

DEMOS

A TAPESTRY OF SERVICES

EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND
CAREERS SUPPORT IN EAST
BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH
SOLIHULL

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AUGUST 2023

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Courtney Stephenson

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August 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In his Spring Budget 2023 speech, Jeremy Hunt structured his policy announcements around four pillars beginning with the letter 'e': everywhere, enterprise, employment and education.

The focus on the 'e' of employment reflects the fact that the number of people in work in the UK remains below pre-pandemic levels, while businesses still have high levels of vacancies and the number of people out of work due to ill health has reached a record high.

The focus on the 'e' of everywhere reflects the government's commitment to addressing place-based inequalities captured in the phrase 'levelling up', especially through devolution to regional and local government. Specifically, the Chancellor announced 'trailblazer devolution deals' agreed with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), designed to further extend devolution within England to enable local policy design and delivery.

This research report focuses on employment, skills and careers services in East Birmingham and North Solihull, a 'Levelling Up Zone' in the WMCA area which has many strengths, but which compared to other areas is economically deprived and has low employment rates. It has been identified as an area of strategic focus for 'inclusive growth' by Birmingham City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and the WMCA. With devolution through the trailblazer deal, it is exactly the kind of locality where the government's stated objective of boosting employment everywhere could make a real difference to people's lives.

Last year at Demos, as part of our programme on relational public services, we published a report on the future of employment support. In it, we proposed a new Universal Work Service: a devolved service designed to integrate employment, skills and careers provision, promote strong relationships between citizens and service providers, and help prepare the UK's workforce for economic change in the future

labour market including the transition to net zero and the use of AI. The design of the Universal Work Service was based on our participatory research which found that current services are overly complex, fragmented and don't always build the strong relationships which are crucial for positive outcomes. These reforms would help achieve the government's levelling up and employment objectives.

But if policy makers are going to change how services operate, both at a local and national policy level, it is important to understand how they currently function on the ground. Therefore, in this project, we have conducted interviews with a range of service providers operating within the employment, skills and careers landscape in the East Birmingham and North Solihull area to understand how it currently functions, what works well and what needs to improve. We conducted these interviews with people working in the public, private and third sectors, reflecting our approach in seeing these services as a system. This has enabled us to produce a 'service landscape map' for the area, demonstrating how people can access and move through the system in a multitude of ways. Our conclusions are based on themes which emerged from our interviews, and so primarily reflect the opinions, perspectives and perceptions of local service providers.

Through our research, we found a 'tapestry of services' in the area, as two of our interviewees eloquently described it. Service providers, local government officials and civil servants told us that these services are interconnected, sometimes overlapping, and at other times only held together by a few key threads.

The threads are the professionals who work in this complex landscape. These individuals, and their organisations, often work well together to deliver services for citizens, despite flaws in the system. Success often relies on the dedication, expertise and long-standing relationships of people involved in providing these services, who are committed to

helping people in the local area, including those with more complex needs.

Overall, there is not a shortage of programmes and services for people to access in East Birmingham and North Solihull, whether for those looking for a job or looking to develop their skills. Interviewees told us that a lack of awareness of the full 'employment, skills and careers system', among citizens and sometimes also among service providers, means that opportunities aren't always fully utilised. Our interviewees called for better communication and partnership working, as more important than introducing additional services, for example. Many service providers do important work to facilitate communication and partnerships, but often do so despite the structures they work within, rather than being enabled by them. This is particularly true of the funding system, which interviewees told us holds them back from offering truly holistic and joined up services to individuals.

There are also wider barriers which can make it difficult for people to access jobs. These include the expense and availability of childcare; inaccessible job application processes; and health conditions or disabilities, including mental ill health. We also heard that people in East Birmingham and North Solihull face some challenges more specific to the area, such as poverty, low levels of educational qualifications, an informal labour market, and the cost and provision of transport required to reach some jobs in the wider region.

There are also unique opportunities in East Birmingham and North Solihull which have the potential to facilitate place-based delivery of integrated employment, skills and careers provision. The geographic proximity of large infrastructure projects such as HS2, coupled with the specialist skills provision available in local colleges, has the potential to provide a wealth of opportunities for local people. For these opportunities to be realised, interviewees told us, policy makers and employers alike must work in a holistic way to ensure residents are equipped to access them. This includes improving essential skills provision, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and addressing other barriers that can hold people back from realising their potential. Interviewees also emphasised the importance of developing 'pathways' for citizens. This means connecting services together coherently so that people can progress along a clear route designed to enable them to access employment. The 'I Can' programme, specifically designed to enable people to access entry-level jobs in the NHS in Birmingham and Solihull, is an excellent example of this kind of 'pathway' approach; a case study of the I Can programme is included in this report.

Going forward, there is much that can be learnt from the current service landscape in East Birmingham and North Solihull. Importantly, the emphasis our interviewees placed on relationships - between service providers, with and between service users, and with the wider community - should not be overlooked. Where the current system works well, it is often due to good working relationships and a culture of trust. A coherent set of services that draws on the importance of such relationships and seeks to support people in a holistic manner should be the objective.

This research report provides an overview of how services operate in East Birmingham and North Solihull from the perspective of service providers. In order to develop policy recommendations to improve the overall system at a local level, it will be important to further understand the perspectives of both citizens and employers. The current 'tapestry of services' provides a good basis for developing an integrated and place-based system: building that in collaboration with citizens, employers, service providers and commissioners should be a priority.

In the conclusion to this report, we briefly cover some of the implications of the trailblazer devolution deal, the Levelling Up Zone and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. With a unique policy context, the East Birmingham-North Solihull area has the potential to become a new model for public service reform and partnership working to increase employment, achieve inclusive growth and improve citizens' lives.

INTRODUCTION

Employment, skills and careers services help people navigate the labour market. They are there to help young people enter work for the first time, to support those who unfortunately lose their job, to help people learn English, to support people with a disability or health condition, and to offer guidance for those considering career options.

In previous Demos research, we examined what the landscape of services looked like at a national level. In our report, we argued that the set of services we have is complex and difficult for citizens to navigate; that services don't consistently prioritise building the strong relationships and social capital which are essential to achieving positive outcomes; and that existing services are not well designed to help prepare us for the future with an ageing population, the transition to a net zero economy, and the growing influence of AI and automation on people's work. We therefore proposed a new Universal Work Service and described in outline how it would join up existing services, strengthen relationships and help people adapt to the changing world of work.¹ This forms part of Demos's wider programme of research on relational public services, our paradigm for public service reform.²

In this research project, we have had the opportunity to examine how employment, skills and careers services work in a specific local area: East Birmingham and North Solihull (EBNS). This has given us the opportunity to explore how employment, skills and careers services work in a local area, contextualising our earlier research in the specifics of a particular place.

This research serves two purposes. First, we hope it will be useful for local policy makers and service providers in the EBNS area; and second, we hope it will also be useful as a case study for national policy makers and other stakeholders, illuminating what the

landscape of labour market services looks like, and how they work together, on the ground in a specific locality.

We are not the first to undertake this kind of exercise to understand the provision of services in a local area. An interesting antecedent is the example of 'Total Place', an approach piloted towards the end of the previous Labour government, which sought to take a 'whole area approach to public services'.³ In the context of our research on employment, skills and careers services, an interesting example is that of Lewisham: the Total Place pilot mapped employment support services, finding that there were "over 120 projects or programmes providing support for workless and unemployed people in Lewisham, delivered by over 50 providers via 15 funding streams".⁴ Although our research project did not set out to produce a comparably exhaustive list, we include a list of providers and programmes available to EBNS residents in the Annex at the end of this report. Our conclusion is that, over a decade after the Total Place pilots, the same problems of fragmentation and lack of joined up services remain.

THE EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL 'INCLUSIVE GROWTH CORRIDOR' IS AN AREA OF STRATEGIC FOCUS FOR THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE WMCA

The EBNS area has been identified as an 'inclusive growth corridor', and is an area of strategic focus for Birmingham City Council (BCC), Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA):

East Birmingham and neighbouring North Solihull has been chosen as an Inclusive Growth Corridor where a new partnership

1 Phillips, A. *Working Together: The case for universal employment support*. Demos, 7 May 2022. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/project/working-together-the-case-for-universal-employment-support> [accessed 15/07/2023]

2 Glover, B. A home for change: introducing the Public Services 2030 Network. Demos, 27 October 2022. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/a-home-for-change-introducing-the-public-services-2030-network> [accessed 15/07/2023]

3 HM Treasury and Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). *Total Place: A whole area approach to public services*. March 2010. Available at www.youngfoundation.org/institute-for-community-studies/repository/total-place-a-whole-area-approach-to-public-services [accessed 15/07/2023]

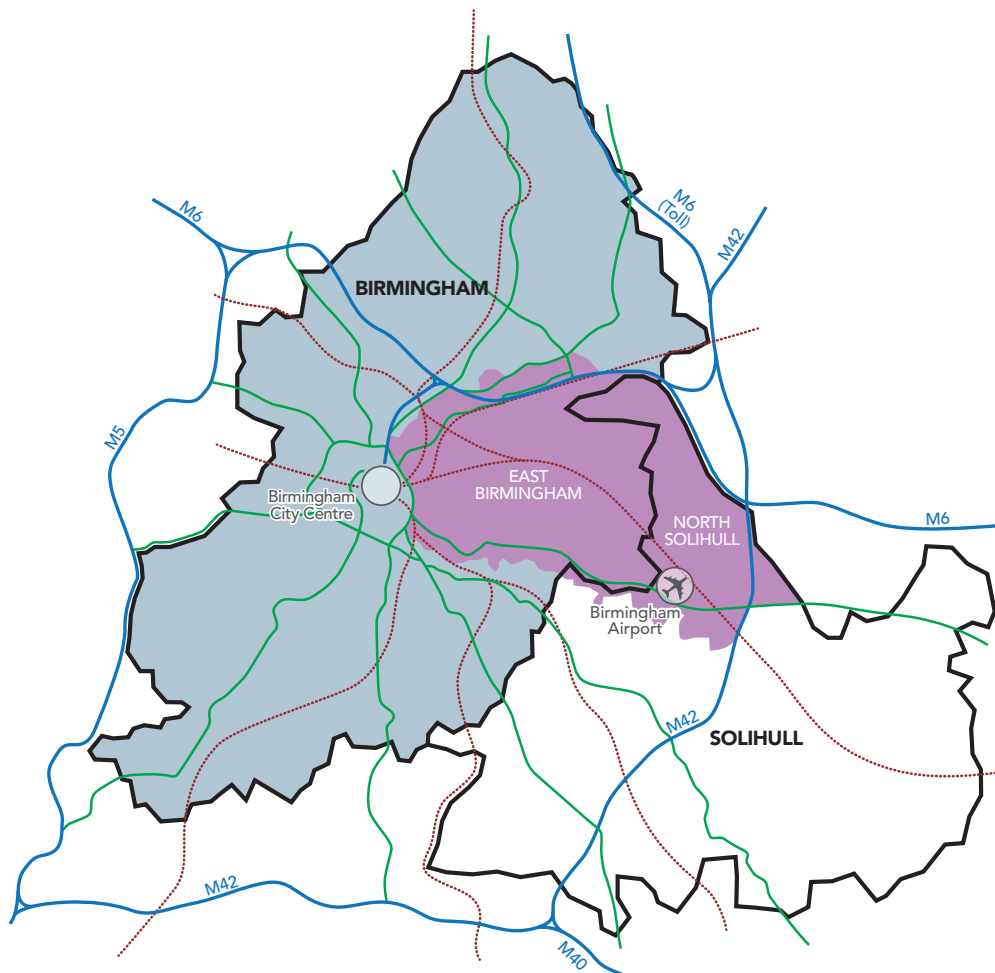
4 HM Treasury and DCLG. *Total Place*. 2010. p. 19.

working approach is being pioneered, bringing together public sector organisations, businesses and the local community to deliver growth, to develop new approaches and better ways of working to ensure that this growth is inclusive.

- East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy 2021⁵

The East Birmingham and North Solihull (EBNS) area is also identified as a 'Levelling Up Zone' in the trailblazer devolution deal recently agreed between central government and the WMCA.⁶

FIGURE 1
EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL LEVELLING UP ZONE (PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS 'INCLUSIVE GROWTH CORRIDOR'), SHADED PURPLE AREA.



Source: East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy 2021⁷

5 Birmingham City Council. *East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy 2021*. February 2021. Available at www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/19118/east_birmingham_inclusive_growth_strategy_2021 [accessed 15/07/2023]

6 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). West Midlands Combined Authority: "Trailblazer" deeper devolution deal. GOV.UK, 15 March 2023, p. 19. Available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/west-midlands-combined-authority-trailblazer-deeper-devolution-deal [accessed 15/07/2023]

7 Birmingham City Council. *East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy*. 2021. p. 5.

The East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy includes improving transport infrastructure, for example with HS2 and the Metro extension to Solihull. HS2 in particular is expected to bring new jobs specifically to the local area; many of our interviewees mentioned HS2 as a significant opportunity for boosting employment in the local area, so its potential for contributing to inclusive growth is widely recognised.

The EBNS area is deprived compared to other areas within England, as measured by the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).⁸ As can be seen in Figure 2, based on IMD data there is a particularly high level of deprivation in East Birmingham.

