

Walsall Pathfinder Research Final Report

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Learning and Work Institute

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Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	10
Context.....	10
Methodology.....	133
Research findings	144
Residents' perceptions of Walsall's labour market	374
Barriers to finding and progressing in work	20
Residents' experiences of employment support and training provision.....	30
Population segmentation.....	30
Towards better and cohesive employment support and training provision in Walsall	40
Does current provision meet Walsall residents' needs?	40
Recommendations	41
Bibliography	43

Executive summary

Many different organisations are involved in planning and delivering employment and skills support in Walsall, with over 85 independent training providers, charities, further education colleges and social landlords offering these services in Walsall, as well as Jobcentre Plus, Walsall College and Walsall Council. At a national level, employment support and skills sit across several government departments. This complex picture makes it challenging to deliver a coherent local employment support and skills offer that meets the needs of Walsall residents.

The Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) Pathfinder projects aim to address these issues and to make sure local residents access the right forms of support to enable them to find or progress in work. In Walsall, the Pathfinder project involves Jobcentre Plus, Walsall Council, Walsall College, Walsall Housing, One Walsall and independent training provider and employer representatives. It is intended that the Walsall Pathfinder will also help the development of a community-based employment support and skills hub, to be funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Priority groups for the new community hub include the estimated 5,600 long-term unemployed people in Walsall, 7,100 economically inactive people in the area who say they want to work and 20,000 local residents undertaking low-paid and precarious work in sectors such as distribution and hospitality.

Understanding the experiences and needs of local these residents is essential if the Pathfinder is to meet its aim and the planned community hub is to help local residents find and move up in work. It is for these reasons that the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to undertake research on Walsall residents' perceptions, motivations and behavior in relation to job-seeking, work and engagement with employment support and skills provision in Walsall. The research comprised 25 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with Walsall residents of working age who were unemployed, economically inactive but wanting to work or were employed in low-paid or precarious work. It also involved desk research and nine interviews with local stakeholders, including representatives of Walsall College, Walsall Council, Walsall Housing, independent training providers and civil society organisations.

Research findings

Walsall residents face multiple and inter-related barriers to finding or progressing in work:

- (i) Personal capability barriers to work, for example, a lack of relevant skills, qualification and experiences, low motivation and confidence, poor career planning capabilities or poor health.
- (ii) Structural barriers to work, for example a mismatch of a person's experiences and skills with the local jobs on offer, limited transport or childcare, a lack of appropriate employment support provision.

(iii) Informational and perceptual barriers to work with residents lacking information about sources of help, or their perceptions about the local labour market deterring them from taking up work or training.

Digital exclusion – Poor digital skills emerged as a significant theme in the resident interviews, alongside wider issues of limited access to devices and wifi connectivity. Some residents had been sent on courses to improve their digital skills by DWP, but still appeared to lack the ability to make best use of algorithm-driven digital jobs platforms such as Indeed.

Soft-skills – Time management, motivation, confidence and communication skills were considered by local stakeholders to be key barriers to employment among some Walsall residents who lack higher level qualifications. Interviews with residents supported this view. Most residents also lacked career planning skills, particularly those who were not working, with people lacking clear career goals and a route to achieve them.

Physical and mental health – Some of the residents interviewed had health conditions that impacted on their ability to work full-time, including severe anxiety and depression (managed through medication), other mental health conditions, addictions, and physical health conditions.

Caring obligations - Some of the female residents interviewed had caring obligations for children, disabled or elderly relatives, impacting on their job-seeking decisions. The interviews also suggested that caring obligations were a driver of informal employment in Walsall, with work in domestic services, construction or hospitality able to be fitted around caring obligations.

Transport as a barrier to work – Transport costs deterred some people from taking up work, with residents balancing pay against their costs of travel. Additionally, the many distribution, hospitality, retail and health and social care jobs in the area often require shift work, and a lack of public transport late in the evening and at night made it difficult for people without cars to take up employment in these sectors. Distance to work was a barrier for people with caring obligations who felt they needed to work near to their child's school or nursery or the home of an elderly relative.

