Connecting Communities

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ies Report

Institute for Employment Studies

Connecting Communities

Process Evaluation: Final Report

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Supporting inclusive economic growth in the West Midlands and across the UK

George Bramley, Rosie Gloster, Anne Green, Clare Huxley, Miguel Subosa, Abigail Taylor

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Institute for Employment Studies

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Summary

Connecting Communities was a voluntary employment support programme funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and procured and overseen by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). It was tested across nine geographically defined neighbourhoods (also called 'lots') and ran for three and a half years. This period included the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted on programme delivery, employment opportunities and everyday life more generally. The nine lots were located across the WMCA area: Birchills Leamore; Batchley and Brockhill; Cannock North; Washwood Heath; Shard End; Chemsley Wood; Binley and Willenhall; Camp Hill; and Glascote.

Emphasising intensive, personalised, and context-specific support, the programme sought to: (a) build social networks to foster positive behavioural and attitudinal changes towards work; (b) increase employment; and (c) work with local businesses to bolster the recruitment and progression of disadvantaged individuals. This evaluation identifies the factors that influenced employment and progression outcomes for participants, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the place-based approach to employment support more broadly. The study drew on qualitative data from observational site visits, in-depth interviews, and analysis of management information and claims data. An impact evaluation and assessment of cost-effectiveness will be published separately.

Performance against quantitative targets

Connecting Communities engaged over 4,000 participants, supporting over 3,250 participants with at least three meaningful interventions (meeting 82% of the target). Programme participants across the nine lots represented a diverse group of individuals, including people out of work for two years or more (36%), people out of work between one and two years (14%), people out of work for less than one year (35%), and people in-work and seeking to progress (16%). The population was ethnically diverse – with 42 per cent of participants identifying as belonging to a minority ethnic group. A quarter of participants reported having a health condition or a disability. Participants also possessed different levels of qualification and childcare responsibility.

The programme was successful in assisting unemployed participants, meeting 106 per cent of the target number of job starts. However, job sustainment rate was below targets across all time points (ie 13 weeks, 26 weeks, 52 weeks). It must be noted, however, that since a significant portion of the implementation was during the Covid-19 pandemic, business closures and downsizing, may have affected job sustainment. The impact evaluation will provide insight. The number of outcomes among participants who were in work to either increase their hours or earnings was below target (46% of the target value, supporting 458 people).

Employment outcomes varied across providers. Whilst, overall, 41 per cent of out-of-work participants found work, this proportion ranged between 21 per cent and 59 per cent between providers. This variability in employment and progression outcomes reflects the fact that providers who were more proactive in engaging employers through a range of methods and had prior experience in brokering jobs with employers had better outcomes. There was variation between out-of-work cohorts in their likelihood of finding employment: with 55 per cent of Rapid Progression participants finding work, compared to 30 per cent and 36 per cent of the Hardest to Help and Harder to Help cohorts, respectively.

Regression analysis exploring who found work showed that the likelihood of finding work was significantly higher among the Rapid Progression cohorts than the Hardest to Help group. Other factors related to the likelihood of finding work included not having a health condition and completing an action to identify possible jobs that matched skills. Compared with participants aged 25–34 years, participants aged between 35 and 54 were more likely to achieve a job outcome after controlling for other factors.

Regression analysis focused on 13-week sustainment found that, when controlling for other variables, participants aged between 35 and 54 and those completing actions to identify possible jobs that matched their skills were more likely to remain in work after 13 weeks. This indicates the importance and effectiveness of focusing on a good job match, aligned to skills, motivations, and interests.

Partnership and governance

Given the localised approach to service delivery, local authorities were involved in the commissioning process, implementing market warming sessions and awareness campaigns, sharing information with bidders, and scoring proposals from prospective providers. This localised approach allowed the WMCA and local authorities to include smaller providers, who sought to test innovative methods to engage individuals furthest from the labour market. For instance, one provider partnered with a community interest company (CIC) with strong roots in their respective area. This partnership allowed the provider to leverage the said CIC's familiarity with the target community and their extensive network with local groups and organisations. Moreover, these innovative partnership models allowed providers to reach potential participants in ways beyond the traditional referral source for employment support of Jobcentre Plus.

However, commissioning timescales limited the extent to which prospective providers could engage with targeted communities and co-design interventions with community-level stakeholders prior to the commencement of delivery. In addition, local authorities and service providers needed to balance taking a localised approach and economies of scale. Whilst a localised approach facilitated the delivery of personalised, context-sensitive interventions, some prospective providers were concerned about the financial viability of operating the programme as any contract, regardless of size, has set-up and management costs. The lots varied in size and the smallest lots were most affected by concerns regarding financial viability.

Partnerships worked best when providers invested in relationship-building on an ongoing basis. For instance, some providers joined local partnership structures to maintain their

relationship with local groups. Attendance at food banks, job clubs, and other community events allowed providers to build new relationships and strengthen existing ones. However, new providers who took charge of three lots in the second year of programme delivery, in place of previous contractors, found it more difficult and time-consuming to forge new partnerships.

The onset of the pandemic disrupted partnership working, testing their resilience. Restrictions on face-to-face interaction therefore diminished possibilities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Moreover, since shared facilities like community centres closed, providers could not co-locate activities with their partners. Partnerships were most resilient in lots where providers maintained contact with partners, despite the challenges posed by lockdowns.

Implementation

Physical presence in the community was critical for providers to promote their services to potential participants and to establish partnerships with community stakeholders. Presence at community events and other local gathering areas created networking opportunities, which in turn facilitated the recruitment of participants. The importance of physical presence to programme engagement was apparent during the pandemic when the number of new enrolments declined amongst individuals in the Hardest to Help cohort, for whom face-to-face outreach was the most effective way of engagement.

Providers used various ways to promote the programme, including leaflets, promotional events, Jobcentre Plus referrals, referrals from other organisations, and word of mouth. The pandemic led to increased use of social media. Social media recruits tended to have higher levels of skill, digital literacy and Internet connectivity.

Whilst providers were generally successful in marketing to and engaging with individuals out of work, they encountered more difficulties reaching employed individuals. These difficulties related to providers' generally limited prior experience in providing in-work support and inconsistent contact with individuals who were currently employed. This could be attributed to traditional employment support not giving much attention to in-work progression, resulting in practitioners' limited experience in the area. Structural impediments, such as the prevalence of zero-hour contracts and jobs with little opportunity for progression, also hampered the provision of in-work support.

The modest results could also be attributed to the definition of in-work progression used by Connecting Communities. The programme defined in-work progression as at least a 10% increase in wages. Whilst this is easily measurable, it does not account for lateral career movements that improve future progression prospects. With an expanded definition, in-work progression outcomes might have been more positive.

Providers identified and recorded participants' barriers to employment. The most prominent barriers were the need for employability support, low confidence and motivation for work, and lack of skills or qualifications. Personal circumstances, such as a health condition or disability, childcare responsibilities, financial debt, and access to transport

were also common constraints to work. During the pandemic, limited access to the Internet became an increasingly important barrier for certain populations.

Given participants' varying support needs, individual action plans indicated different forms of support. This individualisation generated trust between provider and participants, which in turn encouraged positive behaviour change and self-efficacy with regards to work. The provision of volunteering opportunities to jobseekers was especially appreciated by participants. Participants reported increased levels of confidence, self-efficacy, and work-related skills following participation in volunteering schemes.

Amidst the pandemic, support moved online. Participants appreciated how the shift towards virtual media allowed for continued support, but most still expressed a preference for face-to-face delivery. According to participants, face-to-face delivery made it easier to establish trust and rapport with their assigned advisor.

Strong employer engagement was important to the success of Connecting Communities. Approaches taken by providers to engage with employers included: (a) leveraging links from other contacts; (b) attending job fairs; (c) building close relationships with local employers; (d) searching online for job vacancies; (e) cold-calling employers; (f) reverse marketing; and (g) working with employment agencies.

Conclusions

Place-based approaches to employment support provision are an effective means to address the spatial complexity and specificity of worklessness and socioeconomic disadvantage. The localised approach allowed WMCA to commission different organisations across lots. Commissioning different organisations allowed them to deliver context-sensitive interventions, minimise risk, and adapt as needed. However, timescales reduced the potential for co-designing the programme with the communities themselves. As such, commissioning processes in future place-based programmes could allow more time for providers to build partnerships and involve community stakeholders.

Difficulties in recruiting staff, sourcing venues for delivery, and establishing community partnerships stalled mobilisation, and therefore, future programmes should allow providers more time to develop capacity and acknowledge the amount of time needed for place-based programmes to become fully operational.

Despite difficulties in mobilising, however, Connecting Communities nonetheless succeeded in engaging a diverse cohort. This is in large part due to the use of different means of promoting the programme, in response to differing behavioural patterns across target groups. The ethos of individualisation was also reflected in support provision, with action plans indicating different forms of support, in accordance with the wide variety of support needs expressed by participants. This ethos was a core strength and could only benefit future place-based employment support programmes.

Continued investment in partnerships was a contributor to programme success. For example, providers in East Birmingham worked collectively across lots. The social capital resulting from continuous partnership-building had proven especially useful amidst the

pandemic, during which strong partnerships allowed providers to solicit resources from partners as caseloads moved online.

More participants identified the need for work experience than implemented this action. This is an improvement area that could be addressed by stronger employer engagement. Place-based employment support programmes might benefit from a programme-wide strategy for sourcing vacancies and placements, jointly developed with local employers. Limited in-work progression was another important challenge that could be addressed, at least to some extent, through employer engagement. Since the prevalence of jobs with little progression opportunity largely contributed to limited career progression, engaging employers to alleviate these structural hindrances would be beneficial.

Regression analysis highlighted groups that were less likely, when other characteristics were controlled for, to be supported into work. This included participants with a health condition or disability. As found with other employment support programmes, participants in this group were less likely to secure a job outcome. For employment services supporting all residents, more consideration could be given to how to overcome and support health barriers to work, whether through accessing wider health provision alongside employment support, or working with employers to broker access to suitable vacancies. While the service was personalised, it might not have been sufficient alone to overcome structural barriers to work among specific groups.

Providers responded flexibly to the pandemic, adopting online means of support during lockdown. However, whilst participants appreciated the continuity of support through online provision, the fact that most expressed their preference for face-to-face delivery suggests that in-person support will continue to be the primary mode of employment support moving forward. The flexibility of the WMCA during the pandemic, as shown by adjustments in target outcomes and modes of payment, contributed to programme success.

The programme illustrates the potential of place-based employment support programmes in reaching and serving populations who are furthest from the labour market. Its localised, personalised, and context-sensitive support should inspire the adoption of a similar ethos in future place-based employment support programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Partnerships, governance, and responsiveness

- Commissioning timescales need to enable local stakeholders and providers to be closely involved in programme co-design, particularly where community engagement and legacy are important.
- The WMCA should consider how to facilitate a minimum level of contribution from Local Authorities to support the delivery of employment support programmes in their area.
- Providers need to prioritise building trust with local community leaders, including residents' groups, local councillors and faith organisations. A trusting relationship with local community leaders eases identification of new partners.
- Providers should strive to be physically present, in a consistent manner, within the community. This facilitates building social capital between providers and local community organisations, and opportune encounters with participants.

- Future programmes should consider how to remunerate the contributions of community partners. The resources of community partners were benefited from unfunded in Connecting Communities.
- Local governance structures should promote knowledge-sharing between providers, including through regular meetings where experiences and practice can be shared both formally and informally, and be delivered consistently over time, including through staff changes.
- Community-level governance structures, such as community forums, should complement local governance structures. Involving community stakeholders in governance not only promotes community buy-in but it enables an understanding of community needs.
- Commissioners should have license to respond to changing local requirements and adapt provision to ensure it meets evolving community needs.

Promotion and marketing

- The contracting process should allocate ample time for providers to recruit staff, locate venues, and build capability.
- Using different promotional methods proved effective. Future programmes should use a combination of marketing collaterals and community events for promotional purposes.
- Whilst social media has allowed the programme to reach a larger array of customers, future programmes should not rely on it exclusively. Engagement and marketing strategies need to be informed by the target groups of participants, and considerations of the places they go (and the times they go there), and the social media platforms they use. Differentiation is key as evidenced by the effectiveness of varied strategies to engage the in-work group and long-term unemployed groups used by providers.

Pre-employment support

- Smaller caseload sizes allow for greater levels of individualised support, and therefore, providers should strive to designate a reasonable number of customers per advisor. However, the data available for this evaluation did not allow for an estimation of an optimum caseload size. The economic impact assessment that ran parallel to this evaluation could potentially give some direction on this issue.
- Community focus, person-centredness and flexible delivery were among the principal strengths of the programme. Future place-based programmes should maintain these elements.
- Employment support should focus on job matching to participants' skills and interests. Where job matching takes place, customers were not only more likely to find a job, they were also more likely to stay longer in their job.
- The offer would have benefited from a stronger focus on work-placement and volunteering. Strengthening employer engagement and adopting a programme-wide approach to strategy development could help bridge this gap.
- Whilst customers appreciated remote support during the pandemic, many still expressed a preference for face-to-face support. This is particularly true for participants who had lower levels of digital skill or less access to digital infrastructure. Therefore, a flexible, hybrid modality of employment support is ideal.

In-work support

- Many providers had limited experience of giving support to customers who were currently employed. Providers should build their advisors' capability to deliver in-work support. This includes understanding where to effectively promote in-work support to potential participants, and the messages that might resonate.
- The programme used a limited definition of in-work progression. Future programmes should consider expanding this definition to include lateral career movements that boost workers' future promotional prospects.
- Discussions about in-work progression should be appropriately timed with the customer's life circumstances. The importance of timing reinforces the need for individualised support.
- Providers should engage and build partnerships with employers so that job opportunities can be designed with a view towards career progression, where possible.

1 Introduction

1.1 Programme background

1.1.1 Place-based employment programmes

Geographical disparities in labour market outcomes, and the entrenchment and complexity of spatial concentrations of worklessness, even at times when the national economy is performing well, have driven increasing interest in localising public service delivery and employment programmes. Proponents of place-based employment programmes argue that they will see better outcomes[1], particularly for people facing multiple disadvantage, if they:

- join up across relevant policy domains;
- align funding and activities to reduce duplication and address gaps in provision;
- are designed and delivered to address locally-specific needs and priorities, based on local knowledge; and
- are co-designed with local stakeholders, service providers and employers, to gain greater local buy-in and enhanced local credibility.

There are challenges facing place-based employment programmes, including issues relating to economics of scale, the availability of local knowledge and capacity, variability in local service provision, and the short-term nature of many policies.

Local partnership working lies at the heart of place-based employment programmes, including previous examples from the UK, such as Employment Zones (Hasluck et al., 2003), Total Place projects (HM Treasury Communities and Local Government, 2010), and the City Strategy initiative (Green & Adam, 2011). All these examples were underpinned by the rationale that, by better understanding local circumstances and barriers to work, it is possible to target resources where, and on what, they are most needed, and to gain traction sooner through local links.

Of relevance to Connecting Communities is the place-based geographical saturation policy model (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, 2018). This involves providing intensive support, both employment-related and otherwise, to residents in a specific neighbourhood. Saturation aims to achieve greater impact than conventional employment interventions by creating a ‘critical mass’ of successful residents to inspire and otherwise influence others in the community through positive spillovers between

[1] For further discussion on localising employment policy, see: Green et al. (2022).

residents, hence creating cultural change (What Works for Local Economic Growth, 2018).

A particularly influential employment intervention of this type is **Jobs Plus**: a place-based employment intervention in the US, which adopted a neighbourhood-based model focused on residents in public housing where there were high levels of worklessness. Jobs Plus provided intensive, co-ordinated, and neighbourhood-based support (across different policy domains) to help residents prepare for, and find, work (Wilson and McCallum, 2018). Evaluation evidence found that where fully implemented, Jobs Plus increased average earnings among residents by 16% relative to a control group and that these gains persisted over a seven-year follow-up period (Bloom et al., 2005). In the West Midlands, a similar initiative **Working Together**, aimed to reduce welfare dependency and increase employment amongst tenants in four areas of high unemployment and deprivation in the Black Country. It encompassed place-based employment services, community support for work and financial incentives (Brown, 2019).

An earlier place-based initiative operating at a somewhat larger geographical scale was the Employment Zones programme in Great Britain which targeted areas with high concentrations of long-term unemployment and combined financial incentives (for both employees and local employers) with career assistance. Evaluation evidence indicated that eligible unemployed individuals living in Employment Zone areas transitioned out of unemployment at a significantly faster rate than unemployed individuals living in similar comparator areas (Hasluck et al., 2003).

1.1.2 History and overview of the Connecting Communities approach

Announced in August 2017, **Connecting Communities was part of a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) initiative of innovative employment schemes** for combined authorities to work in partnership with government to support disadvantaged jobseekers into work. The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) was interested in the role of community, social, and psychological factors underpinning persistent localised concentrations of worklessness. This interest informed the focus of the programme.

Connecting Communities adapted the Jobs Plus model to the specific social and economic context of the West Midlands, and incorporated learning from the Working Together project. It adopted a place-based saturation approach with no restrictions on eligibility for residents within defined neighbourhoods.

The economic rationale for Connecting Communities was based on equity, information, and coordination failures, and the need to build the trust needed for a more effective labour market. The **aims** were to:

- **build social networks that deliver positive changes in attitudes and aspirations towards work** in areas with historic, high levels of worklessness;
- **increase the employment rate** in local areas; and
- **work with businesses to build the recruitment of individuals from the area** into a wider talent management approach offering visible progression pathways.

The programme began in 2018 in **nine geographically defined neighbourhoods** (also known as 'communities' and/ or 'lots') characterised by high levels of worklessness and proportions of residents with no or low qualifications. At the outset, the WMCA decided to:

- include neighbourhoods across a mix of both constituent and non-constituent authorities;
- join up across relevant policy domains;
- include a mix of areas in socio-demographic terms (ie age and household structure, ethnic profile of the population) and functional terms (ie inner city areas, outer estates);
- include lots of different sizes; and
- exclude neighbourhoods where other non-mainstream programmes were active.

Providers bid in a competitive process to deliver services in each of the lots. In summer 2019, three of the initially successful providers withdrew and were replaced by other providers. Table 1-1 shows the key characteristics of the nine lots and the delivery partners at the end of the delivery period. Lot sizes varied from £173,000 to £1,053,000. Providers included national welfare-to-work providers, a national employment and skills provider, a national training provider, an employment support organisation, and a local employment provider.