Much of East Birmingham falls within the top 20% most deprived areas in England

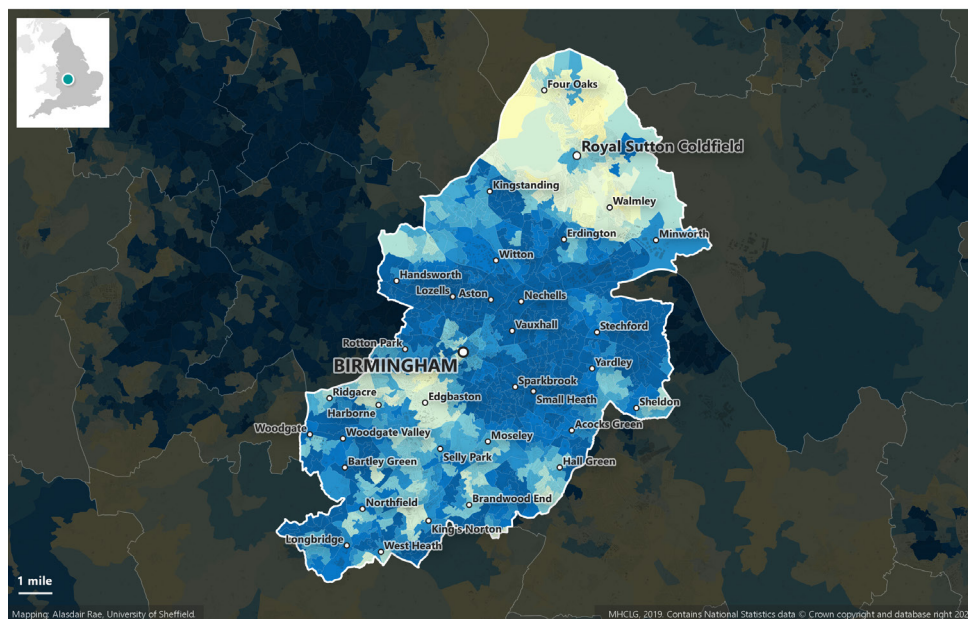
FIGURE 2

MAP OF LOWER LAYER SUPER OUTPUT AREAS BY LEVEL OF DEPRIVATION IN BIRMINGHAM, 2019.

Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019

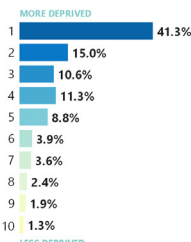
BIRMINGHAM

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government



Local authority profile

% of LSOAs in each national deprivation decile



What this map shows

This is a map of Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019 data for **Birmingham**. The colours on the map indicate the deprivation decile of each Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) for England as a whole, and the coloured bars above indicate the proportion of LSOAs in each national deprivation decile. The most deprived areas (decile 1) are shown in blue. It is important to keep in mind that the data relate to small areas and do not tell us how deprived, or wealthy, individual people are. LSOAs have an average population of just under 1,700 (as of 2017).



Source: mySociety Research⁹

While overall Solihull is less deprived than Birmingham, there are high levels of deprivation in North Solihull: 16 of the 39 Lower layer Super Output Areas are in the most deprived 10% nationally, as can be seen in Figure 3.¹⁰

⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. English indices of deprivation 2019. GOV.UK, 26 September 2019. Available at www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019 [accessed 15/07/2023]

⁹ mySociety. Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019: Birmingham. (no date). Available at <https://research.mysociety.org/sites/imd2019/area/la-birmingham-borough-council/lsa> [accessed 15/07/2023]

¹⁰ Solihull Observatory. 2018 Locality Profile: North Solihull. Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2018, p. 3. Available at www.solihull.gov.uk/sites/default/files/migrated/InfoandIntelligence_North-Solihull-Locality-Profile-2018.pdf [accessed 15/07/2023]

North Solihull has much higher levels of deprivation compared to the rest of the borough

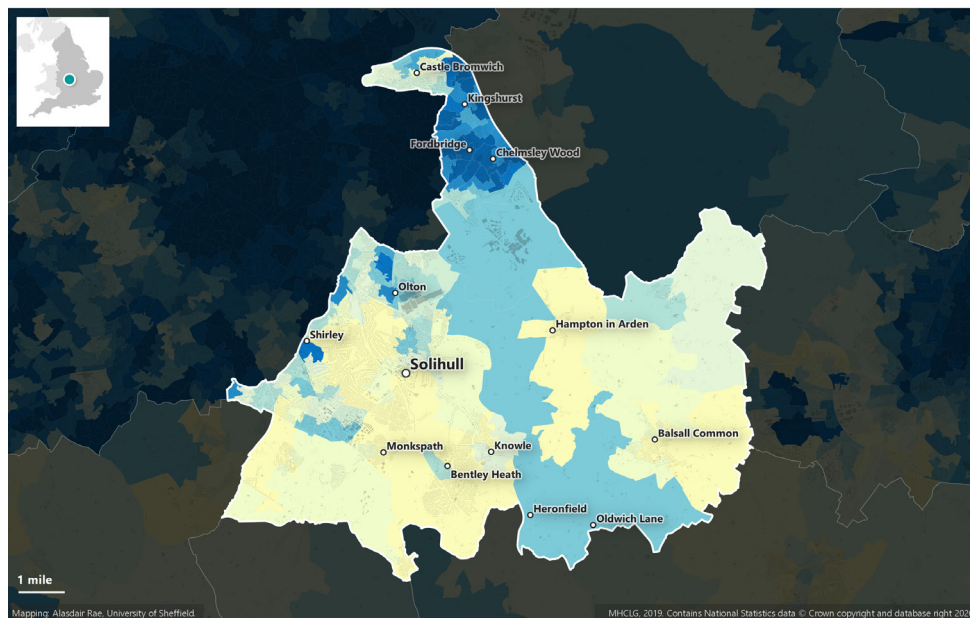
FIGURE 3

MAP OF LOWER LAYER SUPER OUTPUT AREAS BY LEVEL OF DEPRIVATION IN SOLIHULL, 2019.

Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019

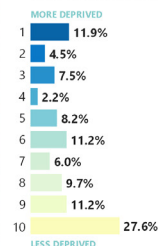
Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

SOLIHULL



Local authority profile

% of LSOAs in each national deprivation decile



What this map shows

This is a map of Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019 data for Solihull. The colours on the map indicate the deprivation decile of each Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) for England as a whole, and the coloured bars above indicate the proportion of LSOAs in each national deprivation decile. The most deprived areas (decile 1) are shown in blue. It is important to keep in mind that the data relate to small areas and do not tell us how deprived, or wealthy, individual people are. LSOAs have an average population of just under 1,700 (as of 2017).



Source: mySociety Research¹¹

Similarly, research by Local Trust measured the presence of social infrastructure in their Community Needs Index, alongside the IMD, and found that five neighbourhoods (wards) in EBNS are among the most deprived 10% in England (Local Trust use the term 'left behind neighbourhoods'). These wards are Hodge Hill, Shard End and Stechford and Yardley North in East Birmingham; and Kingshurst and Fordbridge and Smith's Wood in North Solihull.¹² (Ward boundaries changed in Birmingham in 2018, so the analysis is slightly out of date.)

One aspect of deprivation is low levels of employment. The East Birmingham area is largely covered by two Parliamentary constituencies, Hodge Hill and Yardley. As Figure 4 shows, these areas have low employment rates compared to the WMCA area and to England as a whole. There is a 20 percentage point gap between Yardley, with an employment rate of 56%, and England overall at 76%.

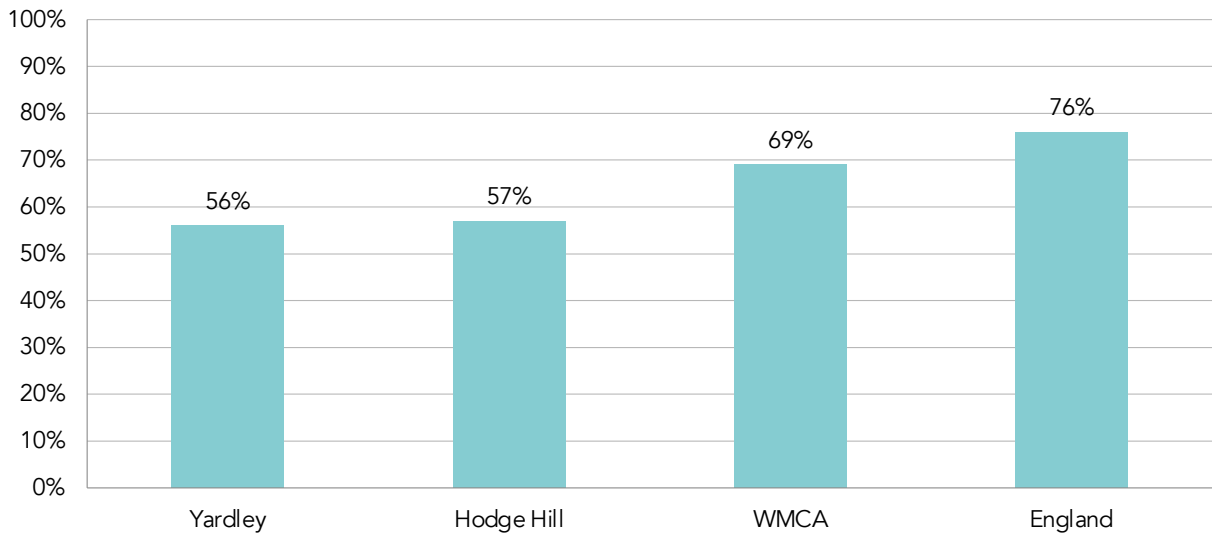
¹¹ mySociety. Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019: Solihull. (no date). Available at <https://research.mysociety.org/sites/imd2019/area/la-solihull-borough-council/lsa> [accessed 15/07/2023]

¹² Local Trust. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods. (no date). Available at <https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/left-behind-neighbourhoods> [accessed 15/07/2023]

Employment rates in East Birmingham are much lower than in the West Midlands Combined Authority and in England overall

FIGURE 4

EMPLOYMENT RATES FOR PEOPLE AGED 16-64 IN HODGE HILL AND YARDLEY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES IN EAST BIRMINGHAM, IN THE WMCA AND IN ENGLAND, 2022.



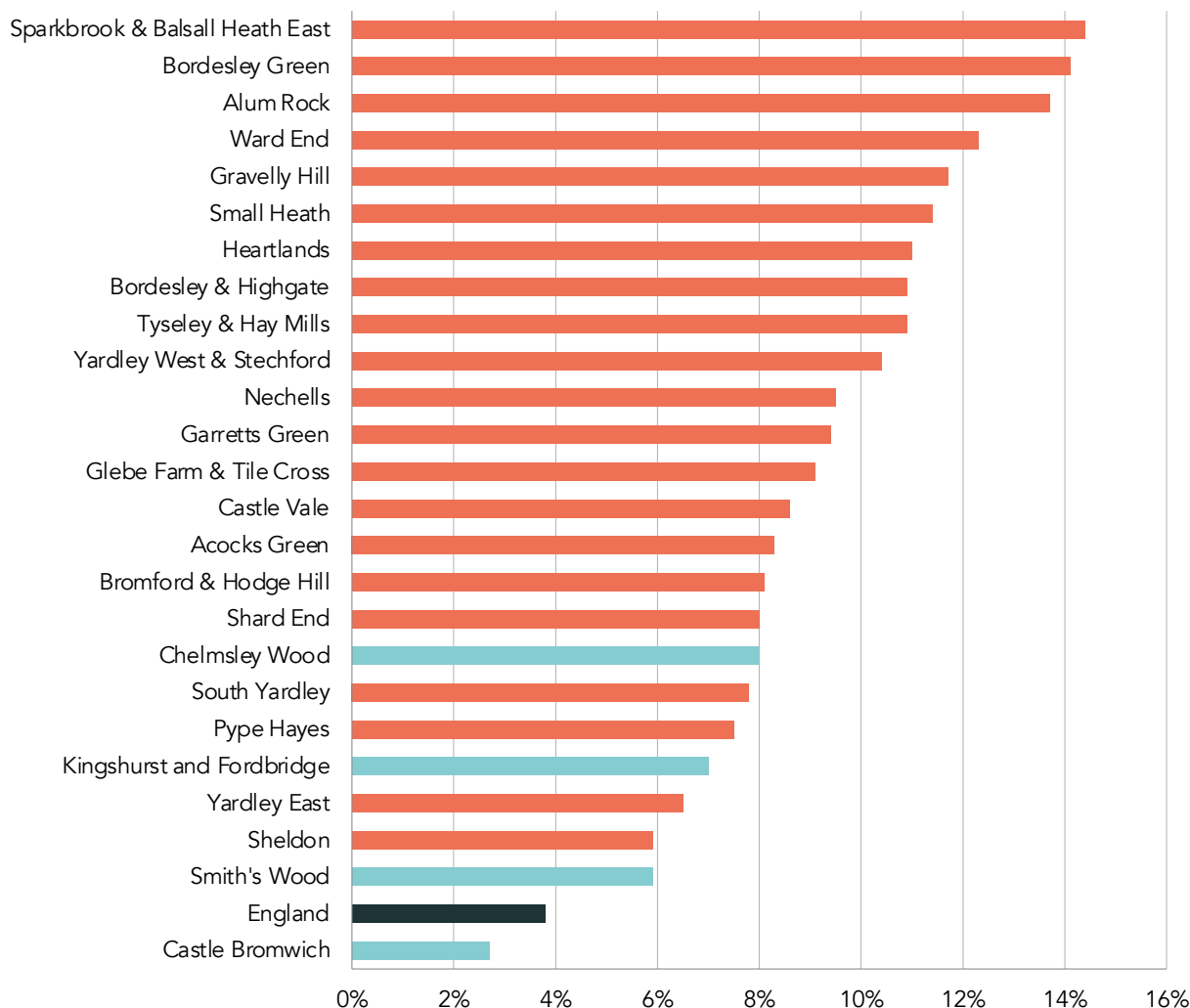
Source: Office for National Statistics, Annual Population Survey, January 2022 to December 2022, via Nomis.