Prejudice and stereotyping - Some residents believed that ageism was a barrier to work, both for school-leavers and for those over 50. Some people said that long-term employed or economically inactive faced prejudice when applying for jobs.

Perceptual and information barriers to work

Impacts of information shared in social networks – Information about job opportunities was shared within residents' social networks. Word-of-mouth information about vacancies were often seen as more helpful than online job boards in finding work. While this was beneficial, social networks also reinforced misinformation or damaging perceptions about the local labour market.

Views about insecure jobs – Some residents believed that taking on a job on a zero-hours contract was felt to be too risky, as a person could be left without any benefits if they did not get work. This perception had led to people not considering work in sectors such as hospitality or retail where they believed zero-hours contracts were prevalent.

Green jobs – There was little awareness of the possibility of employment in the green economy, with ‘green jobs’ being an unfamiliar term to most people.

Better off calculations – Some people believed that they would not be better off in work, although they took into account lifestyle as well as financial factors. A person may be better paid, but it may be more difficult to balance a job with childcare, resulting in decision not to return to work.

Views about training and engagement with voluntary employment support provision– For most people, particularly those who were unemployed or economically inactive, upskilling or reskilling was not part of their strategy to find or progress in work. They knew that Walsall College offered training but were unaware other training provider or those offering career advice or employment support. Almost all residents had not considered using this provision because:

- They believed the prevalence of low-skilled jobs in Walsall means that it is easy to find jobs that do not require qualifications
- There is an inconsistent approach from Jobcentre Plus in relation to giving clients advice about training opportunities or sources of funding for training
- There were misconceptions about being able to undertake a training course while receiving benefits
- People who had dependents felt that they would have to leave paid employment if they wanted to upskill or reskill, which they could not afford to do
- Some residents did not feel confident enough to go back to a classroom setting, particularly if they had a negative experience of schooling. College was seen as the preserve of young people
- Most people lacked information about the training, careers advice and employment support that was available in the area.

Experiences of using employment support and training provision

Patterns of use of services – In addition to Jobcentre Plus and DWP-commissioned programmes such as Restart, residents had used a number of not-for-profit and for-profit employment support. As noted above, there was a lack of awareness of the careers advice and employment support provision on offer, for example, the National Careers Service.

Gaps in employment support for economically inactive people – All the economically inactive people interviewed had received little or no employment support, either because they did not qualify for it (in the case of DWP provision) or because they were not aware of the services on offer.

Employment support for people in work – While Jobcentre Plus has extended its support for people in work, there are some clear gaps in provision for people in work, particularly business support for people who are self-employed.

Use of online and in-person services – Some residents had used online platforms or local employment agencies to help them find work, although their knowledge of specialist or national recruitment and employment agencies was patchy. Having a ‘shop front’ high street presence appeared to make it more likely that people knew about and used employment support services.

Views about DWP provision – Most Walsall residents who were unemployed spoke highly of individual Jobcentre Plus and Restart coaches, believing the support that they had been given had helped them move into work. This was balanced with the view that their relationship with their coaches felt transactional and was mostly influenced by their requirement to comply with benefit conditionality requirements. Some residents also believed that their work coach’s caseload was too high to offer them enough support.

Frequency and nature of help – Some residents wanted more frequent meetings with their coach and a more relational service of the type offered by some charities. They wanted someone that they could turn to when they experienced setbacks in looking for work.

Missed opportunities to improve job-seekers’ basic skills – Jobcentre Plus had given some people advice about training or referred people to training provision to increase their chances of work. However, not everyone received this type of help. There were missed opportunities to address claimants lack of basic skills, such as poor literacy or limited digital skills.

Recommendations

The research shows that some Walsall residents face significant barriers to finding or moving up in work. Drawing on these findings, we propose eight areas for action for the West Midlands Combined Authority, organisations involved in delivering Walsall’s economic strategy, the Pathfinder working group, the organisations involved in planning and delivering the community hub and Walsall’s employment support strategy:

Some Walsall residents are missing out on employment support, either because they do not qualify for employment support or because they are not aware of the services on offer.

