network and safety net, and served as a forum for sharing practical tips that helped parents to feel more confident about entering work.

From a professional perspective, MIW sought to tackle employability barriers, through a two-stage approach, beginning with 'soft' skills – including IT skills-training, CV support, careers counselling and 'dress for success' advice – before moving onto more technical and/or vocational training.[203] The programme exhibited novelty through its provision of 'demand-led' training; namely, training programmes designed in collaboration and consultation with participants on the basis of their interests and assets, and local employers on the basis of their employment needs and opportunities in the local labour market. This gave rise to training bundles, packaged towards real jobs, delivered flexibly to suit parents' caring responsibilities.

MIW appeared to grant participants an unprecedented amount of influence over not only which services they accessed, but also over the services available to them. This ethos of co-production allowed participants to request new programme-content and to refine existing services in line with their stated needs. This obviously operated within resource-constraints but was facilitated by MIW's flexible funding streams and was highly reviewed by participants and evaluators alike for the control and autonomy that it granted participants. This sense of ownership over the programme secured commitment and buy-in, as well as leading to more tailored content.[204] Participants were granted a strong degree of control not only over programme-content, but also the frequency of their meetings, the pace of their employment journey, and their end-goal to ensure the programme worked around their other personal, parental and professional commitments.[205]

MIW sought to provide complementary, joined-up services to dovetail with pre-existing and mainstream provision, and to avoid wasteful duplication. This was provided in each local area through a consortium of partners with complementary skills and expertise, with their roles allocated accordingly. For instance, MIW Glasgow saw Citizens Advice provide advice on finance and benefits, specialist third sector single parent organisations offered personal development and basic employability skills, and training was offered through local employability organisations.[206] Of all its wraparound supports, childcare was seen as MIW's most effective enabler of employment; the programme partnered with childcare experts to help parents to find, arrange and pay for suitable childcare, including through discretionary payments.

This strong, holistic partnership working was facilitated by certain organisational factors (detailed more fully below). The Big Lottery Fund helped form consensus across partner organisations on aims and operations and asked for demonstrable experience of partnership-working in its tendering process. Success factors common across evaluations included concerted context mapping, a clear delineation of roles across partners, and adequate time and resources at the programme-design stage to achieve this in practice.[207]

In contrast with 'work first' approaches, participants were encouraged to take time to consider their aspirations and options, including how child friendly and realistic certain job vacancies were.[208] Participants were encouraged to envision a suitable career path and were supported to achieve the skills and qualifications necessary to make this a reality. Accredited qualifications proved especially effective

[201] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[202] (Batty, et al., 2017; CRESR, 2017)
[203] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016; Batty, et al., 2017)
[204] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[205] (CRESR, 2017)
[206] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[207] (Batty, et al., 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[208] (CRESR, 2017)

for finding employment, as employers did not then have to pay for equivalent training.[209] MIW Fife undertook concerted work with local employer interfaces to secure 6-8 week work experience opportunities for those lacking experience.

Employer engagement, more generally, played a central role: MIW Glasgow, for instance, established a designated job brokerage role, with specific associated funding and resources, to explain parents' needs to employers and crafting mutually-beneficial job-terms. Following any successful job-entry, in-work support offered continued and ongoing assistance to parents, through regular scheduled keyworker meetings (at 3 and 6 months of employment) as well as more *ad hoc* support through meetings, calls, texts and social media.[210] The programme also helped to mediate employer-employee negotiations, helping to resolve conflict and sustain outcomes.

### Carers in Employment (2015-17)

The Carers in Employment programme (CiE) ran from 2015-17 in nine local authority areas in England. Overseen by the Social Care Institute for Excellence, CiE was aimed at establishing 'what works' in supporting people with caring responsibilities into and/or within paid work.

The programme worked with both carers and local employers, supporting 2,794 individuals and 384 employers throughout its duration. This included carers both in and out of work, though with the latter constituting a firm majority.[211] From its conception, the programme established an ethos of bespoke, local solutions and a person-centred approach. It coupled light touch support in the form of advice, leafleting and signposting, with more intensive interventions.

Outreach activities were central to CiE's success, with those areas that adopted a more proactive approach seeing the greatest success.[212] Programme staff demonstrated great commitment and flexibility to the programme and their work, offering support outside of standard working hours. Many (prospective) participants were already in work and thus unable to take time out during the day to access services, and many were reluctant to reveal their caring responsibilities in the workplace for fear of repercussions. It was therefore deemed necessary – and effective – to provide engagement sessions outside of work-hours and workplaces. Those local areas that formed wide-ranging partnerships also reported greater success in engagement and recruitment, especially with regards to 'hard to reach' groups. Partnerships ranging across health, social care, employment/employability and beyond help to secure referrals through a range of venues and organisations.

CiE employed a blend of emotional, personal and professional support that allowed carers to flourish in and outside of work. The programme and its keyworkers were seen by participants as an emotional support, rather than a pure employability service.[213] Keyworkers' willingness to simply listen to carers was reviewed especially highly, and participants reported that this made them feel less alone and more validated. Evaluative outputs found high praise for the programme's empathetic and caring staff.

Peer support and group work also helped to tackle the isolation faced by many carers. Participants shared stories and insights among themselves, resulting in carers often feeling less alone. It was often reassuring for carers to hear similar or shared sentiments expressed by their peers. CiE's keyworkers worked with participants to build their self-confidence and self-esteem, and in professional terms, offered mentoring, careers advice, CV support and interview practice.

Evaluative outputs found that owing to their professional and caring commitments, carers are often time poor, and thus lack the time to do independent research. More intensive interventions offering more

[209] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[210] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[211] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[212] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[213] (Wilson, et al., 2018)

comprehensive advice and support were found to be much more effective. Keyworkers provided tailored guidance and advice on health, career guidance and financial advice, as well as helping with personal development, signposting participants towards related services, arranging training and placements. Evaluative outputs found that having a designated keyworker was effective at facilitating job retention, by helping participants to navigate 'tipping points' in their trajectory. Keyworkers demonstrated great flexibility in their working patterns to suit carers' schedules. Sessions where offered outside of standard working hours to ensure access for working carers, and keyworkers 'hot-desked' at a variety of community venues to remove mobility-related barriers to attendance.

Keyworkers provided support across a wide range of services including information, advice and guidance on employment/employability, health and finance, arranging substitute care, signposting to specialist providers/services (such as assistive technology), direct advocacy in employer-negotiations, and arranging training and placements.

Assistive technology was found by evaluation to be a key enabler of work. This helped carers to maintain contact with their cared for person, or alerted them in the case of an emergency, through technology such as fall alarms, medication reminders, and door alarms. Such technology granted carers greater peace of mind and allowed them to reconcile employment more easily with caring and led to fewer interruptions and early-departures from work.

CiE undertook significant employer-facing activities and used a mix of strategies aimed at making employment more carer-sensitive. From carers and participants' perspectives, this was largely through advice, guidance and brokerage. The programme sought to help carers to establish a healthy work-life balance and to ensure that their caring responsibilities were taken account of in the workplace. In some cases, support workers helped to broker negotiations between carers and their employers to craft more flexible working patterns, and evaluative outputs found that a fifth of participants successfully secured greater flexibility.[214] CiE also worked directly with employers through a mix of resources and practices, including carer support toolkits for employers, a dedicated handbook on carers' needs and challenges, training packages for line managers, templates for carer-friendly policies, and networks with local agencies to whom CiE programmes could signpost employers for support reforming their policies. The programme's evaluative outputs helped to identify effective strategies relating to employer-engagement as well as business-friendly language and arguments in support of granting employees flexibility.

## Health 4 Work (2016-19)

The Health 4 Work programme (H4W) ran in North Aberdeenshire, primarily in the two largest towns of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, both of which appear among Scotland's most employment-deprived areas.[215] It sought to link poor health outcomes to employment and employability through addressing inequalities and improving and integrating access to services, and worked with individuals with mild to moderate mental and physical ill health. It was funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by a range of partners, based on previous evidence of 'what works' and an integrated approach to employability.

The underpinning aim of the programme was to widen and access to services – both employability and health-related – and to tackle inequalities in access. Engagement strategies therefore sought to work around participants' needs, schedules and mobility. Previous consultations had found that participants faced multiple challenges around accessing services, including difficulties arranging a time and date, knowing where and how services could be accessed, getting to the venue itself, and concerns over the stigma associated with such services. It was therefore decided to situate keyworkers within key health settings to improve access to services at the point of contact.

[214] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[215] (AHSCP, 2019)

H4W employed a keyworker model, situated within key health settings to ensure easy and efficient referrals. As noted above, opacity around service access and capacities and limited mobility were serious challenges for participants seeking to access wider services. Evaluative outputs therefore found huge value in services and referral pathways being 'person-led' rather than 'service-led'.[216] This user-centred approach was facilitated by co-location of services – allowing for simple and efficient *ad hoc* referrals and removing the challenges around scheduling and mobility faced by many participants – as well as information-sharing and 'warm handovers' – avoiding repetition.

Partners agreed to offer financial advice and welfare rights advice within key health settings to advise participants on income maximisation, budgeting and more. Qualitative evaluation found that this was especially effective at alleviating mental health challenges through reduced stress and anxiety and improved sleep. Financial support was also found to be a common gateway to accessing wider supports.[217]

Health 4 Work coupled personal and professional development to boost participants' self-confidence as well as their employability, including established methods such as confidence-building and CV-training, as well as more novel feature including its mentoring programme with local agencies and local employer engagement.

[216] (AHSCP, 2019)
[217] (AHSCP, 2019)

## Discussion of Findings

This section will reflect on the learnings and common threads identified across the above-described interventions, and relate these findings to the wider literature, the policy context, and our own qualitative research with service-users and academics. It is hoped that this will identify best practice for replication in the design of future programmes, and identify areas needing further research and clarification. Our findings relate to both best practice at 'street-level' as well as offering recommendations for the overarching design and/or content of employability programmes.

This discussion takes a necessarily iterative approach; the deficiencies of the UK model are well-documented, and these serve as a helpful and reasonable basis for the following discussions. We found a strong degree of consistency across the literature as well as our qualitative research with both academics and service-users with regards to the inadequacies of current mainstream provision in the UK and Scotland. In light of these well-documented deficiencies and/or service-users' expressed needs, we will discuss alternative, effective approaches seen in the interventions we examined, how these differ from current provision, and their potential application to the UK and Scottish contexts.

(Despite some noteworthy departures, the Scottish model broadly replicates the structures and approaches that predated Fair Start Scotland, especially in financial and organisational terms. We therefore see fit to reference previous and ongoing research into UK employability as well as Scotland-specific research. There has been relatively little academic research into Fair Start Scotland, but a plethora exists around previous UK approaches more generally.)

The Scottish Government's principles and frameworks guiding employability programmes appear laudable and robustly evidence-based. However, a rhetorical commitment to certain principles is no guarantee of their practical application.[218] For example, concepts such as 'user-centred services' are largely incontestable, but not necessarily clear in terms of their applied meaning. It is hoped that this discussion might help to conceptualise these principles in practical terms.

From this discussion, we have identified the key ingredients needed to build a more effective employability programme for single parents and carers in the UK. We note that these have been identified and included as responses and solutions to the UK's and Scotland's specific shortcomings. Thus, while the findings on effective practice would likely be generalisable in international perspective, they may be less relevant or novel to non-UK policy contexts.

### Governance and Funding

This report's priorities echo many of the Scottish Government's principles guiding employability policy in Scotland, though in the absence of more decisive changes to the prevailing funding, governance, commissioning and management models of employability interventions, these principles are likely to remain abstract ideals. Our own qualitative research with academic experts found a broad consensus – though willingness to be proven wrong – that Fair Start Scotland's replication of previous funding and governance models limits the scope for real change or innovation and makes it unlikely that FSS will show drastically different or better results than its predecessors.

Our first observation should be that employability programmes are unlikely to deliver radically different services at street-level or achieve significantly different outcomes, without a similar rupture with prevailing governance and funding models. In recent decades, funding and governance models and 'work first' approaches have become mutually reinforcing, entrenching this failed approach in UK employability. As Fuertes and Lindsay argue, "high level policy decisions have produced funding regimes and programme content that has embedded work-first activation as the singular supply-side policy

[218] (Whitworth, 2013)

response".[219] It has even been suggested that established approaches and practices may in fact constrain policymakers' thinking, and preclude them from even imagining a radically different approach from the hegemonic 'work first' norms.[220] Competitive tendering and the increasing marketisation of employability services have, as we shall show, limited the scope for truly personalised or holistic employability programmes.

The New Public Management school of policymaking still dominates in the UK and Scotland, and is associated with competitive tendering, (often private) outsourcing and financial incentives/penalties.[221] This applies not only to the UK Government's approach, but the Scottish Government's too. Critics suggest that this focus on efficiencies privileges cost-control over service-quality,[222] with empirical evidence from recent mainstream interventions to support this.[223]

It also retains a top-down logic of prime providers who oversee supply chains, whereby problems and prescriptive solutions are identified by lead contractors and subsequently outsourced to subcontracted providers.[224] A standard model outlines the stages as: "1) a strategic needs assessment; 2) deciding priorities and outcomes; 3) planning and designing services; 4) options appraisal; 5) sourcing; 6) delivery; and 7) monitoring and review."[225] Thus, it is standard practice for the prime contractor to identify the relevant problems and prescribe solutions prior to engaging any external providers or organisations, let alone consulting service-users.

It appears optimistic at best to hope that a single prime provider can outsource solutions to persistent 'wicked' social problems, and the complex barriers faced by single parents and carers.[226] As long ago as 2011, the Christie Commission concluded that "a radical change in the design and delivery of public services" was needed, with secular and demographic changes driving an increase in demand, and a consensus coalescing around the need for personalisation.[227] To date, however, changes within employability have been more incremental than the radical reorientation called for by the Commission.

The employability landscape has become increasingly marketized in recent decades, as evidenced by the increasing dominance of large for-profit providers with limited state regulation of content or quality,[228] and the increasing use of payment by results, with negative implications for service-quality and outcomes.[229] The increasingly private provision of services, coupled with this transfer of financial risk to the provider, is seen to reward providers that can drive down costs, leading to creaming and parking,[230] increasingly homogenous and generic services, and under-investment in the more intensive interventions needed by those furthest from the labour market.[231] It has also been suggested that this can sour user-provider relationships as performance targets associated with New Public Management approaches can create organisational cultures that tacitly encourage more adversarial relationships between keyworkers and service-users.[232]

The Scottish Government approach of a "mixed economy" in employability services in Scotland of private provision, and local authority and third sector delivery is undermined by the fact that the vast majority of contracts – 80 per cent – were awarded to the private sector, with only a small percentage of contracts

[219] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[220] (Rice, 2017)
[221] (Osborne, 2010)
[222] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[223] (Ceolta-Smith & Salway, 2015; Rees, et al., 2014; Heins & Bennett, 2016)
[224] (Klijn & Teisman, 2000)
[225] (Hussey & Hussey, 1997, pp. 149-150)
[226] (Schlappa, 2017)
[227] (Christie, 2011)
[228] (Rees, et al., 2014; Ceolta-Smith & Salway, 2015; Heins & Bennett, 2016)
[229] (Campbell, et al., 2016)
[230] (Considine, et al., 2018)
[231] (Lane, et al., 2013)
[232] (Rice, 2013)

being won by the third sector. This does not meet the Scottish Government's ambition of a mixed-market of support.[233]

Moreover, complete transparency in operations of the private sector ensuring democratic accountability is not achievable. Often the disclosure of particular information is exempt from public scrutiny as it 'would, or would be likely to, prejudice substantially the commercial interests of each successful Contractor […] and so, could significantly harm their commercial business.'[234]

The need for specialist organisations' support when dealing with single parents and carers' employability is well-documented across the literature, where their expertise and specific knowledge is deemed imperative to the tailored and intensive support needed by these groups.[235] In common with sentiments expressed throughout our qualitative research with service-users, Gingerbread contrasts the generic mainstream support offered by recent UK interventions, with the personalised, intensive support offered by third sector organisations.[236]

However, the tendering processes described have, in previous interventions, appeared to operate to the exclusion of specialist – usually third sector – organisations.[237] Previous scholarship has found that competitive tendering, the cost-cutting that this demands, and common minimum turnover requirements tend to mean that smaller third sector organisations (TSOs) cannot compete in mainstream employability provision.[238] This has been exacerbated by the increasingly widespread use of payment by results, with the additional risk this entails for small providers acting as a further barrier to participation.[239] Despite governmental assurances of a level playing-field, this has made it "difficult, if not impossible" for TSOs to compete against large corporate organisations.[240] While formal academic work on Fair Start Scotland has been much more limited than that surrounding the Work Programme, our qualitative enquiry with expert academics found a broad perception that these challenges have not abated under the Scottish model, and third sector organisations themselves report being marginalised in FSS' tendering processes.[241]

Even when TSOs are successful in securing participation as a subcontractor, they are largely marginalised to delivery, rather than earlier programme design. As such, they are typically bound by the role assigned to them by a prime contractor, with little influence over the programme's wider content.[242] Our own qualitative enquiry with academic experts heard of recurrent issues of 'bid candy' whereby specialist third sector organisations are included/consulted in the bidding stage, and subsequently marginalised once contracts are awarded.

In addition to this exclusion in the immediate term, this is also seen to have longer-term impacts on the very nature of the third sector itself: a large and growing body of literature points to changes within the third sector as organisations begin to behave more like private providers in order to remain competitive, a process known as 'isomorphism'.[243] Thus, over the longer-term, TSOs lose their distinctiveness and strengths, which risks "killing the golden goose".[244]

In short, the state and third sector have been supplanted by large, profit-seeking companies, with participants suffering as a result. Tenders are controlled almost entirely by large, profit-seeking

[233] (SCVO 2017)
[234] (Scottish Government 2017)
[235] E.g. (Vickerstaff, et al., 2009; Lindsay, et al., 2018a; Whitworth, 2016)
[236] (Whitworth, 2013)
[237] (Pestoff, 2012)
[238] (Bennett, 2012)
[239] (Finn, 2011; Rees, et al., 2014)
[240] (Heins & Bennett, 2016, p. 54)
[241] (SCVO, Fair Start Scotland: contracts, commissioning and the marginalisation of the third sector and those we support 2017)
[242] (Pestoff, 2012)
[243] (Heins, et al., 2010; Rees, et al., 2012)
[244] (Aiken & Bode, 2009)

organisations – and Fair Start Scotland is no exception[245] – to such an extent that it has been suggested that what began as an activation agenda has morphed into an activation *industry*.[246]

## The need for meaningful partnerships

Klijn and Teisman distinguish different modes of programme-delivery and commissioning from a contractualism approach – whereby a lead-provider defines the problem and prescribes solutions to a commissioned external provider – to partnerships – based on joint decision-making and planning.[247] For the reasons outlined above, partnership working and co-production – the pooling of assets and expertise between diverse partners and service-users – as an alternative approach to designing and commissioning services has gathered momentum and appears a promising approach to programme design and delivery. Its advocates suggest that this process promises more broad and equal partnerships, including specialist organisations otherwise unable to compete, and see co-production as distinct from and superior to established New Public Management approaches. This pluralism and expertise are seen as essential when dealing with complex problems that no single organisation could hope to tackle on their own.[248]

The benefits of partnership working are visible across the interventions examined above, and the wider literature. Previous research has associated partnership working with more effective programmes,[249] greater (social) innovation,[250] and strengthened trust between service-users and providers.[251] Our own analysis across previous interventions found consistent and recurrent benefits from partnership working and co-production. All the interventions examined used partnerships to tackle the wide-ranging and complex barriers faced by single parents and carers, with three main, recurring benefits.

Firstly, across all interventions, diverse specialist organisations brought and pooled their wide-ranging expertise, leading to more effective programme-design. Especially in combination with thorough context-mapping, this broad array of locally-rooted expert partners ensured the thorough identification of gaps, duplications and inefficiencies in existing service-provision, and allowed for more accurate estimates of capacities and needs. This was seen across programme evaluations, most notably in Making It Work and Working for Families.[252]

Secondly, the breadth of expertise that these partnerships brought – across employability, education, health, childcare, and personal finance, among others – facilitated the design and delivery of comprehensive holistic services.[253] Co-production and partnership working allowed all relevant stakeholder groups to pool their resources to surpass any internal constraints on their activities. This breadth of expertise across all relevant fields allowed programmes to cover all necessary bases, allocating roles according to each partner's specialisms to ensure high-quality, comprehensive services.

Employability has many complex interconnections with other fields, whether in terms of inter-related below-average outcomes (e.g. health), or as structural/external barriers to employment (e.g. childcare), that broad partnerships can help to resolve. Health 4 Work, for instance, partnered healthcare, financial and employment-related supports given their complex inter-connections. Making It Work brought together diverse stakeholders with expertise across a range of fields, and allocated roles accordingly to ensure high-quality and wide-ranging services. It was agreed by both stakeholders and evaluators that no single provider could have provided such comprehensive services on their own.[254] Carers in Employment

[245] (Scottish Government n.d.)
[246] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[247] (Klijn & Teisman, 2000, pp. 85-6)
[248] (Zambrano-Gutiérrez, et al., 2017; Schlappa, 2017)
[249] (Schlappa, 2017; Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[250] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b; Sirovatka & Greve, 2014)
[251] (Fledderus, et al., 2014; Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)
[252] (CRESR, 2017; McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[253] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[254] (CRESR, 2017)

also found that partnering with a large number of providers served as an insurance policy if one partner ceased operations; this minimised disruption and allowed for the fast reallocation of roles and resources.

Thirdly, the inclusion of respected and trusted organisations, with strong local reputations and pre-existing contacts/clients helped to secure buy-in and gather momentum early. Third sector organisations are often highly regarded by single parents and carers as trusted sources of support and information.[255] Their involvement in employability interventions therefore lent these programmes credibility and goodwill and generated significant numbers of referrals of partners' existing clients. The Carers in Employment programme's evaluation remarked that this allowed the programme to gather momentum and a strong reputation early. Health 4 Work similarly used broad partnerships and cross-referrals to widen access routes and tackle inequalities.

Across all the interventions examined, evaluative outputs saw strong partnership working as central to the programmes' successes, and indispensable for designing and delivering high-quality and efficient wraparound support.

Lindsay et al suggest that there is "some albeit mixed" evidence of a more collaborative approach to employability in Scotland, and indeed the Scottish Government has demonstrated a commitment to partnership-working.[256] Concerns persist, however, over its practical application, and the "strong degree of continuity with the UK model's payment by results contractualism".[257] Large for-profit providers still dominate Fair Start Scotland,[258] with contracts recently extended for a further 2 years.[259]

The Employability Pipeline, the Scottish Government's central employability framework, was intended to provide a template by which to organise, design, commission and deliver such partnership working, but independent evaluation has found that much of this remains ill-understood or under-conceptualised.[260] Even under Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) where partnership working has been positively reviewed, there are concerns from third sector organisations over the ramifications of funding changes requiring them to provide 'match funding'. Many small specialist organisations simply do not command such amounts of money and will consequently see themselves shut out of provision despite the expertise they bring. While the' Pipeline' is credited with an increase in partnership working in LEPs, this is highly inconsistent, and third sector involvement varies anywhere between 1-100% of service-delivery.[261]

## Incentivising Greater Partnership Working

With this in mind, we would like to see a more decisive commitment to partnership working, including the implementation of funding and governance models by which to turn this principle into a practical reality. Competitive and contractualism approaches undermine service-quality, stoke adversarial rather than collaborative practices, and shut out the specialist expertise so necessary for single parents and carers. Instead, we would like to see a funding and governance model that incentivises collaboration, ensures adequate investment in high-quality services for those furthest from the labour market, and puts co-production at the heart of employability programmes.

Our analysis of the above interventions gives some clues as to the specifics of such a funding and governance model. Making It Work required bidders to evidence demonstrable experience of partnership-building and working in lieu of competitive tendering, and selected partners on the basis of their complementarity and expertise, rather than the promise of efficiencies. This programme and Working for Families also found that clear messaging from funders that they expected cooperative

[255] (Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)
[256] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a, p. 323)
[257] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b, p. 38)
[258] (ThirdSector 2017)
[259] (STF 2020)
[260] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)
[261] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)

working was effective in establishing a collaborative tone.[262] In contrast, previous research has found that competitive tendering can stoke adversarial relationships between providers and can lead partners to hoard participants as they seek to claim credit for success.[263]

A long lead-in time and generous up-front funding were central to the successes of Making It Work, Working for Families and Carers in Employment. Up-front funding secured the participation of smaller, specialist partners from across the third sector, and allowed for heavy investment in more intensive interventions. This helped to avoid the creaming and parking associated with payments by results. Working for Families noted that high investment and large sunk-costs, coupled with small preliminary in-takes generated high costs-per client at the outset, but that these rapidly fell over the programme's life course.[264] Evaluative outputs found that generous up-front resources and time – at least 6 months – were needed for partnership-formation and thorough planning, but that this helped to achieve efficiencies overall.[265] Making It Work, similarly, found that generous, up-front funding and a long lead-in time led to a more effective programme in the long-run.[266]

Flexible funding streams were found across almost all programmes to be pivotal to successful partnership working. The use of mutual trust and partnership working avoided the constraints associated with formal, tightly worded contractual arrangements. Services could change as necessary without protracted negotiation. In a number of programmes, financial resources were pooled and jointly managed, meaning that flexible funding streams could be quickly re-deployed. This contrasts with the 'supply chain' conception of NPM employability, where funding is largely controlled by prime providers through formal and inflexible contracts.

## Co-Governance and Co-Management

This partnership approach to service-design and delivery may also be facilitated by mechanisms of 'co-governance' and 'co-management'. These further distinguish this approach from New Public Management approaches' 'supply-chain' conception of employability programmes overseen by a prime contractor. Bovaird describes a spectrum of coordination ranging from contractualism approaches – based on tendering, precise legal terms and standards, and financial incentives/penalties – to collaborative approaches – based on trust, mutual commitment and respect, and shared goals.[267] Co-governance and co-management represent the latter.[268]

Co-governance does not refer to an absence of leadership roles; indeed, across multiple interventions, the value and necessity of strong messaging on expectations and goals from funders and leaders was deemed essential. Rather, it refers to consensus-building across partners with regards to the more practical questions of programme content and delivery relative to these aims, to ensure more effective services and a more unified approach.

It was found by both Making It Work and Working for Families that clearly-articulated aims and end-goals from funders, with flexibility on design and implementation was a winning combination: the Big Lottery Fund ensured commitment to certain common principles, but stakeholders and practitioners stressed the benefits of working with a funding body that encouraged collaboration rather than micro-managing budgets.[269] Working for Families similarly noted the benefits of the 'hands off' flexibility afforded by the then Scottish Executive, underpinned by common aims and clear goals.[270] Practitioners favourably reviewed this mutually-trusting and supportive relationship.

[262] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[263] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[264] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[265] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[266] (CRESR, 2017)
[267] (Bovaird, 2004)
[268] (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012)
[269] (CRESR, 2017)
[270] (Bond, et al., 2009)

Making It Work made strong use of co-governance's consensual, deliberative approach. While each local project had a lead partner, most activities were agreed through consensus-building. For instance, the Big Lottery Fund had stipulated that the programme should help disadvantaged individuals, so partners agreed to dedicate significant energy and resources to engaging those further from the labour market, and then set out to find innovative ways of making this happen (e.g. through situating workers within local community hubs). When lead partners did act independently of partners it was seen by evaluation to undermine and hamper partnership working, with negative implications for wider services.[271]

An approach based upon co-governance appears to have resulted in various benefits. Firstly, it helped to establish agreement across partners on methods and ensured unity in partners' activities, leading to better coordination of each partner's activities towards common goals and principles. This in turn led to more effective and efficient services. Secondly, its deliberative thrust across a breadth of expertise ensured all relevant perspectives were heard during the programme's design. As such, it is seen to have led to more effective and comprehensive services.[272] Lindsay et al suggest that "Co-governance arrangements based on collaboration are better able to tap the knowledge and resources of the range of stakeholders whose expertise is required to plan solutions to complex problems."[273] The input of locally-rooted expert organisations allowed for the identification of gaps and duplications in existing provision, and allowed for more accurate estimates of capacity and demand.