The programme used a payment by results funding model, with different payments attached to milestones for four participant groups: Hardest to Help (out of work for two years or more), Harder to Reach (out of work for 1-2 years), Rapid Progression (out of work for less than a year) and Employed. The payment amounts were differentiated to recognise the more complex support needs of participants that had been out of work for more than two years, ensuring providers had the resources to provide support. For example, a job outcome for a participant in the Hardest to Help group was paid at £889, and for a participant in the Rapid Progression cohort was £400.

Table 1-1. Overview of key features of Connecting Communities Lots

Description of group	Lot	Lead organisation type	Lot value (£)	Constituent members of the WMCA
Town community with further education (FE) provider: Small-medium lot size, town-community outside metropolitan travel to work area (TTWA), utilise learning infrastructure, below profile on job outcomes.	Birchills Leamore	FE College (new)	463,000	Yes
	Batchley and Brockhill	FE College (new)	173,000	No
	Cannock North	FE College	211,200	Yes
East Birmingham and Solihull urban partnership: Large-medium lot sizes in urban TTWA, established employment support capabilities and wider infrastructure, joint working across the group. Proximity to large scale investment projects. On profile with job outcomes.	Washwood Heath	National welfare-to-work provider	1,053,000	Yes
	Shard End	National employment and skills provider	824,700	Yes
	Chelmsley Wood	Local employment provider (new)	379,000	Yes
Medium sized lot in urban TTWA, established employment support capabilities. Not part of wider partnership.	Binley and Willenhall	National welfare-to-work provider	497,000	Yes
Town location, small lots, developing capability and capacity in employment support	Camp Hill	National training provider	210,000	Yes
	Glascote	Employment support organisation (CIC)	188,900	No

Participation in Connecting Communities was voluntary. The exact nature of the activities and intervention delivered to participants was designed to be flexible and responsive, both over the lifetime of the programme, and to accommodate the needs of individual participants and the needs of the locality where it operated. Broadly, six types of activity were planned at the outset, underpinned by **an emphasis on personalised, relational, and intensive support between a Connecting Communities participant and their advisor, with supplementary support** (eg regarding financial inclusion) **provided by local partners**:

- **Information, advice and guidance and employability support**, including the advisor and participant developing an action plan to try to address the issues identified.
- **Skills development**, including changing participants' mind-sets and behaviour (towards work). The programme focused on the development of employability skills. Participants could be referred to other providers for the development of other skills and qualifications.

- **Partnership-based approach**, involving working closely with organisations to signpost and refer to holistic support.
- **Building networks and social capital**, to increase the size and diversity of the networks of participants, promote engagement in the community, social interaction and cohesion and support, eg through encouraging participation in social and community-based activities which may help foster confidence in meeting new people and gaining new skills, and linking participants to employers in the community.
- **Employer activity**, including provision of taster days, work experience, skills training, and employment opportunities.
- **Job brokerage,** to support participants into work, either through focusing on matching individuals to specific jobs, or to develop relationships with large employers to guarantee interviews for participants referred via Connecting Communities.

1.2 Evaluation objectives

The **final evaluation** of the Connecting Communities programme seeks to:

- measure programme engagement and employment outcomes across different variables, such as participant characteristics and lot;
- identify 'pain points' and good practices in programme implementation and governance (including but not limited to partnership working, promotion and marketing, employer engagement and job brokerage, what pre-employment support helps individuals, and how to promote in-work progression and identify type of in-work progression);
- document lessons learned;
- assess programme outcomes against the indicators outlined in the Theory of Change, namely: behaviour change towards work, self-esteem and locus of control, awareness of labour market opportunities, and employment;
- determine contexts and mechanisms that hinder or facilitate the attainment of desired programme outcomes; and
- provide recommendations to reinforce the effectiveness of future place-based employment support and in-work progression programmes.

An evaluation of the cost effectiveness of the programme and an impact evaluation are being undertaken.

1.3 Overview of methodology

A theory of change (ToC) (illustrated in Figure 6.1) maps out the links cross the programme's activities, target outputs, and planned outcomes and impact. To evaluate the programme, the evaluation uses the following data sources:

- **Audited claims data** held by WMCA. This is used to present the overall performance of the programme, and provide data about the number of participants, and the outcomes achieved.
- Providers were asked to collect **management information** (MI) about participants, including their characteristics, barriers to work, and actions undertaken. This data covers the period since the programme began in June 2018, through to January 2022, and is provided for a sample of participants. WMCA provided data for validated claims submitted through to November 2021, and until October 2021 for Lot 2: Binley & Willenhall, Coventry. This was matched to the MI data to facilitate the completion and accuracy of the employment outcomes data. The data available for some variables of the MI is limited, and the number of participants with data varies between data fields. For this reason, findings are reported with the number of participants included in brackets so that readers can take this into account when interpreting findings, for example (N = 100). The analysis draws on three regression models for: job outcomes, 13 weeks sustainment and in-work progression. Results from logistic regressions have been presented using odds ratios to describe the likelihood of an outcome occurring. For example, an odds ratio of 2 means that participants in one group are twice as likely than those in another group to have a job outcome.
- **Qualitative data** comes from interviews conducted with stakeholders across programme implementation. These interviews were semi-structured and focused on stakeholders' experiences of programme engagement, partnership working, and implementation. Three immersive visits, conducted in Year 1, supplement the data provided by these semi-structured interviews. The interview sample consisted of lead provider representatives, delivery staff and partners, community residents, and employers. In total, 51 participants were interviewed in Year 1, 63 in Year 2, and 40 in Year 3.

Full methodological detail is contained in the Annex.

2 Performance against quantitative targets

2.1 Main findings

- The programme supported over 3,250 participants with at least three meaningful interventions in a six-to-ten-week period (meeting 82% of the target). Other participants were supported with three meaningful interventions over a longer period.
- The programme had most success in relation to job starts for out of work participants. There were 1,123 job starts claimed until December 2021 (106% of the target). Sustainment in work was below target (89% at 13 weeks, 85% at 26 weeks and 66% at 52 weeks). Sixty-eight per cent of participants starting work remained in work 13 weeks later. The proportion of customers with a job outcome sustained at 13 weeks is largely the same between cohorts.
- The programme supported 458 working participants to progress in work (46% of the target). Participants who were out of work at the start of the programme accounted for just under half (44%) of the employed progression claims. Providers explained that participants in some groups wanted to seek work for a few hours as a steppingstone to help them transition gradually back to work, and then progress by increasing the number of hours worked.
- Providers were less able to reach people already in work that might have benefited from or have wanted support to progress.
- Regression analysis exploring who found work showed the likelihood of finding work was significantly higher among the Rapid Progression cohort than the Hardest to Help group. After controlling for other factors in the model, participants whose completed actions had included identifying possible jobs that matched their skills were twice as likely to achieve a job outcome than those who did not complete this action. Participants for whom the programme was being delivered by a small or medium organisation were twice as likely to achieve a job outcome than those whose delivery was provided by an organisation in the East Birmingham & Solihull Urban Partnership. Participants without a health condition or disability, those not claiming benefit, and participants in the mid-age ranges (25–34 and 45–54 years) were also more likely than others to secure a job outcome.
- Regression analysis focused on 13-week sustainment found that, when controlling for other factors, participants aged over 25 and completing actions to identify possible jobs that matched their skills were more likely to remain in work after 13 weeks.
- Logistic regression to investigate the likelihood of a customer progressing in work, found that when controlling for other factors, participants who were not claiming benefits were more likely to progress in work compared with participants who were claiming benefits.

This chapter uses audited claims data and analysis of management information to summarise the programme's performance against targets up until March 2022.

2.2 Programme engagement

Claims data shows that over 4,000 residents were engaged on the programme. Of these, 3,255 were embedded[2] (82% of the target) (Figure 2-1). There was more attrition between registering and significant involvement in the support than anticipated during programme design, with 19 per cent of registrants not embedding compared to an initial estimate of 12 per cent.

The programme targeted groups based on their length of time out of work. The sample of management information found the Hardest to Help group, those out of work for more than two years, made up 36 per cent of participants[3]. The Harder to Reach group, out of work for between one and two years, made up 14% of participants, the Rapid Progression group 35 per cent and Employed Progression 16 per cent (Table 2.1).

Table 2-1 Total number of participants engaged, by cohort

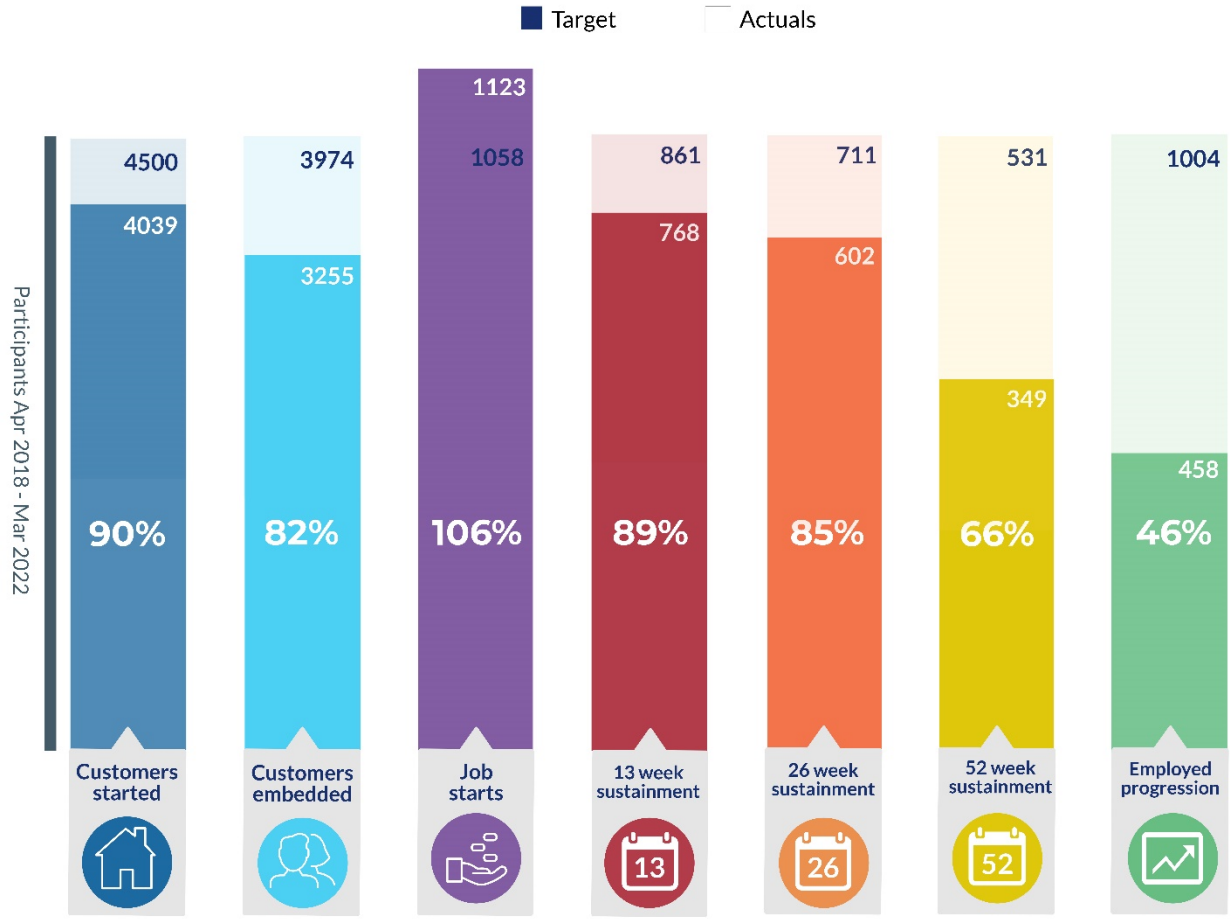
	Participants engaged	Per cent
Harder to Reach (out of work 1-2 years)	557	14
Hardest to Help (out of work more than 2 years)	1418	36
Rapid Progression (out of work less than one year)	1372	35
Employed progression (in work)	619	16
Total	**3966**	**100**

Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021)

[2] For working participants, becoming embedded meant they signed an engagement form and an action plan and had a minimum of one face-to-face intervention. For out of work participants they have signed an engagement form and an action plan, and have had at least three meaningful face-to-face interventions over a 6-10 week period.

[3] The programme targets were reprofiled in autumn 2019, lessening the number of Harder to Reach participants, and increasing the Hardest to Help profile to take some account of engagement up until that point. The proportion of participants in the Rapid Progression group, out of work for less than one year, was higher than profiled (35%, compared with 20%). This reflects the removal of the profile cap that was in place for this group in response to the pandemic in recognition of the large numbers of newly unemployed people. The initial requirement for Rapid Progression participants in adjacent wards to the Connecting Communities areas to demonstrate a link to the ward was also removed at this time, further increasing the number of participants in this group.

Figure 2-1 Progress towards programme targets



Source: IES, 2022, based on IES analysis of WMCA claims data

The programme engaged people from a range of demographic groups across the communities. Figure 2.2 summarises some of the characteristics of programme participants. A little over half of participants were female (53%) and around half were male (47%) (N = 3,957) (Table A-3). Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 75 years of age (N = 3,864). Around one in three participants were aged 16–24 (29%), with one in ten (10%) aged 50 or older (Table A-4). Reflecting the ethnic diversity in the communities, a little under half (42%) of participants identified as being from a minority ethnic background (N = 3,831), with participants from an Asian ethnic background making up around one third (29%) of all participants (Table A-5). The ethnic diversity of participants varied between areas reflecting their varied ethnic profiles, with participants at Cannock North (98%), Glascote (96%), Camp Hill, Nuneaton & Bedworth (89%) and Chelmsley Wood (89%) predominantly from white ethnic backgrounds, whereas those participating in Washwood Heath mostly identifying as from an Asian, Black or other minority ethnic group (83%) (Table A-6).

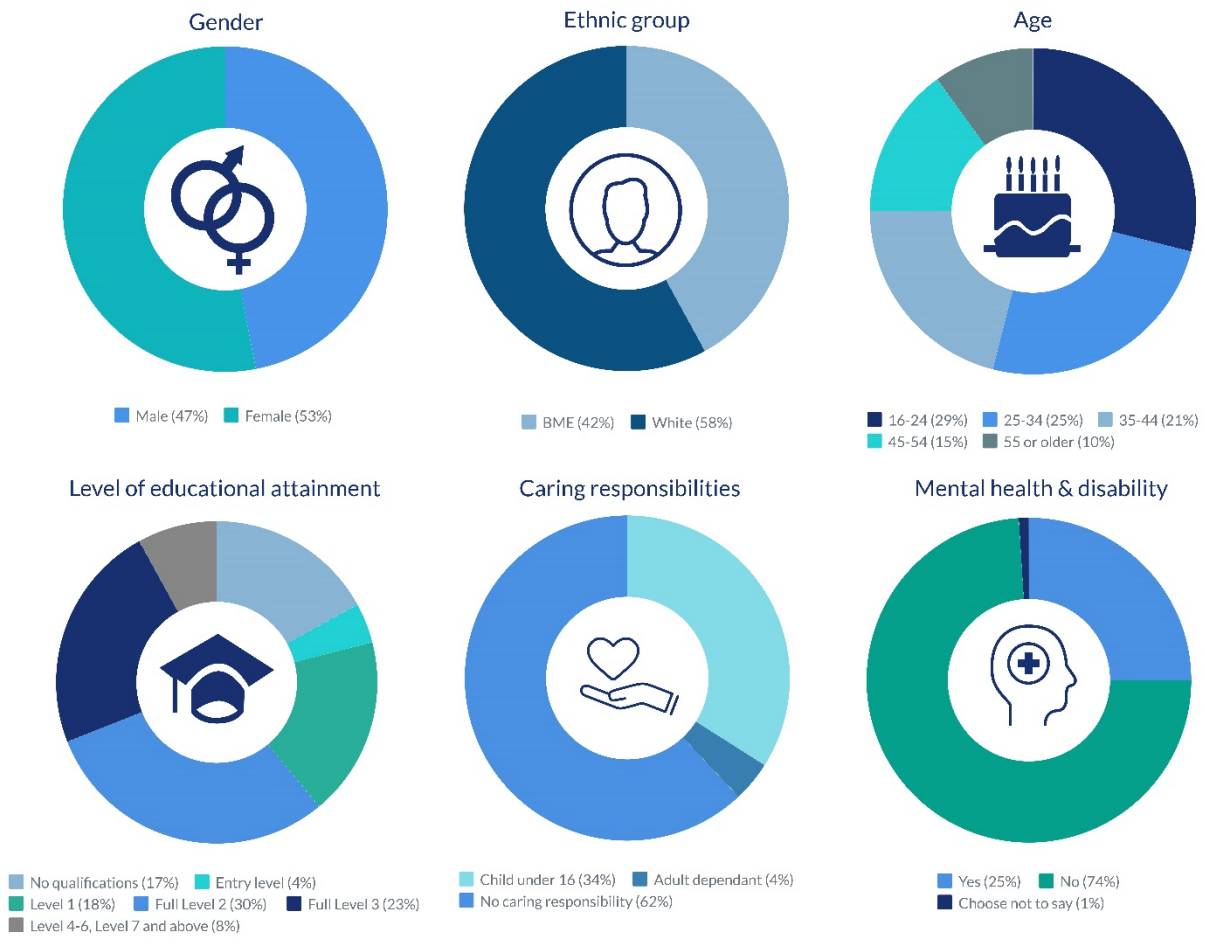
Other characteristics indicate the extent to which specific barriers to work might be identified among participants. With regards to prior education, one third of participants (30%) reported that their highest qualification was at level 2 such as a GCSE at grade A*–

C, a little under a fifth had an entry level or level 1 qualification such as GCSE grade D–G or no qualification (22% and 17% respectively), just over a fifth (23%) had a level 3 qualification such as an level 3 NVQ, and eight per cent were qualified to degree level or higher (N = 3,187) (Table A-7).

One third of participants (34%) were caring for a child under the age of 16 years (N = 2,676) (Table A-8). Around one in five parents of children under 16 (21%) reported that they were the sole carer for their children (N = 1,732) (Table A-9). Five per cent of participants reported that they were caring for an adult dependent (N = 2,663) (Table A-10).

One quarter of participants (25%) reported having a health condition or disability and less than one per cent either chose not to disclose or the information was not collected (N = 3,812) (Table A-11). Among those who specified a health consideration for their work and career development (N=930), around a third reported experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety (34%) or depression (31%), and just under a fifth (18%) had dyslexia or another learning difficulty (Table A-12).