Recommendation 1 – Walsall residents should be offered a universal and targeted employment support and skills offer, informed by an understanding of residents’ needs. The universal offer should aim to make sure that all local residents know where to get help

to look for work, a range of upskilling and reskilling provision and business support that is available to them. Its targeted offer needs to focus on (i) people who are employed or economically inactive who face the most barriers to work and (ii) people in precarious or low-paid work, including people in low-paid self-employment.

Walsall Council has committed to developing an employment support and skills hub. To be successful, it needs a clear brand and be able to offer flexible support to respond to residents' different and sometimes complex barriers to work.

Recommendation 2 – Building on practice elsewhere in the UK, Walsall Council, Walsall College and Jobcentre Plus need to be lead partners in the proposed hub which needs a clear brand and high street presence. The hub should act as a single sign-posting and referral point for people who need employment support and skills provision, as well as being a single contact point for employers who may have vacancies or the capacity to offer work experience placements or apprenticeships. It could also provide co-located health promoting activities, financial advice and other support, and involve the charity sector and volunteers in activities such as a job club.

Civil society organisations are offering employment support in Walsall, providing a more relational service complementing the employment support offered by Jobcentre Plus.

Recommendation 3 – Organisations involved in developing the proposed community hub should aim to increase the involvement of Walsall's civil society sector and of volunteers in this provision.

An estimated 20,000 Walsall residents are working in low-paid or insecure employment, including low-paid self-employment with few routes to career progression.

Recommendation 4 – Walsall Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority, the Black Country Chamber of Commerce and relevant employers should look at ways to increase the business development support to self-employed workers. Organisations involved in developing the community hub should work with the National Careers Service, the WMCA, employers, the local Chamber of Commerce and social landlords to review and improve the employment support and skills offer to people in work, with the aim of offering more training in workplaces.

Caring obligations are a barrier to work for some local residents, with Census 2021 showing 9% of males and 11.4% of females in Walsall providing unpaid care each week to children and older or disabled adults. While the extension of free early education to children aged nine months or over will help some parents move back into work, Walsall nurseries may struggle deliver this Budget 2023 commitments because of staff shortages.

Recommendation 5 – Walsall Council should undertake a childcare sufficiency assessment and take steps to fill gaps in provision. Where staff shortages are causing gaps in provision, interventions might include working with the West Midlands Combined Authority to examine ways to make childcare and social care a more attractive career

proposition, looking at options such as offering free public transport, training bursaries and keyworker social housing for childcare staff.

Transport is a barrier to work for some Walsall residents, including people who have to work at night when public transport is not running. Some employers also struggle to recruit staff because of poor public transport links.

Recommendation 6 – The West Midlands Combined Authority should undertake research that identifies gaps in transport provision. Drawing on its findings the West Midlands Combined Authority should set up a taskforce involving employers, councils and transport operators to look at ways to address transport barriers to work.

Poor digital, English language, literacy and numeracy skills are barriers to work for some Walsall residents. There are missed opportunities to address poor skills when people come into contact with Jobcentre Plus.

Recommendation 7 – Organisations involved in the Walsall employment and skills hub work with the DWP and the WMCA to explore ways to co-commission local provision that makes sure that those using Jobcentre Plus provision receive a formal assessment of their basic skills and are referred to courses to address skills gaps.

Walsall residents lack awareness or have misconceptions about the employment support and skills provision that is available to them.

Recommendation 8 – Organisations involved in the proposed hub should work with the WMCA and social landlords to develop a region-wide public information campaign to raise awareness about employment support and skills provision that is on offer. It should also involve the charity sector to deliver a skills champion programme, where volunteers talk about the range of skills and employment support provision that is available.

Introduction

In many parts of England employment and skills services are fragmented, with responsibility for policy, funding and delivery sitting across a number of central government departments and local bodies. This lack of coherence can make it challenging for local areas to make best use of the investment from government to meet the needs of residents and the local economy, to improve employment and skills outcomes, and to address broader economic and social challenges.