Even after the activities were formulated, partners were encouraged to challenge aspects of the programme that they disagreed with or considered less effective, ensuring continuous improvement. This atmosphere of deliberation and pluralism was facilitated through funders' encouragement of disagreement, consensus-building procedures, regular all-partner meetings and practice-sharing sessions. Previous research has suggested that feedback mechanisms are central to continuous improvement and Making It Work gives examples of how these can be encouraged in practice.[274]

From our analysis of previous interventions, we have identified certain critical success factors to partnership-formation and partnership-working:

- Partners should be brought onboard from across the public, private and third sectors, and should include health specialists, local employers, local education and employability services, experts in welfare rights and personal finance, and – crucially – specialist TSOs with experience working with marginalised groups including single parents and carers, among others.
- Tendering processes should require bidders to show real experience of partnership working, rather than the all too common 'bid candy';
- Up-front funding helps to secure the participation of smaller, specialist organisations, and avoids issues of creaming and parking.
- Clear messaging from funders can help to establish a collaborative ethos. Funders can also ensure commitment to common principles and goals to increase unity across partners.
- Partnership formation and programme design require a long lead-in time, with Working for Families evaluators calling for at least six months between the assignation of funds and operations beginning.[275] While some practitioners found this frustrating, there was a consensus that it led to stronger services overall.
- Thorough context-mapping drawing on the expertise of diverse, local partner organisations helps to identify gaps, needs and duplications in the local context. This helps when assigning roles and, if necessary, recruiting further partners.
- Deliberative consensus-building on programme-design helps to ensure more effective and comprehensive services and helps to establish unity across partners' activities.

[271] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[272] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[273] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a, p. 322)
[274] (Pestoff, 2009)
[275] (Bond, et al., 2009)

- Intra-partner familiarity and respect are essential enablers. These can be facilitated through information and practice-sharing sessions (such as MIW Glasgow's 'Spotlight sessions') where partners can become better acquainted with each other's operations and specialisms. These should take place not only at the outset, but regularly throughout the programme to provide updates.
- This in turn allows for the clear assignation of roles according to each partner's expertise and ensures that partners know where to refer participants.

Partnership working was essential to all of the interventions we considered and shows great promise not only for participants and service-quality, but also for programmes' efficiency through more informed planning, reduced replication, and better targeting of resources. Co-produced partnership-based agreements appear a promising alternative to bureaucratic top-down New Public Management approaches. A logic of outsourcing and supply chains is ill-equipped to tackle the hugely complex challenges faced by many single parents and carers, where specialist, expert input is crucial. Partnership working across a range of stakeholders appears a hugely promising and effective alternative to the binary choice of monopolistic state provision, or marketized private outsourcing.

## Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

All of the interventions we examined were entirely voluntary. Coercive programmes that use financial threats against already-vulnerable individuals are not only cruel, but also highly counter-productive. We have seen too many examples of hugely damaging sanctions for non-attendance within mainstream programmes. Single parents do not have a partner on whom to rely in the case of their child's illness, a school closure, or their childcare arrangements breaking down. Similarly, many carers are the sole-earner and care for a spouse, and cannot, in any case, put their caring responsibilities on hold to attend a meeting. Both groups suffer from high rates of isolation, and therefore may lack the social supports that would see others through. Missing an appointment may at times be unavoidable, and parents and carers should not be forced to choose between financial security and the safety of their cared-for person.

From a more practical perspective, the Welfare Conditionality Project and others have found evidence that conditionality often pushes people into unsuitable and/or poor-quality employment under threat of sanctions.[276] This may lead to individuals 'cycling' in and out of low-paid work and failing to decisively break these cycles of poverty. Other research has found that the adversarial relationships that conditionality engenders can prompt disengagement or non-compliance.[277] We are therefore heartened to see Fair Start Scotland's eradication of conditionality, though note the need for more positive incentives to engage with employability programmes; the promise of wraparound support, for instance, was found by MIW to be an attractive proposition to prospective candidates. There is overwhelming evidence from previous scholarship, as well as our own enquiry with service-users, that single parents and carers are eager to work.[278] To build on its welcome eradication of conditionality, the Scottish model should now work towards raising awareness, widening access and facilitating participation.

The UK has been characterised, especially in recent years, by an increasing reliance on public employment services (PES) – namely, Jobcentre Plus – to get unemployed individuals into paid employment. This has tended to rely on statutory requirements, the tightening of benefit conditionality, and the use of negative financial incentives to spur individuals into action. However, even with these mandatory mechanisms, those furthest from the labour market are often outside of the reach of such bodies. Within our own research and in a number of interventions, [279] many respondents and participants – especially those furthest from the labour market – had not been in regular contact with PES.

[276] (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2018a; Campbell, et al., 2016)
[277] (Alford, 2009)
[278] E.g. (Department for Education, 2019)
[279] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)

Any employability programme should seek to support individuals at all distances from the labour market; an exclusive use of PES appears to offer a simply less blatant form of 'creaming and parking'. A number of interventions sought specifically to reach beyond those already proximal to the labour market, and to work with those facing the greatest barriers and labour market disadvantage. Such proactive outreach activities appear to be sorely lacking from current mainstream services: only 3% of all LEP spending, for instance, was spent on referral and engagement.[280]

## Removing Barriers to Participation

A number of barriers to access persist within employability: the opacity and complexity of the system and policy landscape can lead to uncertainty over eligibility, capacity and where/how to access services; mobility issues and transport costs can inhibit participation; time-poor carers and parents may not have the time to research the available services or attend them; and stigma around using such services persists. On top of this, while we strongly support the development of local programmes, we note that this can generate a crowded field and complex local landscape, with attendant information gaps, low awareness of the supports available, and confusion over where and how to access such services.

Across a number of interventions, we found a highly proactive approach to engagement taken by programmes, with certain findings on effective practices and methods. While an exclusive reliance on PES appears short sighted, there is no doubt that this is an important source of referrals. Working for Families, for instance received a substantial 25% of all referrals from Jobcentre Plus. Despite their very different approaches and ethos, programmes benefitted from forming and maintaining strong relationships with Jobcentre Plus.

Partnerships with a variety of stakeholder groups also helped to widen access routes. Unemployment has well-documented interconnections with health and finance, among others, that certain programmes sought to capitalise on. By partnering with, for instance, healthcare-providers, programmes secured referrals from a broad array of sectors and providers. Partnerships with single parent and carer-specialist organisations proved particularly effective across a number of interventions. The strong reputations that these organisations already enjoyed among parents and carers lent the programmes credibility by association, and their pre-existing client-lists allowed for easy referrals. Those programmes that partnered with specialist organisations tended to have greater success at recruiting those further from the labour market.

Many programmes went further still, through co-location and proactive community-level engagement of individuals. Health 4 Work used co-location to great effect: by situating keyworkers within community health-settings, service-users could easily be referred, *ad hoc*, through warm handovers to the employability service for a preliminary discussion. This tackled time and mobility-related barriers to access, by saving prospective participants the hassle and expense of arranging and attending a separate appointment. Carers in Employment similarly hot-desked at various venues, and outside of 'standard' work hours, to widen access. Meanwhile, Making It Work situated outreach workers in local community venues, including childcare, health and community hubs, to disseminate information on the programme, and to answer any queries from prospective participants. Doing so in familiar venues was found to lend the programmes credibility through their association with trusted settings/organisations.

Some programmes and project areas went further still: one local Making It Work programme saw outreach workers partner with a local single parent-specialist organisation and accompanied them on home visits, while others used leafleting and door-knocking in disadvantaged communities to raise awareness of the programme. Prospective participants reported that this demonstrated to them a sincere commitment from programme workers and made them feel valued. During these activities, evaluative outputs found that the promise of multi-faceted, wrap-around support – beyond employability, and across housing, finance, health, and others – was highly effective as a 'USP'.

[280] (Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2015)

Rural areas typically struggle with issues of poor infrastructure, limited and/or unaffordable public transport, and/or lack a critical mass of clients. One intervention found that a time-limited rolling intensive marketing campaign across sub-regions was an effective and resource-efficient way to boost awareness in rural communities.

These types of outreach activities undoubtedly require intensive and heavy investment – of financial, professional and time-resources – but were found across programmes to be highly effective at engaging those furthest from the labour market.

While proactive engagement appears essential, this should also be tempered with patience and sensitivity: many prospective participants lacked the confidence to commit immediately, or to attend a more formal meeting. It took time to build rapport and familiarity, through sensitive and expert staff. It may be useful to replicate Making It Work's 'pre-engagement' stage where information is shared, and questions answered without any pressure or commitment, prior to any more formal sessions.

## Empowerment

There was a strong ethos of empowerment common across all the interventions we examined. Coercive, directive programmes are axiomatically incompatible with the notion of empowerment or support, with not only dire financial consequences, but disastrous implications for individuals' mental health, anxiety and autonomy. Campbell et al's framework of 'conflict and control' documents the negative impacts of 'work first' approaches on not only employment outcomes – typically into poorly-paid, precarious and unsustainable positions – but on wider health and wellbeing measures through the loss of autonomy that they entail.[281] Other research has speculated that poor-quality outcomes are in fact no accident, but rather that 'work first' approaches are expressly designed to ensure a steady stream of workers to unappealing vacancies.[282] This is unacceptable. Career-first approaches must put the individual and their aspirations at their heart, rather than serving the needs of employers.

All of the interventions we examined sought to provide both personal and professional development and support. It was common across most programmes to offer a two/three-stage approach, beginning with personal development (e.g. self-confidence, motivation) and 'soft' employability skills (e.g. CV support, job-search activities), prior to more intensive vocational training. All of these interventions represent asset-based approaches: working with participants constructively, as active participants rather than passive recipients, encouraging and supporting them to identify and build on their assets and interests. These programmes worked with participants towards their aspirations and a career-path – in the case of Carers in Employment, using explicit visualisation and aspiration techniques.

This language of assets and aspirations contrasts sharply with more directive mainstream programmes. The importance of language and tone should not be under-estimated: we found recurrent observations across programmes that a positive tone and environment boosted participants' confidence, self-belief and motivation, and helped them to find proactive solutions, rather than replicating a discourse and perception of failure.

### Personal Development

Personal development is routinely overlooked in mainstream employability programmes, with their assumptions of work-readiness. Many single parents and carers report suffering from low self-confidence, isolation and/or poor mental health – especially those further from the labour market. These constitute considerable barriers to employment, and across all the interventions we examined, these were recurrent challenges facing participants.

[281] (Campbell, et al., 2016)
[282] (Peck, 2001) (Greer, 2016)

Low self-confidence or poor mental health make it not only unlikely that a participant will find and enter work – many, for instance, will lack the confidence to succeed at interview – but also potentially undesirable: for individuals in an already vulnerable position, a negative experience in work can hamper confidence even further and undermine future efforts to enter work. Our own qualitative research with service-users and academics, and our desk-based research of previous interventions found a firm consensus that single parents and carers must be emotionally and personally prepared before entering work.

Across all interventions, keyworker meetings helped many parents to build and sustain their confidence and motivation. These sessions, and participation in the programmes more broadly, helped to provide structure and regularity in single parents' and carers' lives where it may have previously been missing, with positive impacts for mental health and wellbeing, That is not to say, however, that programmes should not take more active steps to bolster participants' wellbeing.

Effective strategies and methods to boost self-confidence included personal development courses, mentoring, aspiration and visualisation and cognitive behavioural therapy, among others. These all require highly-skilled and empathetic workers, with experience working with vulnerable individuals. In the case of Carers in Employment, participants saw keyworkers (and the programme more widely) as an emotional support, rather than a purely employment-oriented endeavour. Empathetic and caring staff helped with personal crises as well as employment-related ones and were praised by participants and evaluators for their willingness to simply listen. The importance of this should not be underestimated; it was credited with building the emotional resilience of participants and made them feel less alone. This, and confidence-building more widely, were often first steps towards being in a more suitable position from which to pursue employment or training.

Across many of the interventions we explored, evaluative outputs remarked upon the positive impact of peer support and group work on participants' isolation and mental health. We believe that group work should therefore occupy a more prominent position in future mainstream programmes, where it has previously been less prevalent. Group sessions helped to overcome the isolation experienced by many single parents and carers and gave them a means of meeting new people and improving their social skills. In addition to this emotional support, it served as a forum for sharing tips and advice and allowed single parents to establish more practical supports: many parents went on to share collections and drop-offs, and to support one another in case of an unexpected sickness or a last-minute shift becoming available.

In the absence of a secondary-earner or parent, this kind of safety net is vital for navigating the uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in single parents' lives, while maintaining an adequate income. This safety net also served to avoid over-reliance on keyworkers: while keyworkers can provide excellent and timely support, they may not necessarily be available at short notice, and, from an organisational perspective, making last-minute changes might jeopardise service-quality and support for other users.

Carers in Employment similarly found that groupwork allowed participants to feel less alone. Participants felt reassured to hear other peers describe similar challenges and feelings. In some cases, for instance, feeling overwhelmed had been internalised or interpreted as a personal failing, so it was reassuring to hear others express the same sentiments and difficulties. This allowed participants to begin to see their barriers as external and to set about finding proactive solutions to them, rather than seeing it as an immutable personal deficiency.

Across the interventions we examined, personal development had huge benefits, independent of employability, on self-confidence, self-efficacy and wider wellbeing. To reflect this, Making It Work went so far as to run purely recreational group sessions to strengthen parents' bonds and confidence.

The interventions we examined point to the fact that there is no neat delineation between personal and professional dimensions of employability. Across all interventions, it was observed that improved self-

efficacy and self-reliance empowered single parents and carers to make their own informed decisions about their future employment and employability. It was also noted across projects, perhaps most explicitly by Carers in Employment, that improved self-efficacy and wellbeing help to not only attain employment in the short run, but to sustain it in the long-run.

While it is important to maintain a focus on employability and employment, boosting vulnerable individuals' resilience, confidence and home-life can never be a bad thing.

### Professional development

Many single parents and carers lack recent experience or qualifications, usually owing to time taken out of the labour market or education due to their caring responsibilities. Across the interventions we examined, qualifications and experience were frequently cited as barriers to employment and were among the strongest determinants of success.[283]

In international perspective, the UK's active labour market spending is very low, demonstrating its under-investment in training and upskilling initiatives.[284] The inadequacy of the UK's skills policy has been noted even in political circles for some time now, but with little decisive action taken to remedy this. Skills policy is central to a number of the Scottish Government's frameworks and goals, including Scotland's Economic Strategy and Scotland's Labour Market Strategy, including the Fair Work Agenda.[285]

While Fair Start Scotland has laudably removed the harsher elements of conditionality seen in the preceding Work Programme, our qualitative enquiry with experts found a broad consensus that it could not reasonably be described as a 'human capital' approach. Interviewees and service-users almost universally agreed that a greater emphasis on training, upskilling and educational opportunities should be central to a distinctive Scottish approach.

The interventions we looked at did largely use the CV-support, job-search activities and interview practice techniques common to mainstream programmes – albeit with a more selective approach than is often found in mainstream services. These are indeed effective strategies and were seen as helpful for single parents and carers who had taken time out of the labour market and lacked an up to date CV, for instance. However, for those lacking skills, experience or qualifications, more intensive interventions proved necessary and a number of the programmes we looked at offered more intensive, vocational training in addition to this practical support, with certain findings on best practice. Across all interventions, a selective, career-oriented approach was adopted, geared towards specific, suitable and rewarding careers that aligned with participants' assets, interests and responsibilities. In two interventions – Working for Families and Making It Work – providers partnered with the Scottish Childminding Association to help a small number of single parents to pursue training and careers in childcare. This was seen as a stable and rewarding, parent-friendly form of employment for the participants, and had the added benefit of expanding local capacity and provision into the future for other parents.

Training should be 'demand-led'. That is to say, rather than offering a generic menu of training options, training opportunities should be "provided in response to clients' interests and employment opportunities that [arise] during the life of the programme".[286] This avoids the excesses of 'work first' approaches, while continuing to operate within the realities of the local labour market.

In the interventions we examined, this relied upon two critical components: firstly, participants must be supported – as outlined above – to identify their assets and interests, and to formulate/visualise a career-path for themselves; and secondly, programmes must engage local employers early to identify gaps,

[283] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[284] (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014)
[285] (McQuaid, 2017)
[286] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016, p. 26)

needs and opportunities in the local labour market.[287] The logic underpinning this approach suggests that gearing training towards concrete vacancies and employers in the local labour market is more likely to result in real job outcomes. This is reinforced by empirical international findings[288] and a meta-review of activation strategies which finds that training tailored to local labour markets is likely to enjoy greater additionality.[289]

The UK's poor productivity and skills-shortages have, over recent decades, prompted increasing concern from employers. This has presented opportunities – largely squandered in the UK – for employability programmes to engage with local employers to design mutually-beneficial training solutions for both employers and the unemployed, and to craft placements with said employers (see below).[290] This approach relies on "effective information flows across various labour market stakeholders,"[291] including the various different arms of an employability programme.[292]

This demand-led approach of tailoring training to local labour market needs and vacancies is seen by formal analysis to be more effective,[293] and there is growing interest in such demand-led training but, to date, only limited practical application of the idea in a UK context. Our qualitative enquiry with academics stressed the importance of working with local employers to this end but found agreement that this is often an afterthought in both mainstream and non-mainstream programmes. We do, however, find some positive and effective examples of employer-facing activities in our case study interventions (outlined more fully below). Previous scholarship has, however, suggested that demand-led training risks replicating the hiring standards of employers and might redouble discriminatory approaches to hiring, thus failing those furthest from the labour market.[294] Standards must remain high, and unscrupulous employers should not be able to use employability programmes simply to avoid paying for training themselves. 'Gatekeeper' organisations, such as those used by Marks & Start might help to avoid such exploitative practices.

From our analysis of previous interventions, we have identified certain factors affecting the effectiveness of training and/or minimising drop-out rates. Firstly, in addition to engaging with employers, demand-led training should offer structured 'compilations' of training courses geared towards specific roles. Making It Work Glasgow, for instance, designed tailored packages for those specifically seeking to enter caring roles, comprising training in first aid, manual handling, dementia awareness and conflict resolution. These were seen by evaluative outputs to lead to more concrete outcomes than a more 'scattershot' approach.

Secondly, accredited training was seen as especially effective and enjoyed greater additionality, echoing previous research.[295] These 'portable' qualifications are particularly effective when pitched as saving employers extra expenses.

Thirdly, voluntary training initiatives were seen to secure greater commitment from participants. Unsurprisingly, mandated participation on training programmes that are not of interest or relevance to participants can prompt disengagement.

More broadly, training patterns and delivery should take account of single parents' and carers' time commitments and caring responsibilities. Single parents and carers are often the sole-earner and sole-caregiver and thus cannot share their responsibilities. This should be taken into account in the delivery of training programmes. On this basis:

[287] See 'Good Jobs'
[288] E.g. (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020)
[289] (Martin, 2015)
[290] (Spoonley, 2008)
[291] (deBruin & Dupuis, 2008, p. 399)
[292] (Martin, 2015)
[293] (Martin, 2015)
[294] (Fletcher, 2004)
[295] (Whitworth, 2013)

- Training should be delivered flexibly, to account for the volatility inherent in single parents' lives. It should be easy to catch up or retake missed classes as this may prove inevitable.
- Training should be delivered in – for example – 2 half-day sessions rather than a full day, to work around single parents' time commitments.
- Training should, where possible, take place in small groups and informally to encourage the participation of less confident individuals.
- Training should be compatible with part-time work so that parents and carers do not have to choose between earning and learning.
- Training should be accompanied by childcare/crèches so that parents can participate fully without incurring extra costs or stress.

## Placements & Volunteering: Skills-acquisition and safeguarding

In addition to training, work placements and voluntary work were found to be highly effective across a number of interventions, especially for those furthest from the labour market. In the case of Working for Families, voluntary work was found by evaluation to be the most effective programme for those with the very lowest qualifications and experience.[296] Voluntary work or placements allowed these participants to gain skills and experience, while the voluntary/unpaid nature of this work tended to afford them greater control and flexibility over their hours and work patterns. This allowed them to build experience and perform their caring responsibilities, and in some cases served as a 'trial run' whereby they could practice balancing work and care without incurring any financial risk. In this sense, it allowed them to build not only their skillset, but also their confidence about their ability to enter paid work, and/or to clarify what hours and working arrangements would suit them. The interactive element of this work was also found to boost participants' confidence and mental health.

Employer-engagement also helped programmes to craft suitable work placements and voluntary opportunities with local employers, and to build a portfolio of such opportunities. Brokerage and crafting allow programmes to tailor this work to the individual's needs and circumstances, making employment outcomes more sustainable, while work placements offered opportunities for skills-acquisition.

It should be noted that the use of voluntary work or work placements raises the prospect of dubious practices from unscrupulous employers, as well as from employability programmes eager to be seen to be doing something. No participant should be pressured into working for free, or in a sector that is not of interest to them. Therefore, at the very least, such approaches must be entirely voluntary. Going further, measures should be put in place by which to safeguard participants from the threat of exploitation. Marks & Start's use of intermediary 'gatekeeper' organisations – third sector specialists – to pre-screen participants and negotiate and oversee such placements appears a promising model.

More broadly, Marks & Start offers a template that employability programmes might seek to replicate with any (large) employer in the above-mentioned portfolio of placements. Examples of its good practice for duplication include reimbursing travel and food costs associated with placements, accredited portable training that would be undertaken by any new employee, feedback and career development, and a drive towards real job outcomes through its 'suitable to re-engage' feature.

A number of interventions we considered struggled with the finer details of employer-facing activities, but Marks & Start also offers some provisional examples of best practice in this vein. Marks & Start's business-benefits offer clues to the form that employer-friendly arguments might take; namely, a language of untapped resource, greater retention, improved morale and resultant higher productivity, and positive local reputation and press coverage.

[296] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

## 'Human Capital'

In general terms, we – and many of our interviewees – would like to see a greater commitment to 'human capital' approaches to employability. The benefits of investing in training and education over 'work first' approaches are well-documented across the literature: a series of meta-reviews can be summarised to suggest that entry into work has benefits for the individual and society, but that human capital approaches can have longer term benefits;[297] human capital approaches are believed by some to lead to more sustainable outcomes for those further from the labour market and facing multiple barriers to employment;[298] previous research has found that 'work first' approaches appear more effective that classroom-based training in the short term, but that this inverts when a longer-term perspective is adopted.[299]

Human capital approaches are also associated with more sustainable outcomes and improved standards: individuals with specific qualifications or skills are harder to replace, making them less expendable, and giving them greater bargaining power in the workplace. This leads to not only improved progression prospects[300] – of especial relevance to single parents and carers – but also means that employers have greater incentives to acquiesce to their requirements.[301] In the case of single parents and carers, this may help them to secure the more flexible working patterns they require, for instance.

From a macroeconomic perspective, an activation regime that relies on allocating workers to vacancies will inevitably break down when said vacancies dry up. Martin's meta-analysis finds that 'work first' approaches are a 'fair weather' instrument, and are only effective in a buoyant labour market,[302] and there is evidence from the Nordic countries that during a downturn, it is more effective to use longer-lasting training initiatives.[303] The UK is already facing turbulence in the labour market that is likely to become even more pronounced, and reskilling is increasingly entering political discourse as an inevitability.

Nevertheless, we also acknowledge that skills are no panacea: supply-side interventions are inevitably constrained by demand-side realities.[304] It is highly likely that demand-side interventions will be necessary to pick up some of the spare capacity in the labour market.

We equally note that the 'work first' versus 'human capital' dichotomy risks perpetuating narrowly individualistic and competitive conceptions of employability: they fail to take account of the wider, structural or circumstantial barriers faced by certain groups and individuals – perhaps most notably, the inadequacy of childcare provision. For this reason, personalised and holistic services are imperative.

## Personalisation

A key message that surfaced regularly in our findings – echoing previous research[305] – is that personalisation relies primarily on the nature and success of street-level practice. Personalisation should not be a tick box exercise – as has been observed in previous mainstream programmes.[306] The use of keyworkers and personal action plans, for instance, does not guarantee personalisation; rather, this requires high-quality and adaptive services at the level of programme-delivery.

[297] (Meager, 2009; Boone & van Ours, 2009; Card, et al., 2010)
[298] (Sol & Hoogtanders, 2005)
[299] (Hotz, et al., 2006; Dyke, et al., 2006)
[300] (Wilson, 2018)
[301] (Peters & Wilson, 2017)
[302] (Martin, 2015)
[303] (Norlund, 2009; Forslund, et al., 2011)
[304] (Keep & Mayhew, 2010)
[305] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016; Rice, 2013)
[306] (Lane, et al., 2011, p. 49)

The need for personalised support for those facing multiple and/or complex barriers, including many single parents and carers, is thoroughly documented across the literature.[307] UK and Scottish Governments' have embraced the principle of tailored support, though this rhetorical commitment to this has rarely been substantiated with concrete action. Recent Westminster Governments have sought to (rhetorically) pair increased conditionality with the promise of greater tailoring of provision, though the veracity of this is contested by both academics and service-users.[308]

## Keyworkers: a double-edged sword?

Working for Families arguably popularised the use of keyworkers, and they have become a mainstay of UK employability programmes, aimed at providing a more tailored experience for participants. While we welcome this development, it is not enough in isolation to guarantee truly tailored services,[309] and may – as we will show – generate new risks of mistreatment.

However, keyworkers certainly do have real value and impact. Across the interventions we examined they helped clients to navigate a highly complex landscape through referrals to related services. Keyworkers also offered a key point of contact and continuity to resolve queries, facilitate transitions, and reduced the perceptions of participants that they were being repeatedly palmed off between services.

Single parents and carers, owing to their caring (and other) commitments, are often time-poor. For this reason, printed communication and one-off advice were found to be inadequate by the Carers in Employment programme as participants did not have the time or resources to do their own research or navigate this highly complex field. More intensive, regular keyworker sessions were much more effective in making consistent progress. In addition, we should also be wary of the potential downsides of keyworker models in order to identify best practice in this regard. Within our own qualitative enquiry with parents, keyworkers were found to be a real lottery and a potential source of anxiety, stress and dread – a sentiment echoed across the literature.[310]

While discretion is central to a personalised approach, it also entails an inherent trade-off between flexibility and consistency and raises the prospects of adversarial and judgemental treatment by frontline workers. Previous research has shown that many mainstream frontline workers will demonstrate a professional and vocational dedication to their work.[311] Some will make extra effort and show favourable discretion towards those they deem to be making especial efforts.[312] The counterpoint to this, however, is the risk of an "adversarial approach to [those deemed] hardcore customers".[313] More broadly, it has been suggested that the type – and therefore, quality – of support an individual receives will reflect the keyworker's "personal standards of whether or not someone is deserving."[314] Research has also found that advisors' personal feelings can impact on the likelihood of a participant being referred to training and educational opportunities.[315] This highlights the tension between personalisation and consistency; given the ongoing stigma and prejudices surrounding single parents, carers and the unemployed more generally, this raises considerable risks of mistreatment.

It is therefore imperative that keyworkers are sensitive to and understanding of the challenges faced by single parents and carers. It is, however, common for mainstream programmes' keyworkers to have no professional experience in social work or counselling, yet they are tasked nevertheless with supporting

[307] E.g. (Whitworth, 2013; Whitworth, 2016)
[308] (Kozek & Kubisa, 2016; Skills Network, 2014)
[309] (van Berkel, 2017)
[310] (Campbell, et al., 2016)
[311] (Skelcher & Smith, 2015)
[312] (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003)
[313] (Fletcher, 2011, p. 450)
[314] (Lipsky, 1980, p. 23)
[315] (Whitworth, 2013)

highly vulnerable individuals.[316] In many instances, mistreatment or poor-quality support is a result of ignorance rather than malice, arising from inadequate training, and compounded by short-staffing, high caseloads and performance targets that preclude keyworkers from offering more intensive support. In our qualitative research with service-users, practitioners and experts, we found qualitative evidence that mainstream keyworkers often do not share the same experiences as their service-users, limiting the extent to which they can offer true support.