Figure 2.2 Demographic characteristics of programme participants



Source: IES, 2022, based on Management Information

The Employed Progression group were in work at the time of enrolment (N=619) and gave details of their current work. It should be noted that not all providers reported these data, so findings should be treated with caution. Most participants in employment worked less than 16 hours a week (44%). Just 13 per cent worked full-time (35 hours a week or more) (N = 371) (Table A-13). Most participants in the employed progression group (67%) earned less than £199 per week on average (36% earned less than £100 per week, 31% earned £100-199 per week on average) (N = 328) (Table A-14). Most participants in the employed progression group were on a permanent contract (54%), a quarter were on zero hours (26%), and one in ten were on a fixed-term contract or other variable work such as seasonal work (8% and 9% respectively, N = 365) (Table A-15).

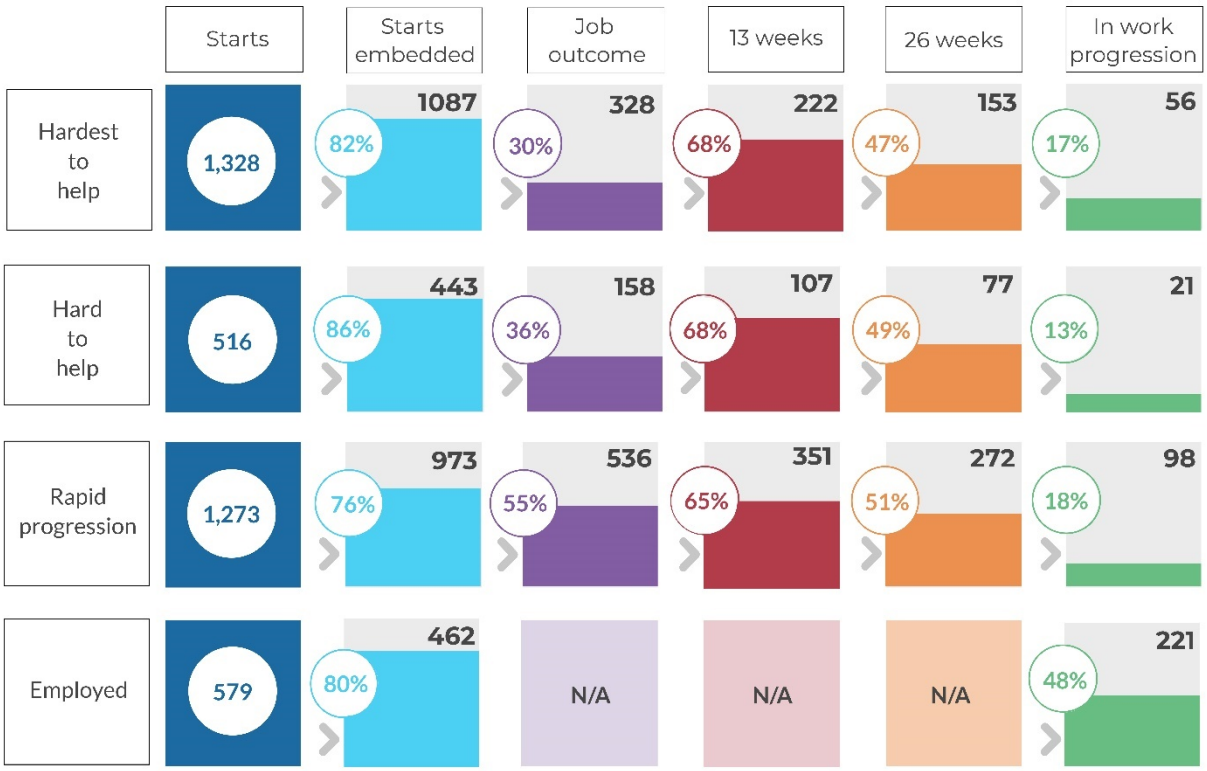
2.3 Work outcomes

It is in relation to securing **outcomes for out of work participants** that the programme has had most success. Claims data shows there were 1,123 **job starts** until March 2022 (106% of the target). However, **job sustainment** was below target on all measures; with 89 per cent of the 13-week sustainment target met (768 participants); 85 per cent of the 26 week sustainment target met (602 participants); and 66 per cent of the 52 week sustainment achieved (349 participants) (Figure 2-1). There are notable variations in job outcomes rates between providers. Using management information, the proportion of embedded out-of-work participants finding work is 41 per cent overall but varied from 59 per cent to 21 per cent between providers (Table A-16). Job sustainment for 13 weeks also varied between providers (Table A-17). Possible explanations for these differences are discussed in Chapter 5.

The likelihood of finding work varies between the three out of work cohorts. Error! Reference source not found. illustrates the number of participants in each cohort achieving the programme outcomes, and the conversion rate at each point, using management information. For example, Rapid Progression participants (56%) are more likely than the Hardest to Help (30%) and Harder to Help (36%) groups to start a job. These differences were anticipated by the programme and are inbuilt into the payment model as they reflect varied labour market attachment, recency of work history and barriers to work. The proportion of customers with a job outcome sustained at 13 weeks is largely the same (between 65% and 68%).

Looking at **outcomes for the in-work group** claimed by providers, 458 working participants were supported to progress in work: 46 per cent of the target (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The proportion of in-work progressions claimed for the embedded in-work group varied between providers, with zero to 55 per cent of participants enrolled in this group achieving a progression in work. Providers that had higher numbers of job outcomes were also stronger at delivering in-work progressions, in part because just under half (44%) of employed progressions claimed, resulted from participants who were out of work at the start of the programme. Providers explained that participants in some groups wanted to seek work with a few hours as a steppingstone to help them transition gradually back to work, and then progress by increasing the number of hours worked.

Figure 2.3 Job outcomes by cohort



Source: IES, 2022, based on IES analysis of Management Information

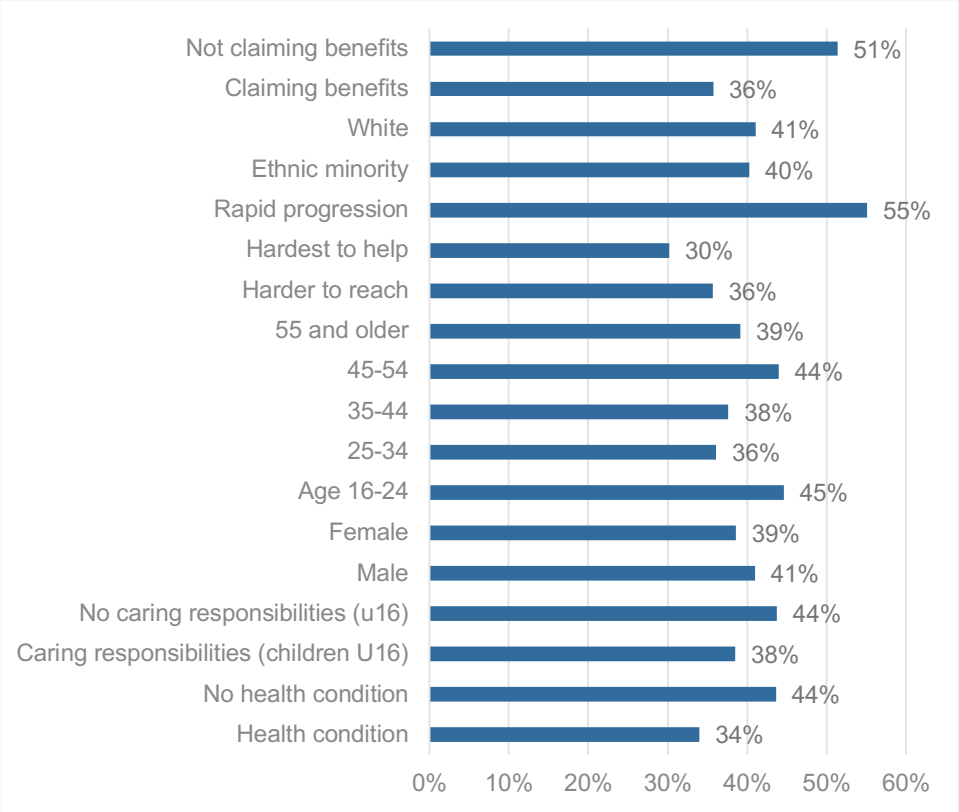
2.3.1 Which groups found work?

Some groups of embedded participants who were out of work when they joined the programme were more likely than others to secure a job outcome (Figure 2-4):

- Participants without a health condition or disability, were more likely than participants with a health condition or disability to gain a job outcome (44% compared to 34%) (Table A-18). This mirrors findings from the Work Programme evaluation (DWP, 2014) and reflects the fact that the national disability employment rate is considerably lower than the overall employment rate (53% in Q2 2021, compared to 81%) (ONS, 2021).
- Participants without caring responsibilities for children under the age of 16, were more likely than participants with these caring responsibilities to find work (44% compared to 38%). The context of the closure of schools during the pandemic is worth noting here (Table A-19).
- Males (44%) were more likely than females (39%) to find work (Table A-20).
- Participants from a white ethnic background (41%), were as likely as those from ethnic minority backgrounds (40%) to find work (Table A-21).
- Participants in receipt of benefits were less likely (36%), than those not claiming benefits (51%) to find work (Table A-22).

- Participants in the youngest age range (16–24 years), and mid-age range (45–54 years), were more likely than other age groups to gain a job outcome (45% and 44% respectively, compared to 36% of participants aged 25–34, 38% of participants aged 35–44, and 39% of those aged 55 or over) (Table A-23).

Figure 2-4 Proportion of participants achieving a job outcome, by characteristics



Source: IES. 2022

To explore the interaction between these demographic characteristics, regression was undertaken. In the MI, there were 3,347 participants who belonged to the Harder to Reach, Hardest to Help and Rapid Progression cohorts. However, participants from Lot 5, Cannock North, were excluded because no data on actions completed was available. Participants whose support was delivered by a provider in the Colleges group were also excluded as there was a large proportion of data missing for this group. In the remaining sample, 2,550 participants had complete data in the relevant fields to be included in the analysis.

Logistic regression analysis was undertaken to investigate which personal characteristics or actions completed were significant influences on customers achieving a job outcome (Table A-24). The model found that, when controlling for other variables, the following factors significantly affected the achievement of a job outcome.

- **Cohort** – Compared with the Hardest to Help cohort, the Rapid Progression group were 1.8 times more likely to have a job outcome after controlling for other factors in the model.

- **Type of provider** - After controlling for other factors in the model, participants for whom the programme was being delivered by a small or medium organisation were two times as likely to achieve a job outcome than those whose delivery was provided by an organisation in the East Birmingham & Solihull Urban Partnership.
- **Health** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants who did not have a health condition were 1.4 times more likely to achieve a job outcome than participants who did have a health condition.
- **Highest qualification** – Compared with participants with no qualifications, after controlling for other factors in the model, participants with qualifications at Levels 1 & 2 were 2.9 times as likely to have a job outcome, participants with a Level 3 qualification were 3.9 times as likely to have a job outcome, and participants with a qualification that was Level 4 or higher were 3.2 times as likely to have a job outcome.
- **Age** – Compared with participants aged 25–34 years, participants aged 35–44 years 1.4 times more likely and those aged 45–54 years were 1.6 times more likely to have a job outcome after controlling for other factors in the model. This could be related to caring responsibilities for children aged under 16, especially in the context of the pandemic with school closures, but due to missing data, caring responsibilities was not controlled for in the regression model.
- **Claiming benefits** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants who were not claiming benefits were 1.3 times more likely to have a job outcome compared with participants who were claiming benefits.
- **Attending coaching sessions** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants who did not attend coaching sessions were 1.6 times more likely to have a job outcome compared with those who accessed this support. It could be that this type of support was offered in a targeted way to those who were less employment ready, whereas those who were closer to employment may have been able to progress straight to searching and applying for roles.
- **Matching skills with suitable jobs** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants whose completed actions included identifying possible jobs that matched their skills were 2.2 times as likely to achieve a job outcome than those who did not complete this action.

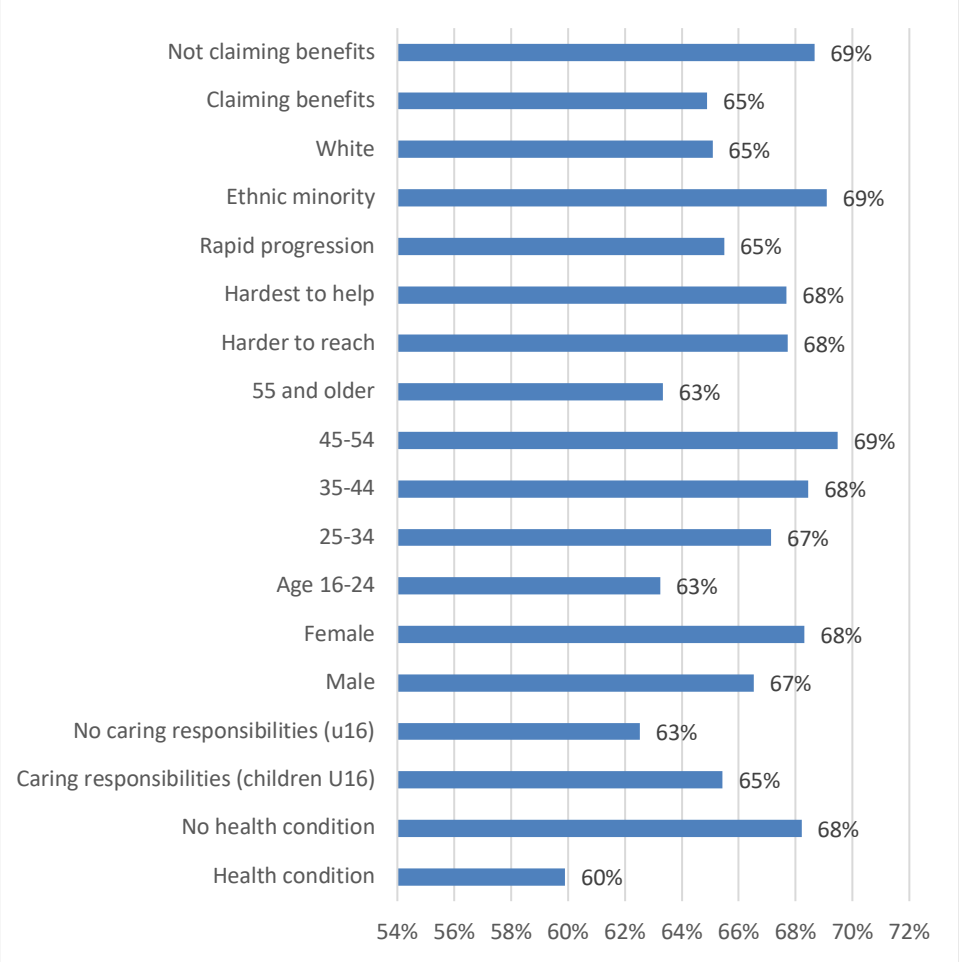
2.3.2 Which groups sustained job outcomes (13 weeks)?

Some groups who found work were more likely than others to sustain work for 13 weeks than others (Figure 2.5):

- Participants without a health condition or disability, were more likely than those with a health condition or disability to sustain work (60% compared to 68%) (Table A-25).
- Participants without caring responsibilities for children under the age of 16, were about as likely as participants with these caring responsibilities to sustain work for 13 weeks (63% compared to 65%) (Table A-26).
- Females (68%) were slightly more likely than males (65%) to sustain work for 13 weeks (Table A-27).

- Participants from a white ethnic background (65%), were less likely than those from ethnic minority backgrounds (69%) to sustain work for 13 weeks (Table A-28).
- Participants in receipt of benefits were less likely (56%), than those not claiming benefits (69%) to sustain work for 13 weeks (Table A-29).
- Participants in the youngest and oldest age ranges (16–24 years, and 55 or over) (both 63%) were less likely than other age groups to sustain work for 13 weeks (Table A-30).

Figure 2.5 Proportion of participants with a job outcome sustaining at 13 weeks, by characteristics



Source: IES. 2022, analysis of management information

In the MI, there were 1,022 participants who belonged to the Harder to Reach, Hardest to Help and Rapid Progression cohorts who had achieved a job outcome. To be consistent with the sample used for job outcomes analysis, participants from Lot 5, Cannock North, where no data on actions completed was available were excluded; and participants whose support was delivered by a provider in the Colleges group were also excluded as there was a large proportion of data missing in this group. In the remaining sample, 823 participants had complete data in the relevant fields to be included in further analysis.

Logistic regression analysis was undertaken to investigate which personal characteristics or actions completed were significant influences on the likelihood of a customer staying in work for 13 weeks once they had achieved a job outcome (Table A-31). The model found that, when controlling for other variables, the following factors significantly affected the likelihood of remaining in employment after 13 weeks.

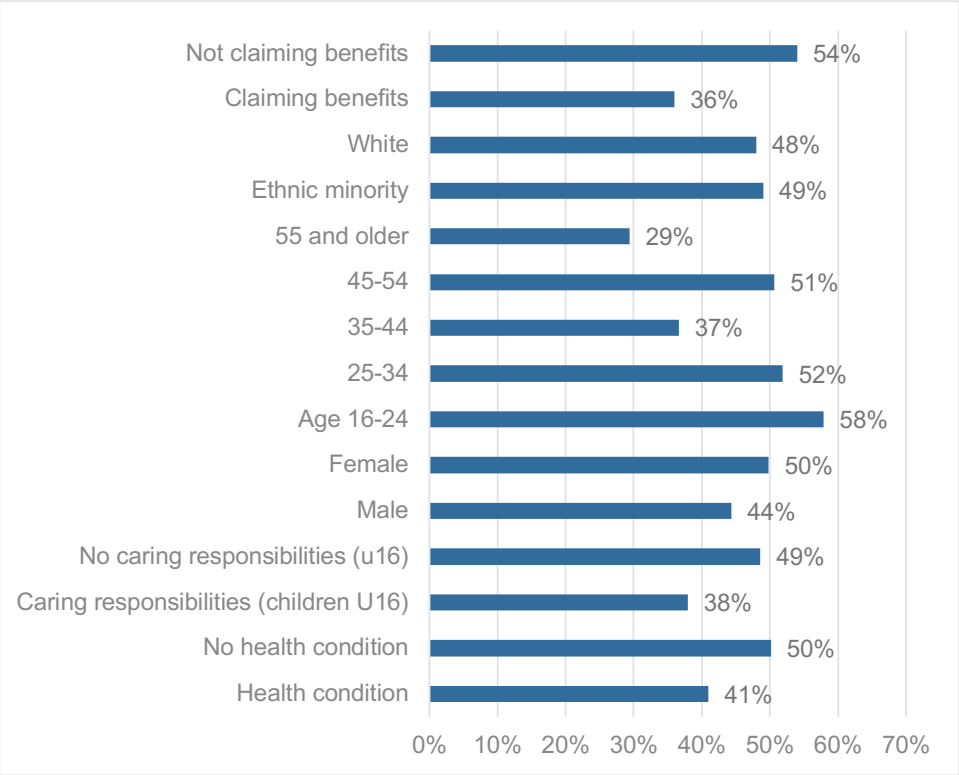
- **Age** – Compared with participants aged 16–24 years, participants aged 35–44 years were 1.8 times more likely, those aged 45–54 years were 2.0 times as likely to have a job outcome after controlling for other factors in the model.
- **Matching skills with suitable jobs** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants whose completed actions had included identifying possible jobs that matched their skills were 2.0 times as likely to still be in work 13 weeks after achieving a job outcome.