The Levelling Up White Paper made the committed to address this fragmentation and bring greater alignment to the delivery of employment support and skills provision, initially through three Pathfinder pilots in Barking and Dagenham, Blackpool and Walsall. Pathfinder pilots are led by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). At a local level they have brought together local strategic and delivery partners from Jobcentre Plus, councils and combined or mayoral authorities, careers services, local employers and education and training providers with the aim of better aligning employment support and skills training, so that residents are better able to:

- Access the right employment and or skills support, irrespective of which organisation they first encounter
- Get the right support to help them into work or to increase their earnings
- Move off benefits or out of low paid work following an employment and skills intervention, and
- Know about and have access to employment support and skills opportunities.

To inform the work of the Walsall Pathfinder, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to undertake research to understand the decision making made by residents and their perceptions, motivations and behaviour in relation to job-seeking, work and access to employment support and training. The research also looked at ways to improve the delivery of employment and skills infrastructure for Walsall that better engages and meets the needs of residents.

Context

The research took place at a time of changing policy in relation to employment support and skills. There has been an increase in economic inactivity over the pandemic, with 600,000 people leaving the labour market, leaving employers struggling to fill posts. In this context, policymakers have discussed the merits of extending Jobcentre Plus and DWP-commissioned provision to include economically inactive people who want to work. L&W analysis suggests that Jobcentre Plus or DWP-commissioned provision currently misses nine out of ten 50-64 year olds, nine out of ten disabled people and four out of ten 18-24 year olds who are economically inactive (and not in full-time education)¹. The 2023 Spring

¹ Evans, S (2022) *Towards Full Employment*, Leicester: Learning and Work Institute.

Budget announced some widening of employment support provision to include some economically inactive young people. From September 2023 (and in stages), 16-25 year olds receiving Universal Credit, but in the 'no work conditionality' group will be eligible for employment support on a voluntary basis from Jobcentre Plus Youth Hubs and youth coaches. A new voluntary employment support programme for people with health conditions and disabilities called Universal Support was also announced in the Spring 2023 Budget, which will provide more intensive support from work coaches and in-work employment support from 2024². Although detail is lacking, this provision may be extended to some economically inactive people.

Over the last five years, the DWP has increased its support offered to people who are in work. Its *In Work Progression* support allows people who are in work and receiving Universal Credit to receive Jobcentre Plus coaching. Recently 12 new in-work progression coaches have been appointed to work in Black Country Jobcentre Plus offices, with the intention to expand this team so that every Jobcentre has an in-work progression coach. There is scope for Walsall stakeholders to be involved with the planning and delivery of the DWP's in-work progression offer.

The West Midlands Combined Authority

With a population of 284,100, Walsall is one of the seven local authorities which are part of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). In August 2019, the WMCA took over responsibility for the Adult Education Budget (AEB) from central government. Prior to devolution of the AEB, much skills provision in the area was at entry level to Level 2, with limited progression into employment, and a limited offer for employed adults. The WMCA set out to address these shortcomings through the implementation of its 2018 Regional Skills Plan and its Plan for Growth. As well as supporting a high-wage, high skill economy, these strategies aimed to address a low employment rate in some parts of the WMCA and low skills levels among some sectors of the population, alongside persistent skills shortages faced by employers.

The WMCA's £128 million AEB budget has focussed on (i) people who are unemployed, including basic skills and employability provision, Skills Bootcamps and the Sector Based Work Academy Programme (SWAPs) (ii) increasing the skills among people who are in work (iii) addressing skills shortages in the construction sector (iv) increasing digital skills, including through digital bootcamp provision (v) skills provision associated with the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games and Coventry 2021 City of Culture (vi) innovation funding to develop new delivery models provision (vii) a community education offer, focussing on wellbeing, family education, digital inclusion and basic skills.

Organisations currently funded to deliver AEB provision in Walsall are listed in the technical addendum attached to this report.

² HM Treasury (2023) *Spring Budget 2023 factsheet – Labour Market Measures*, London: HM Treasury.