With the above in mind, it is imperative that keyworkers are sensitive to, understanding of, and informed about the specific needs and barriers faced by single parents and carers. Given the complexity of the employability landscape and its adjacent fields, they should be familiar with the needs of single parents and carers, and the networks of relevant specialist services and providers that these individuals might benefit from. While Jobcentre Plus staff can refer service-users to external organisations for specialist support, previous research has found limited advisor awareness of such organisations or their operations.[317]

In contrast, across the interventions we examined, keyworkers were staffed largely from local specialist third sector organisations run specifically for single parents and/or carers. The specific knowledge that these professionals held allowed for much faster and more effective referrals, and their vocational commitment led them to provide emotional and personal support rather than purely employment-related advice. The interventions we examined made great efforts to get to know participants, and dedicated significant staffing, time and resources to this. Keyworkers took time to understand participants' personal and household circumstances – including identifying their caring responsibilities and their social support networks, among others – and worked with them to identify their assets and aspirations.[318] Many participants had not previously had the time to even think about their employability or aspirations on account of their caring responsibilities, so keyworkers ensured that adequate time was taken to build up to this. Devising a meaningful personal action plan requires keyworkers to build familiarity, rapport and trust with participants. On account of the highly sensitive information being divulged, it was found by one programme that it was common for participants to withhold personal information for up to 6 months. Only then did they formulate a personal action plan to ensure this took account of all relevant factors. While personal plans are now common to most mainstream employability interventions, this shows that they are not all of the same value.

In order to allow for this intensive one-to-one support, caseloads in the Making It Work programme were kept below 50 to ensure keyworkers could dedicate adequate time and energy on getting to know each client. In contrast, in our own qualitative research with service-users, respondents were acutely aware of mainstream programmes' resource and staffing shortages (and were even forgiving of their own negative experiences in recognition of this).

It is worth nothing that we found a degree of divergence between programmes on the specifics of their respective keyworker models. Some kept a consistent keyworker throughout while others changed keyworker at each stage of the participant's journey. The latter allowed keyworkers to specialise in certain activities, while the former ensured continuity and that participants did not have to explain their circumstances afresh. We do not take a firm position on either, though are inclined towards the former for its consistency and confidentiality; previous research has found issues of inefficiency and frustration associated with high advisor-turnover.[319]

[316] (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016)
[317] (Whitworth, 2013)
[318] Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach appears a highly promising template for such activities.
[319] (Whitworth, 2013)

## 'User-Centred Services

All the evidence from our own qualitative enquiry and across the literature agrees that single parents, carers and the unemployed more generally want to work. Employability programmes must therefore work *with* them to make this a reality, putting their needs at their heart, rather than treating them demanding conformity. Programmes must therefore be user-shaped and user-centred, rather than service-led.

Some services offered more free-form sessions lasting 'as long as it takes', though the Carers in Employment programme found that short, regular sessions were preferable, to provide consistent, small, sustainable progress for participants, and to ensure the smooth running of all sessions from an operational side. Making It Work granted control of the length and regularity of sessions to participants to suit their needs and other commitments. While all approaches have their merits, a combination of the latter two appears most promising, coupling regularity with flexibility.

Strong information storage and sharing were seen as key enablers to effective referrals across programmes, and across the wider literature.[320] Information-sharing and shared information systems, across partner providers allowed for easy referral of clients and their relevant information with administrative ease, and saved participants from having to repeatedly explain their circumstances, with benefits for both programmes' efficiency and users' satisfaction.

Strong partnership working was, more broadly, a key enabler of effective referrals. Intra-partner familiarity – facilitated through practice-sharing sessions and clearly defined roles[321] – ensured accurate referrals with reliable follow-up work.

Co-location was also pursued by a number of partnerships/programmes that we evaluated. Situating different partner-organisations and roles within one venue and/or situating support workers in a range of community venues (e.g. health, childcare and community hubs) helped to widen access and allow for easy *ad hoc* referrals. Given that single parents and carers are often time poor, and may suffer transport/mobility issues, this helped to ensure easy access to all relevant supports without needing to make a formal appointment and/or travel to a new venue. This also served to tackle information gaps – many parents and carers were not aware of where or how to access services, or unsure of capacity/availability – and stigma – situating services within familiar venues ensured that individuals could access such services without facing logistical barriers or anxiety.

Co-location also allowed for 'warm handovers' rather than more impersonal 'signposting'. Some programmes had previously 'lost' clients between referrals, so this, along with strong information-sharing, served to ensure participants accessed all relevant services. Given the low confidence that many single parents and carers face, it could prove intimidating to arrange and attend sessions with a number of different and unfamiliar organisations. Co-location and warm handovers made this process more informal and less intimidating. This approach was praised by practitioners for the efficiency and effectiveness it entailed, as well as by participants for the respect it engendered. Co-location is gaining traction internationally and in diverse fields but has yet to catch on in mainstream employability in the UK. If employability services wish to be truly 'user-centred' then such practices should be institutionalised.

Many programmes also demonstrated huge commitment and flexibility from frontline staff. Carers in Employment sought to widen access and ensure that working carers could attend, so keyworkers offered sessions outside of standard working-hours, and 'hot-desked' at a variety of community venues to

[320] E.g. (Stevenson, 2010; Sutherland, et al., 2015)
[321] See 'Governance and Management' above

overcome any mobility issues that participants might face. Across a number of interventions, keyworkers provided, in addition to regular sessions, *ad hoc* support via phone, text and social media to support parents at short notice in case of emergencies or a breakdown in childcare arrangements to help navigate potential crisis points. This speaks to the importance of having high-quality and dedicated staff, with a sincere and vocational commitment to providing personal support and willing to go the extra mile to do so.

A number of service-users that we spoke to spoke positively about their recent experiences under COVID-19 of remote employability counselling and activities. While they had experienced huge difficulties associated with lockdown, many spoke highly of the peer support and camaraderie of group sessions, especially in tackling isolation. There was also an acknowledgement that online classes and sessions helped from a logistical perspective. This eliminated transport costs and any tensions around care/collections, with reduced anxiety and distraction as a result. Employability programmes may seek to capitalise on the growth of video-call software during the pandemic, especially in rural areas facing issues around infrastructure and transport, and/or lacking a critical mass of clients. However, online delivery should not be used as a cost-cutting mechanism for providers, but rather to facilitate parents' and carers' participation. Nor should it completely supplant in-person and/or group sessions: other respondents were less confident over Zoom, many stressed the emotional benefits of group sessions, and it should be remembered that single parents and carers suffer from high rates of digital exclusion.

If employability programmes are to be truly 'user centred' then the practices outlined above should be institutionalised. Granting participants control over the regularity and timing of their meetings puts their needs first, instead of conformity. Flexibility and co-location of services similarly serve to work around service-users' needs, commitments and mobility, with positive implications for services' effectiveness and users' experiences.

### Co-production of services

Keyworkers are central to personalisation, and good-quality one-to-one support was praised by evaluators and participants alike across all programmes we examined. This one-to-one support was seen as a key enabler of success in all interventions. However, it is not enough in isolation.

Keyworkers' discretion is inevitably bounded by the scope of services available within the programme. The UK's trajectory has gravitated consistently over recent decades towards homogenous, generic services, limiting the scope for real discretion and personalisation. Previous research has suggested that the hegemony of these approaches has limited the potential of policymakers to even conceive of alternative approaches,[322] so concerted effort will be needed to change course.

New Public Management approaches, similarly, treat service-users as consumers able - at best - to select from a menu of options, but with minimal opportunities to influence the services on offer or their delivery.[323] Previous scholarship has noted the contradiction whereby (more disciplinarian) activation paints unemployed individuals as 'self-governing subjects' but offers 'no co-produced processes to engage or develop the agency of the unemployed.'[324]

With this in mind, ideas of co-production are gaining traction, including within the Scottish Government across fields including health and social care as well as social security. Recent 'lived experience panels' organised by the Scottish Government point to a sincere and promising commitment to more participatory approaches.[325] However, despite a commitment to the principle, the Scottish Government itself acknowledges that there is still much "confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the

[322] (Rice, 2017)
[323] (Fledderus, et al., 2014)
[324] (Whitworth, 2016, p. 426)
[325] (Scottish Government 2019)

concept."[326] The principle has also surfaced in the Scottish employability landscape, but with limited practical application. For instance, in 2015 only one LEP had undertaken a full co-production of programme design.[327] We will therefore seek to flesh out this often-under-conceptualised notion, and to identify enablers of its practical realisation. Consultations without real consequences are likely to prompt further disengagement and frustration, so purported co-production may backfire if improperly applied.

Co-production is sometimes incorrectly taken to refer to any interaction between service-providers and service-users at the point of delivery.[328] This takes co-production to be an inherent part of any keyworker-interaction, but in reality, it is far more specific. Rather, co-production should be taken to refer to the active inclusion of service-users in shaping programme content, as active participants rather than passive recipients of support. Co-produced services offer not merely a menu of options from which participants can choose, but involvement in what services are delivered and how.[329]

A number of recent studies have highlighted its potential in the field of employability,[330] and its advocates argue from both principled and practical grounds. It appears paternalistic at best to assume that providers can know participants' needs better than them. Indeed, the Christie Commission found that public services often do not know what outcomes are most valued by people and communities,[331] and employability appears to be no exception. Co-production allows participants to directly report their own needs and desires, with more effective programmes as a result.[332]

Across the interventions we examined, elements of co-production and control were found to give participants a sense of ownership and control over their employability, rather than replicating discourses of 'needs' that can entrench perceptions of failure. Qualitative enquiry with participants found that this allowed them to feel in control of their circumstances, with positive implications for motivation and outcomes. Greater control is not only associated with improved mental health,[333] but also stronger motivation and commitment,[334] and, in turn, more effective interventions. Co-production also helps programmes to establish a positive reputation in the local community,[335] promises better relationships between service-users and providers,[336] and even engenders greater trust in the government and state.[337] However, this only applies to meaningful co-production with real consequences for policy and delivery.

Much has been written on Making It Work's co-produced approach.[338] The programme gave participants (arguably) unprecedented control over programme content and delivery, the pace of their employment plan and flexibility to review this, and the regularity of their keyworker appointments. Qualitative review with practitioners found that participants' feedback, requests and needs were routinely incorporated into programme content, in terms of both content – 'demand-led training' for instance, built packages on the basis of participants' assets, interests and opportunities in the local labour market – and delivery – the delivery of this training was tailored to parents' schedules and needs, and ensured to provide the flexibility they required.

Our research also identified certain common enablers and success factors to a co-produced approach. Firstly, partnership-working was closely associated with co-production: third sector organisations were

[326] (Scottish Government, 2015, p. 1)
[327] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)
[328] (Fledderus & Honingh, 2016)
[329] (Pestoff, 2009, p. 209)
[330] (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012; Fledderus & Honingh, 2016)
[331] (Christie, 2011)
[332] (Garven, et al., 2016)
[333] (Considine, et al., 2018)
[334] (Fledderus & Honingh, 2016; Garven, et al., 2016)
[335] (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012)
[336] (Burns, 2013)
[337] (Fledderus, et al., 2014)
[338] E.g. (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)

seen to commit to the principle and worked actively at street-level to put this into practice.[339] The trust and familiarity that they enjoyed with single parents and the positive relationships this engendered provided a forum for participants to express their needs and preferences. This echoes previous research suggesting that third sector organisations are essential in facilitating user-participation, and that mission-oriented organisations are closely associated with social innovation and co-production.[340]

Flexible funding streams were seen across a number of innovations to facilitate responsive services. In contrast with more rigid payment structures and contractual partnerships, flexible funding allowed for the faster reallocation of financial and other resources to introducing new services and scrapping sub-optimal ones. Similarly, up-front funding ensured partners had adequate resources to introduce, build and alter programmes.[341] Previous research has similarly argued that "co-production may be value for money but, it usually cannot provide value without money."[342]

### Pace, goals, and 'distance travelled'

True personalisation should also take full account of participants' aspirations and distance from the labour market. Given the diversity of circumstances and proximity to the labour market across participants, a unitary end-goal of paid employment appears, at best, unrealistic. Women's advocacy groups and a number of our interviewees suggested that a binary conception of inactivity or paid employment risks ignoring the needs of women moving between these two states.[343]

As noted above, assumptions of work readiness often do not reflect single parents and carers' lived reality and might do more harm than good. 75% of Working for Families participants, for instance, faced multiple or complex barriers that made immediate entry into work neither feasible nor desirable.

In the same intervention, entry into work was the most common end-goal, but still reflected only 38% of participants. 16% aspired to enter education or training, and 13% to "move closer to being able to consider education, training or work," with the latter especially common among those furthest from the labour market. These are perfectly legitimate and admirable aspirations, especially for those furthest from the labour market and/or with significant caring responsibilities. For example, a single parent with young children may want to bring themselves closer to the labour market through training or voluntary work, in preparation for their child starting school, at which point paid work becomes more realistic and rewarding. It should be remembered that an individual's employability changes at certain life junctures that employability programmes might seek to capitalise on. Education and voluntary work can have huge personal and professional benefits for participants, and a longer-term investment in these may well lead to more suitable, sustainable, better-paying job outcomes in the long-run.[344]

This diversity in labour market proximity was reflected in Working for Families' evaluative framework of 'hard', 'soft' and 'other soft' outcomes. The concept of 'Distance travelled' appears to have dwindled somewhat in recent years, as 'hard' outcomes have become increasingly hard: Working for Families' hard outcomes, for example, included education, training and voluntary work, whereas current evaluation tends to focus narrowly on employment outcomes. Fair Start Scotland's payment structure rewards only entry into paid work at over 16 hours per week, with minimal incentives for providers to invest in training or education for participants.

A more longitudinal perspective should be used by employability interventions, whereby a longer-term intervention or a second programme might complete a participant's entry into paid employment. If

[339] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[340] (Mulgan, et al., 2007) (Windrum, et al., 2016)
[341] (Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[342] (Bovaird & Löffler, 2012, p. 58)
[343] (Engender, 2016)
[344] See 'Human capital'

employability programmes are to include and support those facing the greatest labour market disadvantage, then a greater incorporation of 'distance travelled' is imperative.

This appears unlikely under Fair Start Scotland's current payment structures, however. Payment by results means that providers are unlikely to undertake this work without reward, only for another provider/programme to potentially later claim the credit and financial reward for a successful job-entry. Under the Work Programme, payment by results demonstrably led to issues of creaming and parking, and prevented more intensive investment in those furthest from the labour market.[345] Differential payments also appear ineffective – and arguably counterproductive – with various evaluators expressing scepticism at their empirical results.[346] The difficulty – or, arguably, impossibility – of quantifying this risk makes it highly unlikely that any estimated differential will function exactly as intended.

While clear aims and goals proved important across all interventions we considered, these should not operate narrowly and myopically to the detriment of those facing the greatest labour market disadvantage.

A related question is one of pace. Single parents', carers' and, more generally, women's employability journeys are rarely simple or linear. Previous research by service-users and evaluators have found that mainstream services often operate on timelines and expectations that clash with the reality of single parents' and carers' commitments. For instance, a participant is expected to formalise their aims and goals within their first session with the Jobcentre Plus, and must subsequently attend fortnightly sessions or risk sanctions.[347] Skills Network have similarly pointed to the difficulty of finding suitable appointments and attending inflexible sessions, compounded by their lack of childcare provision.[348] Such strict, inflexible timelines should be avoided given their unrealistic expectations and the stress they can engender in participants.

In more general terms, the pipeline approach does appear to be effective in encouraging progression,[349] but should not push participants to go faster than they find comfortable. Caring responsibilities, and potentially work commitments, may limit the regularity with which a participant can engage with the programme. For a variety of reasons, from everyday concerns such as school holidays, to more significant occurrences like mental health or domestic abuse, participants may need to temporarily disengage or take a step back from their employability activities. Participants should be able to do so without penalty, disruption or the need to start all over again. Such flexibility is seen as essential to carers in various evaluations.[350] Arbitrary timelines/time-limits defy this flexibility and/or the distance of many participants from the labour market.

Too many mainstream programmes seek to make participants fit within their system, rather than tailoring a model to suit participants' needs and circumstances.

## Holistic support

Our qualitative enquiry with service-users heard the shocking testimony that one single parent had been advised by their Jobcentre Plus Work Coach that their circumstances were simply too complex, and that they should resign themselves to not working. No individual, and lesser still their employability advisor, should be compelled to give up in the face of complex circumstances. Rather, programmes must work with participants to address all the relevant barriers to employment that they face in a way that both reflects the pace of progress that is appropriate for the individual while recognising the distance travelled by them; these are fundamental elements to a dignified approach.

[345] (Lane, et al., 2013)
[346] (Rees, et al., 2014)
[347] (Whitworth, 2013)
[348] (Skills Network, 2014)
[349] (Sutherland, et al., 2015)
[350] (Formby & Yeandle, 2005; IES, 2014)

There is a growing consensus across the literature acknowledging the need for holistic, joined-up support for those facing multiple and/or complex barriers to employment. An individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link, and holistic support presents an opportunity to tackle the structural and 'personal circumstance' barriers faced by single parents and carers.

Working for Families is credited with arguably popularising the holistic approach to employability: its pilot programme originally intended to couple employment support with childcare-related support, but quickly found that many more facets of employability required attention. Across a number of the programmes we examined, the number of services accessed by participants correlated positively with employment outcomes, and in one intervention, participants accessed an average of five or six services.

We have outlined above the importance of personalisation but recall that it is inevitably constrained by the range of services on offer. With regards to the provision of holistic services, the content a specific programme should obviously depend on the local context, participants' needs, and pre-existing provision, but we have identified a number of key services that proved especially effective or helpful across the interventions we examined, as well as certain more generalised findings on partnership-working and service-commissioning.

Partnerships were central to the programmes' provision of holistic, joined-up services. The barriers faced by single parents and carers are often complex, multi-faceted and/or inter-connected. Broad partnerships therefore allowed programmes to tackle each and every facet, with service-delivery allocated to each partner on the grounds of their respective specialisms. This cohesive and collaborative approach was underpinned by strong information and practice-sharing, mutual respect, shared goals and clearly defined roles.

The importance of co-production applies here as well: programmes' receptiveness to participants' feedback helped to identify and fill gaps in provision as they were reported. This, in turn, was facilitated by flexible funding streams allowing for the fast reallocation of financial and other resources to new content.

Personal development and skills-acquisition – both 'hard' and 'soft' – are essential, as outlined above. Employer-facing activities and brokerage were also central to many operations and are more fully expounded upon below. We will therefore not duplicate these discussions here, despite their central importance. Rather we will look at relevant services aimed at tackling the circumstantial and structural barriers faced by single parents and carers.

## Childcare

Childcare is an essential enabler for single parents and secondary earner carers. This recurred across the literature, the interventions we examined, and our own qualitative research with service-users as a particularly common barrier to employment. Indeed, in one intervention, childcare was found to be the single biggest barrier – reported by 72% of Working for Families participants – but also the single most cost-effective enabler of work.[351]

Single parents cannot 'shift parent' in the same way as coupled households. They must therefore shape their employment around their childcare arrangements and are solely responsible for both drop-offs and collections. This severely impedes the time they can dedicate to work, and in many cases limits their opportunities geographically to those near to their childcare provider. While this challenge is arguably most pronounced among single parents, it is not unique to them: secondary earner carers face similar constraints on their employment patterns and opportunities. Given that the burden of caring responsibilities falls disproportionately on women, this is seen to hinder employment-related gender

[351] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

equality; indeed, in international perspective, countries with greater provision/affordability of childcare see improved gender-parity.[352]

Across all interventions, keyworkers and advisors helped parents to find, arrange and, in many cases, pay for childcare. Provision and funding are often highly complex, so signposting may prove inadequate. Different local providers often offer different patterns of care, so expert staff with knowledge of local provision can help to tailor caring arrangements to the individual's work patterns and financial resources.

Affordability is a regular challenge around childcare in the UK, and while some financial supports are available, including through the benefits system, these are rarely simple, often unreliable and typically assume that parents have savings to use up-front. All programmes supported parents with calculations and funding applications, with positive qualitative feedback from participants. Up-front costs remain, however, a considerable barrier, especially for those who are/have been out of paid employment. A number of programmes used discretionary funds to cover up-front costs, receiving especial praise from participants.[353]

The importance of childcare is echoed across the literature, and previous research has pointed to the benefits of childcare not only on employment outcomes, but sustainability and in-work progression.[354]

Programmes should support participants with childcare not only upon entering employment, but during their participation in the programme as well: a number of interventions noted that engaging with childcare was often a first-step on their employability journey. The time lost to caring responsibilities had precluded many participants from engaging with programmes or reflecting on their employability; one evaluative output found that those citing childcare as a major barrier were more likely to not know their end-goal.[355] In short, childcare allowed participants to dedicate more time and attention to their employability.

Many parents were originally uneasy about leaving their child or using childcare services. Programmes that offered co-located crèche and/or childcare services also reported that this allowed parents to become accustomed to using childcare services in advance of entering employment.

Skills Network have previously reported the logistical difficulties faced by single parents of arranging childcare to attend work-focused interviews. Many single parents reported that this was not always possible, but that they had found mainstream services inhospitable to children.[356] Co-located services remove this stress and anxiety and allow participants to engage more fully and effectively with services.

Despite the hugely positive strides made by the various programmes, issues around capacity, availability, affordability and flexibility persisted across interventions and areas. The Scottish Government's rollout of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) and consultation on out-of-school care are therefore very welcome. Nevertheless, changes to the timetable of the rollout appear likely to create something of a postcode lottery, and even when complete, funded ELC will only equate to roughly primary school hours. This appears to presuppose that a secondary earner working locally and part-time is available to collect their children, and thus risks failing single parents and women more generally.

Furthermore, childcare should be seen in qualitative as well as quantitative terms: while an increase in the number of funded-hours of ELC is evidently desirable, its impacts may be lessened if this provision remains inflexible and/or limited to 'standard' weekday and daytime working hours. Single parents and carers are disproportionately represented in retail and hospitality sectors, associated with evening and weekend work, and with volatility in shift-patterns and work hours. Most mainstream childcare, however,

[352] (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Meagher & Szebehely, 2012)
[353] (McQuaid & Fuertes, 2014)
[354] (Clery, et al., 2020)
[355] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[356] (Skills Network, 2014)

remains relatively rigid in its hours and delivery. Unless this flexibility – often at short notice – is matched by childcare providers, an increase in the number of funded-hours may do little to facilitate employment. Similarly, the Scottish Government's out-of-school care consultation is very welcome, but concerns persist around inadequate provision in evenings and at weekends.

### Substitute care and assistive technology

Our qualitative research found a broad perception that it is highly challenging to find suitable and affordable care, especially for older children with caring requirements.

In the interventions we examined, substitute care proved helpful, though with challenges around reliability and retention associated with voluntary schemes. Carers in Employment established a bank of individuals with prior experience of caregiving that freed participants up to attend employability-focused sessions and/or to work. However, it was suggested that partnering with a more formal agency may prove more reliable than attempts to source substitute care 'in-house'. Further research and clarity on this point would be helpful.

For carers, assistive technology was highly effective in the absence of more intensive substitute care. Technology that allowed them to keep in contact with their cared-for person, as well as fall-alarms, medication reminders and door alarms gave them peace of mind at work, safe in the knowledge that they would be alerted to any emergencies or disruption. This made it easier to reconcile paid work with care, and also served to reduce interruptions and early departures from work, with positive implications for maintaining employment.

### Financial resilience

The ways in which debt, finance and benefits can interact with employment and employability are often inadequately incorporated into the design of mainstream employability programmes. Financial resilience, literacy and preparedness are central to both entering and sustaining employment.

Across a number of the interventions we examined, financial advice and welfare rights were found to be highly effective and popular services. Given the highly technical, complex nature of this field, and the opacity that this entails, participants benefitted enormously from assistance understanding eligibility, applications, and the complex interactions between benefits. Universal Credit does not appear to have delivered the simplification that it promised, with many of our respondents expressing confusion and uncertainty over its withdrawal rates and/or the implications of increasing their earned income.

Programmes that provided 'better off' calculations allowed participants to enter work with confidence and to budget accordingly. While Universal Credit reforms purport to have resolved the 'cliff edge' scenario occasioned by the cessation of out of work benefits when entering employment, other challenges have emerged: for those entering work and migrating from legacy benefits to Universal Credit, the 5-week wait can be profoundly challenging, while monthly payments can impose new and unfamiliar budgeting habits on individuals. Thus, key transition points within an individual's employability journey can prove high-risk if they are not prepared ahead of time.

More generally, a number of the programmes examined offered assistance with budgeting, bills and debt-counselling given the negative implications that debt can have for employment and employability. These services enjoyed positive reviews from participants and helped to build participants' financial-resilience and self-efficacy. For example, income maximisation was central to the Carers in Employment programme, given opacity around eligibility and the highly bureaucratic application processes. In addition to boosting incomes and tackling poverty, it also allowed some to achieve a healthier work-life balance by reducing their work-hours.

## Transport

Transport and mobility are key barriers for many, but arguably do not receive the attention they merit. Deficiencies persist – especially in rural areas – around the affordability, regularity and reliability of public transport. In one intervention, the likelihood of citing transport as a barrier correlated with a participant's distance from the labour market. Like childcare, poor transport and/or mobility can not only present barriers to employment but can preclude people from engaging with or attending employability services. A number of programmes reimbursed participants' travel costs to ensure access, and one supported participants to attain a driving licence. Co-location and hot-desking also helped to widen access to employability services, though may, depending on the local context and specific details, not tackle specific transport-related barriers to employment.

## Discretionary financial support

A number of programmes offered participants practical financial support when entering paid work to cover the extra costs associated with employment, including transport as well as lunches, uniforms, and even childcare deposits. The lag between incurring such costs and receiving a first pay package can see new entrants struggle financially and may undermine employment outcomes. This is one key reason why the first few weeks and months of employment are often a high-risk period. The Scottish Government's Job Start Payment offers £250-400 to smooth this transition and reflects a laudable effort to tackle this problem. However, eligibility is constrained to those aged 16-24 years old, and it thus appears to presuppose that older unemployed individuals will have savings on which to fall back. This is empirically dubious and was challenged by service-users.

## Holistic Support: Means to an end or meaningful ends?

We found divergence within the literature and across our qualitative enquiry on how best to conceive of these wraparound supports. We heard widespread and consistent praise for the spill-over effects that these services can have for participants and their families: improved self-confidence, self-efficacy and financial resilience are beneficial in and of themselves, and – quite irrespective of employment outcomes – can have huge benefits for work-life balance, mental and physical health, and improved parenting and children's outcomes. Nevertheless, certain outputs and interviewees suggested that employability programmes should not lose sight of the end-goal of employment and should conceive of these services as means to that specific end. One programme stressed a longitudinal perspective: that improvements in self-efficacy, resilience, and wellbeing – even if they show limited effectiveness of getting individuals *into* paid employment – may well help those in work to secure labour market attachment further into the future than would be the case under the counter-factual.

It is the view of this report that improving the material and personal circumstances of parents, carers and their families can *never* be a bad thing. While we believe that a range of wraparound services would prove helpful to securing employment, we must stress that their provision should not be conditional on this if they boost the wellbeing of recipients and their families.

## Good Jobs

A related body of recent and forthcoming scholarship[357] calls for a 'career first' approach to employability that puts good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations. This school rejects the idea that 'any job is better than no job' and instead suggests that greater selectivity and specialisation is likely to lead to more successful and sustainable outcomes than a

[357] (McQuaid & Fuertes, 2014)

'scattershot' approach. The rhetoric that work is the best route out of poverty is empirically weak: 58% of households living in poverty in 2017/18 had at least one person in work.[358]

The notion of a career has typically been reserved for higher-paid, professional roles,[359] but an increasing body of academic and policymaking literature has begun to take greater account of the quality and sustainability of lower-paid work.

A number of studies have linked 'work first' approaches to unsustainable and inappropriate employment outcomes.[360] These approaches prioritise entry into employment as soon as possible – with little regard to the quality of the resultant jobs[361] – equipping participants with the bare minimum of competencies to achieve a transition, with negligible regard to sustainability, progression, or future income growth.[362] This empirically contradicts the rhetorical framing of low-paid jobs as 'stepping stones' to better employment. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation found that three quarters of low-paid workers failed to sustainably escape low-pay over 10 years.[363]

Employment may be financially or professionally unsustainable – with pay too low or volatile, or progression prospects too remote – as well as practically or logistically unsustainable – many 'work first' approaches take little account of a vacancy's suitability for the individual or their household. For instance, previous research from Engender has highlighted the long commutes expected of many women with caring responsibilities that simply do not take account of school collections and other commitments.[364] The proliferation of zero-hours and atypical contracts work presents further challenges for parents given the inflexibility of most mainstream childcare provision.