North Solihull is not covered by a single Parliamentary constituency, which means it is not possible to directly compare the employment rate. To give an indication, however, of the similar challenges people face in the area, the following chart uses data based on the proportion of residents receiving Universal Credit or Jobseeker's Allowance at ward level (an indication of the number of people who are unemployed). The four wards of North Solihull are highlighted in teal. As the chart shows, only one ward - Castle Bromwich in North Solihull - has a lower rate than the average across England.

Unemployment rates in East Birmingham and North Solihull are significantly higher than the England average

FIGURE 5

WORKING AGE UNEMPLOYMENT CLAIMANT RATES BY WARD IN EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL, AND COMPARED TO ENGLAND AS A WHOLE, JUNE 2023.



Source: Office for National Statistics, Claimant count by sex and age, via Nomis.

The high unemployment rates mean that the support provided by employment, skills and careers services is particularly important in an area like EBNS.

It is worth noting that the data may not tell the full story of the labour market in an area like East Birmingham. A number of interviewees told us there is a significant informal or black market economy in the local area, which may not be reflected in official

data sources. Several interviewees told us that the presence of an informal economy in the local area adds an additional challenge for employment support services, as people may be more familiar with informal jobs rather than conventional jobs in the regulated labour market.

Another important factor for the area - and for the local labour market - is that it has a young population. The average (median) age in East Birmingham is 33.6 years, which is in line with Birmingham as a whole (34 years).¹³ Both are much lower than England overall, where the average age

¹³ Birmingham City Council. East locality profile 2022. July 2022. Available at www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/23638/east_locality_profile_2022 [accessed 15/07/2023]

is 40.¹⁴ This means that East Birmingham has a high proportion of children and young people, with two in five (40%) of the population being under 25.¹⁵ The average age in Solihull overall is 43, but the population of North Solihull is younger than the rest of the borough.^{16,17} Therefore young people, especially the 16-24 age group, are a particularly important demographic for employment, skills and careers services in the area to focus on supporting.

METHODOLOGY

For this research project, we have primarily relied on interviews with people involved in providing employment, skills and careers services in the EBNS area from public, private and third sector organisations. We conducted interviews from January to March 2023 with a mixture of in person and online conversations. The people we interviewed included those in management or more senior roles, and those in frontline or citizen-facing roles. All the interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity, but we did ask our interviewees for permission to use quotes in this report. We also supplemented our qualitative research with desk-based research, especially using online descriptions of employment support, skills and careers provision in Birmingham and the wider WMCA area.

The findings in this report primarily reflect the opinions, perspectives and perceptions of our

interviewees. The themes we draw out reflect the opinions of multiple people, but almost all our interviewees were broadly working in the same 'sector' (providing services), and so their views, for example, do not reflect the first-hand experiences of citizens or employers in Birmingham and Solihull.

We also recognise that people spoke to us using generalisations, and we lack the necessary data to add more precise nuance to some of their statements.

Our scope included employment support, skills and careers advice services which citizens aged 16+ living in East Birmingham and North Solihull could access, regardless of where the service is located geographically (for example, where a service's office is in central Birmingham but could be accessed by a resident living in East Birmingham). We focused on people aged 16+, and therefore did not include schools in scope for this research project. However, a number of interviewees emphasised the importance of schools when thinking about supporting young people to make the transition from education to the world of work, and we recognise this is a limitation of this piece of research.

The table below sets out the interviews we conducted for this research project. In addition to these formal interviews with 33 interviewees, we also spoke in person to around 20 other people in shorter, more informal conversations.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED FOR THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

SECTOR	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
Public sector managers and providers	12
Private sector providers	5
Third sector providers	10
Employers	2
Others	4
TOTAL	33

14 Office for National Statistics. Population and household estimates, England and Wales: Census 2021, unrounded data. 2 November 2022. Available at www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021unroundeddata [accessed 15/07/2023]

15 Birmingham City Council. East locality profile. 2022.

16 Office for National Statistics. Population and household estimates. 2022.

17 Solihull Observatory. North Solihull. 2018. p. 6

SNAPSHOT SUMMARY

EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND
CAREERS SERVICES AND
ORGANISATIONS IN EAST
BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH
SOLIHULL

FIGURE 6

EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND CAREERS SERVICE LANDSCAPE MAP

East Birmingham and North Solihull



Source: Demos analysis

The service landscape map above illustrates employment support, skills and careers services in East Birmingham and North Solihull, and how they work together as a system. Note that this is only an illustrative summary: a longer list of organisations and programmes with more detail is provided in the Annex.

The following section provides some notes on what it is designed to illustrate:

- Individual circles contain both programmes and organisations. For example, the Restart programme, categorised under employment support, is delivered by multiple organisations under the Prime contractor Serco. By contrast, sometimes an organisation delivers multiple programmes: this is true of The Pioneer Group / Compass Support, for example.
- The programmes and organisations in each circle are illustrative, not exhaustive; the total number of programmes and organisations is significantly greater, so we have chosen illustrative examples to simplify the information presented on the service landscape map.
- The service landscape map is designed from the perspective of a citizen accessing these services.
- 'Points of entry' illustrates some of the organisations which a citizen might initially contact or speak to. Jobcentre Plus is the single largest entry point. Many of these organisations offer their own provision, but many also signpost or refer people to a different programme or organisation depending on the individual's needs.
- The large circle in the centre illustrates the range of provision within the employment support, skills and careers advice 'system'. There are multiple different routes people can take. An individual might only need to access one service, but somebody else might, for example, receive employment support from one organisation, ESOL provision from another, and skills training from another. According to our interviewees, most people don't have a linear pathway through this system, but might access several different services at different points in time.
- The routes or pathways differ according to an individual's needs or characteristics. For example, there are a number of specific programmes and organisations which support people with health conditions or disabilities (listed under bespoke support). Usually individuals would be referred to these health-specific programmes or organisations by a different organisation.
- Employers have a two-way relationship with the 'system' of services, hence the bidirectional arrows in the service landscape map. First, they receive job applications from citizens who are accessing support. Employers are the end point of a citizen's pathway through the system, as these services primarily aim to help people find, stay in or progress in work. This is illustrated by the arrows going left to right. In this sense, employers are *reactive*, waiting for citizens to contact them (or for an employment adviser to contact them on behalf of an individual). But employers also *proactively* use the services illustrated in the service landscape map in order to recruit or train employees: for example, presenting information about available jobs directly to citizens at a Jobcentre, or working with skills providers to put on a Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) with guaranteed job interviews at the end. This is illustrated by the arrows going right to left.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF SERVICES

THERE IS A 'TAPESTRY' OF EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS SERVICES OPERATING IN EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL

East Birmingham and North Solihull generally do not suffer from a lack of employment support, skills training and careers services. One interviewee described the sector in the area, and Birmingham specifically, as "saturated". There are a wide range of organisations providing an equally wide range of services. From programmes commissioned nationally, to services run by local authorities, to bespoke support delivered by small charities, we found that there is a substantial and sometimes overwhelming number of services available.

Focusing on local authority provision, the Employment and Skills Team at SMBC provides employment support for residents across the local authority, with a focus on promotion of services in North Solihull as a more deprived area. For example, the council runs the Solihull Recruitment and Training Centre based in Chelmsley Wood Shopping Centre; the centre has been designated as a Youth Hub and is used by some Jobcentre Plus staff, and also hosts voluntary sector partner organisations.¹⁸

Birmingham City Council provides employment support targeted at young people who are NEET (not in Employment, Education or Training) or through specialist support services for residents such

as those in supported housing, care leavers, and residents with learning difficulties or disabilities, and also the long-term unemployed. The Council also delivers Careers and Adult Education Services to eligible residents, and supports Youth Hubs across the city.¹⁹

In general, both our own research and the views of interviewees suggest that East Birmingham has a larger voluntary and charitable sector providing employment support services compared to North Solihull. In East Birmingham, a significant proportion of employment support services are provided by small, community-based organisations delivering bespoke support. This includes mental health charities, charities for people with disabilities or programmes targeted at young people with experience of the criminal justice system.

ORGANISATIONS OFTEN WORK TOGETHER WELL, BUT THE CURRENT FUNDING MODEL HOLDS THEM BACK

Many of the providers we spoke to emphasised the importance of partnership working between organisations. It is clear that the relationships between organisations - specifically, the relationships between the individuals working at those organisations - is the glue that holds the sector together.

¹⁸ Tennant, R. Careers Advice and Support for NEET young people. Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 11 January 2022. Available at <https://eservices.solihull.gov.uk/mginternet/documents/s96600/Careers%20Advice%20and%20Support%20for%20NEET%20young%20people.pdf> [accessed 15/07/2023]

¹⁹ Birmingham City Council. Jobs, skills and lifelong learning support. (no date). Available at www.birmingham.gov.uk/brumskills [accessed 15/07/2023]

In several interviews the people we spoke to referenced one another, either because of their current working relationship, or because they had worked together in the past. We heard from interviewees that many of the individuals working in the sector had done so for a number of years and partnership working across organisations often happened as a result of the long-standing relationships they had developed. Many interviewees told us that these relationships, and professionals' general knowledge of the sector, were crucial in helping support people to access work or skills training opportunities appropriate for them.

However, in many cases these relationships are working well in spite of the current funding and delivery model, rather than because of it. We repeatedly heard that there are aspects of the current funding model that hold organisations back from being able to work as effectively together as they would like to.

We have strong relationships with some partners. Then there are others that as an organisation, they are the competition. That is what it is - we bid for the same fund.

- Service provider

Sometimes eligibility rules mean that citizens are not able to access two programmes or services simultaneously - because, for example, both programmes/services are being funded by the same funding stream or source. There is a logic behind these rules in theory, to avoid 'double funding' two organisations to support one person, but in practice, according to our provider interviewees, it can prevent people from accessing the set of tools and services that would best address their needs and aspirations. One interviewee spoke of their frustration at not being able to cross refer a client to another organisation for this reason. They told us about an individual they were working with who they could not cross refer to another service, because the organisation providing it had the same funding source. This was despite the person in question being a "perfect" fit for the programme. Because of the rules around funding, they were denied the opportunity to access this service and in doing so a more bespoke package of support. Several interviewees told us that they had developed ways to work round the formal rules (without breaking them) in order to help people more effectively.

Rules about funding and eligibility also make the 'tapestry' of services more complicated for an individual citizen to understand or navigate. A citizen would often not know which specific project or funding stream they were being supported through, or how this might affect their ability to access other services. To some degree we recognise this may be

inevitable - citizens in one sense should *not need to understand* all the minutiae of how services interact with each other - but it does perhaps suggest a need for a clear single point of contact in the form of a 'key worker' or 'navigator' who can answer questions and help an individual citizen understand the services available to them.

The nature of the current competitive funding model also presents problems, particularly for smaller organisations. The resource-intensive process of preparing and submitting bids for contracts has an impact on staff, as does the short-term uncertainty that this model of funding can bring. Some organisations have had to make staff redundant at the end of contracts, losing crucial organisational knowledge and the relationships those people hold with both service users and other organisations.

Despite the problems with the current model, many interviewees expressed concerns about upcoming changes to it. Primarily, they were worried about the loss of European Social Fund (ESF) funding, the impact this would have on their ability to deliver services, and the uncertainty of the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) 'people and skills' investment. Interviewees also expressed a concern about the lack of focus that the new UKSPF has on young people, which they worried would leave a deficit of resources available for this important group. There is, however, nothing in the UKSPF rules which prevents Local Authorities focusing 'people and skills' funding on young people. The bigger issue may rather be that UKSPF is spread across three 'investment priorities', only one of which is 'people and skills' (which includes employment support and skills programmes). There may therefore be reduced funding available for employment support and skills in general compared to ESF, and less for young people specifically depending on how Local Authorities choose to use their funding.

This speaks to a broader problem with funding in the sector. A decline in available resources, uncertainty, competition and siloed working are currently holding it back, often relying instead on the relationships and knowledge of individuals.

THE VARIETY AND NUMBER OF SERVICES COULD BE AN ASSET, BUT IS CURRENTLY OVERWHELMING FOR EMPLOYERS TO NAVIGATE

A dense employment support sector with a range of bespoke service providers has the potential to be an asset to the East Birmingham and North Solihull area. However, the current tapestry can be overwhelming - for service users, providers and employers. The providers we interviewed often

spoke about the importance of making their service 'different' to that of their competitors. This was in part to ensure that service users had the widest range of options available to them, but also because of the need to compete with other providers for contracts. The result is an oversaturated market of similar but not identical provision, in which each provider is trying to 'sell' their service.

Birmingham is brilliant because there are so many initiatives, but they never talk to each other. So that can be confusing.

- Service provider

In our interviews, we also heard that employers can often find the landscape of services overwhelming to engage with. Interviewees told us that for some employers, it can put them off engaging with services at all - the impact of which is felt by those looking for employment or to develop their skills. This is a particular problem for smaller employers who do not have a designated team in house to decipher the multitude of services available to them and select the most suitable and useful for their organisation. Instead, small employers either rely on the individual relationships they already hold with providers or disengage entirely.

Birmingham-wide, there needs to be greater coordination of activity - how it's collated and made available. Employers hate us all knocking on their doors.

- Service provider

Conversely, we heard some good examples of employers working directly with providers. This includes services specifically designed to alleviate the overwhelming nature of the landscape that some of our interviewees reported. This currently includes the Skills Hub, run by the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP), which aims to simplify the landscape of skills provision for employers, and connect citizens, skills providers and employers together. At time of writing, some economic functions of the LEP have recently been transferred to the WMCA, with others to be hosted by local authority partners across the region, especially BCC.²⁰ Based on our interviews and research, we would suggest that the *employer-facing* role of the Skills Hub is an important function which BCC, SMBC and WMCA should consider maintaining under the new arrangements.

EAST BIRMINGHAM HAS SPECIFIC CHALLENGES WHEN IT COMES TO EMPLOYMENT, BUT THERE ARE ALSO UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE AREA

This section focuses primarily on East Birmingham: interviewees told us about some locally specific challenges they face when providing employment, skills and careers services.