A new WMCA Adult Education Budget Strategy was published in late 2022³, taking forward the aims of the 2018 Regional Skills Strategy. This sets out the combined authority's aims in four areas:

- Increasing employability and progression into work – through basic skills and employability provision, Skills Bootcamps, SWAPs and provision to meet labour shortages, for example in health and social care
- Upskilling and reskilling people in employment, including investment in higher level provision
- Basic skills provision: ESOL, literacy, numeracy and digital inclusion
- A community education offer, including a new Community Fund and increased emphasis on digital inclusion.

The new WMCA strategy highlights gaps in skills provision at Level 3 and above in Walsall and will take steps to address this supply shortages through new commissioning of AEB-funded provision.

Employment support and skills provision in Walsall

Walsall Council's new Economic Strategy and Action Plan sets out the council's intention to build a happier, healthier and more economically prosperous Borough for all its residents. Employment support and skills provision is one of the key components to achieve this ambition and is being taken forward by Walsall Works, the council's employment support programme⁴. Walsall Works was set up in 2012 in response to youth unemployment. It is funded by the council, the WMCA and DWP to deliver a number of programme to local residents, for example, as a local subcontractor for the Restart programme.

Walsall Council will receive £8.25 million of UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies over a three-year period from April 2022 to March 2025, (in addition to £1.78 million to boost numeracy through the new Multiply programme)⁵. Some of this funding will be used to deliver a local community-based employment support hub, although not until April 2024⁶. It is intended that the Walsall Pathfinder will help to develop the new community hub.

Employment support and skills provision is also offered by Walsall College, Walsall Housing and a number of for-profit and not-for-profit providers in Walsall. Walsall College runs a large Sector Based Work Academy Programme (SWAP), covering in construction, distribution, hospitality, retail and social care sectors. Some 16 other further education colleges in the region are delivering AEB-funded courses to Walsall residents. Some 15

³ West Midlands Combined Authority (2022) *WMCA Adult Education Budget 2022-2025 Strategy*, Birmingham: WMCA.

⁴ Walsall Council (2022) *Draft Economic Strategy and Action Plan (ESAP)*, Walsall: Walsall Council.

⁵ UK Shared Prosperity Fund paper presented to Walsall Council Cabinet meeting, 14 December 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

local and national charities also deliver employment support or skills provision, some of which receive AEB or DWP funding to provide these services. There are also 35 for-profit independent training providers which receive AEB, DWP or council funding to deliver services. Another 12 independent training providers offering learner or employer-funded provision. A list of these organisations is given in the technical addendum to the report.

It can be seen there are a large number of employment support and skills providers offering services with Walsall residents. In the past there have also been relatively few opportunities for many of these organisations to collaborate with each other. This situation risks gaps in provision or the duplication of services. Led by the DWP, the Pathfinder aims to address these issues, and to encourage the development of a more cohesive employment support and skills offer that better meets residents' needs through collaboration and partnership working, strategic planning and operational delivery, better local insight and improved employer engagement. Further information about the Pathfinder's plan of work in Walsall is included in the technical addendum to this report.

Methodology

The research was undertaken in the autumn 2022 and took a mixed methods approach, comprising:

1. A desk review of existing quantitative and qualitative research about Walsall's residents and the employment support, careers advice and skills training available to them.
2. Mapping of existing employment support and skills provision in Walsall.
3. Online interviews with nine stakeholders in the local authority, including representatives of the local college, council, social housing providers, independent training providers and civil society organisations.
4. In-depth interviews with 25 Walsall residents who were economically inactive, unemployed or in low-paid or precarious work.
5. Two face-to-face focus group discussions with residents of Birchills and Leamore, and St Matthew's wards in central Walsall. It was decided to focus on these two wards because unemployment and economic inactivity are both higher than the West Midlands average in these wards.

Further information about research methodology, including the demographic and social background of the residents is included in the technical addendum attached to this report.

Research findings

This section of the report gives a summary of the background of the 37 residents who took part in in-depth one-to-one interviews or focus groups. It also presents a population segmentation that could be used to inform the planning of employment support and skills provision.