This approach, and the unsustainable outcomes it engenders, appears to have given rise to a 'low-pay no-pay' situation whereby individuals cycle in and out of low-paid employment.[365] Recent research has pointed to the negative implications of such 'cycling' for future earnings and employment.[366] This analysis suggests that underemployment limits opportunities for skills-acquisition (and in turn, earnings growth) and that a chequered employment history can discourage prospective employers. There appears to be a growing awareness of this 'revolving door' and the importance of sustainability within academic and policymaking circles, though with less clarity on putting this into practice.[367] Some previous programmes have implemented tweaks aimed at remedying this, such as the Work Programme's sustainable outcomes payments, though some evaluators are sceptical of their effectiveness.[368]

It is hotly debated within the activation literature whether this agenda is compatible with maintaining employment standards; it has been suggested that in the absence of demand-side intervention, supply-side labour market policies (that boost labour supply relative to low demand) serve to erode pay and non-pecuniary standards, especially given the UK's preponderance of low-paid jobs. It has even been suggested by some that this is not, in fact, a policy failure, but rather that it is designed to ensure a steady stream of workers to unappealing vacancies.[369]

This report believes that such an approach is morally unacceptable. Any employability programme should serve to empower its participants; people should be encouraged into work so they can thrive personally, professionally and financially, and to better their and their families' living standards, not to reduce government expenditure or to bolster the economy.

[358] (Bourquin, et al., 2019)
[359] (Hennequin, 2007)
[360] (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2018a)
[361] (Daguerre, 2007)
[362] (McQuaid & Fuertes, 2014)
[363] (D'Arcy & Hurrell, 2014)
[364] (Engender, 2016)
[365] (Shildrick, et al., 2010)
[366] (McCollum, 2012a; McCollum, 2012b)
[367] (McQuaid & Fuertes, 2014)
[368] (Whitworth, 2013)
[369] (Berry, 2014)

Good, sustainable and rewarding work is central to the Scottish Government's Fair Work Agenda[370] and employability framework, and employability powers and programmes offer a promising, but as yet under-utilised, mechanism to put this into practice. There is increasing academic and political attention to the sustainability and quality of work, though with less detail on the specifics of putting this into practice. This report will therefore explore how this might be more fully realised.

The interventions we examined identified certain single parents and carer-friendly sectors of employment, though there was very little consistency across these findings, with the exception of childcare.[371] Some interventions found retail and hospitality to be more amenable to flexibility, while others – reinforced by the wider literature examined – highlight these as sites of employer-oriented flexibility. The public sector was seen to have more established policies to facilitate flexible working, and female-dominated sectors (including retail and hospitality) were seen by some as more amenable to flexibilization. We draw some tentative inferences in support of some forms of childcare and social care (specifically, publicly-funded services) and the public sector more generally, where higher standards and regulations tend to be imposed – though could still be strengthened. In general, however, we find evidence of significant variation within sectors rather than across sectors.

It is the view of this report that, from the perspective of employability programmes and providers, 'good work' might be better instilled/identified in individual workplaces than in certain sectors, though we would welcome greater research into the latter. It is for this reason that, within the parameters of this report, we focus primarily on employer-facing activities (with individual employers/workplaces) which we believe would enjoy significant additionality.

That is not to suggest that sectoral approaches are fruitless, simply that they lie beyond the parameters of this paper, relating instead to demand-side interventions. There is no doubt that demand-side strategies, which may well operate along sectoral lines, will be an essential complement to effective supply-side support. While a full exploration of these could easily constitute its own report, it would be remiss to not at least touch on them.

## Demand-Side: The inevitable stumbling block

As supply-side interventions, employability programmes are ultimately constrained by the demand-side reality. Over recent decades, activation has related primarily to the individual characteristics of the unemployed – disparagingly termed 'supply side fundamentalism' by some[372] – with little regard to the availability or terms of local employment opportunities.

Insecure and atypical forms of employment are especially associated with unsustainable outcomes,[373] and the proliferation of precarious work appears to have compounded this problem. The volatility and employer-oriented flexibility associated with these atypical contractual arrangements, such as zero-hours contracts, clash with the needs of single parents and carers – largely, though not exclusively – on account of the inflexibility of most mainstream childcare and social care provision. This points to the importance of demand-side intervention, not only from a job-creation, regulation, or procurement perspective,[374] but also in terms of employability programmes' employer-facing activities.

Conditionality should not only apply on the supply-side. Procurement policy offers an effective and indispensable route towards higher employment standards, and, amid the current economic turmoil, governmental grants and loans should attach conditions requiring employers to strengthen their offer,

[370] (Fair Work Convention 2020)

[372] (Peck & Theodore, 2007)
[373] (Metcalf & Dhudwar, 2010)
[374] (Advisory Group on Economic Recovery 2020)

especially with regards to those balancing paid work with care, as proposed by groups including Oxfam Scotland.[375]

### Pre-employment & entry into employment

Our first observation must be that coercion and compulsion will likely see people pushed, out of desperation and under financial threat, into ill-suited, poor-quality, and unsustainable employment. This is a widely-observed effect of 'work first' approaches.[376]

Instead, greater selectivity is likely to help attain better outcomes: across the interventions we examined, participants were encouraged to reflect on their assets and interests, and to identify careers and sectors of interest to them, through practices including career counselling and visualisation. This required patience, time and high-quality support staff, with many recent-joiners unsure of their aspirations. A more selective approach to job-search activities, and thorough scrutiny of vacancies' appropriateness might help to attain more suitable and sustainable outcomes. This might include the adequacy of pay, the hours of work, the regularity of shift patterns, the employer's attitude, and the distance of travel, among others.[377] In addition to this selectivity, an intensive and comprehensive approach to employability support should equip the participant with the relevant skills and qualifications, and provide linkages to wraparound supports necessary to prepare for and remain in paid work.[378]

In the interventions we examined, once the individual's aspirations were identified, training opportunities helped to turn these into a reality, by granting the participants the relevant skills and qualifications. An individual's qualifications correlated strongly with successful job entry. The wider academic literature further reinforces the benefits of higher qualifications not only for job outcomes, but also for jobs' sustainability[379] and for employees' bargaining power in the workplace,[380] with positive implications for employment standards.

Entry into employment is seen as a particularly high-risk period in an individual's employability journey, where disruption can undo a large amount of progress. Therefore, measures to facilitate and smooth these transitions proved effective across a number of interventions. This included measures aimed at allowing participants to move into work with confidence – including better off calculations – as well as more practical and financial supports. Discretionary funds were used across a number of interventions to help cover extra costs incurred as a result of entry into work – such as transport costs, food and uniforms – as well as larger costs including childcare deposits. One intervention also found evidence that the assurance of ongoing in-work support helped participants to enter work with ease and confidence.

A number of interventions sought to root their activities in the local labour market, and to tailor its content accordingly. For instance, demand-led training that took account of real opportunities in the local labour market appear to add greater additionality on the basis of our own research and wider academic work.[381]

On the demand-side, employer-facing activities may help participants to enter and stay in paid work. One intervention saw a designated job broker role develop, tasked with negotiating employment opportunities on behalf of participants, and 'crafting' mutually-beneficial terms and taking full account of the parents' and the business' needs. This might entail negotiating minimum hours to satisfy Universal Credit's conditionality requirements, or agreeing set, regular shifts that align with childcare arrangements. Job-sharing was also negotiated in certain interventions whereby two parents or carers

[375] (Oxfam Scotland 2020)
[376] E.g. (Welfare Conditionality Project, 2018a)
[377] (Ray, et al., 2009; Fuertes, et al., Forthcoming)
[378] (Fuertes, et al., Forthcoming)
[379] (Wilson, 2018)
[380] (Peters & Wilson, 2017)
[381] (Martin, 2015)

share a role and serve as informal (child)care for one another. Alternatively, job-shares could be negotiated with one parent and one non-parent, with the latter better-placed to cover any shifts as necessary in the case of a child's illness, for instance.

We noted a perception across a number of our interviews with academic experts that existing employability services map poorly onto local labour markets. Fair Start Scotland's large, unwieldy regional areas appear too sprawling to provide the locally-rooted support that proves more effective, while Local Authority areas appear somewhat arbitrary and small. One intervention struggled with questions of eligibility for clients living outside of the local authority area but working within it. While it is beyond the parameters of this report, further research should be conducted on Scotland's local labour markets, and the optimal scale and geography of employability service areas.

### In-Work Support & Progression

Our qualitative research with academic experts found a common perception that 'in-work support' is a somewhat under-conceptualised notion, often used rhetorically but with little clarity on its substance. We will now look at examples of positive practice from interventions we examined and attempt to flesh out this concept.

Our first and most obvious observation should be that programmes should not see their participants into work and then consider their job done: parents' and carers' needs are not immutable and can change at short notice. The complexity of their personal and professional arrangements also reflects their fragility. These arrangements may need amending when an individual changes jobs or during school holidays, or childcare arrangements might break down at the last minute. Regular ongoing support can help to predict and plan for the former, while more *ad hoc* support can help in the case of emergencies. Single parents and sole-earner carers cannot swap or shift professional and caring responsibilities in the same way as other households, so such emergencies can considerably undermine progress.

A number of interventions we looked had highly dedicated staff that answered queries and helped to resolve emergencies outside of standard work-hours, and could be reached via call, text and/or social media. Single parents and carers suffer from unfair and inaccurate stereotypes around their reliability, so responsive in-work support is essential for resolving crises quickly. In parallel, regular in-work sessions can help participants to review their progress, maintain employment and pursue in-work progression more incrementally.

Certain interventions we considered saw in-work support workers adopt a brokerage role. This might refer to negotiating an increase in hours or introducing flexible working as an intermediary or leading on conflict resolution between employees and managers. Individual interventions found qualitative evidence that this had helped participants to stay in employment.

While employees are granted certain entitlements, many of these are contingent on a certain length of employment. The right to request flexible working, for instance, requires 26 weeks of continuous employment before an employee becomes eligible. In-work support can help participants to plan for and build up to these landmarks and may work to develop their confidence to make such requests.[382]

There is considerable evidence of a strong appetite among single parents and carers for in-work progression: if there were no barriers to doing so, 38% of single mothers would increase their hours, and 22% would work full time.[383] Parents and carers may ease themselves into employment at low hours of work, and subsequently seek to increase their hours. Moving jobs can also often be an effective way for individuals to attain in-work progression,[384] but these can also necessitate a recalibration of financial and

[382] (Clery, et al., 2020)
[383] (Department for Education, 2019)
[384] (Clery, et al., 2020)

caring arrangements. In a number of the interventions that we looked at, ongoing support helped parents to modify their childcare arrangements ahead of doing so or offered 'better off' calculations to ensure parents understood the financial implications of doing so and allowed them to budget accordingly. In-work income maximisation – through welfare rights advice and clarity on financial entitlements – was favourably reviewed in the Carers in Employment programme, echoing wider findings that this is an effective way to help sustain employment.[385]

A number of studies also point to the importance of qualifications and training for achieving in-work progression.[386] In-work support should assist participants to find and undertake training opportunities, with a view to in-work progression. As under Making It Work, programmes should provide ample opportunities for flexible, part-time training that can be reconciled with work.

A number of interventions allowed for entry into the programme at any stage of employability/employment, including those already in work. Given the proliferation of precarious work and the increasing challenges associated with in-work progression, in-work support should be available to all, regardless of whether they entered the programme while unemployed. The majority of Carers in Employment participants were in work at the time of joining, highlighting the huge benefits that in-work support can give to caregiving individuals.

However, the interventions examined should also give us cause to reflect on the meaning of 'good work' itself. The Carers in Employment programme specifically sought to ensure a healthy and rewarding work-life balance, taking specific account of the time spent on participant's caring responsibilities. It should not be assumed that the norm of full-time employment is the optimal arrangement for all, and indeed a number of participants reduced their working hours – or withdrew from paid employment entirely – with positive implications for their wellbeing and metal health.

As long as conditionality regimes remain a reserved power, Scottish Government employability programmes should of course seek to work within their demands. However, they should not necessarily see more work as an unambiguous positive. If work begins to conflict with caring responsibilities, then the financial benefits may be undermined by the increased stress, worry and guilt felt by parents and carers. Life stages should be at the forefront of keyworkers' minds, with full-time work becoming more feasible and desirable for parents as children grow older.

Previous research has also identified employer-facing activities as a key enabler of progression that is missing from much of mainstream employability.[387] Our qualitative enquiry with service-users found a broad perception that employers did not understand the implications of single parenthood or of caregiving, and even in some instances, found evidence of stigmatisation and discrimination.

## Employer-Facing Activities

We firmly believe that there is an important and pivotal role for local employers in employability programmes. On the basis of our desk-based and qualitative research we have identified certain effective forms of employer-facing activities, and factors in their success. These might be divided into two categories: firstly, activities aimed at specific programmes or individuals through activities such as job-crafting or demand-led training; and secondly, parallel, more generalised activities to make employers and workplaces more single parent and carer-friendly, through challenging prejudices, manager training and changes to internal policy, among others.

Our interviews with experts found broad agreement that employer-engagement is often an after-thought for employability programmes, and often represents a small proportion of a programme's activities and

[385] (Wilson, 2018)
[386] (Wilson, 2018; Clery, et al., 2020)
[387] (Wilson, 2018)

resources. The interventions we examined, however, show the huge benefits of early employer-engagement: 'demand-led' training that takes account of local skills gaps and employers' needs is seen as more effective by both evaluative outputs[388] and the wider academic literature.[389] The UK's longstanding under-investment in skills has prompted increasing alarm among employers as they struggle to satisfy their staffing needs.[390]

This arguably presents an opportunity to reframe the relationship between job-seekers and employers as a collaborative rather than adversarial one – subject to certain conditions on employers' behaviour, of course. There is, we believe, the potential to design mutually rewarding training and employment opportunities that satisfy both the employer's skill-needs, and the employees need for well-paid and rewarding work with decent progression prospects.[391] This requires, of course, safeguards and scrutiny of employers' motives and actions, and is not in and of itself a guarantee of good-quality employment.

Similarly, employability programmes might seek to build a portfolio of work placements with local employers as a way of building participants' experiences and skills. A programme in the vein of Marks & Start can be pitched in a mutually-beneficial language to employers – offering skills-acquisition for participants, and positive local reputation and coverage for employers.[392] If Marks & Start's 'suitable to re-engage' model is replicated, it may even lead to real job outcomes, again with advantages for participants and employers alike.

It was found across a number of interventions that maximising the impact of such approaches require *early* engagement with employers to design relevant demand-led training packages and negotiate placement opportunities, with the added benefit that early success stories can help to build momentum and interest among other local employers.

On the basis of our research, effective outreach strategies appear to include using existing networking opportunities, such as local Chambers of Commerce and business brunches/fairs to engage employers, with follow-up one-to-one contact with those expressing an interest or amenability. This was found by evaluation to be a highly effective strategy, though somewhat reliant on 'low-hanging fruit'. Female-dominated sectors such as health and social care were found to be more receptive to these activities – though these sectors are not without their own problems[393] – and strategic difficulties were noted with regards to either very large or very small organisations. Programmes should seek to capitalise on these 'friendly' sectors, but greater consideration should therefore be given to reaching those less immediately amenable.

In parallel to these activities aimed at supporting specific individuals in their employability journeys, the Carers in Employment programme also sought to bring about more ideational and/or operational changes in employers' processes and cultures. While some programmes – including Making It Work and Working for Families – reported some success at challenging perceptions and prejudices through their job-brokerage activities, the Carers in Employment project adopted a more specific and concerted approach to organisational change. This included providing training to line managers and producing handbooks on toolkits on carers' needs, specifically around flexibility. Previous research has found that among those with experience of balancing caring and work, the single biggest enabler was having a sympathetic and flexible manager;[394] such activities are therefore vital. The incorporation of single parent and carer-specific advice into the Fair Work Agenda might present an opportunity to dovetail these two inter-related causes.

[388] (CRESR, 2017)
[389] (Martin, 2015)
[390] (Spoonley, 2008)
[391] (Spoonley, 2008) (deBruin & Dupuis, 2008)
[392] The specifics of 'employer-friendly' language are expanded upon below
[393] These sectors are often characterised by occupational segregation and poor-quality work. In these fields especially, public procurement may be an effective way to drive up standards.
[394] (Cottell & Harding, 2018)

Line manager training appeared to be particularly effective in changing behaviours and improving awareness of the challenges faced by single parents. This was seen by evaluation to have reduced conflict between employers and employees and improved managers' sensitivity. While training appears highly effective, many employers were not willing/able to spare the time for such intensive activities. Therefore, a bank of resources and printed communications – including a handbook on carers' needs – helped in these instances. Training that is short and delivered to managers in their workplace appears particularly likely to be taken up.

The programme also helped and advised employers on making their internal policies more carer-friendly. This included offering templates of carer-friendly policies around flexibility, as well as signposting to specialist organisations with expertise in such areas.

For larger companies, especially those headquartered outside of the programme's area of operations, a mix of these top-down and bottom-up strategies proved effective – i.e. providing training to managers of local branches and lobbying for change at a company-wide level.

On the basis of our research we have also identified certain success factors to such employer-facing activities. Firstly, activities appear, unsurprisingly, to be more effective when pitched in a business-friendly language. Findings from Marks and Start and Making It Work provide a provisional template for this: using a language of 'untapped resources', improved retention and positive local reputation and coverage might help to convince employers. Carers in Employment found that improving conditions and supports in the workplace had reduces stress and distraction for employees, with positive implications for productivity and reduced absences.

Secondly, programmes undertaking employer-facing activities should be wary of being seen as too combative: arguments predicated purely on employers' statutory requirements were seen as unnecessarily adversarial. Instead, a positive message combining legislative, moral and business-friendly arguments was seen as effective. Relatedly, employers responded more warmly to a 'menu' of options than prescriptive instructions.

Thirdly, evaluations found that employers could view programmes with suspicion that they lacked an understanding of business-needs. It was therefore seen to be effective to employ staff with business experience who can command the respect of local employers and speak authoritatively on the business benefits of making their policies and procedures more single parent and carer-friendly. Staffing was, more generally, seen as pivotal to success. Some interventions found that employer-facing activities were too small an operation and were staffed inadequately. Carers in Employment's evaluation stressed the distinct skillsets and experiences required for engaging participants and employers.

## Evaluation & Monitoring

Across the interventions examined in this report and the wider literature, the importance of rigorous evaluation and monitoring was repeatedly highlighted. Robust evaluation is seen as central to delivering high-quality services and to the principle of continuous improvement.

Our first observation should be that there is disappointingly little reference to single parents or carers in mainstream Scottish programmes, and even less disaggregation. Similar concerns about women's place in the Scottish employability landscape have previously been voiced,[395] but this does not appear to have been resolved. Previous studies have described single parents as largely "invisible" in mainstream employability programmes,[396] and this does little to assuage these concerns. Outcomes and results must be transparently disaggregated for programmes, practitioners and stakeholders to assess the programme's adequacy for single parents, carers and women. A wide body of literature points to the

[395] (Engender, 2016)
[396] (Whitworth, 2013)

centrality of rigorous data-collection and monitoring to high-quality services and to identifying 'what works.'[397]

Nevertheless, the said focus on 'what works' should not be too narrowly geared towards short-term outcomes. Over recent decades, evaluative approaches – both in general and in employability specifically – have moved steadily but consistently from measuring inputs (e.g. expenditure) to outputs (e.g. the number of individuals supported) to outcomes (e.g. the proportion of participants entering employment).[398] Taken to its extreme, this has seen an increasingly myopic and exclusive focus on employment outcomes – reflected in the increasing predominance of 'payment by results' structures. This raises questions over, firstly, the quality and sustainability of such outcomes, and secondly, the implications of this evaluative framework for programme-design.

Early evaluations of work-first approaches and job-search activities found high cost-effectiveness but did not adequately take into account either the quality/sustainability of such outcomes, or the changes that these could engender within the wider labour market in the long-term; namely, the proliferation of precarious work. With the rise of atypical contracts and increase in in-work poverty, there is increasing attention to the qualitative dimension of these outcomes.

This increasing focus on outcomes appears to operate to the detriment of the concept of 'distance travelled'. 'Hard' outcomes have become increasingly hardened: where Working for Families registered education, training and voluntary work as a hard outcome, this categorisation has come to refer exclusively to employment outcomes. Across a number of interventions, we – and evaluators – noted the importance of 'distance travelled' for those facing the greatest disadvantage.

For those furthest from the labour market and facing the most complex barriers, more intensive interventions may serve to bring them considerably closer to the labour market without securing a concrete employment outcome. That is not, however, to say that these interventions are ineffective. Similarly, we recall, for instance, that Working for Families' voluntary work placements saw below-average success but were reserved to those facing the worst labour market disadvantage. Meanwhile, job-search activities may be highly effective for those facing short-term frictional unemployment, while remaining wholly inadequate for those further from the labour market.

An ethos of 'continuous improvement' underpinned by outcome-oriented evaluation risks replicating those aspects of programme-design that benefit individuals already more likely to enter employment and diminishing those that support individuals further from the labour market. In conjunction with payment by results, and its associated practices of 'creaming and parking', this appears likely to see programmes geared ever-more narrowly towards those suffering more frictional employment.

A more longitudinal perspective would see the value in 'softer' outcomes and activities that bring those facing the most barriers closer to the labour market, with the potential for a later/sustained intervention to complete their transition into employment. In this sense, distance travelled should be better incorporated into evaluative frameworks and our conception of employability programmes' purpose. This is not to diminish the importance of evaluation to high-quality services; we simply suggest that this should be tempered with a longitudinal perspective.

We also believe that programmes should avoid an exclusively retrospective evaluative approach. Rather, we believe that providing high-quality services throughout should be central to employability programmes. Empowerment should be seen as a process, rather than an outcome, with evaluative approaches reflecting this.

[397] (Stevenson, 2010)
[398] (McQuaid & Fuertes, 2014)

Wraparound services and personal support can have huge value in and of themselves for both participants and their families, resulting in improved mental and physical health, greater self-efficacy, reduced financial anxiety and improved wellbeing and parenting, among others. These demonstrate social benefits beyond employment, and this should be incorporated into evaluation. Receipt and/or continued provision of these services should not be (entirely) conditional on their contribution to employment outcomes, not least given the impossibility of quantifying such effects: note the Carers in Employment programme's observation that while such programmes may have less direct immediate impacts on employment rates, they may support recipients to remain in employment for longer into the future.

## A Framework of Best Practice

On the basis of our desk-based and qualitative research, we have identified certain key lessons and recommendations for employability, both in general, and in the Scottish context specifically. These are drawn from effective and/or innovative practice across the interventions examined, our qualitative research, and findings within the wider literature.

Our broad vision for employability programmes surpasses the narrowly binary extremes of 'work first' versus 'human capital' to take full account of the quality and sustainability of employment outcomes. This dichotomy perpetuates a competitive and rational conception of labour market participation that fails to engage with the complex personal circumstances and wider, structural barriers that many single parents and carers face.

The model that we lay out would adopt a longer-term perspective, investing in participants' assets, interests and aspirations to build towards good-quality, sustainable employment outcomes, and offer sustained, effective in-work support, and ongoing educational opportunities. Concerted local employer-facing activities would help to craft employment outcomes and terms to ensure high standards and sustainable transitions. Single parents and carers do not want to merely survive but should be supported to thrive.

1. **Specialist third sector organisations should be part of broad partnerships, rooted in and expert in their local communities.**

Partnerships are central to providing high-quality, comprehensive support. Specialist third sector organisations bring exceptional expertise, as well as trained and empathetic staff, strong reputations and credibility with service-users. Previous research has associated partnership working with more effective programmes,[399] greater innovation,[400] and strengthened trust between service-users and providers.[401]

For single parents, carers and those, more generally, facing exceptional labour market disadvantage, partnerships are central to delivering the broad, expert coalitions of local experts that are essential for effective programmes. Within our own research, all the interventions examined used partnerships to tackle the wide-ranging and complex barriers faced by single parents and carers, with three main, recurring benefits.

Firstly, the pooling of resources, thorough context-mapping and consensus-building on strategy helps to identify gaps in pre-existing provision and effective solutions. Locally-rooted providers' familiarity with the local context and existing provision allowed for efficient planning that avoided duplication, identified gaps in provision, and allowed for accurate estimates of capacities and needs. This can help to design services that complement rather than duplicate existing services, with positive effects from the perspective of both efficiency and service-users.

Secondly, a wide range of partners – across not only employability, but health, childcare, personal finance, and more – allowed for a holistic range of services, all delivered by a specialist in that field.

Thirdly, the inclusion of familiar, respected and trusted organisations, with strong local reputations helped to secure buy-in and gather momentum early. Third sector specialist organisations were especially highly regarded by single parents and carers as trusted sources of support and information.[402]

[399] (Schlappa, 2017; Lindsay, et al., 2018a)
[400] (Lindsay, et al., 2018b; Sirovatka & Greve, 2014)
[401] (Fledderus, et al., 2014; Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)
[402] (Vickerstaff, et al., 2009)

Their involvement therefore lent these programmes credibility and goodwill and generated referrals of existing clients.

To achieve this, a funding model that incentivises collaboration and cooperation, and generous up-front funding to secure the participation of smaller organisations are imperative. Consensus-building through mechanisms of co-governance and co-management help to pool resources and expertise, in stark contrast with the monolithic prime contractors of New Public Management approaches. However, strong messaging from funders/government on aims is also important, with flexibility at a local level for partners to achieve this. This is facilitated by co-governance and co-management between partners of programmes' resources.

Of particular note across a number of programmes, was the value added by specialist voluntary organisations run for, with and by single parents and carers. These organisations – trusted by participants, rooted in and experts in their local communities – were crucial for securing referrals and engagement, for identifying gaps in local provision, and for delivering high-quality personal support. These organisations lent programmes credibility that helped to build momentum, and brought expertise that ensured much more effective planning, delivery and outcomes. As trusted organisations, they also received feedback directly from participants, supporting continuous improvement.

2. **Wrap-around personal development should be integral to the model.**

Any programme for single parents and people with caring responsibilities needs to tackle low confidence, isolation, and mental health and wellbeing, while flexible training and skills-acquisition are central to achieving high-quality, sustainable employment outcomes.

Many mainstream programmes overlook personal factors with their assumptions of work-readiness. Single parents and carers suffer disproportionately from low self-confidence, poor mental health and isolation, which might make immediate entry into employment not only unlikely, but undesirable. Programmes should offer personal and emotional support to individuals in a vulnerable position, through highly-trained and empathetic staff. Our research found that staff with experience in the third sector, childcare and/or counselling are generally able to offer higher quality personal and emotional support to vulnerable participants.

Peer support and group sessions can help parents and carers to feel less alone, to overcome their isolation, and to build proactive support networks among themselves. Hearing their own struggles voiced by others can allow parents and carers to see these as external barriers rather than an immutable personal failing and is often the first step towards taking steps to address these. Group work has the added benefit of reducing over-reliance on keyworkers.

3. **Flexible, user-centred service-delivery must be at the centre**.

Voluntary participation coupled with flexibility around the pace, place, delivery, and end-goal enables parents and carers to balance effective participation with caring responsibilities.

Single parents and carers' employment journeys are rarely linear or simple. Programmes must therefore be sensitive to parents and carers' time constraints: they may not be able to commit as much time to employability as other participants. Similarly, programmes should acknowledge the unpredictable nature of parenting and caring, and that this might necessitate temporary disengagement from programmes. Programmes should, in general, avoid arbitrary timelines – whether for specific stages such as formulating an action plan, or pre-employment support's duration overall.

With regards to end-goals, programmes should embrace all outcomes – including training, education and voluntary work – rather than focusing exclusively on employment. Gaining skills, experience or confidence should never be discouraged, and is often the first step for those facing the largest barriers to employment. Similarly, and especially for those furthest from the labour market, programmes should incorporate 'distance travelled' indicators into their ethos and evaluations to ensure that employability programmes work for all.