Some interviewees mentioned that women from backgrounds with traditional gender roles, for cultural or religious reasons, can face barriers to entering employment. We heard that in some cases people in these communities do not expect women to work (a view which can be held by both women and men). As our interviewees emphasised, this is a complex and nuanced issue, and this characterisation is a generalisation which certainly does not apply to everyone. While we do not have the local knowledge required to explore this complex issue in depth, we have nonetheless mentioned it here to reflect it as a factor which multiple interviewees mentioned in the context of providing employment support in the local area.

Young people who are at risk of becoming or are not in employment, education or training (NEET), were also referenced as a group that faces additional challenges. East Birmingham, like the rest of the city, has a high proportion of young people in its population, so this is an important demographic group when assessing the provision of employment, skills and careers services. Several interviewees mentioned that some young people are not aware of all the options available to them - for example, the variety of further education (FE) colleges within Birmingham, a wider variety of career options, or the availability of employment support services. Some of our interviewees emphasised that engaging with young people in community settings was particularly important, to overcome the barrier of lack of awareness, or lack of confidence. Other interviewees mentioned that young people facing social or economic disadvantage may particularly benefit from one-to-one or mentoring support to help them access employment or skills courses. Interviewees also mentioned examples of provision for young people that have worked well, and several said that young people in the local area have high aspirations - they emphasised that the stereotype of a 'lack of aspiration' is not correct.

²⁰ West Midlands Combined Authority. WMCA to continue to support business growth in West Midlands following the closure of LEPs. 3 April 2023. Available at www.wmca.org.uk/news/wmca-to-continue-to-support-business-growth-in-west-midlands-following-the-closure-of-leps [accessed 15/07/2023]

The employment prospects in the area also pose a challenge. There are some large infrastructure projects and employers in the surrounding areas, such as HS2, Birmingham Airport and the NEC and surrounding businesses which offer employment opportunities. However, the connectivity, availability and cost of transport can create barriers for people seeking work outside of the area. We discuss barriers in more detail later in the report.

Service providers told us that they tend to find it easier to engage with larger employers, rather than small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This suggests that, alongside continuing to engage with large employers, there is a need to think about how to make it easier for SMEs to engage with the employment and skills landscape of services when looking to take on new recruits or upskill existing staff.

We also heard that in East Birmingham there is a 'grey economy' of small employers, offering cash-in-hand and insecure work, which may not be connected to formal employment or to training programmes. This can be problematic as it may result in people cycling in and out of short-term, insecure work, while not gaining formal qualifications or skills.

Although a culture of entrepreneurship was cited as a positive attribute for the area, interviewees also said that this means that, understandably, new businesses tend to be focused on establishing themselves and surviving, rather than medium-term employment and progression opportunities. Interviewees also told us that businesses looking to employ people sometimes relied on personal networks rather than advertising opportunities; this suggests that employment support organisations should consider individuals' social capital and social networks when thinking about what job opportunities might be available to them, a topic discussed in greater detail in Demos's research *Working Together: The case for universal employment support*.²¹

There are also unique opportunities presented by the cultural and demographic makeup of East Birmingham. The religious and cultural groups that exist in the area have established cultural networks and organisations. They are trusted by the people that they engage and are deeply embedded in the community and the area. Working with these organisations and networks would allow employers, employment support providers and local authorities to build relationships and trust with harder to reach individuals and groups. This would bring them closer to the employment and skills opportunities in the area. This was something we heard was already

happening and could be built on. The range of community organisations providing employment support services in the area also presents an opportunity - there is no shortage of opportunities in the area. Interviewees told us it was important to utilise this range of provision and develop a place-based way of working to ensure local people could maximise the opportunities available to them, in settings and from organisations they knew and trusted.

An additional opportunity/challenge - which applies in both East Birmingham and North Solihull - is presented by the recent arrival of refugees and migrants under specific UK schemes for people from Ukraine, Hong Kong and Afghanistan. Ensuring that appropriate employment, skills and careers provision is available for these communities is important, including essential skills such as ESOL (discussed in the 'barriers' section later in this report).

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS COULD BENEFIT EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL, BUT CURRENTLY RISK OVERLOOKING THE NEED FOR ESSENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The *East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy* notes a number of infrastructure projects, particularly related to transport, which will present employment and career development opportunities for residents in the EBNS area. These include the construction of HS2 itself, the Midland Metro East Birmingham to Solihull extension, the Interchange Station at the Arden Cross site in Solihull and the HS2 depot at Washwood Heath.²² Many of our interviewees mentioned these developments as potentially providing new jobs for residents both now and over the next few years.

Our interviewees spoke more generally about the positive impact that having a meaningful job opportunity at the end of a programme or training course can have for the motivation and engagement of individuals. The ongoing infrastructure projects present a real opportunity to deliver this, but only if skills provision and employability are properly connected. At present, many providers are concerned that there is a mismatch between the skill levels of the local population and the career opportunities that are and will continue to become available from the delivery of major developments.

HS2 is a good opportunity, but could shine a light on skills gaps.

- Service provider

²¹ Phillips. *Working Together*. 2022.

²² Birmingham City Council. *East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy*. 2021.

We heard from employer interviewees that in the recent context of a tight labour market they have found it challenging to recruit enough people with the required skills and attitude for HS2 and relevant supply chain vacancies.

The labour market has absolutely flipped over for us, we're not seeing the volumes of people come through, so the work that needs to be done locally does really need to be on activating that latent group of people.

- Employer

We also heard from interviewees that the current approach for providing applicants does not always work. Some interviewees felt that applicants were being put forward for unsuitable vacancies or those they did not necessarily want to pursue. Service provider organisations also told us that they recognise that encouraging, for example, job applications from people not ready or not suitable for an employer can discourage employers from engaging with them in the future.

You'll have situations where people are ticking boxes. So they'll come along to a jobs fair we're attending... because their work coach has told them to go to the jobs fair. And then you're not really getting that engagement, because they don't really want to be there... so you're then speaking to somebody that actually doesn't really want to be there and doesn't want that opportunity. So it's about how can our employment support organisations make sure that the people that are put in front of [employers], how can they make sure it's the right people being put in front of them, and how can they support those jobseekers to get them job-ready and to get them to the point in which these opportunities are actually going to be of benefit for them and they're going to be able to engage and take up those opportunities. We've got some great examples of people that have - they were ready, and they've gone into the employment opportunities and now they're absolutely flying. So - how do our employment support organisations get more people funnelled through? That's probably the biggest gap at the moment, there aren't the numbers coming through, we've got the numbers in terms of the opportunities, we haven't got the numbers in terms of the people being at the right place and ready to access those opportunities.

- Employer

At a national level, research conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University with over 100 employers highlighted a similar issue specifically with the Universal Credit system:

Employers were critical of the Work First approach which underpins UK [Active Labour Market Policy]: rather than effectively supporting recruitment, this long-established approach which emphasises moving into any job quickly instead results in a high volume of inappropriate applications which is costly to manage. Employers instead advocated for a greater emphasis on supporting candidates into roles that matched their skills, capabilities and wider circumstances.²³

This is not beneficial for the individual, the service provider or the employer. Many of the providers we spoke to stressed the importance of developing a clear pathway from basic skills provision, through to specialist training and into employment. This will require partnership working between a range of organisations, including colleges, skills training providers and employers. If the future workforce is not identified and supported now, HS2 risks being a missed opportunity for the area and the region more broadly.

While jobs working on large infrastructure projects such as HS2 present a large number of opportunities for people in East Birmingham and North Solihull, it is important for providers, employers and local authorities to understand that these roles will not immediately appeal to everyone. One provider we spoke to highlighted this problem, telling us that the jobs available in growth sectors "don't necessarily match what the residents we engage with want to take". Providers, the interviewee told us, have to contend with that mismatch.

Getting people into jobs is important, but ensuring that they stay in employment is equally so. Understanding the motivations behind why people do or don't want to work in certain jobs, where they would like to develop specific or transferable skills and practically what jobs suit them is important to ensure that the opportunities to which people are directed are appropriate. Of course, not all types of jobs/careers will be available in the local area; high-quality careers advice, including advice about the types of jobs available in the local labour market, is important in this context, as covered in the next section.

23 Jones, K. and Carson, C. *Universal Credit and Employers: Exploring the Demand Side of UK Active Labour Market Policy*. Manchester Metropolitan University, January 2023, p. 3. Available at www.mmu.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/UniversalCreditandEmployersFinalReportJan2023.pdf [accessed 15/07/2023]

CAREERS SERVICES ARE IMPORTANT, BUT PEOPLE MAY NOT ACCESS THEM IN ISOLATION FROM OTHER SERVICES

Careers services can play an important role within the broader landscape of services, particularly in terms of broadening people's horizons and making them more aware of the different options available to them. This is particularly important for young people, but is not exclusive to them. The main public sector provider of careers services for adults is the National Careers Service, a national programme which is delivered in regional or local areas by contracted providers, and is available for all adults. Shaw Trust / Prospects is the Prime contractor in the West Midlands, with a number of additional subcontractors in the region (including East Birmingham Community Forum and Specialist Recruitment Services). Careers advice is also provided by schools, colleges and universities (as well as by employers, recruitment agencies and private consultants), which we have not included in scope in this report.

Several service providers we spoke to told us that careers advice, especially via the National Careers Service, is often available within employment or skills programmes, or when individuals access Jobcentre Plus. Individuals can get support with CV writing or speak to an advisor about career opportunities as part of a broader offer of support. This can be positive: receiving a package of services in a more holistic way is an approach for which many of our interviewees advocated.

However, interviewees pointed out that for some, it would be useful to access careers support in isolation, which can be more difficult, for example due to low public awareness of the National Careers Service. This is problematic because careers support can be useful to set someone on the right path towards bespoke support or training. This picture fits with national survey data: two in three (67%) National Careers Service users find out about the service via Jobcentre Plus, suggesting that for the majority of people it is an additional service to others they are already accessing.²⁴

We heard of some examples of successful careers support programmes that have been run in the East Birmingham and North Solihull area, such as youth employment interventions delivered using 'Partnerships for People and Place' funding by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).²⁵ The strengths of

this approach, interviewees told us, included the presence in schools which allowed closer working relationships with young people, as well as the direct connection to employers. This project revealed both a lack of awareness of the options and opportunities available for young people, but also the strength of their aspirations. One interviewee pointed out that this goes against the narrative that those from deprived backgrounds, as is the case for many in East Birmingham and North Solihull, have low aspirations. Building trust in communities and connecting people to opportunities is therefore important to maintain these levels of aspiration and to provide support to help people realise them. Careers services serve an important role here: by clearly setting out people's options and signposting them to routes to get there, there is a greater chance that their aspirations can be met.

APPRENTICESHIPS CAN WORK WELL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, BUT NOT EVERYONE IS ABLE TO ACCESS THEM

Several interviewees, from FE providers to those representing employment support services, praised apprenticeships as being a good way for people to combine work and education effectively. This was seen to be particularly beneficial for young people, which we focus on here (while apprenticeships can work well for all ages, our interviewees focused their comments on young people in this context). We heard about the value of having a tangible employment opportunity attached to skills training or education, and apprenticeships were often cited as a good example of this. We heard that where there is a close working relationship between the relevant parties, such as the FE college and the employer, apprenticeships are working well for people.

However, there are still some problems with apprenticeships which hold them back from delivering the opportunities and benefits they could for people in East Birmingham and North Solihull. Some interviewees told us that in their experience, young people were reluctant to take an apprenticeship for low pay compared to other jobs, even though the career prospects in the long run were better. This is a particular problem given the cost of living crisis the UK is currently experiencing: the National Minimum Wage for apprentices in their first year is £5.28 per hour, which is only likely to be practical for young people living at home with

24 Albone, J. Thompson, D. and Coltman, N. *National Careers Service Customer Satisfaction and Progression Annual Report 2022*. Department for Education, 13 March 2023. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1141939/NCS_customer_satisfaction_and_progression_annual_report_2021_to_2022.pdf [accessed 15/07/2023]

25 Gamble, M. *East Birmingham is the key to our region*. Centre for the New Midlands, (no date). Available at www.thenewmidlands.org.uk/east-birmingham-the-key [accessed 15/07/2023]

parents.²⁶ A 21-year-old could earn £10.18 per hour in a minimum wage job, and interviewees told us that unsurprisingly some young people chose this option over an apprenticeship.²⁷ It should be noted, however, that employers can choose how much they pay apprentices, and so not all apprentices are paid at the minimum level set by the government.

Another issue which interviewees raised was accessibility, including young people knowing that the option of an apprenticeship is available to them, and being aware of the variety of apprenticeships in different industries available in the local area. Pathways to accessing apprenticeships can pose a problem, particularly for people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This speaks to a wider problem around careers advice and communicating opportunities to young people. This is not a problem exclusive to East Birmingham and North Solihull - a YouGov survey in 2015 found that a third (31%) of 16-18 year olds said they had never received advice on apprenticeships.²⁸ Given what others told us about the high aspirations of young people in the area, this suggests that work needs to be done to promote apprenticeships and make them more accessible to young people from lower income backgrounds as they present good opportunities for long-term career progression.