2.3.3 Which groups progressed in work?

Looking at participants in the Employed Progression group when they joined the programme, some groups were more likely than others to secure in-work progression, either increasing hours worked or pay (Figure 2.6):

- Participants without a health condition or disability, were more likely than those with a health condition or disability to progress in work (50% compared to 41%) (Table A-33).
- Participants without caring responsibilities for children under the age of 16, were more likely than participants with these caring responsibilities to progress in work (49% compared to 38%) (Table A-34).
- Females (50%) were more likely than males (44%) to progress in work (Table A-35).
- Participants from a white ethnic background (48%), were as likely as those from ethnic minority backgrounds (49%) to progress in work (Table A.36).
- Participants in receipt of benefits were less likely (36%), than those not claiming benefits (54%) to progress in work (Table A-37).
- Participants in the youngest age ranges (16–24 years, and 25–34), and mid-age range (45–54 years), were more likely than other age groups to progress in work (58%, 52% and 51% respectively), compared to 37% of participants aged 35–44, and 29% of those aged 55 or over) (Table A-38).

Figure 2-6 Proportion of participants achieving in-work progression, by characteristics



Source: IES. 2022

In the MI, there were 619 participants who belonged to the employed group. To be consistent with the samples used for job outcomes and 13 weeks sustainment analysis, participants from Lot 5, Cannock North, were excluded where no data on actions completed was available. Participants whose support was delivered by a provider in the Colleges group were also excluded as there was a large proportion of data missing in this group. In the remaining sample, 491 participants had complete data in the relevant fields to be included in further analysis.

Logistic regression analysis was undertaken to investigate whether any personal characteristics or actions were significant influences on the likelihood of a customer progressing in work (Table A-39). The model found that, when controlling for other variables, the following factors significantly affected the likelihood of progressing in work. Please note that these findings should be treated with a degree of caution as the dataset used for analysis was small and it is possible that a similar analysis with a larger, more complete dataset may identify other factors that significantly influence the likelihood of progressing in work.

- **Claiming benefits** – After controlling for other factors in the model, participants who were not claiming benefits were 1.8 times more likely to progress in work compared with participants who were claiming benefits. This may be explained by the complexity of needs among the group claiming benefits, or the interaction with the taper rate within Universal Credit.

3 Partnership and governance

3.1 Main findings

- The timetable for the commissioning of delivery organisations limited the extent to which prospective providers could engage with communities and undertake co-design with residents and potential community partners prior to contract commencement.
- Local authorities had an important role in the commissioning process and helping to establish local partnerships.
- During commissioning, the WMCA and local authorities took calculated risks to include smaller local providers with alternative approaches, and test innovative ways of engaging people furthest from the labour market.
- Connecting Communities tested promising new types of partnership, including linking an experienced active labour market programmes provider with a community interest company (CIC) with strong roots in a local area.
- Partnerships were not static and required continuous investment by lead partners.
- When new providers took over in three lots in Year 2, they found it difficult and time consuming to establish new partnerships
- The Covid-19 pandemic tested the resilience of partnership working. Providers had co-located activities and interventions with local partners. This approach not only facilitated community stakeholders' buy-in, but it also allowed lots to alleviate financial and material constraints through resource-sharing. This capacity was reduced during the pandemic.

3.2 Commissioning and contract management

WMCA designed the programme for the West Midlands in response to the piloting of the devolution of DWP funds in 2017. **Significant resource was required and deployed in a very short timescale** during the commissioning to communicate the authority's intention to partners and potential providers that it wished to do something innovative. Seventy-four organisations attended a market warming event in January 2018, including further education colleges, training providers, and human resources (HR) specialists, as well as specialist providers of active labour market services operating at the regional and national level as potential contractors. New potential providers were actively welcomed where they could demonstrate transferable expertise from working with the target groups. In total, 56 proposals were received from 31 organisations, with 15 organisations applying for multiple lots. Two-thirds (20) of these organisations had strong regional connections in that either they originated or were headquartered in the region or had strong local connections (eg. housing associations with premises in the areas).

Reflecting the **localised delivery of services to meet the needs of specific communities, local authorities were involved in the commissioning process**. This involvement included but was not limited to: market warming sessions and raising awareness among potential providers, including new entrants and community-based groups; providing information to potential bidders; and scoring proposals.

There were **trade-offs** between having smaller coherent geographies with concentrated needs and place identity – which were conducive to delivering a saturation model – and economies of scale that potential bidders considered commercially viable. One concern raised during the commissioning stage was the funding for delivery. The lots varied in size because they focused on different sized geographic communities, which resulted in distinct contract values. The smallest lots presented most concerns about financial viability and could only fund one or two employment coaches.

The **commissioning process and payment model allowed WMCA to take calculated risks**. They provided WMCA with the leeway to include smaller local providers with alternative approaches, which lent themselves to delivering locally adapted solutions and innovative measures to engage people furthest from the labour market. For instance, one lot was led by a sports club, which was a new entrant to employment programmes but had extensive experience working with the local community through outreach activities.

The **localised format of Connecting Communities raised expectations of co-designed approaches with community organisations.** However, the commissioning timetable could not realistically accommodate this approach. The commissioning timescale could have been longer to facilitate the consultation of communities about their needs and how these might be best met, as well as to involve other organisations. Several stakeholders and providers felt that the short timescale to move from commissioning to delivery limited the opportunity for co-design which would have contributed to future sustainability. One local authority would have preferred a ‘Whole Place’ approach if time had allowed covering housing and small business support.

In spring/summer 2019, **three original providers withdrew from their contracts,** and the lots were reissued. With new providers under contract by autumn 2019, the programme had a period of relatively settled implementation. However, in March 2020, delivery was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions applied by the UK government and these new providers had less mature partnerships at this stage.

In response to the pandemic, WMCA adapted the payment model by paying providers an amount based on the average claim size for the period spanning November 2019 to January 2021. However, if monthly activity and the resulting claim was higher than this amount, the provider was paid on this basis instead. This change applied from April 2020 until the end of July 2020. Some organisations were paid the baseline amount throughout, whereas other providers were paid based on a combination of the two approaches. Providers reported this flexibility helped in keeping them afloat, meant they did not have to furlough staff, and could maintain a service to participants.

3.3 Partnership working

In Year 1, local authorities were a key partner for some providers in terms of practical support, information, and brokering access to other partners and participants. However, the degree of support that local authorities could provide varied depending on other existing initiatives and programmes in the locality. In addition, since local authorities did not have statutory duty, other priorities had a greater call on limited resources. Examples of support included providing venues, publicity, brokering meetings with potential partners, creating networking opportunities, and using available information on potential participants to help other providers contact potential participants. Some providers reported that this type of support was not available in their area, whereas others reported positively on the support and advice they received from the local authority responsible for their lot, indicating variability.

Connecting Communities **supported testing new and promising types of partnership**, including linking an experienced provider of active labour market programmes managing several employment initiatives with a Community Interest Company (CIC) with strong roots in their area. This CIC brought good local knowledge of the area, of the needs and barriers facing residents, and of community assets, including potential organisations and groups to partner with. It was also responsible for recruiting and supporting participants. Complementarily, the experienced provider supported the CIC with administrative support, monitoring, knowledge, and support with engaging employers.

Partnerships were **not static and required continuous investment** by lead partners (Box 3.1). During the second and third years, providers continued to develop their networks of partners to support implementation. Some providers joined **local partnership structures**, attending regular meetings, and others sought to create these where they did not exist before. Existing potential local partners were more likely to engage when they perceived the lead partner was **orientated towards community development**.

Box 3.1. Continuous investment in partnership development

During the programme, all lead partners continued to identify and engage new partners and develop collaborations with organisations that provided complementary services. This was necessary because partnerships evolved where funding for partners was project-based or time-limited. The configuration of local partnerships depended on the lead provider's skills, expertise, and resources, including other contracts they held. Providers that did not hold contracts related to the Adult Education Budget (AEB), for example, linked up with other organisations that did.

The arrival of new organisations in a lot created opportunities to partner, which in turn allowed for wider support for participants. One new project that emerged from these partnerships provided a two-way source of referrals for residents in financial distress. For example, individuals who were not in the position to explore employment opportunities due to financial hardship were referred to Connecting Communities when they felt ready and had a plan in place to manage their money. Reciprocally, the lead provider referred participants for support to develop money management skills, which would in turn facilitate their transition into employment.

Lead providers whose experience was seen as being predominantly related to welfare-to-work were initially considered by some local community-based partners as **too business-like in approach and overly focused on job outcomes**. These perceptions changed with the adoption of an overt holistic approach to working with individuals – central to Connecting Communities – which contributed to gaining the trust of community organisations.

Conscious effort to build and strengthen relationships with existing and new stakeholders included, for example: having a presence at food banks, hosting job clubs, coffee mornings, and jointly organising community events and activities. These activities served as avenues for networking, which helped generate referrals and facilitated the flow of information from providers to jobseekers.

Early in the programme, some providers reported limited engagement with their local Jobcentre and few referrals because lots: (a) were in peripheral urban areas, and Jobcentre offices are mostly located in town centres; (b) covered a wider geography; and (c) did have not have resource to identify eligible individuals with a connection to the area. Because of the tightly defined geography, having a presence in Jobcentre offices was not a viable option since it might have the unintended consequence of raising expectations, which could not be met for individuals who lacked a connection with a specific ward.

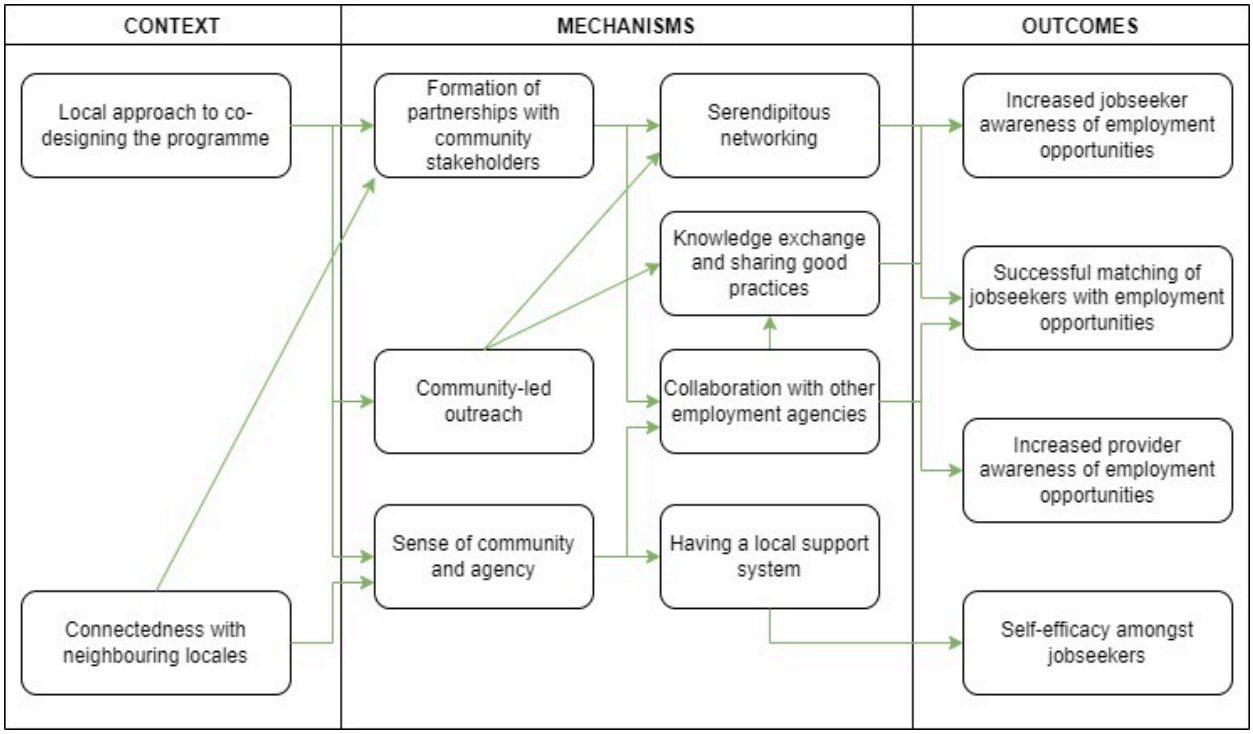
There were examples of **unintended consequences for partnership working where the delivery partner had targets for other programmes.** This could lead to customer referrals to these programmes being prioritised, instead of exploring alternative provision within the partnership. There were examples of increasing one-way referral traffic to the lead partner, and a lack of reciprocity, with few referrals for participants outside of the lead providers' own provision.

Factors that affected **trust** required for effective partnerships included:

- **Reconfiguration of partnerships** in Year 2 across three lots, because of new lead partners taking over and needing to rebuild trust**.** New lead partners found **it difficult to step into the partnership arrangements of previous contractors** and had to restart the process of building trust and developing new collaborations. The one exception was where the new lead partner was part of the original collaboration and had pre-existing strong local connections.
- Improved **stability and continuity in staffing** during Year 2. This enabled areas previously experimenting with staffing models, or that had staff turnover earlier in the contract, to increase their community visibility.
- Working with **local people held in high regard,** such as faith leaders or councillors who **helped create linkages and spaces for partners to come together**, particularly (but not exclusively) where the lead partner was new to the area.
- Some lots were successful in **developing partnerships with local employers to create opportunities** (eg. Binley and Willenhall, Camp Hill, Chelmsley Wood). These opportunities included training offers to prepare individuals to work in specific sectors, which were made possible through partnerships with training providers.

Many **important relationships with local groups** were established over the first two years. In those lots that kept the same provider, a good network of partners had been built up, including: leisure centres; community centres; libraries; churches; food banks; youth clubs; health centres and GP surgeries; colleges; housing associations; and other organisations delivering services to the immediate communities. It must also be noted that partnerships also raised providers' awareness of employment opportunities in the local area – for example, through employers alerting providers to job vacancies as soon as they became available. Figure 3.1 summarises how local partnerships generated positive outcomes for participants.

Figure 3-1. How local partnership generated positive outcomes for participants



Source: IES, 2022

3.4 Governance

Connecting Communities was underpinned by comprehensive governance arrangements at different levels. At national level, responsible officials from DWP **visited sites** during the programme to develop a deeper understanding of the projects. Governance **arrangements at the regional level** included the programme being signed off by WMCA Board and reporting to the Employment and Skills Board that met twice a year. At local level, **the programme manager organised monthly performance reviews** with project managers, although these did not happen with the same frequency during a change of project manager. These meetings were also attended by the relevant local authority representative – though the level of engagement varied between authorities – and this partly depended on the commitments of the officials concerned.

The **governance arrangements and supporting reporting structures** put in place by WMCA reflected the need to **support and capture learning from the programme**. Providers valued **quarterly round table meetings** to provide an opportunity for networking, sharing learning, and peer support, as well as report on programme performance. In addition to this, there were workshops and forums organised by WMCA. Forums provided advisors an opportunity to discuss strategies and best practices. There were also compliance forums where compliance officers met with WMCA compliance officers. These meetings created a form of peer governance amongst providers. However, it must be noted that, as discussed later, these governance and reporting processes became less regular for a period.

In addition to internal governance arrangements, providers developed **innovative approaches to involving community partners in project governance**. Providers referred to both internal and community facing governance arrangements for their projects. Internal governance arrangements varied by provider, but generally aligned with each provider's organisational structure. Community-facing governance arrangements included community connector groups, steering groups, and membership of community forums that brought together different groups within an area. For example, one provider used community connector groups, which included members of the community as a critical friend. They described this arrangement:

> *'[Community connector groups] are basically our "critical friend" that are looking at the provision we're providing, what's working well, what isn't working well, the feedback on the streets about it, so we've really used that as a springboard, a sounding board, to make sure that we're getting the delivery right.'*

Other arrangements included setting up a **Community Steering Group**, which included residents, representatives from local churches, and schools. An alternative approach adopted by another provider was a **focus group** with residents to take on board their ideas and to get feedback.

3.5 Effect of the pandemic: partnership and governance

The pandemic affected partnership and governance mechanisms. The final set of consultations with providers identified the following **impacts of the pandemic on governance and partnership working**:

- **Reduced opportunity for collaboration and sharing lessons between lot providers** as the WMCA team were unable to host roundtables, and online meetings tended to focus on specific issues**.**
- **Providers were unable to co-locate activities with partners**. Shared facilities such as libraries or community centres were closed or had restricted access to meet social distancing requirements. These changes removed the providers' ability to have a joint presence at in-person events, which had been important sources of cross-referral and opportunities for staff to engage residents. Partners with their own premises in

neighbourhoods were better positioned to restart in-person support once restrictions were eased because they managed risk assessment processes and measures; co-locating services could be deprioritised for access by partners.

Devolution of the **AEB created new opportunities to work with local authorities**. For example, in one lot, the local authority worked with the local AEB contract-holder, who provided participants with laptops and data, to enable access to support and training at the height of the pandemic. In some cases where the AEB was not devolved, the opportunity for collaboration in this respect was more limited.

Some lots reported that **partnership working continued to function well during the pandemic** since the lead partner managed to stay in contact with other partners and **maintained a close relationship** with key individuals**.** However, concerns around health and safety prevented the re-establishment of some activities, such as a job club within a local community centre.