With regards to programme-delivery, user-centred services should embed practices such as co-location, warm handovers and hot-desking to widen access and work to the convenience of participants. Information-sharing is also key to a smooth user-experience to avoid repetition and frustration. Services should be delivered at a variety of venues in the community, at the most local level possible to ensure ease and familiarity, and participants should not find themselves out of pocket as a result of attending. Travel costs, for instance, should be reimbursed. These extra touches send a clear signal to participants that they are being prioritised.

Programmes may seek to extend the use of online services catalysed under COVID-19 to save participants' time and expenses, though this must not be used as a cost-cutting exercise and should take full account of the digital exclusion faced by many of those accessing such services.

4. **Personalised, holistic and joined-up services tailored for single parents and carers are essential.**

Single parents and carers often face complex barriers, personal circumstances, and caring responsibilities. Many face multiple disadvantages that compound these barriers, not least gendered discrimination and pay differentials.

Keyworkers play a vital role in supporting participants into and within employment, providing a point of contact and continuity to help navigate a highly complex field. Given the highly complex employability landscape and the abundance of providers, familiarity with the local context, local services and partner-providers is imperative to ensure smooth and accurate referrals. Regular practice and information-sharing sessions between keyworkers and partners can help to ensure effective, joined-up services.

Keyworkers must be empathetic to single parents' and carers' particular needs and circumstances. Programmes should therefore offer specialist advisors and may benefit from recruiting staff with relevant experience in childcare, social care, the voluntary sector or counselling. Many single parents and carers will be in highly vulnerable positions that necessitate sensitive and empathetic expert support. To establish familiarity and rapport, caseloads with those facing especial barriers should be kept low (i.e. below 50).

Programmes should take as long as is necessary to build towards the identification of participants' assets and aspirations and the formulation of an action plan. If highly personal information is being shared, this may require long and concerted relationship-building, and participants should not be rushed.

With regards to the content and range of employability support, the complexity of many single parents' and carers' circumstances necessitates effective, holistic, joined-up support. Wraparound services are essential for helping single parents and carers to tackle their various personal and structural barriers to employment. Holistic services should link to childcare, health, and finance, among others.

Childcare is a central and cost-effective enabler of employment. Programmes should help parents to find, arrange and pay for suitable childcare arrangements. This should, where possible, include direct financial support with up-front costs and deposits which are often considerable. Programmes should also offer childcare and/or crèche facilities during/within their own services to ensure parents can attend. For many, accessing childcare is a gateway to engaging with employability services as it grants parents the time to reflect and work on their employability. In parallel, care provision itself needs to meet the

requirements of single parents and carers: many areas face a shortage of affordable childcare; provision if often limited to 'standard' working hours, excluding weekends and evenings; services often lack the flexibility necessary to match the unpredictability of atypical employment patterns; and out-of-school care and care for older children with special needs is often limited.

Similarly, assistive technology can be highly effective in supporting carers to enter work with greater peace of mind and security. This technical field requires partnerships with specialist providers with the technical knowledge to explain these services to participants, and to install it.

Financial and budgeting advice, better off calculations and income maximisation through welfare rights advice can help parents and carers to navigate crucial tipping points in their employability journey. Administrative support with applications and income maximisation is especially helpful given the complexities – and financial risks – associated with this.

Specialist services and supports should be offered, including support with mental health, isolation, domestic abuse, addiction, trauma, and more. There is a strong gendered dimension to this that many mainstream programmes fail to account for.

Truly 'holistic' services must be integrated, efficient and navigable. A broad array of services is meaningless without reliable and timely referral-pathways. Clearly-defined roles, strong intra-partner familiarity and expert, informed keyworkers are required to achieve this. These, in turn, will benefit from regular information and practice-sharing sessions and co-location between partners.

In addition to their substantive benefits, childcare, financial advice and support with transport are often 'gateways' to engaging with programmes' wider services.

5. **Single Parents and carers should be actively involved in the design and delivery of employability services.**

Single parents and carers know their own needs better than anybody else and should have opportunities to shape the content and delivery of programmes accordingly. True personalisation should surpass having a mere 'menu' of options to choose from. Rather, user-centred programmes should offer real opportunities for co-production with service-users: this includes regular feedback, input and real influence over programme-content. It is paternalistic at best to assume that programmes can identify parents and carers' needs better than them.

Co-production and the control it granted were found to give participants a sense of ownership and control over their employability, rather than replicating discourses of 'needs' that can entrench perceptions of failure. Greater control is not only associated with improved mental health,[403] but also stronger motivation and commitment,[404] a positive reputation for the programme in the local community,[405] and promises better relationships between service-users and providers,[406]

Co-production relies on high-quality keyworkers, an appropriate organisational culture, strong partnership-working and flexible funding streams to provide the necessary dialogue and responsiveness. The rigidities associated with New Public Management's contractualism; efficiency-oriented approach are poorly-equipped to offer this responsiveness.

6. **'Demand-led' training and employer-facing activities should be rooted within the local labour market to maximise the additionality of programmes**.

[403] (Considine, et al., 2018)
[404] (Fledderus & Honingh, 2016; Garven, et al., 2016)
[405] (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012)
[406] (Burns, 2013)

Tailoring training to local gaps and opportunities, and/or crafting suitable employment terms and patterns with employers maximises the impact of employability programmes.

In lieu of scattershot job-search activities, programmes should work with selectivity towards a participant's aspirations, and invest in the necessary training and education required to achieve this. Training opportunities are central to giving single parents and carers the qualifications and skills they need to flourish in the labour market – including progressing within paid employment. To maximise additionality, training should be 'packaged' towards real jobs, and be 'demand-led'– i.e. identified in consultation with participants' aspirations and local employers. This strikes an effective balance between autonomy and aspiration on the one hand, and demand-side realism on the other, whilst avoiding the directive excesses of 'work first' approaches.

These training opportunities should be delivered flexibly, in a range of venues with ample opportunities to catch up and should be available part-time to account for parents and carers' professional and caring responsibilities. Parents and carers should not be forced to choose between earning and learning.

Placements and voluntary work can give participants with the least labour market experience an opportunity to gain skills and experience, while often maintaining a degree of control over their working-patterns. Programmes should seek to build a portfolio of relevant local placement opportunities with employers, perhaps modelled on or akin to Marks & Start, and 'craft' these around participants' schedules through designated brokerage roles.
Programmes should begin employer-facing activities early for two reasons: firstly, this allows programmes to integrate their input into programme-design; and secondly, early successes can help to can build momentum and further interest with local employers.

Employer-facing activities can have a significant wider impact through effective job-crafting and brokerage. Programmes should develop job-brokerage roles to craft employment terms to suit parents' and carers' caring responsibilities, or to negotiate job-shares where parents can serve as informal childcare for one another.

In parallel, programmes should establish a longer-term strategy to change employers' policies and practices to accommodate single parents and carers in the workplace, and to challenge damaging stereotypes and stigma, through (line manager) training, handbooks on parents' and carers' needs, and policy templates.

Programmes will benefit from establishing an 'employer-friendly' language and approach: employers tend to be more hospitable to a 'menu' of options and business-friendly language and arguments – reduced turnover, improved productivity, untapped resources – than statutory requirements. Staff with experience in business can command the respect and attention of employers. Programme should be cognisant of the vastly different skill sets required for employer-engagement and participant-engagement.

7. **Employment outcomes should be assessed qualitatively as well as quantitatively**.

Jobs should be well-paid, sustainable, and should offer opportunities for progression. Employment should not be seen as an end in itself, but a means by which to derive an adequate income and a sustainable livelihood.

Conditional programmes have been seen to feed precarious work and the 'low pay no pay' cycle by pushing people into unsuitable jobs under financial threat. Participants should be encouraged to draw on their assets and interests, and to work with selectivity towards their job-search activities rather than simply applying for any vacancy regardless of suitability. In conjunction with proper investment in the relevant training and effective in-work support, this can help to promote in-work progression.

Notions of a career are often isolated to more 'white collar' jobs, but we firmly believe that single parents and carers should not be precluded from having professional aspirations by dint of their personal circumstances.

However, in order to implement this sort of practice at street-level, it is necessarily to establish organisational cultures and evaluative methods that facilitate such approaches. We see this as largely incompatible with arbitrary/tight timelines, payment by results or performance targets.

8. **Ongoing support – both regular and *ad hoc* – is vital for sustaining and progressing within employment**.

Parents' and carers' complex barriers do not dissipate upon entering employment but may in fact become more pronounced. Effective and tailored in-work support is therefore essential to maintaining and progressing within employment.

In-work support must take account of individuals' working-patterns, and offer sessions outside of standard hours, at a variety of locations and/or over the phone or social media. Regular sessions to anticipate and plan for changes and/or progression should be coupled with *ad hoc* support in the case of emergencies (via phone, texts or social media, for instance).

Like pre-employment services, in-work support must offer a package of supports. When changing jobs or hours, single parents and carers may again require support modifying their childcare arrangements, predicting the financial implications, and budgeting accordingly, among others. Keyworkers can also broker negotiations or conflict-resolution between participants and their employers to make employment outcomes more durable.

Given the proliferation of precarious work and difficulties associated with in-work progression, in-work support should be available to all, including to those seeking to join a programme while already in employment.

9. **Transparency, accessibility and proactive engagement are essential**.

Confusion is common among potential participants over eligibility and access to the services. A highly complex landscape with multiple, often competing, providers can prevent effective engagement with services. Single parents and carers are often time-poor, so effective engagement needs to be simple and transparent.

Voluntary programmes are much more effective and ethical, helping to secure greater commitment from service-users, granting them a sense of control over their lives, and avoiding the huge damage dealt by sanctions and conditionality. However, they also raise challenges around recruitment, and may necessitate proactive local engagement strategies.

Many of those facing the greatest labour market barriers are not in regular contact with statutory employment services. To ensure that employability programmes include those furthest from the labour market, proactive marketing campaigns and community-level outreach – including through familiar community, health and childcare hubs – should be pursued.

Single parents and carers are often time-poor and may face mobility issues, information gaps around eligibility and access, and ongoing stigma. Programmes should widen access through proactive outreach, co-location and hot-desking with a range of partners and venues at a local, community-level.

Specialist third sector organisations can lend programmes credibility and are strongly associated with greater success engaging harder to reach groups.

10. **Achieving this at street-level requires complementary funding and governance models**.

Funding models are central to realising collaborative partnership-working at 'street-level'. Competitive tendering and payment by results are seen as largely incompatible with the collaborative partnership-working needed by those facing especial labour market disadvantages.

Competitive tendering can stoke adversarial relationships between providers, undermining cohesion and reducing referrals, with service-users suffering as a result. Rather, tendering models that demand evidenced experience of partnership-building, and clear signals from funders can instil this ethos in bidders early on.

Payment by results appears largely incompatible with providing effective, intensive interventions. The financial risk that this entails disincentivises investment in those facing more complex barriers and can operate to the exclusion of specialist organisations. Generous up-front funding with long-term guarantees is essential for investment in designing and delivering high-quality, intensive interventions.

Flexible funding – facilitated by co-management – is also imperative for responsive programmes and content, in contrast with the legal and contractual rigidities of New Public Management approaches. Long lead-in times for effective partnership-formation are essential, and are strengthened by a deliberative, consensus-building approach to programme design.

User-centred services should embed practices such as co-location, warm handovers and hot-desking to widen access and work to the convenience of participants. Information-sharing is also key to a smooth user-experience to avoid repetition and frustration. Services should be delivered at a variety of venues in the community, at the most local level possible to ensure ease and familiarity. These extra touches send a clear signal to participants that they are being prioritised.

Delivery should take place locally, be accessible, and participants should not find themselves out of pocket as a result of attending. Travel costs, for instance, should be reimbursed.

Programmes may seek to extend the use of online services catalysed under COVID-19 to save participants' time and expenses, though this must not be used as a cost-cutting exercise and should take full account of the digital exclusion faced by many of those accessing such services.

## The Scottish Context

Fair Start Scotland has made very positive and worthy steps towards offering a more humane, dignified approach to employability service provision. We welcome its commitment to voluntary participation, and its embrace of principles such as co-production and user-centred services, even if these are at times under-realised. It is also hugely encouraging to see a career-oriented and selective approach to job-search activities.[407] Participants report high levels of satisfaction and being treated with respect. We are keen to work with the Scottish Government to build on these hugely promising steps.

However, evaluative outputs have found that certain promising and effective strategies are not being routinely implemented, and there is evidence that the governance and funding structures might obstruct the full realisation of the above-mentioned principles: qualitative research with practitioners noted, for

[407] E.g. (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 80)

instance, a reluctance to invest in more intensive interventions owing to the programmes' payment structures. There is therefore an opportunity – and, given the present circumstances, a need – to build on the above-mentioned improvements to establish an effective, fair and distinctive Scottish approach to employability support.

As we navigate a challenging period of uncertainty, it might be natural and tempting to stick to familiar methods. However, against the scale of the present challenge, these are almost certainly doomed to failure. Bold and decisive action will be needed, including a significant shake-up of employability support, from its 'street-level' practice through to its overarching funding and governance models. We believe that the following recommendations would help to ensure that Fair Start Scotland can deliver real change and opportunity to single parents, carers and anybody facing labour market disadvantage.

A number of these priorities feature in the Scottish Government's No One Left Behind delivery plan, and we are heartened to see a sincere commitment to improving the devolved offer. We hope that our empirical findings can help the Scottish Government to achieve these in practice.

**1. Embed our key principles within Scottish employability:**

- The five key principles and priorities for employability programmes, developed from our research and with the direct input of service-users, should be used to guide Scottish Government employability programmes. These are:
    - **Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach**: No parent or carer should be forced to choose between destitution and the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person. Programmes should use proactive and positive incentives rather than damaging disciplinarian approaches.
    - **Empowerment**: Asset-based approaches should work with the individual's skills and aspirations through intensive investment in personal and professional support and development to ensure that parents and carers can thrive, not just survive.
    - **Personalisation**: Employability programmes should tailor their content and services to the unique combination of barriers unique to each individual. Furthermore, nobody can recognise, report or resolve these barriers better than service-users themselves.
    - **Holistic Support**: Programmes should address every facet of an individual's employability, including structural and external barriers. An individual's employability is only as strong as its weakest link.
    - **Good jobs, not any job**; A job should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to a flourishing and sustainable livelihood. Any employment outcome should promise dignity, progression and an adequate wage.

**2. Enrich and improve measures of success:**

- **Single parents' and carers' outcomes must be transparent and fully disaggregated.** Fair Start Scotland's outputs give little insight into the specific outcomes achieved by single parents and carers.[408] Single parents and carers are not homogenous and should not be treated as such in evaluative outputs. Outcomes and results must be transparently disaggregated for programmes, practitioners and stakeholders to assess the programme's adequacy for single parents, carers and women beyond a headline level, and to ensure that programmes embody the principle of continuous improvement. In the absence of disaggregated outcomes, it is impossible to know whether Fair Start Scotland is serving – or even engaging – single parents and carers furthest from the labour market.
- **Employment outcomes should be assessed on their quality, pay and progression prospects.**

[408] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 11)

Employability programmes should put good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations as part of efforts to ensure people secure a sustainable livelihood. Employability interventions must be scrutinised not only on whether they achieve employment, but also on the quality and sustainability of these employment outcomes.

- **Fair Start Scotland should adopt a more longitudinal perspective and embrace 'distance travelled' indicators.**
  Rewarded outcomes and evaluative outputs remain myopically focused on employment outcomes. Evaluative outputs find awareness among keyworkers that entry into paid employment is unrealistic for certain participants furthest from the labour market.[409] It remains unclear, however, what incentives/means there are for providers to support those furthest from the labour market to move closer to employment.

**3. The Scottish employability landscape should be simplified and integrated:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should be better integrated with local provision.**
  The staggered devolution of employability powers has left a complex patchwork of local and national initiatives. Evaluative outputs have also found a perception in some parts that FSS has yet to develop a distinctive approach to delivery, so merely duplicates existing services rather than complementing them.[410] In addition to overwhelming and discouraging prospective participants, this fragmentation is seen to stoke competition between providers, and reduces efficient and accurate referrals between services, with service-users suffering as a result.[411] This is, absurdly, especially pronounced when FSS and LEPs share similar goals and clients, and in especially disadvantaged areas where coordination would be most effective.[412] Adversarial behaviour appears to be a result of programmes' distinct funding sources/streams and issues of 'double funding'. Nested partnerships and integrated funding streams would make sure that programmes work in the interests of their participants rather than those delivering them.

**4. Fair Start Scotland should make a decisive shift towards partnership-working:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should strengthen and widen its practices around partnership-formation and partnership-working.**
  Fair Start Scotland is still dominated by large, profit-seeking Lead Providers and a 'supply chain' logic. There is a whole spectrum of partnership models, of which contractualist 'supply chains' are just one example. Equally valid and, we believe, more effective, are partnership models based on shared commitments, common goals and mutual respect. Recent evaluative outputs have, however, noted ongoing difficulties forming wider partnerships, especially beyond statutory bodies and services.[413] Partnerships of experts – in their fields and in their communities – are central to delivering the holistic, specialist, intensive support needed by single parents and carers. Consortia of relevant partners can better deliver high-quality wraparound support than a supply-chain model. Dedicated single parent and carer specialist organisations bring indispensable expertise, credibility and trust to programmes, but are often excluded by large-scale tendering processes.
- **To this end, tendering processes should prioritise and incentivise partnership-working and high-quality services, rather than efficiencies.**
  Competitive tendering can foster adversarial rather than collaborative relationships between providers, with participants suffering as a result. Similarly, payment by results and its affiliated target-based operations among profit-seeking providers has been seen to undermine service-

[409] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 80)
[410] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 34)
[411] (Scottish Government, 2020c, pp. 33-34)
[412] (Scottish Government, 2020c, pp. 33-34)
[413] (Scottish Government, 2020c, pp. 33-34)

quality and engendered suspicion between FSS and LEPs, and risks marginalising small specialist organisations.[414] Instead, we would like to see a funding and governance model that incentivises collaboration and constructive deliberation in lieu of a 'supply chain' mentality. Clearly articulated aims, expectations and end-goals from funders, with discretion and deliberation from partners on design and implementation appears a winning combination.

**5. Boost awareness and engagement:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should work proactively at community-level to build awareness, trust and participation.**
  Evaluative outputs have found evidence of low awareness of Fair Start: among those likely to be eligible, 74% had not heard of it.[415] Of these, 35% expressed an interest in participating, implying that a large number of potential participants are being missed by current recruitment processes. Furthermore, FSS exhibits a reliance on Jobcentre Plus for referrals[416] which is likely to limit recruitment to those closer to the labour market. Furthermore, such referral routes are not always reliable, with half of referrals in the Dundee area lost.[417] FSS should surpass statutory bodies and mechanisms for recruitment, and accept that specialist third sector organisations and community-level venues have a vital role to play in this, as trusted and reputable sources of information, but require active inclusion and real incentives to do so.

**6. Invest in participants' assets and skills through intensive interventions and concerted upskilling:**

- **Funding models should be reformed to ensure adequate investment in participants. Payment by results should be avoided.**
  Previous scholarship has found efficiency-oriented tendering and payment by results to be associated with increasingly homogenous services and under-investment in those facing significant or multiple barriers. We are therefore disappointed that a recent evaluation reiterated Fair Start Scotland's commitment to 'outcome-based funding'.[418] Practitioners also note that despite its greater generosity compared to previous programmes, greater investment still is needed to support those furthest from the labour market.[419] Flexible, generous and up-front funding streams, co-managed by partners, and deliberative programme-design are central to providing the tailored, responsive and intensive interventions necessary. Intensive programmes can offer value *for* money but can rarely offer value *without* money.
- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue a fully-fledged 'human capital' approach to employability.**
  The UK's historic under-investment in skills-provision is a direct cause of the current preponderance of low-skilled, low-paid work, and the 'low pay, no pay' cycle that characterises many individuals' employment trajectories. Human capital approaches that invest in upskilling and training demonstrate higher success, especially for those facing multiple barriers to employment and during economic downturns. They are also associated with more sustainable outcomes, higher employment conditions and better progression-prospects. However, we found a consensus among academic interviewees that FSS could not reasonably be described as a fully-fledged 'human capital' approach. A lack of skills, qualifications and experience was the single most commonly cited barrier to employment among FSS participants,[420] and qualifications and experience were found by evaluation to be a key determinant of FSS participants' success.[421] However, of those citing low experience, skills and/or qualifications as a barrier to employment,

[414] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 92)
[415] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 2)
[416] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 17) (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 77)
[417] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 47)
[418] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 5)
[419] (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 34)
[420] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 3)
[421] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 4)

only 46% reported that Fair Start Scotland had helped them to overcome this.[422] The use of training, work experience and voluntary work should be expanded, and opportunities to pursue higher and further education should be backed up with effective financial support. We note with particular emphasis that amid the current and predicted labour market turbulence, Fair Start Scotland should invest in long-term training opportunities for those facing the greatest disadvantage while the labour market readjusts.

**7. Fair Start Scotland should co-produce and tailor employability support with participants**

- **Fair Start Scotland should offer real opportunities for co-production.**
  FSS has demonstrated a sincere commitment to the principles of co-production, though opportunities for effective voice are limited. While 71% of FSS participants reported that there were no other services they would like to receive, a noteworthy minority of early-leavers cited services not relevant to their needs as the reason.[423] There was also an appetite among participants for greater/different support around training, health issues, and work placements, among others.[424] Single parents and carers know better than anyone else their own barriers and needs. By granting participants ownership over their journey, FSS can secure not only greater commitment but also more effective outcomes. Co-production should be core to the design and delivery of employability programmes, with participants actively involved in shaping the support they receive, not merely offered a 'menu' of options. In addition to an appropriate organisational culture, the practical realisation of co-production rests on organisational factors, including partnership-working and the availability of flexible funding needed to provide such responsiveness.
- **Fair Start Scotland should build on the flexibilities granted to participants.**
  Exercising control over the pace, timing and end-goal of their participation is essential for single parents and carers to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. We are heartened to see recent changes increasing the flexibility and patience afforded to Fair Start Scotland participants. We welcome these changes but would like to see further action taken on this. Arbitrary timelines still exist for both specific tasks and overall participation: for those facing the greatest barriers or with complex personal arrangements, 8 weeks may still be insufficient to formulate an action plan, just as 18 months may be insufficient time to move into/towards employment. Of those leaving the programme in year 2, 14% had seen their time on the programme come to an end without achieving an employment outcome.[425] Evaluations have acknowledged the need for greater flexibility around 'freezing' participation, especially amid the pandemic's implications for parenting, caring, schooling and employment. We look forward to seeing further progress in this regard.

**8. Provide holistic support to help a deliver a sustainable livelihood:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should employ a sustainable livelihoods approach to ensure that all facets of an individual's employability are being resolved**
  Following the success of Oxfam's 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' with DWP staff in Wales,[426] we believe that Fair Start Scotland should institutionalise this holistic approach to personalised support. This model relies on relationship-building and a comprehensive understanding of participants' circumstances to ensure tailored, wraparound support.
- **Scottish employability should support financial resilience through both educational and practical routes.**

[422] (Scottish Government, 2020b, p. 45)
[423] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 23)
[424] (Scottish Government, 2020b, p. 25)
[425] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 23)
[426] (Scullion, et al. 2017)

Better-off calculations as well as budgeting and welfare rights advice are highly effective interventions that help to smooth entry into employment and ensure sustainable outcomes. In addition to these established educational measures, practical financial (or, at least, 'in-kind') support should help to tackle the costs associated with entering employment. The implicit assumption that parents and carers have savings or a secondary wage to fall back on defies the reality. The Scottish Government should therefore create new payments or extend eligibility to the Job Start Payment.

- **To provide truly holistic services, childcare and transport will require much greater attention**
  These policy fields in their own right are inextricably linked to employability. In the absence of accessible, affordable care and/or transport, sustained entry into employment remains unlikely. Transport was highlighted as a recurrent barrier, with regards to reliability, availability and affordability, and of those citing caring responsibilities as a barrier, only 43% reported that Fair Start Scotland had supported them with this.[427] While local programmes often appear better able to offer childcare-related support, they are often unable to do so to FSS participants in practice owing to funding arrangements.[428] The (paused) roll-out of funded early learning and childcare should be a stepping-stone towards greater provision, not an end-goal in itself, and the Scottish Government should build on its promising out of school care consultation.

**9. Employability interventions should be rooted in and practiced within local labour markets:**

- **Employer-facing activities should occupy a central role within Fair Start Scotland.**
  There is a widespread perception among FSS participants of a shortage of suitable, appropriate local employment opportunities.[429] Job-crafting and brokerage, with ongoing revision, can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to suit caring responsibilities. However, evaluative outputs suggest that such activities are often centralised, and take place far from the area of operations.[430] This fundamentally undermines the purposes and strengths of local employer engagement. Effective employer-facing activities require familiarity with the local context, geography and the individual's circumstances, as well as a specific suite of skills, tools and arguments detailed in our discussion of findings.
- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue 'Demand-led' training in consultation with participants and local employers to maximise additionality.**
  Training opportunities should be offered in response to individuals' aspirations and local labour market gaps and opportunities. This requires early and ongoing partnerships with local employers. At present, such opportunities appear to often be an afterthought or under-utilised.
- **The Scottish employability landscape would benefit from a 'middle ground' that better maps onto local labour markets.**
  Scholarship has previously noted that arbitrary administrative boundaries map poorly onto local labour markets. At the other end of the scale, FSS' regions appear unwieldy, especially for those who lack mobility or transport. A nested system that integrates national, regional and local initiatives would enjoy greater additionality.

**10 Continue to instil the principles of fairness in the Scottish labour market:**

- **Fair Start Scotland should maintain and expand its selective approach to job-search activities.**
  'Work first' approaches to employability may have fed the proliferation of low-paid work. Under the Scottish offer, service-users used should be encouraged to apply selectively to vacancies that satisfy their financial, personal and familial requirements. This will likely be compromised as long as payment by results remains in place.

[427] (Scottish Government, 2020b, p. 45)
[428] E.g. (Scottish Government, 2020c, p. 51)
[429] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 21)
[430] (Scottish Government, 2020a, p. 33)

- **A revitalised approach to employability should be complemented with activities and incentives that encourage employers to improve their own standards.**
  Long-term ideational activities through the Fair Work Agenda, as well as more immediate financial mechanisms of procurement, conditional business support and financial incentives, are promising tools in the Scottish Government's arsenal by which to instil fair employment practices in workplaces across Scotland. Female-dominated sectors such as hospitality and retail, and publicly funded sectors like childcare and social care are prime candidates for such efforts.

**11. Employability is just one side of the coin:**

- **Effective and high-quality employability programmes are an essential complement to, not a substitute for, bold and ambitious demand-side interventions.**
  As supply-side interventions, the success of employability programmes inevitably hinges on the availability of real, good-quality employment opportunities, in the absence of such jobs, supply-side interventions risk undermining wages and employment conditions. The Scottish Government should use its procurement processes and conditional business support to drive up employment standards, in addition to more direct job-creation and industrial strategies. These must not neglect women-dominated sectors.

# Appendix & Case Studies

## Working for Families (2004-2006)

The Working for Families (WFF) programme from 2004-8 with a budget of £50 million over 5 years and serviced 25,508 clients.[431] Administered and run by 20 local authorities in Scotland, it targeted parents with significant barriers to work, and was aimed at supporting participants towards, into or continuing within employment, training or education. It represented 'disadvantaged parents' facing low incomes or other stressors.

Lone parents made up 71% of all participants, and 81% were women; 63% had a child under the age of 5, and 93% a child under the age of 12. 53% of all participants achieved 'hard' outcomes, and a further 13% achieved other significant outcomes.[432] The programme covered 20 Scottish Local Authority areas and 226 local projects from the public, private and third sectors. The programme's first 2 years (2004-6) covered 10 Local Authority areas representing 39% of the Scottish population, before being rolled out to a further 10, cumulatively comprising 79% of the population.[433]

Subsequent reviews and evaluations suggested that WFF represented a significant step forward in employability: participation was entirely voluntary, and it was among the first projects to acknowledge the need for holistic, joined-up support, though the practicalities of this were somewhat under-realised and were refined in later programmes. The broad thrust of this programme informed many subsequent interventions and many of this report's more general findings, though other programmes' evaluations may offer more insight into how to put these into practice in concrete terms.