While some interviewees told us there is an adequate number and range of apprenticeships available, other interviewees held the view that more should be made available so that a greater number of young people can access them. At a national level, research by the think tank Onward has shown that the number of people starting apprenticeships at entry level (NVQ Level 2), and in SMEs, has fallen over the last decade, and especially since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced.²⁹ As the Onward report argues, this is likely to have a detrimental impact on young people living in more deprived areas - such as East Birmingham and North Solihull - as they are more likely to access entry-level (intermediate) apprenticeships.³⁰

A BESPOKE 'PATHWAY' APPROACH WITH A FOCUS ON CAREERS DEVELOPMENT WAS POPULAR AMONG INTERVIEWEES

Many of the providers we spoke to emphasised the importance of meaningful opportunities when

engaging people with employment and skills services. Having a clear route to a job, or better still a career, at the end of a course or programme was seen as important to engage people. Several people we spoke to cited the importance of careers advice as part of this model, to understand people's interests, skills and aspirations and set a pathway towards employment that meets those needs and objectives. Conversely, interviewees told us that programmes, courses or training with no clear connection to a particular industry or job were less successful, as individuals were less likely to see their value. This can negatively affect participants' motivation or commitment.

Being able to work with an individual to design a bespoke programme of support was seen as important, and a wrap-around set of services is integral to this approach. Bringing in bespoke services, such as mental health support or confidence, for example, was cited as a key component to a longer but more personalised employment journey. This approach not only looks to match people with jobs, but to find meaningful skills development opportunities that align with what people want to do. Interviewees told us that this can help to build trust, not only with the individual concerned, but also with the wider community of people they know.

There are some programmes that operate in this way, but the problems posed by the current funding model in terms of cross-referrals to different services was again cited as a barrier to this way of working. One example of an employment support programme that has successfully created this kind of 'pathway' model is the 'I Can' programme - an employment support programme designed to help people in Birmingham and Solihull, especially those from more deprived areas, secure employment in entry-level NHS jobs.

We have provided further detail on the approach taken by this programme in a specific case study included in this report, but in summary I Can is an excellent example of a 'pathway' model. Partners have worked together to create a route which people can follow, from initially expressing interest, to a more detailed follow-up conversation, through to pre-employment training and ultimately an NHS job. I Can therefore links up the 'supply' side of employment and skills services with the 'demand'

26 GOV.UK. Employing an apprentice. (no date). Available at www.gov.uk/employing-an-apprentice/pay-and-conditions-for-apprentices [accessed 15/07/2023]

27 Low Pay Commission. *The National Minimum Wage in 2023*. GOV.UK, 31 March 2023. Available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-minimum-wage-in-2023/the-national-minimum-wage-in-2023 [accessed 15/07/2023]

28 Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA). *Apprenticeships - what do young people really think?* 2015. Available at www.accaglobal.com/content/dam/ACCA_Global/Students/apprenticeships-report-acca-web.pdf [accessed 22/03/2023]

29 Fraser, F. and Hawksbee, A. *Course Correction: Why apprenticeship reform is needed to level up opportunity*. Onward, 6 April 2022. Available at www.ukonward.com/reports/course-correction-apprenticeships [accessed 15/07/2023]

30 Fraser and Hawksbee. *Course Correction*. 2022.

side of employers. The programme has been successful because of effective partnership working between Birmingham and Solihull ICS, NHS Trusts, the two councils and community organisations. All these organisations have worked together to create a coherent pathway, with the result that people who would never have considered even applying for an NHS job previously have successfully secured NHS employment. The programme has also found innovative ways to overcome specific problems which the team working on it identified: for example, replacing person specifications with simplified 'job family' descriptions for clinical, admin and facilities roles. Pre-employment training is provided at the University Hospitals Birmingham (UHB) Learning Hub. I Can has also focused on attracting people from more deprived areas, including East Birmingham and North Solihull, through a joined up referral process across a number of community organisations. Interviewees praised the programme as an example of successful innovation, and in its first year of operation the programme was shortlisted for a *Health Service Journal* award for 'Workforce Initiative of the Year'.³¹

31 University Hospitals Birmingham. "I Can" programme shortlisted for the HSJ Awards 2022. 15 August 2022. Available at www.uhb.nhs.uk/news-and-events/news/i-can-programme-shortlisted-for-the-hsj-awards-2022/618428 [accessed 15/07/2023]

BARRIERS

There are both systemic and personal barriers preventing people from accessing employment or skills development opportunities, or making it more difficult for people to do so. In this chapter, we outline the key areas our interviewees presented as being barriers to people in East Birmingham and North Solihull accessing skills or employment opportunities.

LACK OF TRANSPORT OUT OF THE AREA LIMITS PEOPLE'S OPTIONS WHEN IT COMES TO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

Interviewees cited both *availability* and *affordability* of public transport as a barrier to employment for some people in East Birmingham and North Solihull.

Generally, public transport is available to the city centre of Birmingham, but it is more difficult to get to other locations. Interviewees told us that journeys to other areas often require multiple changes of bus, train or tram, sometimes including going into the centre of Birmingham and then back out again. This can make journeys both time consuming and potentially more expensive, factors which act as a barrier for some people to taking opportunities further away from their local area. This is also the case for skills or training opportunities located in other areas: we were told that for this reason, people want to undertake training in the area they live in, but that this can limit their options in some circumstances. Some employment support programmes offer participants assistance with financial costs, like travel, and where this is available interviewees told us it can be helpful in widening people's access to opportunities.

Interviewees also told us that work which requires shifts was difficult for those relying on public transport because the transport was not always available late at night or early in the morning when required. Some large businesses provide their own transport in the form of shuttle buses, but this puts smaller businesses at a disadvantage as they do not have the resources to do so.

BOTH AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS TO CHILDCARE PREVENTS PEOPLE FROM ENGAGING WITH THE EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SYSTEM AND FINDING WORK

Childcare also presents a significant challenge for those looking to enter the workforce or take up opportunities for skills development. Interviewees repeatedly identified both availability and cost of childcare as a barrier for people with children looking for work.

Lots of people pigeonhole themselves into particular jobs because they know it won't affect their childcare.

- Service provider

Affordability is a problem when people are weighing up how financially beneficial employment will be for them - if they are spending a significant amount of their income on childcare, they may not feel that it is worthwhile for them to work. A provider or work coach therefore needs to be able to work with them to understand their options, and support them to find a route into employment that is beneficial to their confidence and wellbeing, and that is financially viable. We also heard that childcare can be inaccessible - a lack of registered childcare providers available, either at all or at the times people need it, poses a problem for those who do want to utilise it.

Finally, the practicality of childcare arrangements can make it difficult for people to access the employment support system or benefit from support. Finding childcare while attending meetings or skills development sessions can be a problem for parents; we heard of parents, often mothers, who had to bring children along to meetings/appointments, which sometimes detracted from the amount they were able to get out of the time available.

THE AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY OF ESOL PROVISION COULD BE SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVED

One of the most commonly cited barriers to employment and training in our interviews was ESOL provision. The demographic makeup of East Birmingham means that there is a high demand for ESOL provision in the area; demand is much lower in North Solihull. Table 2 shows Census 2021 data for the number of people aged 18+ who do not identify English as their main language and who said they either “cannot speak English” or “cannot speak English well”.

TABLE 2

USUAL RESIDENTS, AGED 18+, WHO DO NOT IDENTIFY ENGLISH AS THEIR MAIN LANGUAGE, BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, 2021.

LOCAL AUTHORITY	WARD	MAIN LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH: CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH	MAIN LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH: CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH WELL	TOTAL
Birmingham	Alum Rock	672	2415	3087
	Small Heath	466	2037	2503
	Bordesley Green	240	1144	1384
	Heartlands	206	998	1204
	Ward End	211	892	1103
	Bordesley & Highgate	159	916	1075
	Nechells	128	750	878
	Bromford & Hodge Hill	147	703	850
	Acocks Green	121	719	840
	Glebe Farm & Tile Cross	118	609	727
	Tyseley & Hay Mills	83	602	685
	Yardley West & Stechford	114	512	626
	Sheldon	47	241	288
	Garretts Green	49	235	284
	Yardley East	35	203	238
	South Yardley	32	194	226
	Shard End	19	109	128
Castle Vale	12	56	68	

LOCAL AUTHORITY	WARD	MAIN LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH: CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH	MAIN LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH: CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH WELL	TOTAL
Solihull	Kingshurst and Fordbridge	10	53	63
	Smith's Wood	6	49	55
	Chelmsley Wood	9	46	55
	Castle Bromwich	13	37	50

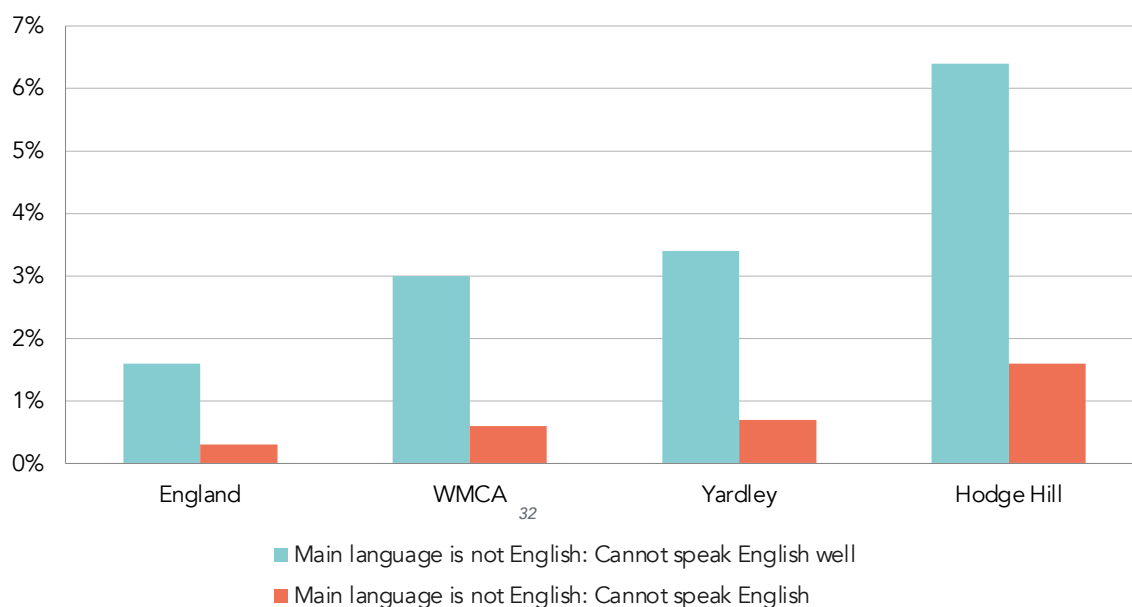
Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021. Data tabulation provided by the WMCA.

For the purposes of comparison, Figure 7 shows the proportion of people (aged 3+) who either 'cannot speak English well' or 'cannot speak English', according to the 2021 Census. This shows that ESOL provision is particularly important in East Birmingham (mostly covered by the Westminster constituencies of Hodge Hill and Yardley), in comparison to the average across England and in the WMCA area.

East Birmingham has a comparatively high proportion of people who 'cannot speak English' or 'cannot speak English well'

FIGURE 7

PROPORTION OF POPULATION AGED 3+ BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, IN HODGE HILL AND YARDLEY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES IN EAST BIRMINGHAM, IN WMCA AND IN ENGLAND.



Source: Office for National Statistics, Census 2021.

32 Birmingham City Council. 2021 Census: Proficiency in English language. (no date). Available at www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/25610/proficiency_in_english_language [accessed 15/07/2023]

Often, people need to access ESOL before they can take any further steps towards employment or training. However, we heard from a number of providers that ESOL was a problem in the area, due to the perceived lack of availability and quality of provision.

Some of our interviewees told us that ESOL was difficult to access, with many people on waiting lists to begin courses. Several interviewees criticised the fact that many ESOL courses run only during term-time, which means people sometimes have to wait an unnecessarily long time to even start a course, or creating a bottleneck with a long waiting list at the beginning of a term.

The lack of availability of ESOL is a real blocker for people who are otherwise job ready.

- Service provider

Based on interviews with officers at the WMCA, we recognise that, since devolution of the Adult Education Budget, the WMCA has made efforts to address some of these issues. However, overall we found a similar picture to that described in 2019 in a report on ESOL commissioned by the WMCA, which noted as a barrier, “[ESOL] delivery is predominantly day time training during term-time rather than reflect[ing] the needs of the region’s communities”.³³

When individuals are able to enrol on courses, the quality of provision is also a perceived problem. We heard about individuals who had been on the same course for a prolonged period of time, or who would come back to their programme provider having made limited progress. This inhibits their ability to progress onto the next stage of training, or into employment. Although interviewees told us there were good examples of effective ESOL courses, in general service providers had either mixed or negative views of the quality of ESOL. The 2019 WMCA report on ESOL suggested nearly a third of teaching was delivered by staff on temporary contracts, “leading to lack of stability and limitations in terms of quality improvement”.³⁴ The picture may have changed since 2019, but it is worth investigating whether this continues to be an issue which is holding back delivery of high-quality provision.

In East Birmingham, improving the availability and quality of ESOL provision was seen by many of our interviewees as a key piece of the puzzle in terms of achieving the growth strategy set out by the WMCA. At present, some felt there was a risk that residents were not in a position to take up specialist skills

training or career opportunities because there was not enough emphasis being placed on first acquiring essential skills, such as English.

As with other skills and training provision, it is important to connect ESOL provision with employment opportunities. Interviewees emphasised that an individual is likely to be more committed to learning a difficult and time-consuming skill, such as a language, if there is a meaningful opportunity at the end of it.

People are really sick of going through the training revolving circular door and coming out with nothing. Some of the people with the biggest appetite to get a job are the people who can't speak English. [...] There's got to be more connection between ESOL provision, and businesses and employers. But I think what they do is they wait for them to be better at it before they even think about moving them on. What you need to do is contextualise their learning, while they've got the momentum and the appetite to do so and the ambition to work, within the workplace. [What frustrates participants] in ESOL provision is that they want to get a job, and that's why they're doing it.