4 Implementation

4.1 Main findings

- Physical presence in communities helped providers to promote their services to target populations and build partnerships with community stakeholders.
- Different demographic groups heard about Connecting Communities in different ways. For instance, 40 per cent of the Hardest to Help group heard about the programme through social media or an outreach event, compared to around 25 per cent of participants in other groups.
- The Covid-19 pandemic induced a shift in the way Connecting Communities was promoted, with social media having a larger role. Participants recruited through social media tended to have a higher level of skill, digital literacy, and internet connectivity.
- The content of action plans indicated different forms of support required by participants, and illustrates the individualised approach taken by the programme.
- Intensive, individualised support – where the pace and nature of support was co-determined by advisor and participant – generated trust, which in turn yielded positive behaviour change towards employment and greater self-efficacy with finding work.
- Where advisors had smaller caseloads, they reported finding it easier to provide personalised support to participants.
- Volunteering opportunities helped certain participants develop their confidence, increase their sense of self-efficacy, and build work-relevant skills, but overall, there were not as many volunteering opportunities accessed as need identified. Volunteering opportunities were limited by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Changing advisors and irregular contact from some providers frustrated some participants, which resulted in their disengagement from the programme.
- The shift to online delivery due to pandemic-induced lockdowns allowed for continued provision, which participants appreciated. However, participants expressed a preference for face-to-face delivery, describing how this facilitated building trust and rapport with an advisor.
- Different providers adopted diverse approaches to employer engagement, namely: (a) leveraging links from other contacts; (b) job fairs; (c) building relationships with local employers; (d) through advisors searching online for vacancies; (e) cold-calling employers; (f) reverse marketing; and (g) working with agencies.
- Providers found it easier to provide employment support for those out of work than people in work. They lacked experience in providing in-work support and described difficulties in keeping in contact with individuals who were currently employed. There were also structural impediments to in-work support, such as the prevalence of zero-hour contracts and jobs with few opportunities for progression.

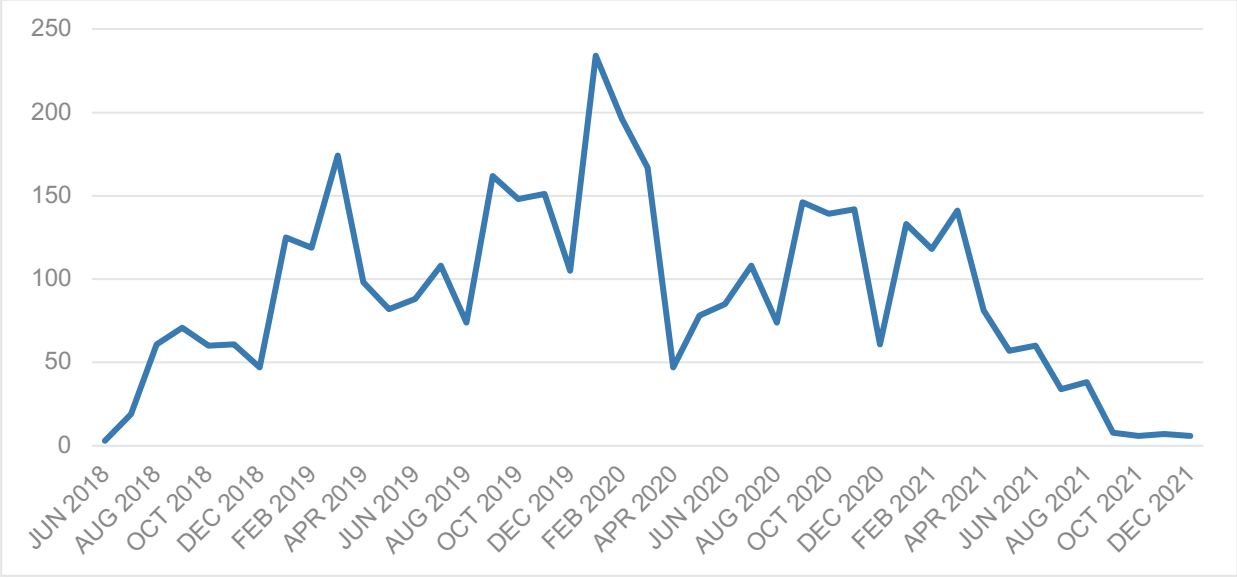
4.2 Promotion and marketing

4.2.1 Programme enrolment

Providers engaged with over 4,000 residents, of whom 3,255 became embedded onto the programme. In 2019, between 75 to 173 participants registered with the programme each month, and this increased to between 168 and 263 participants per month in early 2020, as implementation commenced. However, the nationwide lockdown implemented from 23rd March 2020 caused disruption to enrolment and in April 2020 enrolments fell to 46. From that point, monthly enrolment numbers increased, with the number of monthly enrolments over autumn 2020 at similar levels to those observed in 2019 (around 70 to 150 per month). Enrolments began to tail off from summer 2021 as providers began to conclude their delivery in settings where participation targets were already fulfilled. Two in every five participants in the MI dataset (40%) were enrolled after March 2020 in the context of the pandemic (N = 3,922; see Figure 4-1).

Half of participants (50%) were engaged through two sites: Shard End, Birmingham; and Washwood Heath, Birmingham (N = 3,966), reflecting their contract sizes (Table A-40).

Figure 4-1. Monthly enrolment between January 2019 and December 2021 (count)



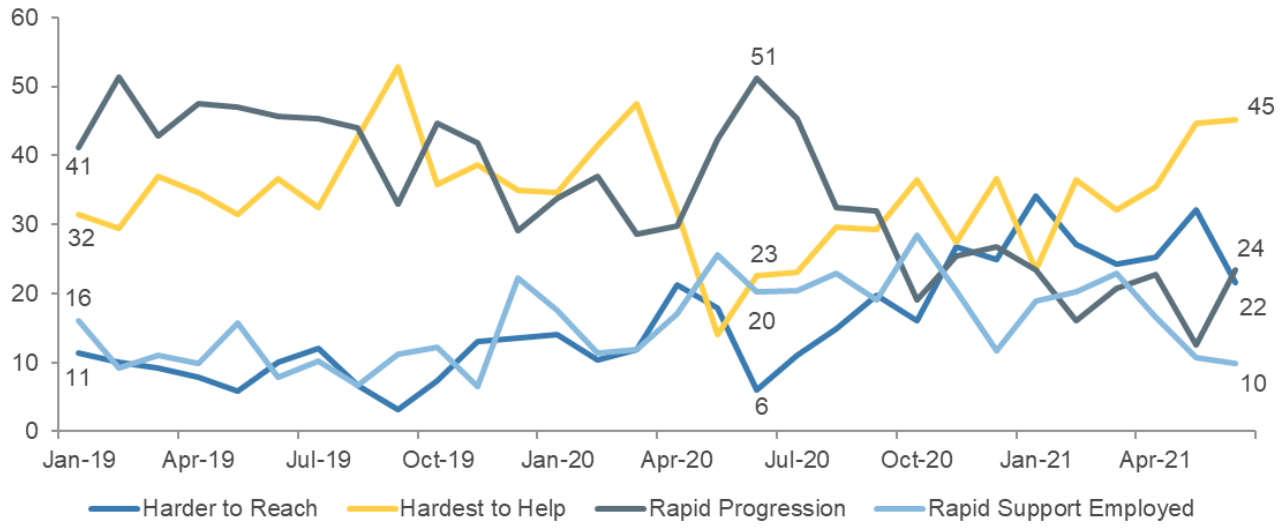
Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021) (N = 3,922)

After the lockdown in March 2020, there was a large fluctuation in enrolments for two of the cohorts. Between March and May 2020, the proportion of enrolments from the Hardest to Help group fell from 48 per cent to 14 per cent, and the proportion of enrolments for the Rapid Progression group increased from 29 per cent in March 2020 to 51 per cent in June 2020 (Figure 4-2). This change was by design, as WMCA removed the profile cap for engaging with Rapid Progression groups to reflect changing labour market circumstances and people losing work because of the pandemic. It also reflects a

decline in face-to-face outreach during the lockdown, which was most effective for engaging the Hardest to Help group.

There was variety in engagement by cohort between lots. Over half of participants in Binley and Willenhall (56%) were in the Rapid Progression cohort, compared with 26 to 46 per cent of participants in other lots. Just over two-fifths of participants at Camp Hill (40%), Washwood Heath (39%), and Chelmsley Wood (39%) were from the **Hardest to Help** cohort, compared with 24 to 36 per cent of participants at the other settings. A fifth of participants at Shard End (20%) were in the **Employed Progression** cohort, compared with 8 to 18 per cent of participants at other settings (Table A-41).

Figure 4-2. Cohort, by month of enrolment (percentage)



Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-June 2021 (Q1 2019-Q2 2021) (N = 3,507)

4.2.2 Promotion activities

At the outset, providers emphasised the importance of building a physical presence in the community, having 'feet on the ground'. As one provider expressed: 'The pilot was about being visual in the community, and very much part of the community to reach out.' Along with supporting partnership working, a physical presence was central to raising profile amongst residents.

Outreach activity to support promotion of the programme involved establishing networks of partners, including community centres, leisure centres, community cafes, libraries, schools, residents' groups, foodbanks, and faith-based organisations. Some providers used co-location and/ or having a regular physical presence alongside partner organisations. Sharing spaces facilitated opportune encounters with potential participants, whilst also enabling participants to have exposure to other services available. Delivery providers viewed conducting recruitment in participants' local environment as key to making them 'relatable'. Almost universally, they considered building meaningful relationships with participants was easier in person, especially with people furthest from

the labour market. Providers supplemented outreach activity with local flyers setting out the support that they offered.

This approach is reflected in the two most common ways participants heard about the programme: through leaflets or an event, or via another organisation such as a food bank (37% and 27%, respectively). Other ways participants heard about the programmes were through their local Jobcentre Plus (13%), their friends and family (16%), or other organisations (8%; N = 3,676; see Table 4-1).

Table 4-1. How participants heard about Connecting Communities

	Participants	Per cent
Leaflets/ Event	1629	37
Jobcentre Plus	565	13
Friends/Family	699	16
Other Organisation	370	8
Other	1203	27
Total participants specifying how they heard about the programme	3,676	

Note: Multiple options could be recorded per customer so percentages in the table may add up to more than 100 per cent.
Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021)

There was variation by cohort as to how participants heard about Connecting Communities (N = 3,821). Four in ten participants in the Hardest to Help group (41%) heard about the programme through another way, such as social media or encountering a drop-in/ outreach setting, compared with around one in four participants in other groups (23–27%), indicating the success of the community-based, focused outreach approach at reaching people most distant from the labour market (Table A-42).

A key issue facing providers and advisors with little to no experience of working with people in-work was how to access them. One provider hoped to get referrals from Jobcentre Plus of Universal Credit claimants working part-time, although few participants came via this route (Table A-42). Providers who were more active in helping people in work, found that outreach in supermarkets (where those in employment might be more likely to visit in evenings and weekends), through community providers, and by word of mouth were effective engagement routes. These routes were considered more effective than approaching employers, which might be considered another possible route.

Providers had different levels of success with engagement methods (N = 3,822). Over half of participants at Camp Hill and Cannock North heard about Connecting Communities through Jobcentre Plus (57% and 59% respectively), compared with less than a third of those in other lots (0–33%), reflecting the varied extent to which providers were able to partner with their local Jobcentre offices (Table A-43).

4.2.3 Impact of Covid-19 on programme engagement

Interviews revealed how the pandemic impacted programme engagement, leading to **changes in the type of participants recruited and the way they were recruited.**

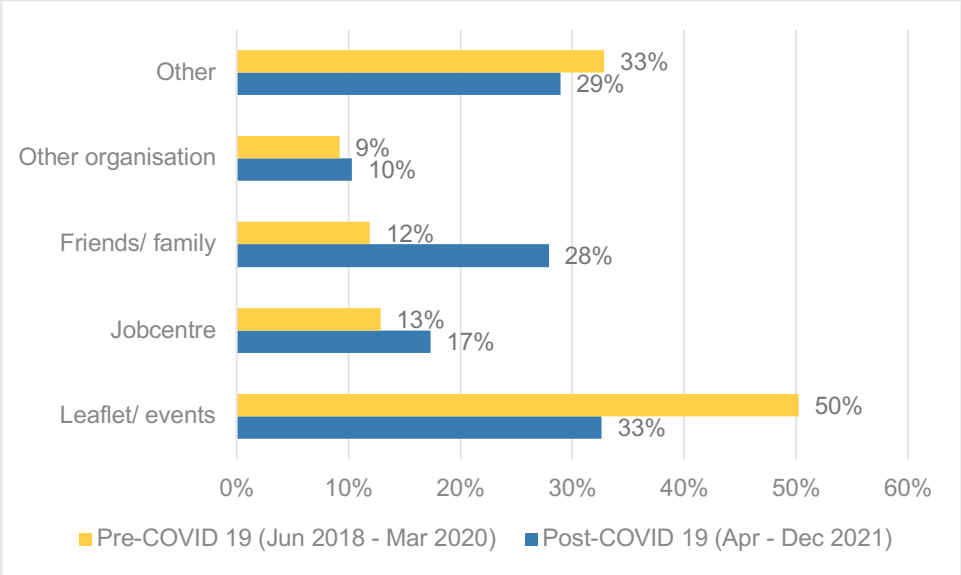
Prior to the onset of the pandemic, providers engaged a diverse range of organisations to refer participants to the programme, including community organisations, food banks, training providers, and health organisations. Having a presence at foodbanks, hosting job clubs, coffee mornings and jointly organising community events and activities with other organisations in the community were important in creating **networking opportunities** to recruit new participants. These activities have increased the flow of information from providers and created referrals.

As services moved online and many community centres closed for in-person activities, **due to the Covid-19 pandemic, opportunities to recruit participants through unplanned interactions, or through joint presence at in-person events, diminished**. Instead, following the start of the pandemic, participants more commonly found out about the programme via **Jobcentre or social media**. **Participants recruited via social media** tended to have **higher skill levels** (including digital skills), more **recent work experience,** and/ or more **reliable access to the Internet**.

Comparing how participants heard about the programme, before and after March 2020 when the pandemic started, identifies some interesting differences between participants' pathways to the programme. The proportion of participants reporting that they heard about the programme from friends and family increased from 12 per cent of participants before March 2020 to 28 per cent of participants enrolling after this point. Referrals from trusted sources who knew the programme played an increasingly important role over time. In contrast, there was a fall in participants hearing about the programme via leaflets or an event (50% compared with 33%), as illustrated in Figure 4-3. Providers adapted physical engagement activities in line with restrictions where they could. Whilst providers returned to physical settings at different points in time, consideration was also given to community recruitment in other formats, such as outdoor walking groups, run by one provider.

Providers felt that social media became an important method for recruitment during the pandemic, especially as recruitment methods, such as referrals from other organisations, were complicated or prohibited by social distancing requirements. For example, one provider hired an administrator with a digital marketing background to support a Facebook presence and engage with participants in other social media sites. One provider reported success in targeted social media postings developed during the pandemic that aimed to attract furloughed workers who might be considering a job change (N = 3,773). Using social media was not without risk, however. Social media engagement meant that providers were reaching participants beyond the postcodes in which they operated. As such, some individuals expressing interest in receiving support did not meet the residence-based eligibility criteria.

Figure 4-3. How participants heard about Connecting Communities before and after the initial Covid-19 lockdown (percentages)



Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021) (Jun 2018-March 2020: N = 2,231, Apr 2020-December 2021: N = 1,542)

4.2.4 Barriers identified at enrolment

The following section provides an overview of the perceived barriers to work that participants identified and discussed with an employment advisor. Information on perceived barriers was provided for 3,882 participants. Most participants identified employability support as an issue (91%), with confidence and motivation for work (53%) and a lack of qualifications or skills (41%) being the next most identified. Approximately a third of participants identified a lack of work experience (36%) or debt (30%) as barriers to accessing work or increased pay at work. It is also notable how speaking English as a second language (ESOL) was identified as a barrier for 14 per cent of participants (see

Table 4-2. Most identified perceived barriers

).

Table 4-2. Most identified perceived barriers

	Participants	Per cent
Employability support	3548	91
Confidence and motivation for work	2070	53
Lack of qualifications / skills	1597	41
Lack of work experience	1398	36
Debt	1175	30
Health condition / disability	749	19
Lack of suitable local jobs	568	15
Lack of English language skills / ESOL need	555	14
Availability / cost of childcare	483	12
Availability / cost of transport	369	10
Total participants with identified barriers	3,882	

Note: Multiple options could be recorded per customer so percentages in the table may add up to more than 100 per cent.
Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019- December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021)

Whilst each of the cohorts includes the same issues in their top six barriers, focusing on the top three demonstrates some variation in the order of barriers and the extent to which it is identified as a barrier. Lack of qualifications or skills and lack of work experience and lack of confidence and motivation were more likely to be identified as a barrier for the Hardest to Help group (58%, 73%, and 59%, respectively), and around a third of people in this cohort (32%) identified ESOL needs as a barrier to work. Support with debt was most likely to be identified among the Rapid Support Employed group (37%; Table A-44).

Some issues were more commonly reported in certain lots. These differences are likely to reflect the content of conversations that advisors were having with participants as well as local need. For example, two in five, or 42 per cent of participants in Glascote, Tamworth cited the availability and cost of transport as a barrier. In Camp Hill, participants were more likely to report lack of qualifications and skills (75%), lack of suitable local jobs (58%), or lack of flexible working options (20%) compared to those in other lots. Participants in Washwood Heath were the most likely to identify lack of English skills or ESOL needs as a barrier (36%); most participants (92%) in this area also identified debt as a barrier. The availability or cost of childcare was more likely to be reported as a barrier by those in the Shard End lot (38%) compared to other lots.

Interviews with participants also illustrated a diverse range of support needs. These needs primarily related to low skills and poor qualification levels, but issues concerning physical and mental health, immigration, childcare, domestic abuse, debt, and housing also arose. In addition, not being able to drive, or to afford public transport, limited the ability of some participants to search for work outside of their immediate local area. In addition, during the pandemic, lack of access to a computer and/ or the Internet became an increasingly important barrier. Whilst some participants who did not have a computer could access the internet through their smartphones, this access remained limited.

Whilst some interviewees had higher skill levels, other barriers – particularly a lack of (relevant) work experience – were crucial factors in explaining why they struggled to find work. For instance, some older interviewees had high skill levels, and had had professional careers, but found it difficult to return to the labour market after leaving jobs due to ill health. Health conditions meant that some participants were advised to shield at the height of the pandemic, which limited their ability to work. Other participants put their job search on hold because they had to home-school their children (see Box 4-1).

Box 4-1. A parent with a young child who found out about the programme in a community venue and put job search on hold during the pandemic

Aged 25-34, Belinda had a son of primary school age and was recruited by the programme in its first year. After leaving school at sixteen, Belinda looked for work but struggled to find anything. She subsequently had her son. Once her son started nursery, she completed a level 3 qualification over two years at college. After finishing the course, she looked for work in the field but was unsuccessful since she did not have much practical experience.

Belinda had learnt about Connecting Communities after meeting project workers looking for participants in the local library about 11 months prior to the interview. They asked if she was local to the area and looking for work and if she needed help. Belinda then booked an appointment to meet with them. Since joining, she had received a lot of support from her advisor and felt more confident about looking for work. Support included 'fixing' her CV, improving her confidence with applying for jobs, and learning how to sell herself to companies. Belinda paused looking for work after the first lockdown was introduced, due to needing to home-school her son.