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

WFF's novel voluntary participation was seen as central to its success. Voluntary rather than mandatory participation granted greater autonomy to participants than WFF's more coercive antecedents and was seen to secure commitment and buy-in from participants.[434]

WFF's innovative keyworker model helped to establish and build trust and familiarity with participants' personal and professional circumstances. In addition to the welcoming atmosphere this created, the keyworker model also offered a key point of contact and continuity and was lauded by participants for the consistency that it offered.[435]

While voluntary participation does appear to have positive effects on participants' morale and commitment, it nevertheless raises challenges around engagement and recruitment. 26% of referrals came from Jobcentre Plus, pointing to the importance of good working relationships with Public Employment Services (PES), but also highlighting the gaps in coverage that an exclusive reliance on statutory services entails, especially among those further from the labour market.[436]

Self-referrals accounted for 25% of participants, and word of mouth was seen to become especially important as the programme continued.[437] This again underlines the importance of establishing a positive environment, not only from a normative perspective, but from a practical one of engagement.

[431] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[432] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[433] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[434] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[435] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[436] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[437] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

WFF successfully attracted a wide range of individuals at very different stages of their employability journey and different distances from the labour market. Indeed, it represented a wider breadth than the mainstream New Deal for Lone Parents, reflecting the need to surpass a myopic use of PES and Jobcentre referrals.[438]

### Empowerment

WFF sought to empower participants in both a personal and professional sense.

Personal barriers were prevalent among participants, with 30.3% reporting low self-confidence at the outset. Low skills, qualifications and experience were significant barriers to employment for a large majority of participants: 69% held qualifications at or below SVQ Level 2; 34% had either no qualifications or qualifications below SVQ Level 1, relative to an average of 15% across the Scottish population.[439] 56% of participants had been out of work for over 2 years;[440] while this is perfectly reasonable and normal among parents of young children, it is a barrier nonetheless.

WFF offered training in pre-vocational skills where participants were lacking them, as well as more intensive vocational training. Every participant was assigned a 'main programme' which, for the vast majority (80%) was a keyworker. Among those facing the most disadvantage however, there were other, more intensive interventions equivalent programmes. These included 'Improving Access to Training and Education' (4% of participants) and 'Developing childcare workers or provision' (3%). The former track showed below-average outcomes (with 40% achieving a 'hard' outcome) though it should be remembered that this represents the most disadvantaged participants. The programme offered various different options with mixed results, of which voluntary work proved the most effective, with 49% achieving an intermediate outcome.[441] The latter track helped participants earn qualifications in child-minding and/or childcare with dual-benefits in the short-term – skills-acquisition and career opportunities for single parents in a child-friendly sector – and long-term – improved provision and capacity into the future.[442]

Regression analysis found qualifications to be the single strongest determinant of success (at all levels but especially at SVQ 2 and higher): 46% of clients with no qualifications at the outset made a transition, relative to an overall average of 54%. Evaluative outputs however stressed the need for a longitudinal perspective of 'distance travelled' whereby the improved prospects of participants stood them in good stead for a subsequent employability programme to complete their entry into the labour market.[443]

### Personalisation

One-to-one mentoring across a range of subjects was the central innovation of the Working for Families programme. The keyworker model was fundamental to its successes, with the vast majority (80%) allocated a keyworker as their main project. Participants formulated a personal action plan in consultation with their keyworker which linked them to local employability services, ranging across personal development, education and training, work experience, money advice, careers advice, and more.

In most areas the keyworker helped to find, arrange and fund childcare (including accessing/requesting access to childcare subsidy funds) and signposted to other local services to overcome opacity and complexity in the system, and to ensure accurate and efficient referrals. In addition to its personal and

[438] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[439] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[440] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[441] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

[443] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

procedural benefits, the keyworker model also correlated with above-average outcomes: 55% of those with a keyworker achieved a hard outcome, compared to 46% of those without.[444]

Other aspects of personalisation under WFF include the structure, pace and end-goal of the programme. The programme covered three stages of employability support to tailor services and programme-content to an individual's present needs and circumstances:

- 'Pre-employment' support covered basic employability skills, confidence and motivation.
- 'At transition points' WFF provided practical support with entering work, training or education (including childcare arrangements and costs incurred).
- 'Post-employment' support offered advice and guidance on maintaining employment, changing jobs, or in the case of disruption (for instance, when childcare arrangements broke down).

WFF was innovative in incorporating, and arguably coining and/or popularising, the concept of 'distance travelled' into its ethos, practices and evaluative framework. Our qualitative enquiry with academic evaluators found evidence of a concerted effort from its outset to acknowledge the diversity of not only needs, but of starting-points, labour market proximity and end-goals among participants.

75% of participants faced multiple and/or substantial barriers that rendered immediate entry into work neither feasible nor desirable.[445] In contrast with preceding 'work first' mainstream programmes that assumed all candidates were 'work ready', WFF adopted a more gradual and 'staged' approach that acknowledged their very different starting points. While this may seem unremarkable to a modern-day observer, at the time it represented a significant step forward.

As regards end-goals, entry into employment was the most common stated aim, but still represented a minority of participants (38%, of which half was for part-time work between 16-29 hours per week). Other common aims included sustaining employment (16%), entering training and/or education (13%) and even "moving closer to being able to consider education, training or work" (13%). The latter was especially common among those furthest from the labour market and facing the most barriers.[446] Rather than seeking to override or stretch participants' aspirations, WFF demonstrated a willingness to support all participants, regardless of their end-goal or distance from the labour market.

In lieu of an exclusive focus on exit rates or employment outcomes, WFF's evaluative framework distinguished between 'hard', 'soft' and 'other soft' outcomes. Even within these classifications, there was a breadth of potential outcomes:

- 'Hard' outcomes were achieved by 53% of participants and encompassed transitions into or within employment, education or training lasting over 6 months, and voluntary work above 16 hours per week.
- 'Soft' outcomes were attained by 10% of participants and referred to "intermediate activities outcomes" that moved participants towards employment without attaining a formal transition. This included activities such as completing 20 hours of personal development courses.
- 'Other soft' outcomes or 'distance travelled' indicators covered 3% of participants and included improvements in self-reported subjective indicators such as self-confidence.

[444] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[445] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[446] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

### Holistic Support

The Working for Families programme is seen as instrumental in the gradual shift towards providing holistic services. Prior to WFF, employability programmes were rarely linked to wider supports.[447]

A pilot of the programme that took place in Glasgow, Dumfries and Galloway had originally planned to couple employability-skills support with childcare assistance, but soon found a much wider range of supports to be necessary. The pilot found one-to-one mentoring on a range of subjects to be essential, which was then replicated in the full programme.

82% of WFF participants suffered 'major employability barriers',[448] 74.3% faced 'major childcare barriers'[449], and a staggering 61.7% of participants suffered both. In addition to these dual barriers, however, 43% of participants suffered from at least one additional stressor, including poor mental or physical health, debt or housing problems, necessitating wide-ranging supports across personal and financial services.[450]

60% of participants took on at least one extra programme, of which 35% accessed one, 39% accessed two to three, and 26% accessed four or more services. Those who took on more than one project or outside service were significantly more likely to achieve a 'hard' outcome, at 62% and 53% respectively, compared to 44% among those accessing only one service. The most popular programmes were financial advice (accessed by 14% of all participants) and childcare subsidies (13%).[451] Wider services on offer ranged across personal development (self-esteem, confidence, motivation), careers advice, debt counselling, money advice, mobility and childcare, among others.

Caring responsibilities were found to be the single most common barrier, identified by 72% of participants, and childcare support was found by programme-evaluation to be the single most cost-effective enabler of work.[452] A less expected discovery found that accessing childcare often constituted a first-step towards accessing wider support as it freed parents up to commit greater time and attention to thinking about their needs and aspirations, and to engage with programmes. Parents who identified childcare as a major barrier were more likely to not know their aims at the outset, implying that they had previously lacked the time to look into this.

Nevertheless, structural deficiencies in childcare provision and availability persisted: pre-school provision and hours were found to align poorly with working patterns, shortages in capacity and provision (especially at evenings and weekends) were also identified as problems, and high up-front costs were a considerable challenge for parents. WFF's discretionary funds and childcare subsidies were highlighted as an especial help with the latter.

Personal and employability support worked to build participants' self-confidence and motivation, while a wide array of other programmes sought to help build participants' self-efficacy through debt counselling and financial advice.[453]

WFF even helped certain participants to attain a driving license to overcome the connectivity barriers associated with more rural communities, where public transport is less regular, reliable and affordable. 34% of participants found public transport to be irregular and/or unreliable, and 14.1% reported

[447] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[448] 'Major employability barriers' were classified as holding no qualifications or qualifications below NVQ1, having been out of the labour market for over 2 years, and/or identifying one or more employability barriers.
[449] 'Major childcare barriers' were defined as having three or more dependent children, a youngest child under 5, or identifying one or childcare-related barrier.
[450] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[451] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[452] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[453] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

struggling with the cost. This is an often-overlooked barrier, but the likelihood of citing transport as a barrier correlated strongly with a participant's distance from the labour market. As with childcare, evaluative outputs suggested that improving mobility is often a first-step towards allow individuals to engage with employability services.[454]

In addition to these administrative and educational supports, WFF also enjoyed ample discretionary funds. These facilitated the above-mentioned supports, and their use varied from small expenses – such as reimbursing travel costs to ensure participants were not out of pocket as a result of participating – to larger investments – in education and training or covering up-front costs and deposits for childcare. Such supports received huge qualitative praise from participants in programme-evaluation.

In general, the wrap-around services were designed to complement rather than duplicate existing services. These supplementary supports were designed and provided through partnerships across public, private and third sector organisations. These partnerships brought on-board local expertise and experience – largely in the form of specialist third sector organisations – that allowed for the efficient and effective planning of services. Thorough context-mapping, informed by such organisations' local expertise, avoided inefficient service-duplication, while their knowledge of single parents' needs helped identify gaps in existing provision, with especial mention given to shortages in training and educational opportunities.[455] It is worth nothing that these broad partnerships also had the added benefit of securing referrals from a diverse range of organisations.

### Good Jobs

Job-quality appears to have received less attention both within the programme and in its evaluations, though this arguably reflects the buoyant labour market of the time and the fact that it predated the proliferation of more atypical work and the resultant academic turn towards interrogating job-quality.

Employment outcomes from the programme appear very sustainable, with 92% still in employment after 3 months, 90% after 6 months and 89% after 12 months.[456] However, evaluative outputs point to less success among younger participants and those with lower qualifications. The evaluative reports however are uncertain of whether lower sustainability among the latter group is a direct result of their lower skills or of the kinds of jobs and sectors that they entered on account of their lower skills.[457]

In-work support formed a relatively small aspect of the programme's activities, though we note that participants were allowed to join at any stage of the programme, including those already in work: 16% of joiners' motivation for doing so was to sustain employment or progress. This support was geared at helping them to sustain employment or progress within it. This approach was compared positively with the contemporaneous DWP 'New Deal for Lone Parents' programme, for its more longitudinal perspective.[458]

## Learnings and Recommendations

### Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach

WFF's voluntary participation empowered participants to take control of their own lives and gave them a sense of ownership over their employability, especially when compared with directive and prescriptive mainstream services.

[454] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[455] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[456] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[457] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[458] (Bond, et al., 2009)

WFF benefitted from widening access routes and found that reliance on public employment services was inadequate in isolation. Word of mouth proved highly important for self-referrals, pointing to the importance of awareness and reputation.

### Empowerment

Qualifications held at the outset were found to be the biggest determinant of success in the programme. However, this should not be taken to imply that this limiting factor makes employability efforts futile, but rather that investment and participation in training and education can bring a participant closer to the labour market and stand them in good stead for a subsequent intervention to support them into work.

Investing in training in childcare helped both in the short-term by boosting individual participants' skills and securing child-friendly employment, but also built local capacity into the longer-term, with benefits for other participants.

Among those with the lowest qualifications and/or the least experience, voluntary work had hugely positive benefits not only for their professional employability, but for their self-confidence and mental health. Subjective and self-reported metrics showed marked improvements through socialisation and personal development courses. Among those facing the most barriers to employment, voluntary work was especially effective at boosting confidence and autonomy.[459]

Evaluation should continue to monitor such 'soft' indicators – including self-confidence and self-efficacy – given their importance not only for employability, but as a social benefit.[460]

### Personalisation

The keyworker model was central to WFF's successes and this approach has been largely replicated subsequently in mainstream services. The formulation of a personal action plan between keyworkers and participants helped tailor services accessed to the individual's needs and desires. WFF's specialist single parent advisors and childcare mentors were especially positive on account of their expertise and familiarity with relevant services.[461] Keyworkers were also highly valued by participants for the consistency and continuity they offered, rather than feeling shipped back and forth between providers.[462]

The multi-stage model employed by WFF acknowledged the diversity of participants' personal and professional circumstances, and their distance from the labour market. In contrast with mainstream interventions' assumptions of work-readiness, WFF demonstrated an understanding that immediate entry into work was not a feasible or desirable outcome for many participants. Pre-employment stages helped to build the confidence, self-efficacy and soft skills of participants furthest from the labour market to make an eventual entry into work more sustainable and suitable. It should be remembered that 13% of participants wanted to "move closer to being able and ready to consider education, training or work," and this figure was much higher among those facing the greatest barriers.[463] This is a legitimate aspiration, and a more realistic one among participants furthest from the labour market, that should be encouraged rather than denigrated or side-lined.

WFF was instrumental in popularising the concept of 'distance travelled'. This longitudinal conceptualisation of employability surpassed a blinkered focus on employment outcomes and appears more likely to support those furthest from the labour market, by approximating them to employment in preparation for further work or a second intervention to complete their transition. In contrast, a short-

[459] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[460] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[461] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[462] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[463] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

term fixation on employment outcomes risks pushing people into unsuitable or unsustainable employment and exacerbating self-confidence barriers.

### Holistic Services

WFF was influential in popularising a holistic approach to employability support, and the number of programmes accessed correlated strongly with achieving hard outcomes.[464] Those who participated in more than one programme were significantly more likely to make and sustain a transition, implying that a package of measures is needed.

Services were designed to complement rather than duplicate pre-existing provision. Critical enablers of this included strong partnerships of local actors and stakeholders (including local third sector organisations) and thorough context mapping.[465] This meant that programme content varied between local authority areas, but common 'gaps' identified by WFF included a shortage of training and educational opportunities, and a lack of affordable or suitable childcare.[466]

Partnership working was central to providing more specialist services including generalist work with single parents, childcare support, personal development and confidence-building, and training, as well as more specialist but vitally important services related to, for instance, substance abuse.

Support from childcare mentors and keyworkers to find, arrange and fund childcare was found to be WFF's single most cost-effective programme. Childcare subsidies and assistance with up-front costs were especially highly-reviewed by evaluative outputs and by participants themselves.[467] Childcare-related assistance also acknowledged that childcare needs and patterns would vary at different stages of an individual's employability journey, and/or that disruption could occur. Childcare support should offer ongoing assistance, including at short notice in the case of disruption or breakdown.

Childcare also acted as a gateway to accessing wider employability support as it freed parents up to begin thinking about and/or dedicating time to their employability.[468] Any employability programme should help run, arrange and/or fund childcare not only when entering employment, but to complement its own programmes. Evaluation also pointed to the positive social benefits of improved access to childcare, including educational and socialisation opportunities that can aid children's cognitive and social development.[469] These wider social benefits should be taken into account in the planning and evaluation of programmes indecently of employability factors.

According to qualitative evidence, financial advice, benefit support and debt counselling were especially helpful in boosting self-belief and supporting parents into employment with ease and confidence. Given the complexity and complexity of the benefits system, 'better off' calculations and budgeting advice should be fully incorporated into all employability programmes.

Improving transport and/or mobility, as with childcare, was found to often constitute a first step towards boosting an individual's employability. Poor connectivity and/or unaffordable public transport were disproportionately cited as barriers by those furthest from the labour market and can prevent individuals from even accessing or engaging with employability services. Any programme should seek to overcome these barriers (whether through assistance paying for public transport, or larger investments in driving lessons).

[464] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[465] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[466] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[467] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[468] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[469] (Bond, et al., 2009)

More generally, discretionary funds should be used to ensure that no participant is out of pocket as a result of participating. This should include reimbursing participants for transport costs incurred as a result of engaging with employability programmes.

### Good jobs

While this was a less pressing concern of WFF given the buoyant labour market context, we can nevertheless draw a few judgements as regards best practice.

WFF was novel in its inclusion of in-work support, surpassing the more immediate preoccupations of contemporaneous mainstream projects, and instead demonstrating a longitudinal perspective. This included ongoing support with, for instance, childcare and/or finance, and how these might change within work during holidays, as hours increased or when changing jobs.

In-work support was available to all participants, regardless of the stage at which they had joined. This allowed those already in work but struggling to sustain employment, or those seeking to progress within it, to receive the support necessary to do so.

## Governance and Funding

### Aims & Governance

Evaluative outputs stressed the importance of clearly defined and universally agreed aims and end-goals by organisers and across partner-providers. The flexible and somewhat 'hands off' approach taken by the Scottish Executive, but clear messaging on its expectations and aims appears to have struck a positive balance that allowed for necessary flexibility and adaptation at a local level.

More specifically, evaluators suggested that employability should be framed as the specific end-goal rather than supporting parents with childcare, regardless of the benefits the latter may have. Evaluators stipulated that childcare and other wraparound services should be seen as means to an end.[470]

### Partnerships

Partnership working was central to WFF's operations and successes for three main reasons:

Firstly, broad partnerships spanning the public, private and third sectors ensured a breadth of experience and expertise to guide programme development. Specialist and local expertise was especially useful during context-mapping owing to pre-existing familiarity with the context, service-provision and gaps therein. This allowed programmes to complement rather than duplicate existing services, with benefits for both resource-efficiency and for the comprehensiveness of wraparound services.

Secondly, broad-based partnerships allowed WFF to cover a wide range of services, each delivered by an expert provider in that field. This included, specialist third sector organisations run by, with and for single parents that understood their needs, childcare specialists able to advise and fund childcare arrangements, and more specific services such as those aimed at substance abuse. Evaluative outputs suggested that no individual provider could have brought such breadth to programme content and services.[471]

[470] (Bond, et al., 2009) (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[471] (Bond, et al., 2009)

Thirdly, partnerships and the network of positive working relationships they brought with a range of actors and stakeholders – including but not limited to Jobcentre Plus – helped to secure referrals to the programme.

### Monitoring and evaluation

WFF undertook rigorous monitoring and formative evaluation with a keen focus on 'what works' and replicating such practices across partnerships. A huge body of information was collected on participants to evaluate individual programmes' effectiveness and to measure outcomes for different groups, and the learning opportunities organised by the programme allowed local authority area projects to share their insights on best practice at semi-regular intervals.[472]

### Local adaptation

Such learnings should, however, be tempered with questions of scalability and replicability relative to specific contexts, and local programmes should not lose sight of context mapping. WFF appears to have enjoyed superior local adaptability when compared to contemporary mainstream programmes and, despite the inevitable trade-off between local adaptation and national consistency, evaluators appeared to prioritise the former.[473]

Evaluation found that those areas that did not undertake thorough context mapping often had to do so later at considerable cost and with resultant waste. Evaluative outputs suggested that significant time and resources should be dedicated to early stages of mapping and partnership-formation; namely, at least six months between grant funding and the programme's first intake.[474]

Flexible funding streams were positively reviewed for the scope they offered to revise, scrap or introduce programmes as ongoing evaluations saw fit.[475]

### Funding

Evaluation found that employability programmes need time to bed in, with considerable sunk costs and small intakes at the outset leading to large costs-per-outcome that quickly and consistently fell over the course of the programme.

Budgets for voluntary programmes should factor in the gradual increase in importance of 'word of mouth' recruitment as participant numbers can be expected to rise considerably into a programme's third and fourth year.[476]

Funding streams should also be long-term (at least three years to allow economies of scale to bed in) and should provide as much long-term certainty as possible: WFF's fourth year saw referrals and numbers dry up as uncertainty over the future of the programme discouraged prospective participants.[477]

WFF enjoyed a budget of £50 million over 4 years. Costs per client varied across different areas and different phases of the programme. In its first year, average costs were considerably higher given start-up investment and small intakes. These high averages fell quickly, however, into the second year and beyond. Year one costs per client (£2,878) fell to just £697 in year 4.[478] The cost per client achieving a transition was £3,382 overall, and £2,587 in year 4, though these exclude training costs provided by

[472] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[473] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[474] (Bond, et al., 2009; McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[475] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[476] (Bond, et al., 2009; McQuaid, et al., 2009)
[477] (Bond, et al., 2009)
[478] (McQuaid, et al., 2009)

external providers. The cost per participant attaining a 'hard' transition, even after adjustment for deadweight, was £6,764 overall, and £5,174 in year 4. Fiscal savings on benefits, after adjusting for deadweight, were estimated at £2.1 million, plus income tax payments. The evaluation also stresses that even if fiscal implications are relatively neutral, the considerable social and personal benefits are likely to be considerable, though the report does not try to quantify these.

## Marks and Start (2004-2018)

Marks and Spencer's 'Marks & Start' Programme ran between 2004-18 for single parents and was the UK's largest company-led work experience programme.[479] The programme targeted various groups – including single parents, as well as unemployed young, disabled and homeless people – and was delivered in partnership with various organisations drawn from the third sector according to their specialisms. Gingerbread supported over 5,000 single parents through the programme from 2004, and One Parent Families Scotland led the Scottish single parent partnerships from 2012-16.[480]

In 2014/15 in Scotland, 94 single parents started and completed tailored training through the programme; 93 and started and 90 completed a two-week placement in a Marks & Spencer store. Over the same period, the programme saw 62 job-starts at below 16 hours per week, and 57 job-starts above 16 hours per week. The Scottish arm of the project saw 60% of participants successfully enter work in 2015/16.[481]

### Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach

Participation in the programme was voluntary, though it could also be accessed through the Work Programme. Referrals to the programme were overseen by specialist partner organisations who ensured work readiness through a pre-screening session to make sure that participants were not pressured prematurely into the workplace.[482] This pre-screening session also gave an opportunity for partners to flag any health conditions or disabilities that might require allowances or adjustments to be made to ensure fair treatment.[483]

Marks & Start operational guidance for practitioners made efforts to avoid stigmatisation and/or embarrassment; for instance, operational guidelines stipulated that coaches should not ask participants to buy their own trousers as they may not be in a financial position to do so and should not assume that participants have access to laundry facilities.[484]

### Empowerment

Training was divided over a 3-day induction led by partner organisations, and on-the-job training during the 2-week placement from Marks and Spencer.

The preliminary induction training took place at a Marks & Spencer location but was run primarily by third sector partners. This training was equivalent to a Level 1 award in the NCFE's 'Job Search and Employment Potential',[485] and could be accredited or non-accredited according to preference.[486]

Programme-content ranged across developing a personal development plan; clarifying the benefits of being in work; identifying skills and achievable job-goals; creating a CV; applying for jobs and interview techniques; as well as personal finance and understanding and planning for the financial implications of entering employment. The programme was devised to help participants recognise and build on their existing skills, with a view to real job outcomes.[487]

[479] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)
[480] (OPFS, 2018)
[481] (OPFS, 2018)
[482] (OPFS, 2018)
[483] (Marks & Start, n.d.)
[484] (Marks & Start, n.d.)
[485] This course aims to support those who have been out of paid work for some time to re-enter it and to plan ahead to make outcomes more sustainable (Qualhub n.d.)
[486] (OPFS, 2018)
[487] (OPFS, 2018)

This was followed by a 2-week placement, during which time participants receive the same training as a new employee would. Coaches took participants through the Marks & Spencer career path training, drawing on the participant's personal development plan and covering customer service and product knowledge. Participants were allocated a 'buddy' to learn from and to offer peer-support. Said training was logged on accredited Marks & Spencer training cards, and a certificate was given on completion of the placement.

### Personalisation

Partner organisations worked to craft the terms of the placement to suit the needs of the participant. For instance, partners negotiated the dates and type of placement, and the department into which the participant was placed ahead of time, following consultation with the participant, and on the basis of their interests, skill-set and aspirations.[488] Work-hours were similarly set around school-hours and parental responsibilities.[489]

Continuous feedback was promised throughout the placement, and upon completion, the participant, coach and partner held a review of the placement to discuss performance. This meeting gave all parties the opportunity to review the participant's progress relative to their personal development plan, helped them to update their CV, and allowed them to discuss further goals and next steps.

### Holistic Support

Given that Marks & Start constituted an in-work placement programme, the provision of holistic support might appear less relevant. Nevertheless, we find some examples of good practice, and evidence of due thought, attention and sensitivity to participants' wider needs.

Induction sessions and training covered a broad range of areas: professional support offered advice on CV-writing and job-search activities, while financial advice helped participants to understand and plan for the financial implications of entering work. Partners also helped by signposting towards or supporting parents to find suitable childcare.[490]

At the start of the placement, uniforms were ordered and paid for by Marks & Spencer in recognition of the financial position of many participants. Similarly, Marks & Start reimbursed participants for any travel costs and offered a (modest) lunch allowance to ensure that participants were not out of pocket as a result of participating.[491]

### Good Jobs

If a participant completed all relevant training to a satisfactory standard then they were deemed 'suitable to re-engage', entitling them to enter employment with Marks & Spencer if/when a vacancy became available, without the need to interview. Overall, 40% of participants went on to work with Marks & Spencer or elsewhere within 3 months, with the equivalent figure standing at 60% in Scotland.[492]

If this was not the case, then the coach explained why the participant had been unsuccessful. In any case, all training was logged on an accredited Marks & Spencer training card and a certificate of completion was given.

[488] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)
[489] (OPFS, 2018)
[490] (OPFS, 2018)
[491] (Marks & Start, n.d.)
[492] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)

After completion, ongoing support was offered: participants could access a telephone helpline offering one-to-one support for 13 weeks after completion; every participant was supported to formulate an action plan when leaving and was provided with links to other agencies including Jobcentre Plus and further training opportunities.[493]

## Learnings & Recommendations

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

The programme showed considerable success – with 50% of participants overall and 60% in Scotland successfully entering employment within 3 months – and would be easily replicable in any large organisation.[494] It offered a number of lessons for crafting and arranging placements, and for employer-facing activities more generally.

The use of specialist partner-providers as an intermediary served to safeguard participants from any potential exploitation. Pre-screening ensured that prospective participants were indeed ready for work and did not risk being further set back in their employment journey by a negative experience.

### Empowerment

Participants followed the same training as a new employee would, again with mutual benefits: participants gain skills and training, which was logged on an accredited training card and could be shared with other prospective employers; and for Mark & Spencer, if a participant did become employed with the company, there was no need for further/duplicated training.

Even for those who did not attain a job at Marks & Spencer, there were still notable benefits: logged accredited training, personal development plans (both at the outset and after completion) and signposting towards further opportunities helped participants to improve their experience, skills and CVs.

### Personalisation

Placement programmes should be based on the needs and aspirations of participants. Again, the use of partners to negotiate the nature of placements with Marks & Spencer helped to tailor the placement according to the participant's aspirations and assets, resulting in a more rewarding and effective placements. Similarly, the programme crafted the dates and work-hours of placements to suit childcare arrangements and caring responsibilities.

### Holistic Services

As was the case under Marks & Start, those undertaking placements should not find themselves out of pocket as a result of participating. Transport costs should be reimbursed and a stipend for lunches should be provided, even if the placement remains unpaid. Programmes should also signpost to relevant wraparound services including childcare to facilitate completion of the placement.

### Good Jobs

The programme reflected an intended move towards ongoing employment. Those deemed 'suitable to re-engage' were offered interview-free entry into a vacancy as and when one appeared, with benefits for both the participant – the guarantee of a good job and reduced anxiety – and for the business – easy

[493] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)
[494] (Marks & Start, n.d.; OPFS, 2018)

recruitment, with no need to expend time and resources on training. This mutually-beneficial arrangement should be easily replicable in most large organisations.

It should be noted, however, that the main strengths of this approach – shaping shifts around childcare arrangements, and support with the associated costs – were rarely maintained if a participant entered into formal employment with Marks & Spencer. Preserving these arrangements in employment should be a priority and will likely rely on effective job-brokerage.