- Employer

Embedding ESOL and other essential skills provision into pathways towards employment should be a priority for policy makers, service providers and employers alike. The WMCA, in the *Adult Education Budget 2022-2025 Strategy*, has said that it will continue to develop ‘ESOL for employment’ commissioning, which aims to ensure that a proportion of ESOL provision is more directly connected to employment/training. Our interviewees agreed with this general approach, but none mentioned this initiative specifically and many raised concerns about the availability and quality of ESOL as described above. Although the purpose of this report is not to make specific recommendations, we would recommend that the WMCA work with BCC, the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Board and ESOL providers to review and improve ESOL provision in East Birmingham.

ACCORDING TO SERVICE PROVIDERS, REFERRALS FROM JOBCENTRE PLUS WORK COACHES CAN BE INCONSISTENT

For this research project, we conducted background interviews with Jobcentre Plus managers and Work

³³ West Midlands Combined Authority. *Unlocking Potential - Making Sense of ESOL in the Region*. June 2019. Available at www.wmca.org.uk/media/3537/making-sense-of-esol-in-the-region-v4.pdf [accessed 15/07/2023]

³⁴ West Midlands Combined Authority. *ESOL in the region*. 2019. p. 7.

Coaches to help us understand the overall landscape of services in EBNS. However, we have not included the opinions or views of Jobcentre staff in this report, and so the following paragraphs only reflect the *perceptions* of service provider interviewees - and we recognise that this is a partial and limited picture.

One of the primary entry points into the employment and skills landscape are Jobcentres - specifically appointments with individual work coaches. Typically, work coaches at Jobcentres provide support to people on a one-to-one basis through regular weekly or fortnightly appointments; Jobcentres also provide a broader range of types of support and advice as well, such as group sessions and longer appointments for some customers. Importantly, work coaches also discuss wider opportunities for support, training and employment with individuals and signpost them to services available in the local area.

Many service provider interviewees told us that, to a greater or lesser degree, they rely on Jobcentre Plus referrals because, as described in this report, citizens' awareness of services is often low, and so the information provided to people at Jobcentres plays a critical function. Service provider interviewees outlined the positive relationships they often hold with Jobcentre Plus and the ways this can work well. If they have a good relationship with an individual work coach and the work coach knows their programme well, service providers told us they get good referrals - both in terms of the number and suitability of people referred to them. Some providers go to Jobcentres to talk to people in person about the service or programme they offer and were positive about the opportunity to talk to people directly.

However, our service provider interviewees also expressed some frustrations with how this model worked. Interviewees told us that the *quality* of referrals from Jobcentre work coaches could be inconsistent - for example, referring people who weren't suitable for a particular programme/course. Interviewees also explained to us that the *number* of referrals could also change over time quite dramatically, which caused provider organisations difficulty in managing capacity. Though quality of service provision is not explored in this report, this issue shows that a 'feedback loop' between referrers and services would be beneficial to help strengthen communication within the support system.

When we asked our interviewees for their perceptions about why they thought this was the case, there were two consistent themes which emerged. First, interviewees said that they felt work coaches were under "pressure" in their roles, with one-to-one appointments usually being around 10 minutes; interviewees told us that, in their view, this sometimes contributed to inconsistent referrals. The Jobcentre Plus appointment system does have flexibility for additional support (for example, up to an hour for customers with declared health conditions), and personalised advice and guidance can be cumulative across regular appointments, rather than relying on one single appointment.. Previous research by Demos and the National Audit Office has highlighted that work coaches having time to build good relationships with citizens/clients is important so that people get personalised support and/or referrals.^{35, 36}

Second, interviewees we spoke to recognised that the sheer number of courses, programmes, support providers and employers that work coaches and service providers are expected to have knowledge of can be counterproductive. Several interviewees said that building relationships with work coaches was crucial for this reason, but that a good relationship could be lost if an individual work coach moved job, for example. Relatedly, the landscape of services is constantly changing; some service providers told us that the number of referrals to them changed if new services were introduced, or if there were DWP policy changes. Of course, the quality of service provision varies, and there may be very good reasons for these types of changes, but the frequency of change can sometimes cause problems for service providers.

While we were finalising this report, new research was published, *Work Coach provision of employment support*, carried out by Ipsos and the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the DWP.³⁷ Several of the themes in the research are similar to those we heard about through our own qualitative interviews with service providers: that service providers valued building relationships with Jobcentre staff; that it can be difficult for work coaches to be aware of all the relevant service provision in a local area; that the quality of referrals can be inconsistent; and that turnover/job changes among work coaches were "seen to affect work coaches' level of awareness of the employment support system" and "could affect the quality and appropriateness of referral decisions".³⁸

35 Phillips. *Working Together*. 2022.

36 Comptroller and Auditor General. *Employment support*. National Audit Office, 9 June 2021. Available at www.nao.org.uk/reports/dwp-employment-support [accessed 15/07/2023]

37 Ipsos and Institute for Employment Studies (IES). *Work Coach provision of employment support*. Department for Work and Pensions, May 2023. Available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-coach-provision-of-employment-support [accessed 15/07/2023]

38 Ipsos and IES. *Work Coach provision*. 2023.

We have already outlined that there is a tapestry of employment support, skills and careers provision available to EBNS residents. For individuals to be able to access the most suitable options for them, work coaches need to be able to have a good understanding of what is available. The current model of Jobcentre Plus facilitates this with weekly team meetings where providers can come in and talk to work coaches directly about the programmes and services they are running. We heard from providers that this is valuable. Creating more time for sharing information in this way, aiming to improve the consistency of referrals, and emphasising a localised and place-based approach were all suggestions we heard for how the partnership model between Jobcentre Plus and other organisations could work even better.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN BENEFITS AND INCOME FROM WORK MAKES PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT TAKING A JOB

The tapestry of employment and skills can be overwhelming and difficult for individuals to navigate. One element of this that can pose particular challenges is the interaction between benefits and income from work. We heard that individuals often worry about whether a job will be financially beneficial, and that they risk losing benefits that they rely on if they do take on employment. Although it is almost always the case that somebody receiving Universal Credit will be better off financially in employment, it is understandable that people worry about this especially when initially moving into work and perhaps having to wait four weeks for their first payment from their employer. Support providers told us that one of their roles is often to reassure people about this aspect of moving into work, including explaining the way that Universal Credit operates to 'top up' any short- or long-term changes to income.

This is a particularly pronounced problem for those living in supported housing, which is offered at a significantly lower rate for unemployed people but becomes unaffordable if someone takes on even a small amount of part time work. Some providers told us this can leave people in a difficult situation where they feel trapped in their current situation.

There are resources that exist, such as benefits calculators, which can be used to support people to understand the reality of their situation and alleviate stress. Signposting people to these services and spending time with them to navigate the system is important to reduce the impact of this barrier.

HEALTH CONDITIONS, INCLUDING MENTAL ILL HEALTH, ARE A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO EMPLOYMENT FOR MANY PEOPLE

Long-term health conditions pose a significant challenge for people looking to find work. One interviewee told us they considered it to be "the most important barrier" that they come across. These individuals require tailored provision in order to support them to access employment that is suitable for them. However, the onus is not only on individuals; employers also need to be supported to understand what they can do to support a prospective employee with a long-term health condition. There are bespoke programmes available to individuals with health conditions, as well as organisations who engage directly with employers. However, we heard from providers that the latter is often a challenge, and that work needs to be done to encourage more employers to be more open to employing people with health conditions and disabilities.

Many interviewees told us that mental health conditions are a significant problem, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples people mentioned to us were reluctance to take on in-person opportunities owing to anxiety related to isolation during the pandemic, and mental health issues connected to the cost of living crisis. Being able to refer people to mental health services as part of employment support programmes is vital, and having clear cross-referral pathways and sufficient funding for services are both of paramount importance. Of course, this issue goes far beyond the employment support system. Nonetheless, the impact on people's employment prospects further strengthens the case for increased investment in mental health provision and a preventative approach more broadly.

APPLICATION PROCESSES CAN BE INACCESSIBLE AND PUT PEOPLE OFF APPLYING FOR JOBS

Complexity is also a problem when it comes to application processes. Several interviewees told us that the process of applying for jobs itself is a barrier to people in East Birmingham and North Solihull. Inaccessible, complex and unclear application forms were cited as a key problem for a wide range of reasons. If someone is unclear about the specific requirements of a job, such as what the role will entail or the hours required, they are less likely to feel that the opportunity is suitable for them and may not apply at all.

Conversely, application forms and job advertisements that are overloaded with jargon are also off putting and have the same effect. If people do apply, the process itself can cause problems. Application forms that require a significant amount of time to complete, or ask for an excessive amount of information or research, can also be a barrier to those who have other commitments or lack the confidence to undertake the process.

Earlier in the report we drew on the I Can programme as a case study. This programme is a good example where employers and providers have worked together to address this barrier, by simplifying both the job advertisement and application process. Interviewees told us that they had identified inaccessibility at the very start of a person's engagement with a potential job as being a key barrier to employment. Having clear parameters and expectations from an employer, in this case the NHS, providers were able to work with them to devise clear and accessible information about what jobs were available.

This up front approach encourages a culture of trust - potential applicants know what is expected of them from the outset when they are considering applying for a job, and are not surprised further along the process by additional responsibilities in the role or skills that they did not know they needed. This approach was also applied to the application process: the requirement of a formal interview was removed and making the process more about suitability from both the employer and applicant's perspective. While this exact approach may not work for all jobs, the principles are transferable. Simplifying application processes and placing more emphasis on suitability will aid employers and providers to support people into meaningful, long-term employment opportunities in East Birmingham and North Solihull. At present, some people are put off by overly complex and intimidating processes. This is detrimental to both individuals looking for work and employers looking to recruit people.

PERSONAL BARRIERS SUCH AS A LACK OF CONFIDENCE CAN HOLD PEOPLE BACK FROM ENGAGING WITH THE EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT LANDSCAPE ALTOGETHER

It is important not to underestimate the impact that people's personal circumstances, confidence and skills can have on their ability to engage with employment and skills services. We repeatedly heard from interviewees that personal reasons, particularly a lack of confidence, were significant barriers to people getting into work or accessing employment support at all.

For many, there can be a self-perpetuating cycle whereby the longer someone is out of employment, the more their confidence is impacted, meaning they find it increasingly difficult to apply for jobs or seek support, and so on. This can be a problem at various stages throughout someone's journey towards employment, such as when they are applying for a job or attending an interview. One interviewee told us that in a world of online job applications sometimes has a detrimental effect on people's confidence if they are repeatedly rejected with little feedback or human interaction.

As we outlined earlier in the report, there are interventions that can make the application process more accessible and take a holistic approach to build a prospective applicant's confidence and trust in the process. In the current landscape, there are bespoke service providers offering support with confidence building, either as part of an employment or skills programme or directly in the form of mentoring or mental health provision.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

CONCLUSION AND POLICY CONTEXT FOR REFORM

As BCC, SMBC and the WMCA work together on their plans to support inclusive growth in East Birmingham and North Solihull, employment, skills and careers services will play a crucial role. There is clear potential to raise the employment rate in the area, provide people with better skills, and improve careers advice and pathways, especially for the area's young population.

This review of existing provision has shown that there are existing strengths in the area. Many organisations offer provision, including some which offer services tailored to specific groups, and others which are embedded in local communities. Our interviewees were passionate about helping to support people in the local area, shared an understanding of the importance of working together with other organisations, and many recognised the potential for 'inclusive growth' in the EBNS area, mentioning a geographical focus or new opportunities from HS2, for example. A project like I Can shows the potential for creating local 'pathways' for people to access employment, helping to improve people's lives and reduce inequalities.

However, our interviewees were also clear that there are weaknesses in the current system of services. In particular, the 'tapestry' of services which interviewees talked about was seen as overly complex and confusing for both citizens and employers to navigate. Restrictive funding rules and constant changes in policy and funding were also seen as weaknesses. Interviewees also emphasised the need for additional support for many citizens to overcome barriers they might face - whether with health, childcare or a lack of confidence. Better personalised support which is joined up across different services and organisations is needed.

There are at least three relevant changes to the

policy landscape, which we discuss below: the transition from ESF to UKSPF; the trailblazer devolution deal; and EBNS being identified as a 'Levelling Up Zone', including the potential for public service reform.

First, the ongoing change from ESF to UKSPF (focusing on the 'people and skills' funding stream). Service provider interviewees we spoke to were worried about this transition: they talked about a high degree of uncertainty for the continuation of existing services and programmes; a reduced amount of funding; and some were concerned about the loss of an explicit focus on young people within UKSPF. We recognise that this represents the views of service providers, and so it is not surprising that they are worried about changes to their funding. Nonetheless, at least in theory, there is potential to use UKSPF to improve employment, skills and careers services in the EBNS area. For example, this could be through more local alignment with other service delivery, so that residents can be supported to benefit from more than one programme at a time, or through providing services for groups who need specialised support which may not currently be available.

Second, the trailblazer devolution deal gives additional powers to the WMCA and its constituent local authorities which are relevant for the employment, skills and careers landscape in EBNS:

- Agreement of a **single settlement budget** for the WMCA, which will "increase WMCA's autonomy, ability to prioritise decisions locally, and ability to reprioritise across its own budgets".³⁹ This could enable the WMCA, BCC and SMBC to prioritise spending to boost inclusive growth in the EBNS area, including by improving employment, skills and careers services.