4.3 Forms of support agreed and accessed

Following an assessment of barriers to work, the advisor and participant jointly would develop an Action Plan that identifies next steps. At a future meeting, the advisor and client would then review the latter's progress and complete an Action Review, which would in turn lay out steps taken to complete agreed actions or career goals and pinpoint any further barriers.

Information on agreed actions was provided for 3,594 participants. Most participants agreed to create a CV (89%) as one of their actions. The next most common actions were to apply for a job (77%), identify possible jobs that match their skills (74%), research possible careers or jobs (71%), and attend a job interview or practice interview skills (65%). It is also notable that approximately a third of participants sought support for travel to work, and financial and digital inclusion (35% and 30%, respectively). This information is summarised in Table 4.3.

Table 4-3. Agreed actions

	Participants	Per cent
Create a CV	3203	89
Apply to a job	2750	77
Identify possible jobs that match their skills	2652	74
Research possible careers/ jobs	2548	71
Attend a job interview/ practice interview skills	2339	65
Attend mentoring session(s)	1396	39
Attend other specialist support	1264	35
Access support to travel to a work opportunity	1253	35
Enrol on a training/ learning programme	1222	34
Attend coaching session(s)	1169	33
Access support for financial and digital inclusion	1062	30
Access support with their current work	707	20
Take part in volunteering	672	19
Arrange/attend a work experience placement	594	17
Attend pre-employment training	587	16
Other involvement with an employer	17	<1
Attend employer taster	8	<1
Total participants with agreed actions	3,594	

Note: Multiple options could be recorded per customer so percentages in the table may add up to more than 100 per cent.
Source: Connecting Communities, Management Information, Jan 2019-December 2021 (Q1 2019-Q4 2021)

There were some differences in the agreed actions between cohorts. This is unsurprising, given that the programme served groups with significantly different degrees of labour market attachment and support needs. These differences are to be expected and indicates that advisors have developed tailored action plans and support packages in response to participants' individual needs. For example, the Hardest to Help group were more likely to seek support by enrolling on a training session (55%), attending coaching sessions (51%), accessing financial and digital inclusion support (49%), or undertaking volunteering (39%). In contrast, the Rapid Support Employed group were more likely than other groups to access support with current work (65%), attend pre-employment training (43%), or support to travel to a work opportunity (44%).

The most frequently completed actions broadly reflects the actions agreed (Table A-46), but there are some exceptions.

- Notably 17 per cent fewer participants accessed support for financial and digital inclusion than had identified this as an action initially.
- Sixteen per cent fewer participants than had agreed to enrol on a training programme realised this intention.

More positively 15 per cent more participants attended a job interview or interview skills practice than had agreed this action at the outset. More participants also attended coaching sessions (26% more), than had previously agreed to do so. These examples illustrate the ways that support needs and actions will change over time, as well as potentially indicating blocking points and lack of capacity in referrals and ongoing support.

4.3.1 Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on support

The pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions struck in Year 2 of the programme. Subsequently, all **providers moved to a virtual delivery model**. This contrasts with how previously providers emphasised the value they placed on building up a **strong visible presence in the neighbourhoods** at community venues. As part of the switch to virtual delivery, providers moved from offering face-to-face meetings to **phone, text, and web support**, expanded the range of **online workshops** available (for example, offering mental health awareness and employability skills courses), and placed greater emphasis on emailing participants with **job alerts**. Some providers pivoted themes and resources in emails to respond to the altered context and differing client needs (eg greater focus on mental health support, coping with isolation). As social distancing requirements were lifted, some providers returned to full face-to-face delivery whilst others continued to work predominantly remotely.

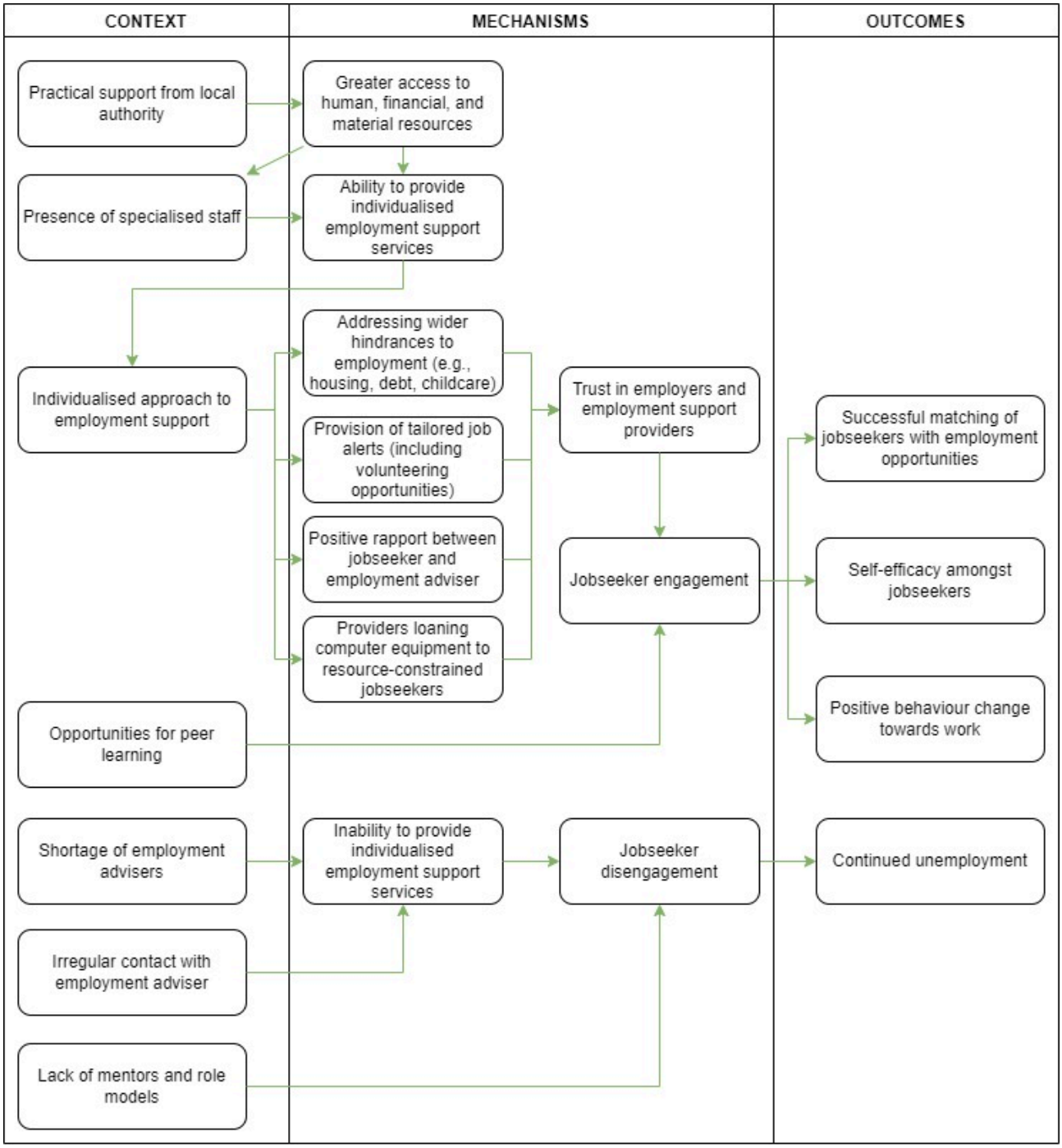
The **context for programme delivery also changed** because of the pandemic. Providers and participants reported the availability and types of job opportunities changed. Several participants, who found work in the second year of the programme, found that their **employment offers were withdrawn as firms furloughed** employees. However, **additional opportunities emerged in certain sectors**; several participants moved into roles in the care, retail, environmental cleansing, and warehousing sectors, as roles were created in response to increasing demand in the pandemic.

Interviews with participants recruited in the second and third year of the programme, when most meetings were virtual, suggested that they had managed to **form good working relationships with advisors despite not seeing them face-to-face,** but they also indicated it would have been easier to build rapport in person. Amongst participants recruited in the first year of the programme, some participants had disengaged from the programme by the third year of interviews. This was particularly the case among participants with no internet access or with caring responsibilities.

4.3.2 Strengths and weaknesses of support

Figure 4-4 summarises key contexts and mechanisms which either supported positive outcomes from the programme or led to participants' continued unemployment.

Figure 4-4. Contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes related to employment outcomes



Source: IES 2022

Provider and participant feedback indicated that an important strength of the programme was the **individualised, intensive nature of support**. Individualised support and the opportunity for the pace and nature of support to be co-determined by the advisor and participant, generated **strong trust between advisors and participants**. This was crucial to engaging participants and enabling them to address wider barriers to employment (see Box 4.2)**. Tailored job alerts**, as well as promoting opportunities to **learn from other participants** and participate in **volunteering**, helped participants to

improve their confidence, find relevant job opportunities and develop work-relevant skills. In turn, this **contributed to achieving successful outcomes**, such as positive behaviour change towards employment, greater self-efficacy with finding work, and successfully entering employment.

Advisors supported participants by helping them to recognise their skills and experience outside of employment, by **developing their CVs** and by ensuring their applications were 'sharper and more tailored'. Several older residents who had had long careers before losing work valued help from their advisor with drawing up a CV. Since CVs were not as common when they entered the labour market, they lacked knowledge of how to structure a CV.

Other providers supported participants through weekly one-to-one meetings with participants to **develop Maths and English skills**. Specialist staff within provider organisations contributed to participants receiving individualised support. Many residents interviewed contrasted the approach taken by their advisor with that taken by advisors at other organisations, such as Jobcentre Plus. Several residents explained they received little substantive support with looking for work from Jobcentre Plus and felt that the staff 'just want to see people quickly'. Advisors cited the **small caseloads** on the programme, which were limited to around 50 participants, as important in giving them the opportunity to offer participants more personalised and intensive support.

Participants indicated they benefitted from some opportunities to **learn from other participants** through meetings at job clubs or coffee mornings, for example. Opportunities to engage with other participants appeared more limited when support moved to virtual delivery, but some participants enjoyed meeting others during online courses. In addition, **taking part in volunteering opportunities** (for example, in charity shops) helped some participants **increase their confidence and develop work-relevant skills**.

Box 4-2. Mother with challenging childhood values supportive attitude of advisor

Aged between 35 and 44, Jess was fostered from a young age. She was expelled from school and passed her GCSEs at college. Jess had her first child as a teenager and moved frequently. Jess received Carers' Allowance for many years to look after one of her children, but started looking for work as her child became an adult and she realised she would lose her Carers' Allowance. Jess gained employment in the hospitality sector but left due to health issues.

Jess found out about the support available when an advisor approached her at a Community Hub where she volunteered. When Jess first found out about the support, she felt she didn't need help as she was working. She later phoned the provider and arranged to meet. Her advisor helped her to redesign her CV and identify suitable roles to apply for. Jess received help by phone and in-person. She turned down help from her advisor contacting employers as she preferred to do that herself. Jess trusts her advisor a lot, describing her advisor as 'absolutely lovely, really caring, so helpful to everybody'. She thinks trust is very important as you must be able to be open and honest with your advisor. She values how her advisor is very empathetic, understanding that she has a 'past' and that she is trying to change her future.

Despite the strengths of the programme, several challenges, with regards to provision can be identified. **Frequent changes in advisors and irregular contact** from some providers, particularly smaller providers, led some participants to become frustrated with the programme, resulting in jobseeker disengagement and a loss of confidence and momentum with achieving progress in line with the ToC (see Box 4.3).

Box 4-3. Carer who became disenchanted when provider contact declined

Aged between 25 and 34, Shannon lives with her mum whom she cares for. Shannon was registered with a large Connecting Communities provider and was looking for a flexible role that would fit around her caring responsibilities. At the time of interview, she had been out of work for several years. Shannon found out about the support available when her provider had a presence at a local community centre.

When Shannon joined, she was quite hopeful that the support would enhance her job search and enable her to work on specific skills (eg interview techniques). Shannon was assigned a work coach, who she thought 'nice', who helped her with her CV, and gave her advice on job search. However, she had not received wider help because of limited communication from her provider.

Shannon described it as 'a bit annoying' that she has had to chase meetings with her work coach and had not met with her provider for weeks in the run up to the interview. Shannon contacted them by phone to schedule a meeting to discuss a job application but did not get a response. It was not until a few months later that she was informed by a different team member that her work coach was on leave. Shannon felt they should have communicated this with her sooner.

The only regular support she had received were job alert emails. However, Shannon felt some were 'random' as they related to different sectors to those she was looking to work in. Shortly, before the interview, she received a text from her provider saying they had applied for a role for her. Shannon would have liked an opportunity to discuss role with them as she did not think it was relevant.

Some participants **struggled to find volunteering opportunities** to put into practice skills they had learned through courses (eg bookkeeping). Whilst all participants had a dedicated employment support coach on the project providing structured guidance on their goals and to help them to achieve their full potential, most participants did not have other mentors who shared their knowledge, skills and experience to foster personal growth. Job alerts from providers were valued by participants but several suggested that the alerts they received were **too generic**, not being tailored to the sectors they were looking for work in.

There was widespread support across the participant interviews for **expanding the use of guaranteed interviews** in motivating participants to engage in training. Several participants had found work through similar schemes previously. Interviews stressed that schemes should enable participants to gain insight into the organisation to help them stand out for the job at interview. Moreover, participants thought that it is important that schemes offer a reasonable chance of gaining employment at the end.

Most participants stated that they wanted to find work, but circumstantial barriers (eg childcare, being a young carer, lack of quality roles in desired sector, poor health) limited their ability to progress towards employment. Some participants suggested a need to expand opportunities to move into quality employment.

Overall, providers responded **flexibly to the pandemic**, continuing to provide support to participants remotely, through expanding their focus on wellbeing and wider support, as well as supporting participants wanting to work in sectors with growing vacancies. Participants valued the **convenience** of speaking to advisors by phone, but several suggested they did not enjoy phone calls as much as face-to-face meetings and thought it was harder to read body language virtually. Many, particularly lone parents, or those living alone, **missed the opportunity to 'physically get out'** and meet their advisor.

The closure of community centres/ libraries, where many participants with limited connectivity at home previously accessed the internet, exacerbated challenges. The switch to online support and staff changes meant that several participants who had been receiving one-to-one support prior to the pandemic, were unable to continue receiving such support once the pandemic began. Providers described how making contact and engaging some participants, especially those that were further from the labour market, became more challenging due to changes in their motivation to work and lack of digital skills and/ or access to information technology. Fears of catching Covid-19 stopped some participants from engaging whilst home-schooling children when schools were closed during the lockdowns took priority for some participants.

Young participants with good digital skills and access to the Internet via computer or mobile phone adapted easily to the switch to virtual support. However, some of these participants still missed aspects of face-to-face support, even if they found virtual support more convenient. Some participants who are particularly motivated have taken advantage of virtual learning portals to complete training, engage with the programme, and make progress towards ToC outcomes. **Loaning computer equipment** to participants was important in enabling participants without a reliable computer to engage in online support, particularly training courses during the pandemic.

Online courses can be very positive in increasing confidence among participants with stronger digital skills, who are motivated to learn and find work. Offering support via phone was important in maintaining contact with participants who did not have reliable internet access. Some participants with reliable internet access preferred meetings via virtual platforms to phone calls because virtual platforms enabled them to develop their digital skills.

4.4 Job brokerage and working with employers

4.4.1 What is appropriate at the neighbourhood scale?

Employers have a central role in an employment intervention as gatekeepers to jobs. In an intervention focused **at the neighbourhood scale, a key question concerns what the extent of employer engagement should be, and with whom links should be**

made. The context for this is that many existing organisations are involved in employer engagement activities and additional approaches to employers may result in 'turning them off', resulting in disengagement for some employers.

At the outset, an interviewee from a local authority felt there was a conundrum at neighbourhood level as to whether it was desirable for providers to engage directly with employers or whether it was more appropriate to link in with other ongoing activity concerned with engaging employers (eg via the local authority). This interviewee was clear that providers should focus on local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and microbusinesses. Except in the case of large employers in the immediate neighbourhood, they argued that providers should otherwise link up with other existing employer engagement activity. Within Connecting Communities, there were no explicit contractual reward for engaging with employers, albeit a payment for a participant starting work implies an incentive to engage with employers. Some interviewees considered that the lack of an explicit output in the contract relating to number of employers engaged with was a good thing because the result of any such rewards would be providers 'trampling over each other' to engage with employers within physical reach of residents from more than one lot, with negative consequences all round.

4.4.2 Provider approaches to employer engagement and key features of successful collaboration

One possible strategy would have been a centralised process of formal ongoing promotion of Connecting Communities to larger West Midlands employers and sharing of employer vacancies/ contacts. In practice, **for the most part, the providers worked individually on building partnerships with employers**. The main exception to this was some joint working arising organically between three providers operating in relatively close geographical proximity in East Birmingham and North Solihull.

Overall, there was **marked variability in the extent and success of employer engagement activity between the lots**. The extent to which employers were involved in partnerships through providing support to job seekers tended to be limited.

Seven key approaches to job brokerage and building partnerships with employers were adopted across the lots, with most lots adopting a **variety of approaches, including**:

- leveraging ongoing links from other contracts;
- jobs fairs;
- building close ongoing relationships with local employers;
- advisors searching online for vacancies;
- cold calling employers;
- reverse marketing; and
- working with agencies (which handled recruitment for some companies).

Leveraging ongoing links from other contracts was a way to generate access to job openings. Examples included making links to employers via a National Careers Service

contract and taking advantage of the pre-existing Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP). There were examples from one provider of SWAPs resulting in jobs with a local hospital and in the security industry. The ability to draw on such links varied by provider – with larger providers and those with more recent experience of employer engagement within their organisation being in the best position to adopt this approach. More generally, targeted pre-employment training and opportunities for guaranteed interviews were appreciated by participants.

Jobs fairs – initially taking place physically and subsequently virtually – were used as a means of bringing together employers and individuals looking for employment. The value of jobs fairs was seen as providing insights into opportunities that were available, perhaps encouraging them to try something new. In addition, jobs fairs also made employers aware that candidates for jobs were available, who, even if not immediately job-ready, might become so quite quickly with targeted support.

Building ongoing close relationships with local employers enabled providers to promote the importance and value of 'local people for local jobs'. The number and variety of local employers varied by lot and this approach embraced both relationships with large local employers (for example, Birmingham Airport), local supermarkets (including local outlets of national chains in cases where there was some local discretion over recruitment), and small businesses. The extent to which the providers were proactive in building close relationships varied.