Marks & Spencer's review of the programme gives an indication of the business-friendly language in which such programmes can be pitched. According to Marks & Spencer itself:[495]

- The programme allowed the company to benefit from a wealth of untapped talent.
- Workers and participants showed their gratitude through high motivation, pride in Marks & Spencer, and hard work.
- Wider benefits included positive press coverage for corporate social responsibility, and a positive reputation within the local community.

[495] (Marks & Start, n.d.)

## Making It Work (2013-17)

The Making It Work programme ran from 2013-17 in five local partnership areas in Scotland (Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire & South Lanarkshire) and supported single parents furthest from the labour market who were under-served by pre-existing provision. The programme targeted single parents with 'complex needs' including disabilities, having a large family (of more than three children), living in a depressed local labour market, having little work experience or being out of work for over 2 years.[496] The majority of participants were women. Half its participants were aged below 25 or over 35 and thus outside of prime employability ages; most were in receipt of benefits and living in rented accommodation, and almost one in four suffered an illness or disability that impacted their ability to work (most frequently depression, anxiety or stress).[497]

The model was run and funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) and enjoyed a budget of £7 million between 2013-17.[498] Its model was designed through wide-ranging consultations by BLF with varied stakeholders and experts in single parents, employability, childcare and more, and drew heavily on evidence of 'what works' from previous interventions.[499] Each of the 5 local area projects was designed, run and delivered by partnerships, composed of a lead partner and core partner projects. The funding model used by the Big Lottery involved bringing together local authorities, the third sector and regeneration companies appropriate to each local area to develop funding bids which met criteria set by the lottery. Specialist single parent organisations OPFS and Fife Gingerbread were involved in delivery of services in each of the areas. It was a 'not for profit 'model.

The evaluation found the programme to be highly effective on both a personal and professional level: 30% of participants moved into work, and quantitative analysis of self-reported subjective and 'distance travelled' indicators – self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the number of reported barriers – found marked improvements, especially after 6 months.[500] Qualitative evaluation also found highly positive reviews of the programme for its flexibility, holistic and tailored support, and the sense of empowerment that participants reported.[501]

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

The programme was favourably reviewed by participants and formal evaluation alike for its intensive and proactive engagement strategies. Evaluative outputs found the voluntary nature of MIW to be a very positive asset in the medium-term, in contrast with the compulsion of many mainstream services, but acknowledged that this does entail certain challenges around engagement and recruitment. Furthermore, the distance of many participants from the labour market meant that proactive engagement was essential; many of the programme's participants had not previously been in contact with public employability services.[502]

Its first stage – termed 'pre-engagement' reflecting its gentle and non-binding approach – established contact and sought to build trust with prospective participants.[503] Some examples of good practice were common to all partnership areas, while others were more specific to local areas and reflected their unique traits and challenges.

Engagement methods common across all partnerships included situating development workers in local community, health, and early learning centres, as well as local childcare services (especially at times of

[496] (CRESR, 2017)
[497] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[498] (CRESR, 2017)
[499] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[500] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[501] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[502] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[503] (CRESR, 2017)

new intakes and in disadvantaged areas).[504] Such proactive engagement strategies had two main positive effects: firstly, it allowed workers to spread information about the MIW programme and recruit individuals directly; secondly, doing so within the community and through familiar and trusted organisations lent the programme credibility. Development workers were staffed primarily from local third sector organisations that enjoyed positive reputations and goodwill, especially in comparison with Jobcentre Plus. These informal introductory meetings gave information very gently and stressed the entirely voluntary nature of the programme. Holding the meetings in familiar and trusted environments helped build a rapport with prospective participants who lacked the confidence to attend a formal meeting in an unfamiliar office-type setting.

Evaluations found that the voluntary participation and the promise of multi-faceted support across a range of services (including benefits, money, and housing advice, as well as family support) were effective 'USPs' that helped to secure participation.[505]

Certain innovative practices were more unique to individual areas. MIW Fife, for instance, saw development workers accompany local third sector support workers on their home visits. Prospective participants appreciated this extra effort, and the affiliation with trusted third sector organisations lent the programme credibility.[506] Elsewhere, MIW North Lanarkshire sought to tackle the challenges associated with rural service-provision – namely, poor connectivity, transport and a lack of a critical mass of clients – through an intensive marketing and recruitment campaign on a time-limited (6-monthly) rolling basis across different sub-regions. This targeted approach was found to maximise impact and resource-efficiency.[507]

Evaluative outputs consistently found that the time and effort expended by development workers to build strong relationships, rapport and familiarity with prospective participants was pivotal to MIW's success, especially among those further from the labour market.

### Empowerment

MIW devoted significant time and resources to boosting self-confidence and self-efficacy from a personal perspective, and low skills, qualifications and experience from a professional viewpoint. This was critical given, on a personal level, most MIW participants reported suffering from low confidence at the outset.[508] 71% of participants took personal development courses aimed at remedying this, but MIW went much further than this in its efforts to empower participants.[509]

While MIW's process of 'co-production' (detailed more fully below) relates principally to the criterion of personalisation, its advocates also stress the empowering impacts of allowing service-users to design and shape their own employability journey. By granting them this autonomy and situating them as active participants rather than passive recipients of support, this was seen to boost their sense of control and 'ownership' over their circumstances.[510] This process follows a positive language and logic of capabilities and assets – rather than just needs and barriers – that helped to improve their self-confidence and self-efficacy.[511]

At the outset, many participants also reported feelings of isolation, with two in five citing not having family or friends nearby/available as a barrier to employment.[512] All of the areas had a group-based element which offered the participants the opportunity to share experiences and learn from each other.

[504] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[505] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[506] (CRESR, 2014)
[507] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[508] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[509] Ibid
[510] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[511] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[512] (Batty, et al., 2017; CRESR, 2017)

This peer support element was very important to the model. Most of the participants were mothers so these groups served as a 'safe space' where women could feel comfortable sharing their experiences, including of domestic and financial abuse. Group work sessions were found to help tackle isolation, and peer-support built a strong social network and safety net that helped parents feel more confident about entering work. Many parents, for instance, went on to share pick-ups and drop-offs, or provided emergency childcare for another parent when a child fell ill or in the case of an extra shift becoming available at short-notice.[513] This kind of peer-support also prevented over-reliance on the keyworker and helped build parents' shared self-efficacy.[514]

From an employability perspective, many participants lacked qualifications and/or experience. MIW sought to tackle employability barriers, through a two-stage approach, beginning with 'soft' skills – including IT skills-training, CV support, careers counselling and 'dress for success' advice – before moving onto more technical and/or vocational training.[515] As a proportion of all those who accessed support, 57% accessed basic skills development, and 35% and 20% respectively undertook accredited and non-accredited courses and qualifications.[516]

Qualitative evaluations with participants and stakeholders found highly positive reviews of what evaluators termed 'demand-led' training.[517] This refers to training and skills-acquisition oriented towards both participants' aspirations and to the needs of local employers and the local labour market. With regards to local labour market opportunities and needs, partnership areas undertook employer-facing activities (detailed below) at the outset and throughout to identify skills-gaps and (child-friendly) opportunities in the local labour market, which informed the vocational training packages they offered to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

With regards to participants' aspirations, parents were encouraged to devise a specific career path that drew on their interests and assets, rather than merely applying for any vacancy. MIW then offered training courses related to the specific fields they wanted to enter: MIW Edinburgh, for instance, collaborated with the Scottish Childminding Association to support parents to earn qualifications and pursue careers in childcare with the dual-benefits of good, child-friendly job outcomes, and improved capacity into the future.[518] MIW Glasgow compiled and targeted certain bespoke packages of training depending on participants' aspirations (rather than a generic or scattershot menu of training options).[519] By way of example, these included:

- For those seeking to enter caring roles, training in first aid, manual handling, dementia awareness and conflict resolution.
- Call centre training comprising conflict resolution and data protection training, among others.
- For those seeking to enter cleaning professions, health and safety, manual handling, and food hygiene.

This balance of aspiration and labour market realism appears to strike a promising balance that avoids the directive excesses of work first approaches and invests in participants' assets and aspirations.

Acknowledging the competing responsibilities of parents, MIW strove to ensure that its training was flexible and compatible with parents' caring responsibilities and/or working patterns. These training opportunities had very low drop-out rates and evaluative outputs have identified certain success factors, including: flexible training that acknowledge the unpredictability inherent in single parents' lives and allowed ample opportunities to re-take or make up for missed classes; small class sizes that encouraged

[513] (CRESR, 2017)
[514] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[515] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016; Batty, et al., 2017)
[516] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[517] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[518] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[519] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)

participation, with especial benefits for those lacking confidence; delivery-patterns that matched parents' caring responsibilities – for instance over two half-days rather than one full-day; and part-time training that allowed parents to work alongside skills-acquisition.[520]

Work experience and voluntary work were offered across all partnerships and, while not considered core activities, were undertaken by 6.5% and 4.7% of participants respectively.[521] This was found to be especially useful, most notably for those lacking experience, but also in terms of boosting participants' confidence and helping them to overcome feelings of isolation.[522]

Qualitative research found that personal and work-focused support had huge benefits for claimants not only in increased employability and career prospects, but also for the drastic improvements they entailed in self-esteem, mental health, family-care, work-life balance and wellbeing more generally.[523] Furthermore, it was those furthest from the labour market and facing the most disadvantage that benefitted from the greatest 'additionality'. Our own qualitative research found a perception among some evaluators and academics that this should be seen as a desirable outcome in its own right, independent of its implications for employability.

### Personalisation

OPFS was involved in delivering a single parent tailored element in the Glasgow, North & South Lanarkshire and the Edinburgh projects and access to OPFS freephone advice service was part of the Fife project. Evaluative outputs saw the keyworker model employed by MIW as "integral" to its success.[524] 95% of participants had access to a keyworker, and the vast majority completed a personal action plan.[525] The keyworker model allowed the plan to function smoothly and in tandem with mainstream and pre-existing employability support through expert signposting.

Keyworkers were often the initial contact that participants made with the programme, or at the very least were introduced at an early stage. This early one-to-one work helped build rapport, familiarity and understanding with participants and their circumstances and needs, on which to base a personal action plan. Keyworker roles were mainly staffed from childcare, voluntary and third sector organisations, ensuring vocational dedication, specialist knowledge and/or expertise in single parents' needs, while small caseloads – usually below 50 per keyworker – allowed for more intensive support.[526]

The pace of early interactions was deliberately gentle. MIW Glasgow, for instance, adopted an 8-stage process, including 'pre-engagement' and 'engagement' prior to the 'initial assessment' where an action plan was formulated.[527] Stakeholders and practitioners reported that the (pre-)engagement process sometimes took up to 6 months, and that participants would often not divulge relevant but sensitive information until some months into their journey.[528] Given the distance of many of these parents from the labour market, evaluative outputs also found that a plurality of participants did not know their end-goal at the outset, requiring a longer lead-in time to formulating their action plan.[529]

MIW also appeared to grant participants an unprecedented amount of influence over not only which services they accessed, but also over the services available to them. This ethos of co-production allowed participants to request new programme-content and to refine existing services in line with their stated

[520] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[521] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[522] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[523] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[524] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[525] Ibid
[526] (CRESR, 2017)
[527] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[528] (Batty, et al., 2017)

needs. This obviously operated within resource-constraints but was facilitated by MIW's flexible funding streams and was highly reviewed by participants and evaluators alike for the control and autonomy that it granted participants. This sense of ownership over the programme secured commitment and buy-in, as well as leading to more tailored content.[530] Qualitative reviews found almost universal praise for the flexibility and control this afforded participants, and this was overtly compared with the more coercive methods adopted by Jobcentre Plus.[531] Participants were granted a strong degree of control not only over programme-content, but also the frequency of their meetings, the pace of their employment journey, and their end-goal to ensure the programme worked around their other personal, parental and professional commitments.[532]

Great effort was made to ensure effective and efficient signposting. Locally sourced and specialist keyworkers were already familiar with the local context and services, meaning they could direct participants accurately and quickly. This was further facilitated by strong partnerships and healthy working relationships when referring to partner projects. To sustain this, partner organisations engaged in regular practice-sharing to ensure ongoing intra-organisational familiarity. Information-sharing between partner organisations saved participants from having to repeatedly explain their circumstances, with the dual-benefits of improved programme-efficiency, and seamless handovers that were more agreeable for participants.[533] Some local services even went so far as to co-locate services to allow for 'warm handovers' rather than more impersonal 'signposting'. This saved participants time by not necessarily having to make a separate appointment and made them feel at ease.[534]

The concerted partnership-working of MIW and the unprecedented autonomy granted to participants led some evaluators to suggest that it represents a true and sincere realisation of the principle of co-production, rather than its all-too-frequent use as a rhetorical device.[535]

### Holistic Services

MIW strove to provide a wide range of services spanning personal development to boost self-confidence and self-esteem (accessed by 71% of participants), childcare support (61%), practical support around debt, housing and personal finance (52%), and personal support aimed at tackling health-related barriers and substance use (42%).[536] On average participants accessed five or six services throughout their time on the programme.[537]

MIW sought to provide complementary, joined-up services to dovetail with pre-existing and mainstream provision, and to avoid wasteful duplication. This was provided in each local area through a consortium of partners with complementary skills and expertise, with their roles allocated accordingly. For instance, MIW Glasgow saw Citizens Advice provide advice on finance and benefits, specialist third sector single parent organisations offered personal development and basic employability skills, and training was offered through local employability organisations.[538]

Childcare was central to MIW's operations. A lack of affordable childcare and/or of capacity was a frequently cited barrier to employment that MIW sought to address in various ways.[539] MIW keyworkers supported parents to find, arrange and fund suitable childcare, including through use of discretionary (non-repayable) funds to cover the considerable up-front costs and deposits that nurseries and

[530] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[531] (Batty, et al., 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[532] (CRESR, 2017)
[533] (CRESR, 2017)
[534] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[535] (CRESR, 2017)
[536] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[537] Ibid
[538] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[539] (Batty, et al., 2017)

childminders required.[540] MIW also established crèches – run by, within or near MIW centres – with two primary benefits: this freed parents up to attend sessions and meetings to boost their employability, and helped parents get accustomed to using childcare services. Many parents were initially reluctant to leave their child, so using trusted and/or co-located services helped them to overcome this aversion.[541]

Discretionary funding was also used to supplement existing local provision and/or to build capacity where and when it was not available (most notably outside of 'normal' hours of operation at weekends and in the evenings).[542] Some deficiencies in local provision did persist nevertheless, and peer support networks proved especially useful in such circumstances.[543]

Beyond childcare, MIW's most effective and/or popular services included welfare rights and money advice. 'Cliff-edge' scenarios and uncertainty over the financial implications of entering work were especially daunting, so benefit and 'better off' calculations were remarked upon in qualitative reviews as especially effective in allowing participants to enter work with confidence.[544] MIW Fife's financial counselling showed especial innovation through its 'Open Me' initiative, whereby parents were encouraged to open bills and correspondence in the presence of a support worker to relive anxiety and to help find proactive solutions.[545]

This strong, holistic partnership working was facilitated by certain organisational factors (detailed more fully below). The Big Lottery Fund helped form consensus across partner organisations on aims and operations and asked for demonstrable experience of partnership-working in its tendering process. Success factors common across evaluations included concerted context mapping, a clear delineation of roles across partners, and adequate time and resources at the programme-design stage to achieve this in practice.[546] In general, this process ensured positive and collaborative working practices, and a mutual acknowledgement across partners that no single provider could offer all of the necessary services on their own.[547]

### Good jobs

A lack of suitable local jobs was among the most frequently cited barriers at the outset.[548] It is worth noting that in one MIW programme, for example, 87% of participants lived in a depressed local labour market.[549] Nevertheless, MIW was successful in getting 30% of its participants into employment, 83% of which was at over 16 hours per week, and the vast majority were happy with their job outcomes.[550]

In contrast with 'work first' approaches, participants were encouraged to take time to consider their aspirations and options, including how child friendly and realistic certain job vacancies were.[551] Participants were encouraged to envision a suitable career path and were supported to achieve the skills and qualifications necessary to make this a reality. Accredited qualifications proved especially effective for finding employment, as employers did not then have to pay for equivalent training.[552]

MIW programmes sought to root their activities within the local labour market and used employer engagement strategies to identify and capitalise on concrete opportunities. As outlined above, MIW sought to identify real opportunities and skills-gaps in local labour markets and tailored its training

[540] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[541] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[542] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[543] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[544] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[545] (CRESR, 2014)
[546] (Batty, et al., 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[547] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[548] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[549] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[550] (CRESR, 2017)
[551] (CRESR, 2017)
[552] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)

packages accordingly.[553] It also identified certain 'child-friendly' sectors – including retail, social care, and childcare – more amenable to flexibility and/or more easily reconciled with caring responsibilities.[554]

Employer engagement played a notable role in MIW, though our own qualitative research suggests this could have been better incorporated at an early stage. Nevertheless, MIW showed innovation in certain areas: MIW Glasgow, for instance, established a designated job brokerage role, with specific associated funding and resources, that coupled careers advice with employer-facing activities; MIW Fife undertook concerted work with local employer interfaces to secure 6-8 week work experience opportunities for those lacking experience; and MIW Edinburgh and MIW Lanarkshire used employer networking and employment consultants respectively.

These employer-facing activities showed great promise and were at times successful in challenging and changing employers' attitudes and/or practices. Job brokerage, for example, involved explaining parents' needs to employers and crafting mutually-beneficial job-terms. This included: explaining a parent's caring responsibilities and arranging for set shifts to align with childcare availability/arrangements; negotiating contracts of, for instance, 16-hours to satisfy Working Tax Credits' eligibility requirements;[555] or negotiating job-shares between two parents who could then serve as informal childcare for one another.[556]

Employer-facing activities also enjoyed some, albeit mixed, success at challenging harmful stereotypes about single parents. Some evidence was found that support workers succeeded in crafting employment-terms that disproved some of the negative and false preconceptions around reliability, though other evaluations found it best to not divulge a participant's single parent status as it proved off-putting to employers.[557] In general, it was suggested that more work will be required to overcome these challenges, but that an employer-friendly language of 'untapped resources' and 'reduced turnover' might be effective in crafting single parent-friendly employment terms.[558]

In-work support offered continued and ongoing assistance to parents, through regular scheduled keyworker meetings (at 3 and 6 months of employment) as well as more *ad hoc* support through meetings, calls, texts and social media.[559]

Transition points when entering employment are especially perilous, and any disruption can easily derail progress. MIW therefore sought to smooth these transitions through various means including discretionary financial support for food, transport, and clothing, among others, when entering work (especially between the cessation of out of work benefits and receipt of the first pay packet), and support with in-work benefit applications.[560] Evaluations found that a clear articulation of the available in-work support ahead of entering work helped parents take up employment with confidence and ease.[561]

Ongoing support also helped parents seeking to transition within work to plan for and smooth such movements. For parents seeking to increase their hours or change jobs, this included 'better off' calculations and support modifying their childcare arrangements. Such support enjoyed notable qualitative support from participants.[562]

[553] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[554] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[555] While this is now less pertinent given the roll-out of Universal Credit, these reforms do stipulate minimum hours of work to qualify for exemption from job-search activities; namely 16 hours per week or 25 hours depending on the age of the youngest child.
[556] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[557] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[558] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[559] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[560] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[561] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[562] (Batty, et al., 2017)

Finally, in-work support also entailed brokering negotiations and/or conflict resolution between employers and employees to help participants to sustain employment.[563]

## Learnings

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

Resource-heavy and early engagement were central to MIW's successes, especially given the distance of its participants from the labour market. The inclusion of local, specialist and trusted third sector organisations, rooted in familiar community-spaces helped build the trust and credibility needed to recruit individuals outside of the reach of statutory services, and perhaps reluctant to engage formally with services. Innovative practices like home-visits, door-knocking and leafleting showed dedication and built trust with prospective participants, and engendered huge additionality and reach beyond mainstream and/or statutory services.[564]

Strong early partnerships across a range of partners (especially third sector organisations) was essential for arranging this, and for securing referrals from partners. Other key sources of referrals included local NHS and public health bodies and – despite their very different ethos and methods – Jobcentre Plus.[565]

The promise of wide-ranging support was an effective 'USP' to secure participation, and discretionary funds allowed development workers to reassure prospective participants that they would not be out of pocket as a result of joining.[566]

Pre-engagement and engagement should follow a pace comfortable to the individual and should establish trust and transparency prior to any individual action plan or assignation to services: many participants had not had time to think about their aims prior to joining, and many did not divulge sensitive but important information until months into the programme.

### Empowerment

Isolation was a common challenge for parents at the outset, and peer support was highly regarded by participants and providers alike: it helped to tackle isolation, boosted social skills and gave parents a supportive safety net (for advice, childcare, and more), as well as preventing over-reliance on keyworkers. Group work was not introduced until parents were ready and need not only pertain to professional or personal development: MIW's projects included purely social and recreational activities like craftwork.[567] Group work had huge personal and social benefits, and some parents even went on to form their own groups outside of MIW, boosting the social infrastructure of their communities.[568]

Training and professional development should follow a language and logic of assets and aspirations, encouraging parents to devise a career path in child friendly sectors. This will inevitably take time as many parents did not know their end-goal when joining the programme. Training packages should follow participants' aspirations and give them a package of skills tailored to certain sectors or roles, rather than the more common 'scattershot' approach. Accredited training gives them an especial advantage in the labour market as employers do not then have to pay for this.

Given the demand-side constraints of employability interventions, 'demand-led' training programmes should also take account of local opportunities and skills-gaps and should engage local employers in the

[563] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[564] (Batty, et al., 2017; CRESR, 2017)
[565] (CRESR, 2014)
[566] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[567] (CRESR, 2017)
[568] (CRESR, 2017)

design of such services. Our own qualitative enquiry found a perception that such activities are usually an after-thought; this should be done at an early stage to maximise its integration, impact and efficiency through a streamlined process geared towards real job opportunities.

Training programme should take full account of single parents' competing personal, parental and employment related responsibilities. Thus, training programmes should:[569]

- Offer the flexibility that childcare responsibilities require, with ample opportunities to catch up or retake missed classes.
- Be delivered in line with parents' time-constraints (e.g. over 2 half-days rather than 1 full day) and in various locations.
- Take place in small groups to encourage participation among less confident individuals.
- Offer accreditation where possible to maximise its impact.
- Be accompanied by adequate childcare to ensure parents can attend.
- Be compatible with part-time work to allow working parents to gain skills and qualifications and progress within work, without facing a financial loss.[570]

Supporting training and skills acquisition in childcare can help participants to enter child-friendly employment in the short-term and bolster local capacity in the longer-term for future parents. (Concerns over the level of pay in this sector do persist, however.)

Voluntary work and work experience are also highly effective, especially for individuals lacking prior experience and/or confidence. Early employer-facing activities engagement can help identify and craft suitable opportunities.

### Personalisation

The keyworker model was central to many of the successes of MIW. Nevertheless, having a caseworker does not in and of itself guarantee personalisation, MIW's specific strengths lay in the complementary facets of the programme's design and operations, including its highly-skilled staff, its flexible service-provision, partnership working, and funding model, among others.

Keyworkers must be empathetic to and understanding of single parents' commitments and needs, and they must be familiar with the employability landscape and all relevant pre-existing service-provision to ensure smooth and accurate referrals. This often, though not necessarily, means staffing keyworkers from specialist third sector, voluntary, or childcare organisations to ensure expertise and a sincere vocational commitment.[571]

True personalisation requires a comprehensive knowledge of an individual's circumstances, needs, prior experiences and assets, and potentially the disclosure of sensitive or personal information. Adequate time (up to 6 months in some cases) and resources were required to build familiarity, trust and rapport with participants. For this reason, caseloads should also, where possible, be kept low (i.e. below 50 per keyworker).[572]

Strong partnership working and intra-organisational familiarity are imperative to achieving smooth and accurate referrals. Strong, early, and intensive partnership formation and ongoing practice-sharing can help establish mutual-familiarity across partners' operations and specialties.[573]

[569] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016; CRESR, 2017; Batty, et al., 2017)
[570] (CRESR, 2017)
[571] (CRESR, 2017)
[572] (CRESR, 2017)
[573] (CRESR, 2014)

Information-sharing between partner organisations that saves participants repeating their circumstances, and co-location of services can help achieve 'warm handovers' rather than impersonal 'signposting', with benefits for both programme-efficiency and users' experiences.

Co-production entails not just partnerships of providers, but the active inclusion of users in programme-design and content. This in turn requires flexible funding streams and receptive caseworkers.

Participants should also have control over the frequency of meeting, as well as the pace and end-goal of their employability journey to take proper account of their caring (and other) responsibilities.

According to programme evaluation, enablers of co-production include: proactive, resource-heavy (pre-)engagement to build trust and familiarity; receptive and trusted keyworkers; and a strong third sector presence (experts in single parents' specific needs and often the first to hear about gaps/inadequacies in provision); and a governance model that encourages deliberation and ongoing modification of sub-optimal content.[574]

### Holistic Services

Holistic services are central to providing comprehensive employability support, but also proved highly effective in securing participation.[575]

Partnerships were key to providing a range of high-quality services. Critical success factors to partnership formation include: [576]

- A clear articulation from funders of the expectation of partnership-working, and a tendering process that requires lead-partners to demonstrate such experience.
- A clear identification of overarching principles (both 'top-down' – from funders – and 'bottom-up' – through consensus-building among partners).
- Consensus-building between partners on programme-design and delivery.
- Clear identification of partners' respective roles.
- Intra-partner familiarity with other providers' roles, expertise and operational strengths.
- Information and practice-sharing, both at the outset of partnership formation (as in MIW Glasgow's full-day 'Spotlight' sessions)[577] and regularly throughout the programme (as in MIW Fife's monthly partner-meetings).[578]
- A funding model that secures the participation of third sector organisations that would rarely qualify under mainstream bidding processes (further detailed below).

In many cases, childcare was seen as a first step towards tackling an individual's barriers as it freed them up to devote the necessary time and attention to their employability. Complementary childcare should accompany any employability programme to ensure parents can participate to the best of their abilities. Co-located crèche services can also help parents acclimatise to using childcare services if they are unaccustomed and/or reluctant to do so. Support not only finding and arranging, but funding childcare and its associated up-front costs through (non-repayable) discretionary funds proved essential.

Financial advice and benefit calculations were central to supporting parents into employment with confidence and ease, given 'cliff-edge' scenarios and opacity around the financial implications of entering paid work.

[574] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[575] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[576] (Batty, et al., 2017; CRESR, 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[577] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[578] (CRESR, 2014)

### Good jobs

Participants should be encouraged and supported to identify their professional aspirations and a viable, child-friendly career path, rather than applying for all and any work.

Early employer-facing activities are essential, to incorporate local opportunities and skills-gaps into training programmes and to identify and secure work experience, voluntary work and job vacancies.[579]

Employer-facing and job-brokerage activities can also make job-outcomes more sustainable and might include:

- 'Job crafting' whereby brokers negotiate with employers to shape employment at a number of hours that satisfies conditionality requirements, or craft regular shift patterns to suit childcare responsibilities/arrangements. [580]
- Negotiating job-shares between two parents such that each can serve as informal childcare for the other.
- Conflict resolution to maintain healthy working relationships and sustain employment.

Employer-facing activities might benefit from developing and using an employer-friendly language of 'untapped resources' and the promise of 'reduced turnover' if single parent-friendly terms of employment can be negotiated and maintained. Prejudice persists, however, and it might be advisable to not disclose to employers that candidates are single parents.[581] Longer-term efforts to challenge stigma should nevertheless be pursued.

In-work support is essential during the high-risk transition into employment. Discretionary funds should be available to help with costs associated with entering employment (e.g. transport, uniforms, food).[582] A mix of regular scheduled in-work sessions (covering general challenges and in-work progression) and *ad hoc* support (in case of disruption or emergency) covers all bases. In-work support should, like employability itself, be conceived of as a package of supports: for instance, ongoing assistance with personal finance and benefits as earnings change, and/or alterations to childcare arrangements and funding when increasing hours or changing jobs might prove essential.