39 DLUHC. West Midlands trailblazer devolution deal. 2023.

- Further devolution of **post-19 adult skills** (e.g. Skills Bootcamps), which will enable more local flexibilities in offering skills courses
- More regional influence over **post-16 skills**, including a new joint governance board
- On **careers advice**, the devolution deal states that the government will offer “a more place-based approach to careers education and develop joint governance arrangements for the delivery of careers services in the West Midlands”. The devolution deal also states that “the government will pilot a new strategic fund to respond to careers priorities for young people in the West Midlands, including to support those who are not in education, employment or training or at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training.” Along with the existing Partnerships for People and Place project, this offers the opportunity to strengthen the links between schools and colleges and the wider employment and skills system in the EBNS area.
- Some devolution of **employment support**, including joint working with the DWP on contracted employment support programmes and a new Regional Labour Market Partnership Board. In partnership with the DWP, the WMCA, BCC and SMBC could use the new Partnership Board and innovate through collaboration to ensure that they build on the strengths and address the weaknesses of current service provision and employer relationships which we have identified in this report.
- Improved **data sharing** on labour market and skills, with the devolution deal stating that “dependent on the requisite legal gateway being defined, DWP and WMCA will work together to explore feasibility and potential for proportionate data sharing arrangements for programmes and services operating in the region to reduce duplication and facilitate better targeting and efficiency of an integrated employment and skills offer.” As this report has shown, there is a clear need for better integration of employment and skills, so this is a positive step in the right direction. Stakeholders should explore whether the data is sufficiently localised to enable analysis at a local level (e.g. by ward), and what kind of data sharing would best support inclusive growth ambitions in the EBNS area.

Third, as described in the introduction, the EBNS area is identified as a ‘Levelling Up Zone’ in the trailblazer devolution deal.⁴⁰ EBNS is an area of

strategic focus for BCC, SMBC and the WMCA along with the East Birmingham Board, because it is an area with high deprivation and low employment. BCC, SMBC and the WMCA want to move towards a ‘whole place approach’ to public services in the area, with a focus on employment, skills and careers services.⁴¹ Integration could mean multi-year funding streams, pooling existing funding, and improving collaboration between existing organisations across different public services.⁴² The ‘Levelling Up Zone’ initiative could provide an opportunity to address the specific local needs of EBNS residents, especially addressing the barriers identified in this report through integration and collaboration of local public services.

For national policy makers, our research demonstrates the complexity and fragmentation of the existing system. National policy makers should therefore be cautious about introducing new programmes or initiatives at a national level, which risk further adding to the complexity of the existing landscape of services at a local level. Each local area has its own specific challenges, and therefore devolving powers to Combined and local authorities has the clear potential to lead to better outcomes. But an additional lesson for national policy makers is that devolution (or devolved commissioning) doesn’t automatically lead to improved integration and collaboration at a local level. As our interviewees told us, there remain significant barriers to these ways of working, due to, for example, inflexible funding and contracting. One of the key benefits of devolution should be improving integration and collaboration, but this may not be fully realised within the existing constraints. Greater devolution of policy design and commissioning powers is necessary to enable local areas to create integrated employment, skills and careers systems which will improve outcomes for citizens.

NEXT STEPS: POLICY DEVELOPMENT TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND CAREERS SERVICES IN EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL

This report is the main output from the first stage of our research and policy work in East Birmingham and North Solihull. The aim of this first stage was to understand the existing landscape of services, especially the strengths and weaknesses, and hearing about some of the barriers faced by people living in the area.

40 DLUHC. West Midlands trailblazer devolution deal. 2023.

41 Internal Birmingham City Council documents.

42 Internal Birmingham City Council documents.

While the first stage was focused on research - mapping and assessing the existing service landscape - the second stage will focus on policy development. The aim of the second stage will be to develop policy recommendations to address some of the key issues identified in this report. In particular, we will explore practical ways in which to develop better integration, collaboration and 'pathway' working.

With the trailblazer devolution deal in place, the strategic focus on EBNS as a Levelling Up Zone and established partnership working between local agencies, this is an exciting opportunity to develop practical policy solutions at a local level for public service reform in order to improve outcomes. With both the government and the opposition committed to reducing regional inequalities by devolving powers and boosting employment in local areas across the country, EBNS has the potential to be an example for how to actually achieve this in action, not just in words.

CASE STUDY

CREATING A PATHWAY TO ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT IN THE NHS THROUGH THE I CAN PROGRAMME

We include the I Can programme as a case study in this report because it is an innovative example of creating an employment and skills 'pathway' by bringing together employment support, training and specific jobs within NHS organisations. There are a number of design features of the I Can programme which have been important, and these are explored below, but our interviewees stressed that its success has also depended on the commitment and dedication of key people at partner organisations.

The aim of the I Can programme is to develop a clear pathway to entry-level employment in the NHS within the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System, with a particular focus on increasing workforce diversity and improving employment in more deprived areas. Although geographically the programme covers the whole of Birmingham and Solihull, in Birmingham the East Birmingham area was the initial priority; one of the local partner organisations, The Pioneer Group (a local community group), has a strong presence in East Birmingham, which means the programme has directly benefited East Birmingham residents.⁴³ The I Can programme started delivery in November 2021.

A significant reason for the success of I Can has been partnership working between multiple organisations. The following list includes some of the key partners which interviewees mentioned, but is not exhaustive:

- Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS)
- The five NHS Foundation Trusts within Birmingham and Solihull ICS
- University Hospitals Birmingham (UHB) Learning Hub (part of Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham), which 'exists to help people into careers in the NHS'⁴⁴
- CLES and the Birmingham Anchor Network
- Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
- Birmingham City Council
- The Pioneer Group
- Other organisations which refer people to I Can or promote it

THE I CAN PATHWAY IS DESIGNED TO SIMPLIFY THE PROCESS OF APPLYING FOR AN ENTRY-LEVEL NHS JOB

This section describes the I Can pathway which has been designed and refined by the team working on the programme. The overall aim of creating this pathway was summarised by one of our interviewees:

⁴³ The Pioneer Group. Who We Are. 2023. Available at www.pioneergroup.org.uk/about-us [accessed 15/07/2023]

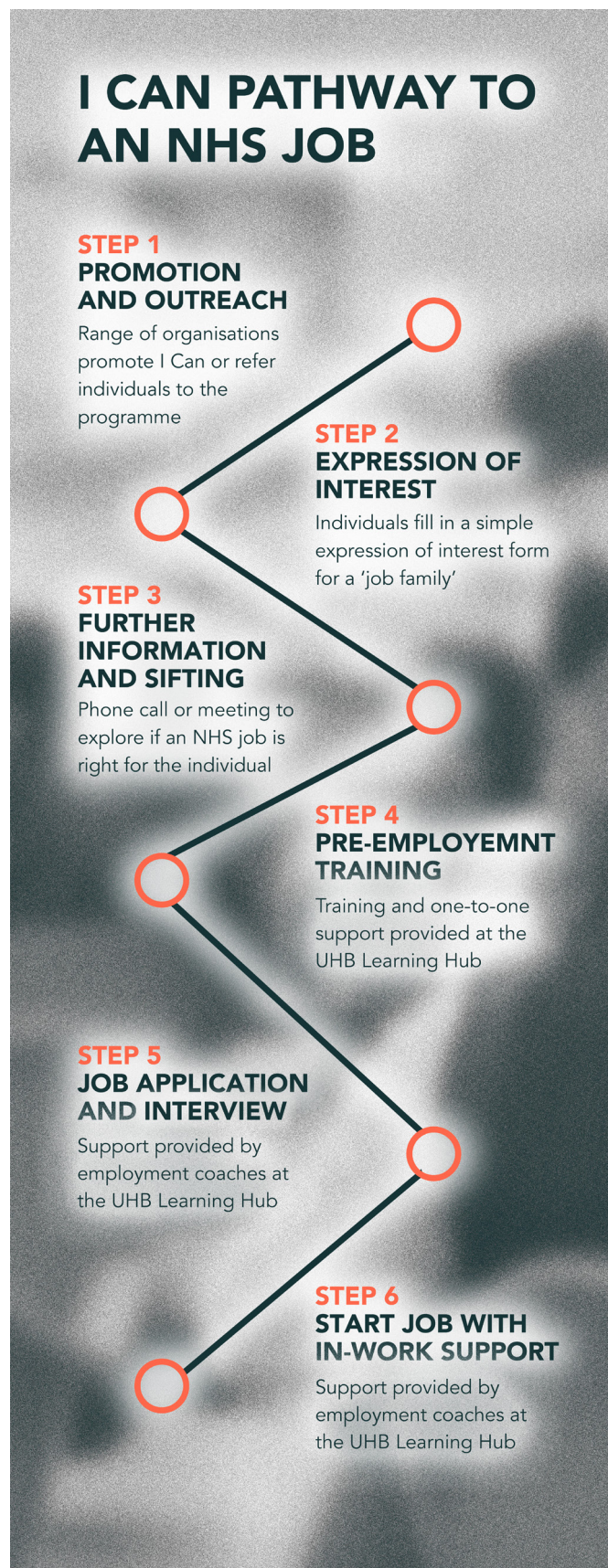
⁴⁴ University Hospitals Birmingham. Looking for a role in healthcare? June 2021. Available at www.education.uhb.nhs.uk/career-development/looking-for-role-in-healthcare [accessed 15/07/2023]

The whole recruitment process [used to] put the emphasis on the individual to navigate that process and find their way through it, and overcome all these barriers they face. So first of all, they've got to have the confidence to think they can apply for an NHS job. They've then got to find where those jobs are, and then they've got to try to translate job descriptions which are almost designed to be off-putting. Then you get the 17 page application form [...] then there's the challenge of have you got two years previous NHS experience and the right qualifications (five GCSEs grade A-C). And then if you navigate all of that, which many people don't, then there's a formal job interview, which people find off putting. So the I Can process was designed to [...] support those people in coming forward.

- I Can interviewee

The following illustration summarises the I Can pathway:

FIGURE 8
SIMPLIFIED DIAGRAM OF THE I CAN PATHWAY TO AN ENTRY-LEVEL NHS JOB



The I Can pathway starts with promotion and outreach activities. The programme benefitted greatly from the knowledge and experience of the UHB Learning Hub team who already had an engagement team, with an established network of system contacts. Community organisations, such as The Pioneer Group, promote I Can to community groups or local neighbourhoods, or at jobs fairs, for example.

Especially early in the programme, NHS staff joined others in promoting the programme, and interviewees told us this was important for building trust and brand awareness. Other organisations also refer people to I Can, and there is also some spontaneous promotion via word of mouth in the community. Interviewees told us that a simple, clear message is important, along the lines of "We're I Can, we can help you get a job in the NHS."

One of the barriers which the I Can team identified was the complex NHS application form which job applicants were asked to fill in. The I Can programme supports people to complete this form as part of the training programme. First, instead of asking people to apply for specific vacancies, I Can has created three 'job families' simply describing NHS entry-level jobs: clinical, admin and facilities. These 'job families' allow candidates to choose which area is best suited to them. Interviewees told us this approach has two key advantages. First, it helps people understand the type of roles available, rather than having to wade through detailed descriptions of individual jobs. Second, it helps people see that this could be a career route in the NHS in a 'job family', rather than viewing it as a single job vacancy in isolation. One interviewee told us:

Making a clear structure of the jobs they wanted people to go into - the job families - really works well. It sounds so simple, but having a simple A4 crib sheet of what the NHS wanted and what was needed, there's no comeback, trust really works between a job and what people know they are going for, which is so important.

- I Can interviewee

Second, at the initial stage people are invited to fill in a simple 'expression of interest' form. This form has a number of basic questions, but is far simpler than the formal 17-page NHS application form, and so encourages more people to register their interest who might not feel confident about filling in a formal application at this stage.

The next stage is a 'sifting' process, which involves a conversation (or conversations) between an individual and a staff member from one of the partner organisations such as the UHB Learning

Hub, The Pioneer Group or Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. The purpose of the conversation is to explore the possible job in greater depth, and to enable an individual to ask questions they might have. Clients are booked onto a 'Discovery Workshop' or an information session on Microsoft Teams, and after attending these clients are invited to a Basic and Key Skills Builder (BKSB) assessment. Interviewees told us that this sifting stage is important to ensure that people who went on to the next stage understood the reality of the job and felt it could work for them - at this stage some people leave the process having realised working in a hospital (for example, on a shift pattern) wouldn't suit them.

We do a quite rigorous sifting process whereby we identify whether they are the appropriate people that could work within the NHS, and [make sure] they understand the values and ethics of working in the NHS.

- I Can interviewee

As part of the sifting stage, staff also identify pre-employment training requirements an individual may have, relevant to the 'job family' in which they have expressed interest.

At this stage, participants access training at the UHB Learning Hub (located next to Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham). Some training is also delivered in other settings, but the UHB Learning Hub is the main setting. A programme employment coach, employed by the NHS, offers one-to-one support and helps guide people through this stage while people are waiting for a job. There are set training courses for the job families, some of which are job-specific training for clinical roles, alongside generic training and other forms of skills coaching or training (for example, courses to improve functional English). Employment coaches can also help candidates with pastoral support for up to 16 weeks, with a view to equipping them to secure a role at interview.

The I Can programme has also tried to adapt the interview stage. Formal interviews (for example, with panels) can be a barrier for people who may not be familiar with the process, or lack confidence speaking to a group of people simultaneously. In certain departments, instead of a formal interview panel, participants have an informal 'coffee cup' conversation with the recruiting manager, which is felt to be less intimidating for candidates. Employment coaches at the UHB Learning Hub also help support people to prepare for interviews.

Finally, the UHB Learning Hub team offers pastoral support to participants after they start work, so that there is continuity between pre-work training and

support after starting a new NHS job.

I CAN HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN ITS FIRST YEAR

Based on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, I Can has been highly successful in its first year of operation.

In terms of quantitative evidence, a few key statistics from the first year evaluation are:

- Over 220 job offers for unemployed residents (the original aim was 100 people per year)
- 69% of those with job offers through I Can are from an ethnic minority background compared to a population of 47% from an ethnic minority background for Birmingham and Solihull according to the 2021 Census
- 23% increase in engagement in wards in Birmingham and Solihull with the highest levels of disadvantage
- 85% retention rate after six months

These statistics suggest that I Can has delivered on its goal of supporting people from more deprived areas of Birmingham and Solihull to access entry-level employment in the NHS, especially given it is the programme's first year. Interviewees told us they had been learning and improving the programme, and promoting it, during the first year, and were therefore hopeful that there is potential to increase scale in future years.