In one lot, participants were beneficiaries of an ongoing relationship with a major employer in the waste and environmental cleansing sector, with whom the provider worked in partnership on an annual seasonal recruitment drive. The employer utilised the lead organisation (over DWP or other providers) in recruitment, and this resulted in over 20 people being recruited. There were also examples of efforts to enhance the visibility of Connecting Communities locally paying dividends in building close relationships with local employers. This was exemplified by a local plumbing business approaching one provider, leading to them working together to fill various roles, including apprenticeships. Such close local relationships enabled the provider to become a 'partner of choice' in sourcing candidates for vacancies, sometimes facilitating the whole recruitment process and providing ongoing support to recruits when in employment.

Cold-calling employers was an approach adopted across lots with varying degrees of sophistication. A less structured approach involved advisors and/ or participants searching online or calling employers about vacancies. This could be quite haphazard, albeit when advisors did this the results of searches might be circulated to colleagues. During the pandemic, when there was greater emphasis on use of social media, a somewhat more structured approach reported by one provider adopted was to research employers online and then to contact them by social media to find out about vacancies and the skills and attributes they required from candidates, and then use that knowledge to place suitable participants. One provider interviewed considered that a degree of complacency had set in around searching for vacancies on online job sites and that there was merit in 'old school' techniques of candidates cold calling employers in person (see Box 4-4).

Box 4-4. The value of 'old school' techniques

An older participant who had lost her job in catering during the Covid-19 pandemic was eager to stay in the catering sector, but eventually came round to looking at other roles when it was put to her that people on furlough were at the front of the queue for being taken back on.

'I suggested to her, "why don't you print off 50-odd CVS, I will identify the companies, you could go and walk in with a CV, and you can literally spend a day doing that will pay for your day saver. Just go and spend the day doing it". And she did. And she got two interviews from it'.

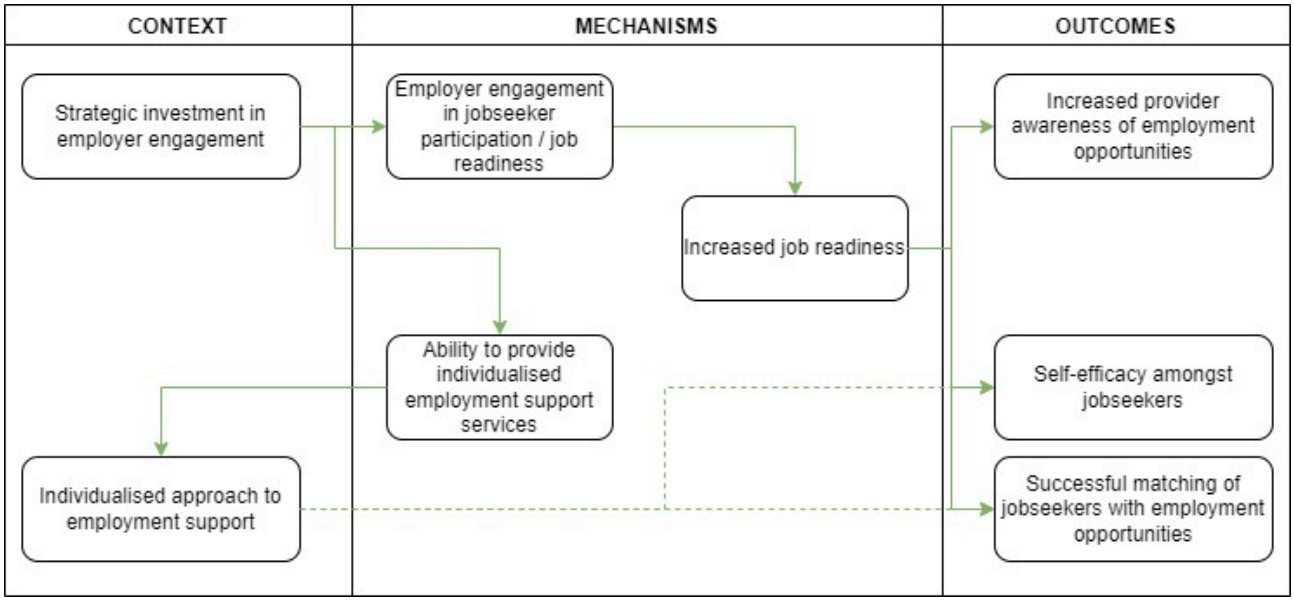
Advisor

Reverse marketing (ie an individualised approach to employment support involving 'selling participants' to employers and searching for suitable vacancies that would 'fit' the participant) was an approach used by many of the lots as a component of building ongoing close relationships with local employers and cold-calling employers. Importantly, a relational reverse marketing approach was one element within a wider repertoire of approaches to employer engagement and job brokerage.

> *[The approach used] is 'trying to actually reach out to the employer, whether that be to the employer direct or to the agency, and actually sell your participants … explaining that you've got matches that they're looking for. … always look [at] a bit of a backdoor way to put your participants forward. And create that freedom; they should go to [you for] direct support with their recruitment.'*
>
> Provider

Generally, reverse marketing involved the advisor taking ownership of the participant's employment journey. Sometimes it involved using individual advisors' pre-existing contacts with employers. One provider reported that it was important to 'leave no stone unturned' in finding out what participants want and then contacting employers directly. Part of the rationale for reverse marketing was that it enhanced the chances of job retention through its emphasis on 'fit', and the successful matching of jobseekers to opportunities (as shown in Figure 4-5). In the words of one provider: 'It is easy to get somebody a job, but it has to be the right job'.

Figure 4-5. Contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes related to employer engagement



Working with agencies, rather than with employers directly, became a more common approach during the lifetime of Connecting Communities. This was particularly the case for accessing the increased opportunities in distribution, warehousing, and the care sector, which became available during the pandemic. One provider emphasised the value of working closely with agencies to anticipate upcoming vacancies, to prepare participants for work becoming available and to enable them to make early applications.

4.4.3 Challenges encountered engaging employers

Challenges encountered by some, or all, of the providers in engaging with employers fall into three categories:

- Those unrelated to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- tThose related to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the changing nature of employment opportunities.
- Those related to operational and timing issues associated with Connecting Communities compared to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact.

In the first category, there are challenges in engaging successfully with local employers when **decisions about local jobs are not made locally**, and there is no discretion to alter selection criteria imposed elsewhere in the organisation. This is the case for some (but not all) local establishments that are part of larger chain. Other challenges faced can be traced to some providers having a **relative lack of experience and/ or placing insufficient prioritisation on engaging employers**.

Overall, there was marked variability in the extent and success of employment engagement activity between lots. The more successful lots emphasised that relationships with employers were ‘very important’. By contrast, amongst those that were less successful in meeting their outcomes, one provider noted that the ‘relative lack’ of

employer engagement had shown them how important employer engagement is. In some instances, there was also an issue of a lack of time that employers were able to devote to employer engagement activity. This is a perennial issue when advisors deal with the whole of the participant's journey: an approach which some providers prefer to provide an individualised, relational experience. When there is investment in employer engagement as a specific separate function – which was the explicit route taken in one of the lots – it is likely that more time is devoted to it, leading to increased provider awareness of a broad range of employment opportunities. However, a close 'fit' between a participant and a job can be difficult to achieve unless there is also investment in providing individualised employment support services.

The second category of challenges relates to the **pandemic and its impact on the changing nature of employment opportunities**. In some local areas, large local employers – such as Birmingham Airport and Drayton Manor Theme Park – were hit badly, as were the hospitality and non-essential retail sectors. There was a clear shift to opportunities in the care and distribution sectors. Opportunities in the construction sector held up well. The impact was such that **some employers were 'too busy' to engage** in the way that they might have done previously, while **others were closed and/ or had no vacancies** in the initial lockdown. Providers adapted activities during the pandemic to focus on where employment opportunities existed.

A third category of challenges relates to **operational and timing issues associated with Connecting Communities and the pandemic**. Providers' initial activities focused on engaging participants. When more emphasis on employer engagement was expected, the pandemic hit. By the time vacancies were reaching record highs in 2022, as the economic recovery gathered pace, Connecting Communities was winding down.

4.5 In-work support

In Connecting Communities, in-work progression for those in employment can be achieved through a 10% increase in wages. A participant could attain this by working for the same hours for 10% higher pay, or through increasing hours of work for the same pay, or through a combination of higher pay and more hours. Such progression may be achieved with the same employer (ie a move within the internal labour market) or by changing employers (ie a move within the external labour market; Sissons et al., 2016).

4.5.1 Features of effective in-work support

For some participants in-work support involved the provider helping them to know when, and how, to approach their employer about the possibility of a pay increase and/ or working more hours. However, this was not a viable option for some participants. Indeed, one provider noted that facilitating a change in employer, often by helping the participant to identify transferable skills that could help them obtain a new role or type of work, was crucially important for those participants whose confidence could be damaged by a lack of prospects for progression in their current job.

In the MI, 221 participants in the employed cohort were identified as progressing in-work. However, information about whether progression had occurred at the same or a different

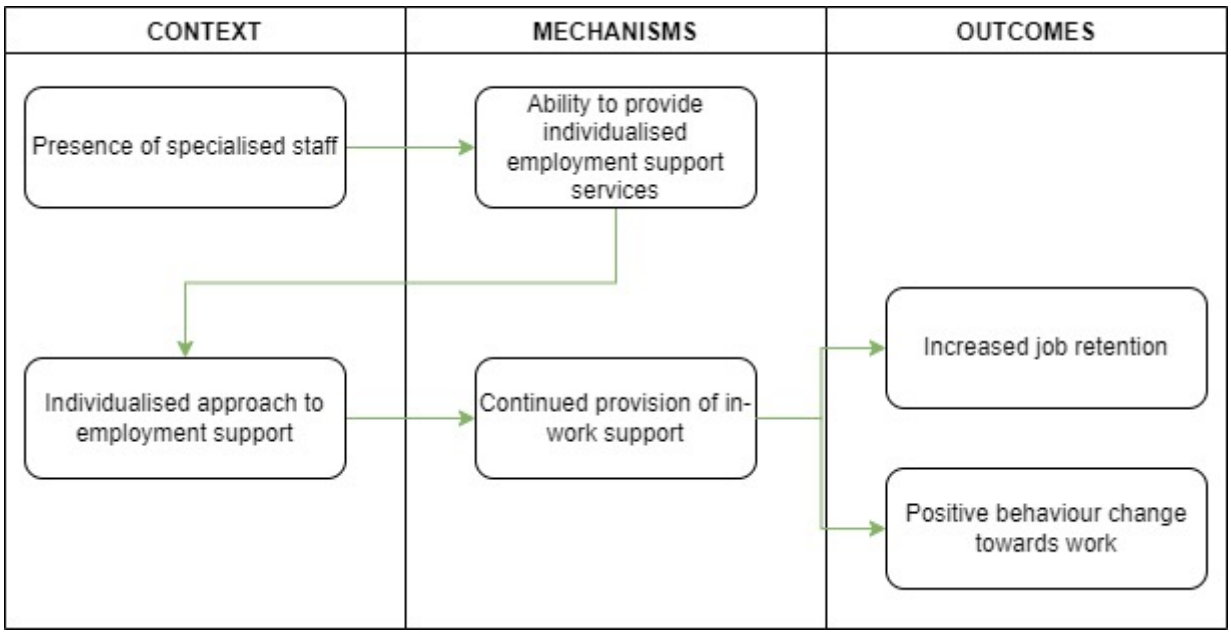
employer was only available for around half of these participants (N = 101). In addition to this, two providers had only recorded cases where progress had been at the same employer, and two providers where progress was at a different employer, so it was unclear whether these providers were failing to report the other outcome (**Error! Reference source not found.**). However, within this limited sample, around two-thirds had progressed at the same employer (67%) and a third had progressed by moving to a different employer (N = 101). While not representative, this data indicates that in-work progression was happening in both same employer and different employer contexts.

For participants in the hardest to help and hard to reach cohorts, **job entries could be designed to build in in-work progression opportunities** as they settled into employment and became more confident. An example of this approach came from one of the providers working with a care agency to design jobs that began with 10 hours worked per week and increased four hours per fortnight for the first six weeks.

Success in facilitating in-work progression for participants in the employed cohort depended to some degree on **'listening to people'** and **'choosing the right moment'** to engage with them on progression (as described by an advisor), which is indicative of an individualised approach to employment support (see Figure 4.6). This refers to the fact that, for some participants, the time for progressing in work must be 'right' in relation to non-work factors (eg a child reaching an age when a parent feels able to take on more hours in a job/ move to a different job).

One advisor commented that what worked for in-work progressions was 'calling people regularly, whether the participant themselves wanted to progress, and listening to what they want (although this can be wanting less hours and less stress)'. There was general agreement that the emphasis should be on raising the awareness of the participant that in-work progression is an option, so encouraging a positive behaviour change towards work (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4-6. Contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes related to in-work support provision



Keeping in touch with participants in work to provide ongoing support can be vital in helping them sustain employment in a new role and aid in identifying opportunities for progression, as well as supporting them with non-work issues, as illustrated by the example below:

Box 4-5. A parent with a young child appreciating an advisor checking up on her job

Suki reported that her advisor had been in touch with her a few times over the year since she had been working in the care sector. Suki had appreciated how the advisor was 'helpful in the sense that she is always checking up on me and how my job is and how my life is and if I'm alright and things like that. It's just nice to know that someone is checking in on you'. Suki was grateful also that the advisor had helped her with a housing issue. Her hours of work had increased since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic from 20 to 25 hours per week, which was 'good'. At the time of the interview, the participant had found out that she would need to find an alternative role in a new sector due to vaccination requirements in the care sector (Suki was reluctant to be vaccinated). Suki was looking for a customer support role in a call centre and felt she was doing okay in finding jobs she could apply for. If Suki had not found a new role before her current role came to an end, she planned to contact her advisor again – Suki 'trusts' her advisor and felt the support that she had received had been 'good'.

Strong relationships with the participant and the employer were effective in facilitating in-work progression. This support might entail advising a participant how and when to make a request for more hours and/ or a more senior role, and support with their CV. An ongoing relationship with a participant and an employer could also help in **identifying and sourcing training** that would enable a participant to progress to a more senior role. Indeed, where provided, in-work training was, in the words of one provider, 'incredibly useful in building good relationships with employers'.

4.5.2 Challenges in providing in-work support

As intimated above, one challenge in the provision of in-work support is that **not everyone wants to progress** – whether according to the definition used by Connecting Communities or otherwise - at least not at all points in time. Individuals have different attitudes towards progression in work: for some, progression may be a long-term rather than short-term goal; for others it may not be a priority at all (Green et al., 2016). Indeed, many low-paid workers have purely functional relationships with their jobs, with very few expectations of their employer and their own prospects in the company (Hay, 2015). For some participants 'progression' could be about moving to a job with more predictable hours or to one which offered a better quality of life, whether or not this involved higher pay. 'Progression' could be 'horizontal' in the short-term (ie moving to a job with similar pay) to gain experience for a 'vertical' move (ie one involving higher pay) subsequently. Given that participation in Connecting Communities was voluntary, there was no compulsion for participants to progress.

At the outset of there was **a lack of experience of in-work support amongst the providers**. Yet, providers reported that some of the most valuable learning for the future came from supporting in-work participants to progress.

An initial realisation (and surprise) for those providers who were most active regarding in-work progression was that, particularly in the local area, there were **many roles with little or no opportunities for progression**. This led some providers to conclude that most employers were not particularly interested in upskilling in-work participants because they had a relatively large number of jobs that did not require additional skills; hence in these cases they tended to place emphasis on in-work progression in the external labour market. Construction was one sector identified where there were good prospects for progression. **Zero-hour contracts** also presented a structural obstacle to in-work progression; there is no obligation for an employer or agency to provide more hours.

From a practical perspective, at least prior to the pandemic when the main emphasis was on face-to-face support, it was **more difficult to keep in touch with those in work than with those out of work**. Keeping in touch with those in employment often had to be by phone or email. However, it was recognised that keeping in touch was particularly important to retain the motivation of those participants in jobs that they did not particularly like, while looking for an alternative position. It was also the case that some participants did not see the need for support once in employment and so shunned contact.

4.5.3 The impact of Covid-19 on in-work support

The providers were largely untested about achieving in-work progression at the outset, reflecting the relative lack of emphasis on this in previous employment support programmes. The pandemic meant that for some in-work participants possibilities for in-work progression diminished as business reduced, while for others, especially in care and distribution, there were opportunities to increase hours. In general, the pandemic made it **more difficult for providers to reach out to employers**.

During the pandemic, some participants became **more focused on their immediate circumstances**. One small provider felt that they were beginning to make headway on in-work progression before the pandemic, but 'lockdown halted progress as people were harder to reach and became more focused on their immediate circumstances'. Another provider noted a 'dip in positivity' and **greater risk aversion** to change current circumstances.

However, another provider considered that by changing everyday routines the pandemic had given individuals, particularly more mature individuals, a chance to **re-evaluate what they wanted to do** – perhaps making them more 'open' to considering a change of role or sector:

> *'Covid-19 was an opportunity for employees and ex-employees to re-evaluate whether they want to do the kind of work they have done before. I think you're going to begin to struggle to get people who want to do airport work now - it's the hours, it's the priorities, the childcare; it's given them a chance to re-evaluate whether they actually want to do that anymore – in a way that there is not space to do so in an ordinary routine.'*
>
> Provider

Another provider reported examples of participants moving from hospitality to the NHS to

‘give something back’. A different provider highlighted that for some participants moving sector to a role with reduced responsibility and/ or with a more people-oriented focus than their previous role had provided more enjoyment or fulfilment. The experience of an individual moving from a managerial position in the leisure sector to a care role is illustrative of this.

One provider reported having been **assisted by furlough** (where an employee is laid off but remains employed) and **greater investment in social media skills** during the pandemic increased outcomes for the employed cohort. The strategy adopted was to put out a call on social media targeting people on furlough and encouraging them to look for a new job, so providing a role model for others that securing new employment is possible; ’it’s a small proportion, but that small proportion impacts in the local community.’ Aside from social media campaigns, it was reported that being on furlough meant that some individuals sought a new employer to gain more income. Again, this is illustrative of the pandemic as a trigger for individuals to re-evaluate their situation.

The examples discussed above illustrate how **the pandemic had different impacts on different individuals**, leading some to be more risk-averse and others to become more open to seeking a change. These behaviours were either hindered or facilitated by personal and contextual factors.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter summarises the critical insights and lessons learnt to help guide the implementation of future programmes. These should be reviewed alongside findings from the economic and impact assessment, which ran parallel to this evaluation.