### Funding and Governance

The Big Lottery Fund's governance and funding model offers various lessons and examples of good practice for replication in mainstream interventions. This model established clear and consensual priorities and methods at the outset (both imposed 'top-down' from BLF, and mutually-agreed between partners), but with a funding and governance model that ensured ongoing flexibility to revise programmes as necessary. An organisational ethos expressed clearly and early by funders, of deliberation that encouraged partners to challenge sub-optimal services helped ensure ongoing revision and continuous improvement. Qualitative enquiry with practitioners found high praise for the hands-off approach taken by BLF after the initial partnership-formation.[583]

MIW's bidding process helped to form healthy and broad-based partnerships by requiring lead partner applicants to show proven experience of coalition-building and collaborative practices.[584]

Critical success factors to strong partnership formation included:

[579] (CRESR, 2014)
[580] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[581] (Macdougall & Kromydas, 2016)
[582] (CRESR, 2017)
[583] (CRESR, 2017)
[584] (CRESR, 2017)

- BLF's early and clear articulation of its expectations of collaborative, consensual practices sent out an incontrovertible message;[585]
- The inclusion of third sector interface organisations in partnership formation helped recruit diverse partners with wide-ranging specialisms;[586]
- Intra-organisational familiarity (e.g. through full-day practice-sharing sessions) helped identify organisations' specialisms and helped to allocate roles accordingly.[587] This in turn engendered a collaborative ethos whereby partners accepted their own operational limitations, and acknowledged that no one organisation could provide all services;[588]
- Up-front funding ensured that third sector organisations' participation was financially viable, in contrast with many mainstream competitive tendering processes.

Partnerships led by and composed of third sector organisations, rather than private providers, ensured local and specialist knowledge that helped map pre-existing provision and plan the complementary services needed by single parents, and avoided wasteful duplication. More specifically, the inclusion of specialist single parent organisations ensured relevant and tailored programmes, helped to establish credibility and trust with prospective participants, and helped to secure referrals. Rigorous context-mapping and partnership-formation requires substantial resources and a long lead-in time, but evaluative outputs found a consensus that this led to more thorough and efficient planning in the long-term.[589]

The intensive and flexible approach taken by MIW was facilitated by its funding streams. Up-front funding showed various benefits, including:

- Collaborative practices between partners, rather than the adversarial dynamics associated with competitive tendering.[590]
- Heavy investment in more intensive interventions (e.g. training) without fear of financial losses and avoided issues of 'creaming and parking'.[591]
- Securing the participation of third sector organisations whose funding streams are often less compatible with efficiency-oriented tendering processes.[592]

BLF's flexible funding stream (facilitated by an ethos of deliberation, co-production and rigorous evaluation) also allowed for ongoing revisions, including the introduction of new programmes as requested by participants, or the scrapping of ineffective programmes. This was positively reviewed across the evaluative outputs.[593] Discretionary funds allowed for both short-term *ad hoc* support (e.g. to reimburse travel costs, or smooth transitions into work) as well as larger investments (e.g. in training programmes or up-front childcare costs). Both of these were seen as a critical success factor for those successfully entering employment.[594]

In terms of cost-efficiency – i.e. the cost relative to outputs/outcomes – evaluation found that MIW operated within a normal range for more intensive regenerative schemes. The cost per employment outcome was estimated at £7,424 and the cost per accredited skills outcome was £6,284.[595] This is broadly in line with programmes such as the Flexible New Deal, and indeed considerably lower than average governmental spending on regenerative schemes (£13,320).[596] In terms of cost-effectiveness – i.e. the value associated with job outcomes and MIW's return on investment – MIW saw an estimated

[585] (CRESR, 2017)
[586] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[587] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[588] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[589] (CRESR, 2017) (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015a)
[590] (Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[591] (CRESR, 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b)
[592] (CRESR, 2017)
[593] (Batty, et al., 2017; Pearson & Lindsay, 2015b; CRESR, 2014)
[594] (Batty, et al., 2017)
[595] (Dayson, et al., 2017)
[596] (Crisp, 2013)

fiscal value of £8 million, and an estimated economic value of £11.5 million.[597] While hard to quantify, evaluative outputs also highlight the considerable social value that MIW brought. It valued improvements in self-esteem at £526 per parent and in emotional well-being at £207 per parent.

[597] (Dayson, et al., 2017)

## Carers in Employment (2015-17)

The Carers in Employment programme (CiE) ran from 2015-17 in nine local authority areas in England. Overseen by the Social Care Institute for Excellence, CiE was aimed at establishing 'what works' in supporting people with caring responsibilities into and/or within paid work.

The programme worked with both carers and local employers, supporting 2,794 individuals and 384 employers throughout its duration. This included carers both in and out of work, though with the latter constituting a firm majority. Those already in employment worked an average 34 hours per week – though this varied anywhere between 7.5 and 60 hours – and provided an additional average 34 hours care per week.

From its conception, the programme established an ethos of bespoke, local solutions and a person-centred approach. It coupled light touch support in the form of advice, leafleting and signposting, with more intensive interventions.

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

Outreach activities were central to CiE's success, with those areas that adopted a more proactive approach seeing the greatest success.[598]

Programme staff demonstrated great commitment and flexibility to the programme and their work, offering support outside of standard working hours. Many (prospective) participants were already in work and thus unable to take time out during the day to access services, and many were reluctant to reveal their caring responsibilities in the workplace for fear of repercussions. It was therefore deemed necessary – and effective – to provide engagement sessions outside of work-hours and workplaces.

Those local areas that formed wide-ranging partnerships also reported greater success in engagement and recruitment. Partnerships ranging across health, social care, employment/employability and beyond help to secure referrals through a range of venues and organisations. Those areas that partnered with local carer-specialist organisations were seen by evaluative outputs to have the greatest success engaging 'hard to reach' individuals and groups facing more and/or complex barriers. These organisations enjoyed established and strong reputations, we well as trust, among prospective participants, and their prior contact and familiarity with certain clients allowed for easy referrals to the programme.

### Empowerment

CiE employed a blend of emotional, personal and professional support that allowed carers to flourish in and outside of work. The programme and its keyworkers were seen by participants as an emotional support, rather than a pure employability service.[599] Keyworkers' willingness to simply listen to carers was reviewed especially highly, and participants reported that this made them feel less alone and more validated. Evaluative outputs found high praise for the programme's empathetic and caring staff.

Peer support and group work also helped to tackle the isolation faced by many carers. Participants shared stories and insights among themselves, resulting in carers often feeling less alone. It was often reassuring for carers to hear similar or shared sentiments expressed by their peers; for instance, hearing that other carers felt similarly overwhelmed made participants feel less alone. They no longer saw such barriers as personal failings, helping to build their self-esteem. Peer support and group work also served to tackle isolation and provided a forum for sharing practical tips and proactive solutions.

[598] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[599] (Wilson, et al., 2018)

In terms of personal development, CiE's keyworkers worked with participants to build their self-confidence and self-esteem, and in professional terms, offered mentoring, careers advice, CV support and interview practice. The vast majority of participants were, however, already in work, and those out of employment were typically very far from the labour market.

As a result, these participants often lacked recent experience and/or qualifications. Voluntary work and placements were seen by evaluative outputs to have huge value for those lacking experience; older carers especially appreciated accredited and non-accredited training opportunities. Evaluative outputs found that training at an appropriate level was more likely to be effective if tailored to the individual's prior experiences, interest and assets on the basis of their carer's assessment.

### Personalisation

The CiE programme offered primarily 'light-touch' support (to 79% of participants) comprising one-off advice, printed marketing and communications. Evaluations, however, found that owing to their professional and caring commitments, carers are often time poor, and thus lack the time to do independent research. More intensive interventions offering more comprehensive advice and support were found to be much more effective.

The 21% of participants who received a more intensive, bespoke service were much more likely to report positive outcomes. This more tailored support included formulating a personal carer's assessment of needs, circumstances and goals, and/or regular meetings with a keyworker to support and monitor progress towards or within employment. Keyworkers provided tailored guidance and advice on health, career guidance and financial advice, as well as helping with personal development, signposting participants towards related services, arranging training and placements, and helping broker employer-negotiations.

Evaluative outputs found that having a designated keyworker was effective at facilitating job retention, by helping participants to navigate 'tipping points' in their trajectory at which their progress might otherwise have been derailed. It should be remembered that for single parents and carers alike, their particular barriers and challenges do not simply melt away upon entering employment. Indeed, qualitative evaluation found a perception that designated caseworkers providing guidance and information was the most notable and effective enabler of employment.[600]

Short, regular conversations – whether face to face, over the phone or via social media – with the fixed keyworker were found to boost carers' confidence and self-efficacy. These sessions helped cares to understand their entitlements and made them feel more comfortable asking their employers for greater flexibility, often after only a few sessions. Regular contact was deemed especially helpful when the cared for individual's health fluctuated or deteriorated, and the needs of the carer changed as a result. In addition to the benefits of this regularity for participants, from an organisational perspective, short, regular sessions rather than more free-form appointments, ensured a more efficient and reliable service-delivery for all participants.[601]

Keyworkers demonstrated great flexibility in their working patterns to suit carers' schedules. Sessions where offered outside of standard working hours to ensure access for working carers, and keyworkers 'hot-desked' at a variety of community venues to remove mobility-related barriers to attendance. The emotional support provided by empathetic keyworkers was also well-documented within the programme's evaluative outputs: keyworkers were seen by participants as a 'safety buffer' and provided companionship in addition to professional services. The positive implications this had for mental health and self-confidence were seen to indirectly boost employability.[602]

[600] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[601] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[602] (Wilson, et al., 2018)

### Holistic Services

The specific supports and services offered by CiE varied between local authority areas, but with certain commonalities across the programme. Such services included information, advice and guidance on employment/employability, health, and finance, arranging substitute care, signposting to specialist providers/services (such as assistive technology), direct advocacy in employer-negotiations, and arranging training and placements.

Advice and guidance largely concerned carers' rights to flexibilities and other entitlements in the workplace (as outlined above) but also included finance and welfare rights advice aimed at income maximisation. Given the complexity, opacity and bureaucracy associated with these, programme staff provided guidance and administrative support to navigate this field. Staff provided administrative support to secure funding and/or grants to cover, for instance, lags in welfare receipt, and assisted with applications for blue badge parking and carers' allowance. Many participants had no prior experience of these administrative processes and benefitted hugely from this support. In addition to the obvious financial benefits of income maximisation, evaluation found that this support helped to ease the anxiety and stress associated with such bureaucracy.

In addition to this informational support, young carers especially were very receptive to practical, everyday support such as clothing and travel costs.

CiE helped to fund and provide assistive technology, which was found by evaluation to be a key enabler of work. This lessened the caring burden, helped carers to maintain contact with their cared for person, or alerted them in the case of an emergency, through technology such as fall alarms, medication reminders, and door alarms. Such technology allowed carers to more easily reconcile employment with caring and led to fewer interruptions and early-departures from work. It also granted carers peace of mind when at work or the confidence to enter employment, safe in the knowledge that they would be alerted to any emergency. This had an added benefit for employers in the form of fewer distractions and resultant higher productivity in work.[603]

CiE also sought to establish substitute care services to free carers up to work or engage with its own services. Staffed by volunteering individuals with their own prior experience of caring, this allowed for the establishment of a service with a thorough understanding of the needs and challenges of carers. While this did at times lighten the caring burden faced by some carers, from an organisational perspective, challenges persisted: owing to its voluntary nature, the project struggled with recruitment and retention, and many of its substitute carers disengaged or proved somewhat unreliable. It was suggested that partnering with more formal, established agencies operating a similar programme may be more effective.

### Good work

CiE undertook significant employer-facing activities and used a mix of strategies aimed at making employment more carer-sensitive.

From carers and participants' perspectives, this was largely through advice, guidance and brokerage. The programme sought to help carers to establish a healthy work-life balance and to ensure that their caring responsibilities were taken account of in the workplace. Keyworkers helped to explain and clarify carers' entitlements and rights, for instance to flexible working and to the carer's allowance. In some cases, support workers helped to broker negotiations between carers and their employers to craft more flexible

[603] (Wilson, et al., 2018)

working patterns, and evaluative outputs found that a fifth of participants successfully secured greater flexibility.[604]

This, and wider support with income maximisation (e.g. through the carer's allowance), actually led some carers to reduce their working hours. It should be remembered that the average working carer was performing 34 hours of paid work and a further 34 hours of caring work each week. Therefore, a reduction in working hours should not be seen as a negative if it led to a more desirable work-life balance. Indeed, the programme explicitly did not attempt to increase the hours of any carer working over 30 hours per week for this reason. Some participants even moved to lower-paid and/or lower-skilled roles, and one even withdrew entirely from paid employment. While these participants largely acknowledged a perceived loss of status, they also tended to report an improved work-life balance and suggested that this made employment more sustainable in the long-run.[605]

CiE undertook a vast amount of employer-facing activity, engaging with 384 local employers over its life-course. Such activities were aimed at raising awareness of and sensitivity to carers' needs and responsibilities among employers and line-managers and supporting employers to make their practices and policies more carer-friendly – most frequently by introducing greater flexibility to working practices. To this end, a mix of resources and practices was prepared, including carer support toolkits for employers, a dedicated handbook on carers' needs and challenges, training packages for line managers, templates for carer-friendly policies, and networks with local agencies to whom CiE programmes could signpost employers for support reforming their policies. This was found to be highly effective at challenging and changing workplace practices, improving line managers' sensitivity to carers' needs, and reducing conflict between caring employees and employers.

CiE projects employed a variety of engagement strategies and routes. Local programmes worked to establish contact with local employers through networking opportunities such as business fairs and breakfasts, commercial exhibitions, and by partnering with local chambers of commerce. CiE programmes also hosted events and used cold calls to employers, and then built on any 'warm contacts' – i.e. those employers expressing interest in or amenability to CiE's aims and operations – through one-to-one contact, surgeries and workplace visits, to great effect. Evaluations found that this approach was highly effective, though warned that it relied on 'low hanging fruit' and that greater efforts should be made to reach those employers less immediately responsive to the programme.

Through such avenues, CiE engaged employers and subsequently worked with them, through various strategies, to change attitudes and practice, with certain findings on effective 'best practice'. CiE focused on areas where change was realistic and feasible from a business perspective, such as reforming organisational policy on carers, or through providing training to line managers on carers' needs. CiE found that it was more effective to offer a 'menu' of options from which the employer could pick, rather than giving prescriptive instructions. There was sometimes a perception that CiE did not understand the business' needs, so having staff with experience of business and therefore able to engage constructively was deemed helpful.

More broadly, finding a business-friendly language in which to pitch carer-friendly changes was essential, especially when dealing with the private sector. While the specifics of this are beyond the evaluative outputs' remit, we find certain promising examples of business-friendly arguments; namely, improved staff retention, reduced turnover (and associated costs), and higher morale and productivity. Such arguments showed the benefits of appropriate messaging and helped identify a provisional template. More generally, predicating an argument purely on statutory requirements was seen as too combative, and a positive, ethical and/or business-friendly case was found by evaluative outputs to be desirable.

[604] (Wilson, et al., 2018)
[605] (Wilson, et al., 2018)

The programme also identified certain sectors more amenable to carer-friendly reforms and policies; specifically, health and social care sectors, and female-dominated industries more generally. Nevertheless, we should again remain cognisant of over-reliance on 'low hanging fruit'.

The programme encountered certain challenges associated with microbusinesses and large employers headquartered outside of the local area. For the latter, a mix of top-down activities – lobbying head offices for procedural and policy change – and bottom-up initiatives – such as providing training for local managers – was found to be effective.

In general, evaluative outputs expressed concerns that staff were spread rather thin on employer-facing activities, and that adequate staffing and resources are essential. It also found that areas that were more successful at recruiting employers were less successful in recruiting carers/individuals, owing to the discrete skillsets that these roles require.

This jointly points to the importance of an integrated pathway, including good-quality, sustainable employment outcomes, and in-work support that is tailored and well-resourced.

## Learnings

### Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach

The Carers in Employment programme used partnerships, co-location and hot-desking to widen access routes to their services. Given their predominant focus on working carers, their dedicated staff worked to provide accessible services outside of standard working hours and in a variety of local venues to take account of carers' often-limited time and mobility.

Partnerships across health, social care, employability and beyond, helped to widen access routes and secure referrals. Partnering with local specialist organisations with pre-existing goodwill, reputation and contacts helped to engage individuals from 'harder to reach' groups. Especially at the outset, before word of mouth had spread, partnerships with recognised 'brands' helped to build interest and momentum.

### Empowerment

The emotional support offered by keyworkers had hugely positive effects not only for participants' wellbeing and confidence, but, taking a more longitudinal perspective, likely helped them to build their confidence and resilience to remain in employment.

Peer support and group work also helped participants to feel less alone. Hearing their own difficulties were shared by others made this feel less of a personal failing, and more of an external, structural deficiency. Group work also provided a forum for practical advice and solidaristic support.

Those who were out of work when joining the programme tended to be very far from the labour market and lacking recent qualifications and/or experience. Such individuals found voluntary opportunities, work placements and training highly effective in bringing themselves closer to the labour market, especially when these were tailored to their own experience, assets or interests.

### Personalisation

In short, those participants receiving more intensive interventions were found to have much greater success than those receiving only 'light touch' advice. A bespoke 'carer's assessment' helped to identify the correct blend of services for the individual, and to tailor training or work experience to the individual's prior experience or interests (resulting in more positive outcomes).

Flexibility from the programme and its staff was essential for widening access given working carers' time-commitments. Offering surgeries/appointments outside of standard working hours and hot-desking shaped the programme's delivery around carers' needs and commitments, with positive effects on engagement and progress. Regular, short sessions ensured continuity and reliability, and allowed participants to build their self-efficacy in-between meetings, as well as ensuring smooth service-delivery from an organisational perspective.

### Holistic Services

Holistic services including financial and welfare advice, and administrative support with such income maximisation, were highly effective in boosting carers' wellbeing.

Assistive technology was a key enabler of employment, granting carers greater confidence and peace of mind at work or to enter work.

Substitute care could be effective in lightening the burden on carers and allowing them to work more or engage with the programme. However, the programme struggled with retention of volunteer carers. If such services are unreliable and an individual's arrangements break down, this could in fact increase turbulence and challenges for carers. The programme might have benefited from partnering with a more established/formal agency.

Partnership working brought various benefits to the programme:

- A breadth of expertise at early stages helped to achieve thorough context-mapping and the identification of necessary services and potential client groups during programme-design.
- Broad partnerships were also deemed necessary to deliver an effective range of high-quality wraparound services. For instance, providing assistive technology through expert partner providers was more effective than providing it in-house for two main reasons: technical knowledge was required to set up and pitch assistive technology to participants; and this helped manage demand more effectively.
- Offering a range of services through a larger number of partners was seen by evaluation to increase resilience in the case that a provider ceased operations and allowed for a more efficient re-allocation of roles and resources.

The programme and its evaluative outputs also found certain critical success factors to partnership formation:

- Partnership-formation and working requires adequate lead-in time to form relationships and familiarity, and adequate resources.
- Those areas that used local specialist partners and that mapped and built on existing provision were found to have greater success.
- Positive working relationships between core partners and wider (third-party provider) partners were seen as central to this success.
- This in turn was facilitated by strong practice-sharing and intra-partner familiarity. Evaluative outputs recommended using mechanisms such as practice-sharing sessions to facilitate this.

Evaluation encouraged a careful balance between ongoing evaluation and patience: while continuous improvement is important, evaluators also suggested that programmes like CiE will likely require at least 1-2 years to bed in and for results to be seen.

In addition to health, social care and employability, the programme's and partners' expertise should also include business. Having staff with experience in business and capable of speaking to employers' needs proved important in employer-facing activities.

### Good Jobs

The programme undertook considerable employer-facing activities and helped identify multiple learnings in this vein.

Employer-facing activities were a core feature of the project from the outset, with dedicated time and resources targeted at this from a very early stage. This allowed the programme to build a bank of accessible resources and strategies and used early success stories to stoke interest and forward momentum. Critical success factors in employer-facing activities included:

- Programme should capitalise on pre-existing networking opportunities and then build on prior contact through one-to-one meetings.
- Employer-engagement requires vastly different skillsets from participant-engagement and thus both roles should be kept discrete and adequately resourced and staffed.
- Appropriate messaging was central to CiE's success:
    - Programme's should focus on realistic changes that are feasible in the short-term.
    - Employers preferred a 'menu' of options over a more prescriptive approach.
    - A business-friendly language – of reduced turnover, reduced hiring costs, and improved productivity – proved effective, especially when dealing with profit-seeking companies.
    - Having staff with experience of business helped avoid the perception that the programme did not understand the organisational needs of employers.
    - Relying solely on employers' statutory requirements was less effective than using a blend of statutory, moral and business-friendly arguments.
- Line manager training and handbooks on carers' needs were highly effective in challenging ignorance and changing workplace practices.
- Simple, accessible toolkits, handbooks and policy templates were effective on account of their simplicity where employers were not able/willing to engage in more formal and/or resource-intensive changes, or for smaller businesses.
- A mix of top-down – e.g. policy change – and bottom-up strategies – e.g. line manager training – proved effective, especially in larger organisations.
- When participants lacked the confidence to do so themselves, brokerage by keyworkers helped to secure more flexible working patterns and reduced conflict with employers.

The programme raises valid questions around optimal working hours and patterns, and suggests that full-time employment may not be feasible or desirable for some. Some participants reduced their work-hours to dedicate more time to caring and/or to improve their work-life balance. For those with considerable caring responsibilities, this should not necessarily be seen as a negative. However, we do acknowledge that this option was not available to low-earners.

The primary outcomes cited in evaluative outputs were improved wellbeing, with little evidence of greater employment outcomes. However, evaluations suggest that it would be narrow-minded to read this as a failure; rather, this improved wellbeing may well constitute a first step on the employability pathway and have the secondary, longer-term benefit of maintaining labour market participation for longer than would have otherwise been the case.

## Health 4 Work (2016-19)

The Health 4 Work programme (H4W) ran in North Aberdeenshire, primarily in the two largest towns of Fraserburgh and Peterhead, both of which appear among Scotland's most employment-deprived areas.[606] It sought to link poor health outcomes to employment and employability through addressing inequalities and improving and integrating access to services, and worked with individuals with mild to moderate mental and physical ill health. The programme was funded by the Scottish Government's Employability Innovation and Integration Fund and was designed and delivered by a range of partners, based on previous evidence of 'what works' and an integrated approach to employability.

While the programme was not single parent-specific, they did make up a significant proportion of the programme's intake. We have included this intervention on the basis of its innovation and its strong – and relevant – focus on health and its interconnection with employment; previous research has found that single parents are almost twice as likely as coupled-parents to report having poor health, a disability or long-term health condition, and/or care for a disabled child.[607]

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

The underpinning aim of the programme was to widen and access to services – both employability and health-related – and to tackle inequalities in access. Engagement strategies therefore sought to work around participants' needs, schedules and mobility. Previous consultations had found that participants faced multiple challenges around accessing services, including difficulties arranging a time and date, knowing where and how services could be accessed, getting to the venue itself, and concerns over the stigma associated with such services.

Unemployment is known to have various interactions with health-outcomes. It was therefore decided to situate keyworkers within key health settings to improve access to services at the point of contact. Keyworkers, including welfare rights advisors, were placed within local hospitals and health centres, allowing for *ad hoc* referrals and meetings following medical consultations, and as such tackled issues around scheduling, mobility and access.[608]

### Empowerment

Health 4 Work coupled personal and professional development to boost participants' self-confidence as well as their employability. With regards to the former, the programme adopted Scarf's[609] 'STEPS to excellence' course comprising cognitive behavioural therapy, confidence-building, self-esteem, as well as visualisation and identification of goals.[610] The programme itself boosted self-efficacy, while the group work and peer support it entailed helped to overcome the isolation faced by many of the participants. Professional development ranged from CV support and interview practice to skills development and training.

A more novel feature of the programme was its mentoring programme with local agencies and local employer engagement. This helped to build trust and familiarity (between participants and mentors) and helped to craft suitable and appropriate placement and voluntary opportunities with local employers that allowed participants to gain experience and skills.

Qualitative review of the programme found that the range of services on offer, and the constructive tone set by visualisation and aspiration courses allowed participants to recognise, draw on and build on their

[606] (AHSCP, 2019)
[607] (One Parent Families Scotland, 2015)
[608] (AHSCP, 2019)
[609] See: https://www.scarf.org.uk/
[610] (SCARF, 2019)

assets, rather than feeling like an 'issue'. Evaluative outputs found that previous service-oriented programmes had defined participants on the basis of their employment status, reinforcing self-perceptions of failure and with little regard to individual circumstances or needs.[611]

### Personalisation

H4W employed a keyworker model, situated within key health settings to ensure easy and efficient referrals. As noted above, opacity around service access and capacities and limited mobility were serious challenges for participants seeking to access wider services. Evaluative outputs therefore found huge value in services and referral pathways being 'person-led' rather than 'service-led'.[612] This main innovation of the programme, whereby participants accessed all services at their original point of contact, tackled this and minimised stigma by operating services within familiar, trusted venues. Access to the programme followed no set procedure: participants could engage with the programme through any single service and then be referred to other partner services.

This user-centred approach was facilitated by co-location of services – allowing for simple and efficient *ad hoc* referrals and removing the challenges around scheduling and mobility faced by many participants – as well as information-sharing and 'warm handovers' – avoiding repetition and saving participants time and, in some instances, money. Rather than having to repeatedly explain their circumstances to different advisors, warm handovers ensured a concise but comprehensive run-down of the participants' circumstances and needs. Information-sharing similarly allowed for less repetition and more tailored support. Co-location and information-sharing between health and employability partners also meant that keyworkers had access to, for instance, a participant's medical records, facilitating benefit applications and/or appeals without incurring the significant costs normally associated with accessing such records. Qualitative reviews with participants and providers found a consensus that this was a much more efficient and effective approach.

### Holistic services

H4W strove to provide fully-integrated support through wide-ranging partnership working. It was acknowledged by health practitioners that a range of factors (including but not limited to employment/employability) could impact adversely on mental and physical health. It was therefore decided to offer a range of non-medical services within a medical setting.

Partners agreed to offer financial advice and welfare rights advice within key health settings to advise participants on income maximisation, budgeting and more. Qualitative evaluation found that this was especially effective at alleviating mental health challenges through reduced stress and anxiety and improved sleep. Financial support was also found to be a common gateway to accessing wider supports.[613]

Given the programme's emphasis on health outcomes, it also offered a variety of health and wellbeing related services. This included training, fitness and nutrition, with improved wellbeing through physical activity. Every single participant in this track reported an improvement in health and wellbeing.

## Learnings

### Dignity, Inclusion & Outreach

Widening access was a key aim of the Health 4 Work programme. Participants had previously been found to lack the time and mobility to access disparate services, compounded by stigma and uncertainties over

[611] (AHSCP, 2019)
[612] (AHSCP, 2019)
[613] (AHSCP, 2019)

eligibility. Co-location, hot-desking and provision outside of standard working hours were found to be effective solutions to this, while providing services at the original point of access helped to sustain attachment of participants to the programme.

### Empowerment

The use of a positive, asset-based language, and personal development courses covering visualisation and aspiration helped to grant participants a feeling of autonomy over their journey, rather than continued perceptions of personal failings. In conjunction with user-centred services, this helped to establish a positive tone and boosted their motivation rather than replicating a discourse of failure.[614]

### Personalisation

H4W appears to reflect truly user-centred services, with service-provision and delivery tailored to the participant's first point of contact. As such, the services worked around the participant's mobility and schedule to ensure ease of access and to avoid stigmatisation. This was facilitated by co-location and information-sharing.

'Warm handovers' were seen as particularly effective relative to more impersonal sign-posting which was seen to have previously 'lost' some participants. Again, this was facilitated by co-location of services, information-sharing and strong partnership-working.

### Holistic Services

Partnership-working was seen as central to H4W's successes. The provision of health and non-health related services drew on the evidence base on health and wellbeing, and acknowledged the interconnections of personal finance, employability, and fitness with health outcomes. This partnership working was facilitated by flexible funding streams and consensual approaches to programme-design.

Employer-facing activities and mentoring programmes helped to find and/or craft suitable and helpful placements and voluntary opportunities through which participants could gain confidence and boost their skills and experience.

[614] (AHSCP, 2019)

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