All our interviewees also cited qualitative evidence that I Can had been successful. This was partly because it had helped overcome barriers to applying for NHS jobs, such as the complex application forms and person specifications. People who would previously not even have applied for these types of jobs had been successful in entering NHS employment.

[The organisations involved in I Can] have really done something - they've told people that NHS jobs are for them, and people believe that those jobs are for them, which is a mindset change.

- I Can interviewee

Interviewees told us that recruitment staff working in the NHS had a high opinion of the programme:

What we've found is, the [NHS] Trusts are so impressed with the calibre of people that come out at the end of the programme, that are job ready rather than coming cold from an NHS

job application form - if they know somebody is an I Can candidate, they'll shortlist them straight away.

- I Can interviewee

Interviewees also emphasised that effective partnership working to design and support people along the I Can 'pathway' had been successful. Partners recognised the value of the 'pathway' or 'bridge' design of the programme, which connected citizens in deprived neighbourhoods through multiple steps to speaking to NHS recruitment managers and accessing NHS jobs.

True partnership, that's worked really well, everybody understanding what they're good at, because we've all got different skills and attributes. The NHS deserve enormous credit [...] - true partnership has worked.

- I Can interviewee

It was also clear from our conversations that the dedication and commitment of some of the key people involved in I Can have been crucial in bringing together people and organisations around a shared vision of what the programme was trying to achieve. Interviewees mentioned talking to stakeholders, face-to-face, and explaining I Can as crucial in making it a success, and it is clear that some of the key people involved have been very effective advocates for the programme. This is especially important since I Can is new and innovative - and the importance of people's time and energy was recognised by the various partner organisations involved.

STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD LEARN LESSONS FROM I CAN AND CONSIDER WHETHER IT IS POSSIBLE TO APPLY THIS KIND OF MODEL MORE WIDELY IN EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND CAREERS SERVICES

The I Can programme has achieved a lot in its first year of operation - not just in terms of helping over 2000 people consider a job in the NHS, with the result of over 220 people being offered employment, but in creating a 'pathway' or 'bridge' model and helping to redesign NHS recruitment for entry-level jobs. Interviewees identified a number of success factors, which we explore below. In our view other stakeholders in the employment, skills and careers system should consider whether it is possible to apply this kind of model more widely. Of course there are some unique factors in I Can, the most obvious one being the size of the NHS as an employer. But many of the lessons learnt could be applied more widely, for example with other large

employers, or by bringing groups of employers together in the same industry, for example.

One of the real strengths of the I Can programme has been to create a 'pathway' which builds a strong connection between employer, employment/skills services and the citizen. A lot of employment and skills activity tends to focus on the 'supply side' - that is, helping an individual look for jobs or improve their skills. Although many employment and skills organisations do work with employers, the direct connection to the 'demand side' of employer's needs is not usually as strong as in the I Can programme. As noted in this case study, this has worked well for the NHS as an employer. But it also works well for citizens, who can clearly see how the various steps they are taking are leading towards a potential job at the end of the process. Strengthening the connection between the demand side and supply side via this kind of 'pathway' or 'bridge' model is something other organisations/groups of organisations should explore.

Allied to the 'pathway' model has been the effective partnership working between multiple organisations. Most of this partnership working is not formalised, but rather relies on more informal relationships between staff at different organisations. This demonstrates the power of a relational model; giving staff the flexibility to make room for this kind of effective partnership working should be an aim of every organisation, and an aim of broader employment and skills 'system design' as well. One interviewee, for example, highlighted that I Can did not just signpost people to other services, but actively guided people along the pathway:

People are handed on in an individual way through each stage, so [one team] works really closely with [another team]. So it's actually an active handover as people move through - they're not just pointed in a direction, [like] signposting... it's far more intentional than that.

- I Can interviewee

Another clear strength of the I Can programme has been the creation of 'job families' and the simplification of the initial 'expression of interest' form. Both of these have reduced barriers to jobs, by increasing understanding of what the jobs involve and by making it easier to take a first step of expressing interest. Although this would be less likely to work for roles which require more advanced technical skills, employers should consider taking similar steps, especially for entry-level or junior roles. The advantages for an employer are increasing the potential pool of applicants, and improving the diversity of an organisation's workforce.

Another clear success factor for I Can is the sifting process which happens between people expressing interest and accessing support at the UHB Learning Hub. This process helps ensure that people who go forward to the next stage understand the nature of the job and how the I Can process works, and are genuinely interested in pursuing the opportunity. In turn, this makes better use of staff time at the UHB Learning Hub, and increases trust from within the NHS because of the high calibre of candidates at the end of the process. This is at least partly a result of I Can being a voluntary programme. In contrast, interviewees told us that mandatory programmes or courses can frustrate employers because some participants have no genuine interest in the roles they have to offer, which reduces trust.

Pre-employment training is crucial for the success of I Can. This partly works because the NHS is such a large employer, but it could also be possible in other industries - for example, if several different employers grouped together to fund pre-employment training. Indeed, the SWAP model is to some extent comparable with the UHB Learning Hub, offering pre-employment training with a guaranteed job interview at the end of the process. However, SWAPs tend to be specific to the needs of an employer (or employers) at that moment in time, and sometimes lack the simplification of 'job families' in I Can. They also tend to be temporary or short-term, which can add additional complexity to the employment and skills landscape, and can only be run when enough participants have been brought together to form a cohort. By contrast, I Can promotes an ongoing/consistent pathway to NHS job opportunities. The success of I Can in this regard suggests that stakeholders should explore how to apply this kind of model to other industries. Also, the UHB Learning Hub goes beyond some other examples of pre-employment training by offering personalised one-to-one support alongside training. Evidence from employment support programme evaluations shows that this kind of personalised and relational support is crucial for achieving successful outcomes. Building on this, design of similar programmes should aim to ensure that each participant has a clear point of contact for help and support, whether from the organisation providing training or a different organisation.

ANNEX

EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND CAREERS SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR RESIDENTS OF EAST BIRMINGHAM AND NORTH SOLIHULL

This annex provides a list of some of the employment, skills and careers services available for residents of East Birmingham and North Solihull; the list also includes organisations which are relevant but do not provide services directly to citizens. It is not exhaustive, especially given the fact that residents can potentially access services operating in different parts of Birmingham or Solihull, or services which

operate nationally. Where relevant we have included the specific location of a programme or service; sometimes we have only noted the location within the EBNS area (there may be other locations outside of this area as well). Although we have aimed to ensure the information is accurate, it is possible that some errors remain in the information below.

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
Better Pathways	LIVE programme; Youth Promise Plus	Employment support	Birmingham	People with mental health issues or conditions	
Birmingham City Council	Birmingham Careers Service	Careers advice	Birmingham	Young people (age 16-19 or up to 25 for those with additional needs)	BCC; ESF

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
Birmingham City Council	Employment Access Team	Employment support	Birmingham	Unemployed Birmingham residents and businesses, especially the Council's corporate suppliers and partners	BCC
Birmingham City Council with partners	PURE (Placing vulnerable Urban Residents into Employment)	Employment support	Birmingham	People aged 25+ living in Birmingham with complex needs	ESF
Birmingham City Council with partners	Youth Promise Plus	Employment support	Birmingham	Young people (aged 16-29) who are NEET	BCC; ESF
Change Grow Live	Youth Promise Plus	Employment support	Birmingham	Young people (aged 16-29) who are NEET, especially those facing disadvantage	BCC; ESF
Clarion Housing Group	Clarion Futures	Employment support; skills		Varied (housing association residents and others)	Clarion Housing Group
Colebridge Trust	Various	Employment support	North Solihull (Chelmsley Wood)	Varied	Colebridge Trust; ESF; WMCA
Disability Resource Centre	Positive Pathways	Employment support	Birmingham and Solihull	People with a disability or long-term health condition	BCC; ESF
DWP with partners	Access to Work	Employment support	National	People with a physical or mental health condition or disability	DWP
DWP	Standard Jobcentre support	Employment support	Jobcentres in Chelmsley Wood, Sparkhill, Washwood Heath and Yardley	People receiving Universal Credit or other type of benefit	DWP
DWP with employers and learning providers	Sector-based work academy programme (SWAPs)	Skills	National	People receiving Universal Credit or other type of benefit	DfE / ESFA

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
DWP with partners	Youth Hub - Chelmsley Wood Shopping Centre	Employment support; careers advice	Solihull	Young people (aged 16-29) - mainly via JCP	DWP
DWP with partners	Youth Hub - Library of Birmingham	Employment support; careers advice	Birmingham	Young people (aged 16-29) - mainly via JCP	DWP
East Birmingham Community Forum	Adult Education (inc. ESOL)	Skills	Birmingham	Adults age 19+	WMCA
East Birmingham Community Forum	Employment Support	Employment support	Birmingham	Any age, primarily people not in employment, education or training	
East Birmingham Community Forum	National Careers Service (subcontract)	Careers advice	Birmingham	Adults age 19+	DfE / ESFA
Enterkey Training	Various skills courses	Skills	Birmingham	Adults eligible for skills courses	WMCA and others
FareShare Midlands	Employability / I-CAN (employability in warehousing and logistics)	Employment support; skills	Birmingham	People who are unemployed and living in Birmingham	ESF
FareShare Midlands; Centre for Ageing Better	Elevate	Employment support	WMCA area	Redundancy support for over 50s	Barclays; Centre for Ageing Better; WMCA
The Ladder	Promoting apprenticeships	Skills	Birmingham	Promotes apprenticeships (especially to employers)	
UHB Learning Hub	NHS employment and skills	Skills; employment support	Birmingham / Birmingham and Solihull ICS	Training and support for people looking to work in the NHS	ESF; University Hospitals Birmingham
Maximus	Restart (subcontract)	Employment support	Referrals via JCP	People receiving Universal Credit or other type of benefit	DWP
Norton Hall	Dolphin Women's Centre	Employment support; skills	Birmingham (Washwood Heath)	Women (all ages)	
Pathway Group	Skills courses	Skills	West Midlands		ESF; WMCA; others

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
The Pioneer Group	Compass Support	Employment support	East Birmingham; Birmingham	Varied (housing association residents and others)	The Pioneer Group; ESF
The Prince's Trust	One-to-one support; several specific programmes	Employment support	Birmingham and Solihull; centre in Digbeth, Birmingham	Young people (up to age 30), focus on NEET	Various (currently includes ESF)
The Pump	Arconic Internship Programme	Employment support; skills	East Birmingham	Young people (age 18-25)	Various
Reed in Partnership	Restart (subcontract)	Employment support	Referrals via JCP (Washwood Heath)	People receiving Universal Credit or other type of benefit	DWP
Serco	Adult Skills for Work	Skills	Birmingham	Adults aged 19+	WMCA
Serco	Restart (prime contract)	Employment support	'West Central' area	People receiving Universal Credit or other type of benefit	DWP
Serco	Skills Support for the Workforce	Skills	Greater Birmingham and Solihull	Supports businesses through upskilling employees	DfE / ESFA; ESF
Shaw Trust	Find Your Future	Employment support	WMCA area	People aged 16+ who are out of work	WMCA; ESF
Shaw Trust	Work to Recovery	Employment support	Birmingham and Solihull	Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for people with mental health conditions	Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System
Shaw Trust	Work and Health Programme	Employment support	Contract for Central England	People with disabilities or health conditions	DWP
Shaw Trust	Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES)	Employment support	Contract for Central England	People with disabilities and 'complex barriers to work'	DWP
Shaw Trust / Prospects	National Careers Service	Careers advice	Contract for West Midlands	Careers advice for people aged 13+	DfE / ESFA

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
Shaw Trust / Prospects	Thrive into Work	Employment support	WMCA area	People with health conditions in the WMCA area	DWP; WMCA
Solihull College	FE college	Skills	Woodlands Campus, North Solihull	Learners aged 16+	DfE; WMCA
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Digital Hub	Skills	Solihull	Solihull residents	SMBC
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Employed for Success	Employment support	Solihull	Adults age 30+	SMBC; ESF
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Skills for Success	Careers / employment support / skills	Solihull	Students in Years 11, 12 and 13	SMBC; ESF
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Youth Employment Promise	Employment support	Solihull	Young people (aged 16-29) not in employment, education or training	SMBC; ESF
South and City College Birmingham	FE college	Skills	Bordesley Green Campus, East Birmingham	Learners aged 16+	DfE; WMCA
Specialist Recruitment Services	National Careers Service (subcontract)	Careers advice	West Midlands	Careers advice for people aged 13+	DfE / ESFA
Sport4Life	Variety of specific programmes	Employment support	West Midlands, mainly Birmingham and Sandwell	11-29 year olds across the West Midlands	National Lottery and other funders
Trident Reach	PURE and other general support	Employment support	Midlands	Housing association residents and others	BCC; Trident Group
Various	Apprenticeships	Skills	National	People aged 16+	DfE / ESFA; employers via Apprenticeship Levy
Various	Skills Bootcamps	Skills	National	Adults aged 19+	DfE / ESFA
Various	Supported internships	Skills	National	Young people aged 16-24 with SEND and an education, health and care plan (EHCP)	DfE / ESFA

ORGANISATION	PROGRAMME / SERVICE	CATEGORY	GEOGRAPHY	FOR WHO?	FUNDING (IF KNOWN)
Various	Traineeships	Skills	National	Young people (age 18-24)	DfE / ESFA
Various partner organisations in Birmingham and Solihull	I Can	'Pathway' programme combining careers advice, employment support and skills	Birmingham and Solihull ICS	People looking to get an entry-level NHS job	Various

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