The localised, context-sensitive, and tailored support that characterised Connecting Communities helped participants become more aware of employment opportunities and adopt more positive dispositions and behaviours towards work. However, some groups were more likely to achieve job outcomes than others. In future, proactively seeking ways to overcome barriers to work beyond effectively supporting individuals could be explored. Systemic factors, such as employer willingness to offer flexible work, support for people with health conditions, accessibility of public transport, childcare costs, and unreliable internet connectivity, were found to impede employment. These systemic factors can vary across localities, so it is imperative to develop an intimate understanding of local contexts for place-based employment support programmes to succeed. The WMCA has a role in co-ordinating the response across all these policy domains, bringing together both employers and the public sector to best match the skills and requirements of local people with demand from employers. A job fit-orientated approach, that matches jobs against individuals' skills, interests, and circumstances was found to generate positive employment and job sustainment outcomes. This job-fit orientated approach works in conjunction with strong partnership working.

By providing avenues for networking, local partnership working not only mutually builds social capital amongst community stakeholders, but it also promotes encounters between customers and potential employers. However, 'local' does not mean 'insular'. Whilst local partnership working was critical to the success, local partnerships should be guided by a wider, coherent strategy that also takes stock of national and regional circumstances. Connecting Communities demonstrated synergy across national, regional, local, and community-level structures.

5.1 Insights: Partnership working

The commissioning of different types of providers allowed the creation of localised solutions drawing on local knowledge of challenges and opportunities, the mitigation of risks, and the adjustment of approaches as challenges arose. Working with both smaller and larger providers, and national and local organisations (including national employment support organisations, local further education colleges and a local football club) brought different skill sets to bear. In Connecting Communities providers had opportunities to learn from each other. They also benefited from the WMCA being an approachable commissioner sensitive to reasonable requests for change in the light of experience and changing circumstances.

Contracting with a range of different providers with their own local knowledge, together with the emphasis on developing relationships with local partners, including residents' groups and representatives, helped to place a central focus on local challenges and opportunities. It enabled making connections and linking up across different elements of the local infrastructure which is central to a holistic approach. It also fostered the development of trust-based relationships. Here the creation of a different brand was helpful in attracting some participants and employers.

Connecting Communities also permitted the adoption of innovative methods to engage target populations, including through a mix of having a regular presence in shared spaces such community centres, community cafes, libraries, and food banks, as well as distributing leaflets at leisure centres and in supermarkets. A targeted social media campaign by one provider focusing on specific sub-groups of residents (notably those on furlough) was also deemed successful.

Overall, the local design and flexible nature of Connecting Communities was a positive feature in enabling tailoring to local needs and making adaptations to changing circumstances in a way that is more difficult for nationally designed programmes with no or limited flexibilities. However, whilst a localised approach gave way to more context-sensitive employment support initiatives, differing contract values led to concerns about financial viability in some cases. This depended on the level of organisational financial resilience, due to the outcomes-based nature of the contract, over-dependence on one or two members of staff whose absence could stall delivery, and cashflow in some cases.

Initially, local authorities served as a key partner and source of practical support for providers. This practical support took the form of providing event venues, brokering partnerships between communities and prospective providers, and sharing available information to help identify potential participants. However, not all local authorities provided equal levels of support to their affiliated lots. Notably, local authorities with dedicated employment and skills teams were able to provide more extensive support. As such, providers' experience of support differed. The WMCA could consider asking Local Authorities to commit a minimum level of support for employment programmes, so that providers are clear and the offer is more even across geographies.

Commissioning timescales limited possibilities for programme co-design with local communities. Providers felt that a longer bidding period could have enabled them to better build the future legacy of the programme. As such, for future commissions where community-engagement is important, more time should be allowed to build partnerships and involve communities. What time is sufficient will depend on the complexity of the project, the importance of building community capability and legacy. However, recruitment and training of staff often takes around three months. Then a further three months may be required to work with partners and establish working practices and processes. Where staff with relevant local knowledge can be recruited more quickly the timeframe required could be shorter.

A range of organisations were engaged by providers to support the programme, including community organisations, faith organisations, food banks, training providers, and health organisations. These partners provided support in several ways, including: (a) providing a

venue; (b) referring participants; (c) providing wraparound support; (d) providing work experience opportunities; and (e) engaging with employers and sourcing vacancies. They have been engaged without providers paying for use of their resources. The degree to which this support facilitated service provision underscores the need for partnership working across local organisations in place-based employment support programmes. In the future, especially as European Social Fund monies come to an end, ensuring how to effectively remunerate community organisations for their contribution should be explored.

Providers stressed the importance of being present in the community. Constant physical presence in the community from the start of the implementation period paid off even further in the face of challenges brought about by the pandemic. Partnerships with the community organisations, which were established through providers' constant physical presence early in programme implementation, helped to develop the needed social capital to harness partners' resources as caseloads moved to remote working. Furthermore, constant physical presence created opportunities for unforeseen encounters, to the benefit of providers, existing customers, and prospective customers alike. Providers co-located in settings where there were other activities (not obviously related to employment support). This enabled different individuals to be engaged and facilitates cross-referring between support services, helping both partners and customers to build networks.

The providers looked to each other for support. Providers were appreciative of knowledge-sharing opportunities since they served as avenues for networking, peer support, and collaborative development of strategies to address common difficulties. For instance, three providers in closely located neighbourhoods in East Birmingham and Solihull shared ideas and worked together to some extent, sharing contacts and practice. The providers had opportunities to share experience at meetings convened by WMCA in the earlier stages of Connecting Communities. However, with the onset of the pandemic and changes in the organisational structure of the WMCA, some of this momentum was lost at a time when smaller providers would have benefitted from it. In future contracts, the WMCA should ensure it facilitates collaboration consistently during the lifetime of contracts.

In addition to these internal governance structures, providers found ways to involve community stakeholders in programme governance. Community-level governance structures included steering groups, community connector groups, and community forums. The involvement of community stakeholders in governance is an arrangement that would benefit future place-based employment support programmes. Not only did this create community buy-in, but it also allowed providers to maintain a deep understanding of the needs of communities, for example through the involvement and engagement of local counsellors and residents' groups. These representatives tended to be well-networked locally and be a source of support and advice for employment support providers. However, it took staff time and resource to engage with communities in this way, and consideration needs to be given to the inclusion of all parts of the community (eg through faith groups).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Commissioning timescales need to enable local stakeholders and providers to be closely involved in programme co-design, particularly where community engagement and legacy are important.
- The WMCA should consider how to facilitate a minimum level of contribution from Local Authorities to support the delivery of employment support programmes in their area.
- Providers need to prioritise building trust with local community leaders. A trusting relationship with local community leaders eases identification of new partners.
- Providers should strive to be physically present, in a consistent manner, within the community. While remote services are valuable, a physical presence facilitates building social capital between providers and local community organisations, and encounters with participants.
- Future programmes should consider how to remunerate the contributions of community partners, for example in making referrals or providing meeting space, which were unfunded in Connecting Communities.
- Local governance structures should help promote knowledge-sharing and problem-solving between providers and be delivered consistently over time, including through staff changes.
- Community-level governance structures, such as community forums, should complement local governance structures. Involving community stakeholders in governance not only promotes community buy-in but it enables understanding of community needs.

5.2 Insights: Promotion and engagement

The programme took longer than anticipated to mobilise. Although capacity to start in June 2018 was assessed as part of the procurement process, an extended mobilisation period was required by the providers to recruit staff, source venues, and establish community links to gain referrals. Future contracts should ensure a time for providers to develop capacity and capability and recognise the length of time required to become fully operational. For example, recruiting and training staff takes in the region of three months. Once in post, these staff need time to work with partners, and establish working processes to deliver the contract. Ideally, a set-up time of around six months should be expected.

A multi-pronged approach to promotion enabled the programme to reach a diverse set of participants. Providers used leaflets and promotional materials, ran events, and encouraged partners and participants to refer people from the communities. Community events, which were often organised in partnership with local community partners, were important to participant engagement.

Most participants who engaged with the programme were embedded and received substantial support. This low attrition indicates that, even from the early stages of programme delivery, providers were able to build a trusting rapport with participants, primarily through positive participant-provider interactions.

However, the onset of the pandemic and the resulting restrictions on in-person gatherings reduced opportunities for social interaction. Social media therefore became a source of

new participants. Participants recruited through social media tended to have higher skill levels (including digital skills), more recent work experience, and internet access.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- The contracting process should allocate ample time for providers to recruit staff, locate venues, and build capability.
- Using different promotional methods proved effective. Future programmes should use a combination of marketing collaterals and community events for promotional purposes.
- Whilst social media has allowed the programme to reach a larger array of customers, future programmes should not rely on it exclusively. Digital-only marketing risks excluding potential customers who are less digitally literate or have limited access to the internet. Engagement and marketing strategies need to be informed by the target groups of participants, and considerations of the places they go (and the times they go there), and social media platforms they use. Differentiation is key as evidenced by the effectiveness of varied strategies to engage the in-work group and long-term unemployed groups used by providers.

5.3 Insights: Pre-employment support

Connecting Communities was successful in moving unemployed individuals towards work: the programme surpassed its targets for job starts. The job outcome rate varied between providers. The regression analysis revealed that, controlling against other factors including participant characteristics, participants in the group of providers that were small to medium-sized which a local focus, were more likely than providers in the East Birmingham Partnership to find work. Small-medium sized lots had greater flexibility to pivot and to experiment with innovative approaches. In addition, many were embedded locally prior to Connecting Communities, which is likely to have built trust with partners and participants alike. The buoyancy of local labour markets, and the suitability of opportunities to the skills of participants offers an alternative explanation.

Participants demonstrated a wide range of support needs – the most common ones being: (a) employability support; (b) building confidence and motivation for work; and (c) obtaining necessary skills and qualifications. Various personal circumstances, such as debt, childcare responsibilities, health conditions, and lack of affordable transportation, were reported as being barriers to securing employment. This highlights the need for flexible and responsive support. Furthermore, participants aged 16–24 were less likely to remain in their jobs, which could be attributed to the career exploration that is common to younger people as they gain experience of employers. As such, younger customers could potentially benefit from career coaching and orientation to increase retention. In short, the large variety of needs and circumstances expressed by participants underscores the need for tailored, individualised support.

Since participant needs and competencies varied widely, the forms of support provided to them also varied. Whilst most of the completed actions aligned with activities identified in the action plan, there were exceptions. Some participants did not pursue certain activities laid out in their action plan whilst others pursued activities that were not identified in their

action plan. These changes demonstrate how support needs can vary over time, highlighting the importance of constant communication between participants and advisors. The WMCA could consider how to coordinate and facilitate communication between providers. For example, by co-ordinating a database of participants across employment support programmes (and more widely). Capturing information about participants and their changing needs systematically would provide evidence about how services need to adapt and respond. Connecting Communities also demonstrated the importance of commissioners being responsive to change in customer need.

It must also be noted that the lack of support activities provided for programme participants with English as a second language was a source of inequity. Consideration should be given to how participants can access this provision should it be identified as a barrier to work. The regression analysis for participants finding work, highlighted that those participants with no qualifications were significantly less likely than participants in other qualification groups to gain a job outcome. Consideration could be given to how to effectively build qualification and skills progression into employment support for this group. This is especially important, given the disadvantage experienced by individuals with little to no formal qualifications.

A lack of opportunities for work experience emerged as a common theme; this is a potential area for programme-wide working. Participants, especially in the Hardest to Help group, described how volunteering opportunities helped them build their confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn facilitated acquisition of employment. Given the positive impact of volunteering opportunities, the fact that they were relatively lacking in Connecting Communities represents an untapped potential for future place-based programmes to generate more positive outcomes. It must be acknowledged, however, that lockdowns caused by the pandemic made it difficult to arrange volunteering and work placements. However, future place-based programmes should bolster this form of support.

Strong employer engagement presents an opportunity to fill this gap in work placement and volunteering opportunities. Connecting Communities might have benefitted from a programme-wide strategy for sourcing vacancies and placements – particularly with larger employers and those with a national focus. Providers wanted to engage employers to encourage them to offer placements, vacancies, and to refer in-work participants. If the WMCA were to have undertaken this role, it would have been a new way of working on employment programmes with the commissioner co-ordinating at least some employer engagement activity. This programme-wide approach to strategy development has been successfully adopted by other employment support programmes with a local orientation; the Restart scheme uses a similar employer engagement model, with the ReAct Partnership, composed of six prime providers, taking the steering role.

In addition, Connecting Communities benefited from strong relationships between participants and providers, so promoting staff retention should be a priority in employment programmes. In some areas, staff vacancies slowed the recruitment of participants, and staff turnover adversely affected the development of trust with participants and wider communities.

New providers taking over lots during programme implementation felt that the handover of caseloads had not been well-managed, leading to some participants disengaging. Employment advisors noted that smaller caseloads helped them provide more intensive, individualised support to participants. In contrast, advisors whose caseloads were at the upper end of the reported range reported the contrary. As such, where possible, it is ideal to maintain reasonably sized caseloads for employment advisors. However, data on hand does not allow for the estimation of an optimal caseload size; the economic impact assessment conducted in parallel to this evaluation could provide this information.

Regression analysis also highlighted groups that were less likely when other characteristics were controlled for, to be supported into work by the programme. This included participants with a health condition or disability. Participants in this group were significantly less likely to secure a job. However, once in work, health condition and disability was not a significant factor affecting sustainment at 13 weeks. For employment services supporting all residents, more consideration could be given to how to overcome and support health barriers to work, whether through accessing wider health provision alongside employment support, or working with employers to broker access to suitable vacancies and/ or make suitable workplace adaptations. Whilst the service was personalised, it might not have been sufficiently so to overcome the barriers to work among this group. Personalisation of services could be bolstered by working more closely with employers to locate appropriate job opportunities and arrange for working conditions that accommodate customers' diverse needs.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Smaller caseload sizes allow for greater levels of individualised support, and therefore, providers should strive to designate a reasonable number of customers per advisor, such as the 50 required by Connecting Communities. This number will be dependent on the level of support participants need which is likely to vary by the length of time out of work, and the mix and needs of participants is crucial in determining the caseload size. However, the data available for this evaluation did not allow for an estimation of an optimum caseload size. The economic impact assessment that ran parallel to this evaluation could potentially give some direction on this issue.
- Community focus, person-centredness, and flexible delivery were amongst the principal strengths of the programme. Future place-based programmes should maintain these elements.
- Employment support should focus on job matching to participants' skills and interests. Where job matching takes place, customers were not only more likely to find a job, they were also more likely to stay longer in their job.
- The offer would have benefited from a stronger focus on work-placement and volunteering. Strengthening employer engagement and adopting a programme-wide approach to strategy development could help bridge this gap.

5.4 Insights: In-work support

Reaching the in-work group, looking for progression, was challenging. More modest outcomes in relation to in-work progression were in part due to many providers having

little prior experience of working with this groups, reflecting the main emphasis of active labour market policy. Learning about approaches to in-work progression was discussed and shared at a meeting of partners.

Connecting Communities adopted a specific definition of in-work progression: defining in-work progression as a 10% increase in wages. This conception could partly explain the modest in-work progression outcomes observed. Subsequent place-based employment support programmes should consider expanding their view of in-work progression. For example, lateral career movements that would enable future vertical (that is, promotional) career movements could count as in-work progression. It must be noted, however, that this expanded definition of in-work progression will be more difficult to quantify.

According to advisors, the nature and timing of the conversation about in-work progression was critical to how participants responded. For instance, participants whose children reached an age where they were more independent, or started school, were more receptive to a progression conversation. Since participants can have very different circumstances and competencies at any given time, individualised support is crucial.

The demand side of in-work progression must also be considered. In some areas, there were few roles that presented opportunities for progression. As such, some providers concluded that there was limited employer interest in the professional development of in-work participants with their existing employer and participants looked for progression opportunities in the external labour market. However, whilst progression in the external labour market is always a valid option, it is important for providers to constructively engage with employers to determine how progression opportunities can be integrated into the jobs offered to participants.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Many providers had limited experience giving support to customers who were currently employed. Providers should build their advisors' capability to deliver in-work support. This includes understanding where to effectively promote in-work support to potential participants, and the messages that might resonate. Developing capabilities to deliver careers advice among advisers and how to effectively engage with employers beyond job entry are key skills for advisers supporting the in-work group. Considering progression upon joining the workforce and supporting the training of new entrants to progress could be an effective way to for employment support providers to work with large organisations in the medium-term. More generally, consideration could be given to understanding common progression pathways within organisations and sectors in the region.
- The programme used a limited definition of in-work progression. Future programmes should consider expanding this definition to include lateral career movements that boost workers' future promotional prospects.
- Discussions about in-work progression should be appropriately timed with customer's life circumstances. The importance of timing reinforces the need for individualised support.
- Providers should engage and build partnerships with employers so that job opportunities can be designed with a view towards career progression, where possible.

5.5 Insights: Adapting to the pandemic

It is important to consider the impact of the pandemic on providing support to participants. Overall, providers responded flexibly and adaptably. They continued to provide support to participants remotely when premises were closed during lockdown. In addition, advisors provided a greater focus on wellbeing and wider support and encouraged and supported participants wanting to work to consider sectors with growing vacancies. Participants appreciated the convenience of communicating with their advisors over the phone, but many still expressed a preference for face-to-face meetings. This was especially the case for participants who, amidst the move to virtual provision, were disadvantaged by a lack of digital skills and IT equipment. Virtual support has become an important element in the employment services toolkit, but the availability of face-to-face services remains critical.

The pandemic created challenges for employer engagement during the initial and lockdown stages of the pandemic with sectors closed, for example. Furthermore, the economic impact could have also influenced job sustainment negatively. With businesses closing or downsizing because of the pandemic, some customers could have lost their employment, which would have brought down the job sustainment rate observed in this evaluation. The impact evaluation will provide insights.

WMCA's flexibility during the pandemic was welcomed by providers. For example, the WMCA temporarily removed the profile cap on rapid progression participants to cater for the increase in people who were newly unemployed. In addition, they extended the geographies of the lots to neighbouring wards to bring more potential participants within scope. WMCA adjusted the way that payments were made to providers to support contract viability when Covid-19 impacted on previous ways of working.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Employment support programmes should focus on customer well-being and provide broad wraparound support (eg mental health, housing, personal finance).
- Whilst customers appreciated remote support during the pandemic, many still expressed a preference for face-to-face support. This is particularly true for participants who had lower levels of digital skill or less access to digital infrastructure. Therefore, a flexible, hybrid modality of employment support is ideal.
- Commissioners should have license to respond to changing local requirements and adapt provision to ensure it meets evolving community need.

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