Of the 37 residents who took part in the research, 10 people were employed in insecure or casual roles, including with zero hours contracts. Their time spent in employment had usually been inter-dispersed with periods of unemployment. A further nine residents were employed in more secure roles, with guaranteed hours, including some part-time workers who wanted to take on more hours. Some eight people were long-term unemployed, having been out of work for more than 12 months and five people had been unemployed for less than a year. Five people were economically inactive. Further information about the demographic and social background interviewees is given at the end of this report.

Residents had many different experiences of finding and progressing in work. Some interviewees had strengths or protective factors that they could draw on to help them find work. Protective assets included relevant qualifications, transferrable skills, job-seeking and career planning strategies, supportive family or peer networks and good labour market information. However, some people also experience adverse or risk factors that limited their ability to find and stay in work, such as poor health, few qualifications, poor job-search strategies or the inability to access employment support.

Residents' perceptions of Walsall's labour market

Walsall grew from a number of villages in the 16th century to a prosperous town of nearly 100,000 people by 1850. This expansion was a result of its thriving metal and leather industries – at its height, Walsall made more saddles and light leather goods than any other place in the world. The importance of leather and metals to the local economy has shrunk, due to changing demand and competition from abroad. Despite the loss of these traditional industries, Walsall still has a strong manufacturing base, with this sector employing 11,000 people (Table 1). But outside of manufacturing, most of the workforce are employed in low-skill low-wage sectors. There is also a significantly lower number of workers in higher value 'knowledge economy' sectors when compared to the Great Britain average⁷. At £571 per week, the average gross weekly earnings for a full-time worker are 12.4% lower than the Greater Britain average.

⁷ Hawksbee, A., Fraser, F. Tanner, W. (2022) *Levelling Up in Practice, Walsall Interim Report*, London: UK Onward.

Table 1: Employee jobs in Walsall, 2021

Industry sector	Jobs	Percentage of jobs, Walsall	Percentage of jobs, WMCA	Percentage of jobs, GB
Manufacturing	11,000	11%	9.1%	7.6%
Water and waste management	1,250	1.2%	0.9%	0.7%
Construction	4,000	4%	3.8%	4.9%
Wholesale, retail, repair of motor vehicles	18,000	18%	15.2%	14.1%
Transportation and storage	8,000	8%	5.1%	5.1%
Accommodation and food	4,500	4.5%	5.9%	7.5%
Information and communications	1,000	1%	3.2%	4.5%
Financial and insurance activities	2,000	2%	2.9%	3.6%
Professional, scientific and technical services	3,500	3.5%	7.4%	3.9%
Administration and support services	12,000	12%	11%	8.9%
Public administration and defence	2,500	2.5%	4.2%	4.6%
Education	10,000	10%	9.7%	8.5%
Human health and social work	15,000	15%	15.3%	13.7%

Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, 2021.

People need labour market information when they are deciding on their career path, balancing their aspirations with local conditions and their chances of finding employment in the areas that interest them. They need to know about jobs on offer so they can make decisions about the skills and qualifications they may need in future. Knowledge about the local labour market also helps people looking for work or to upskill to consider their transferable skills⁸.

Inaccurate information about local labour market decisions can contribute to unemployment, if people spend time searching for jobs in declining industries. Many people also overestimate the size of the manufacturing sector or may not be aware of the range of service sector employment. Migrants and refugees, in particular, may not have accurate local labour market information because they may not have had the opportunities to gain this knowledge⁹.

This section examines the sharing of local labour market information and Walsall residents' perceptions of the local labour market.

⁸ Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2004) Labour Market Information Matters, Coventry: LSC.

⁹ Marshall, T. (1991) The cultural aspects of job-seeking, London: Refugee Council.

Social networks and labour market information

Residents discussed how information about local labour market conditions and job opportunities is shared within their social networks, emphasising the importance of word-of-mouth information and recommendations in finding work. Personal connections were often seen as more helpful than online job boards.

“My son was out of work for about six months at one point and he got a phone call one night from a guy he used to work with somewhere else, who'd started at this new place and he said, 'Jobs going here.' So he applied and he was working there for about two years.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Social isolation has been shown to be a risk factor in long-term unemployment¹⁰. Some of residents who were furthest from the labour market appeared to be the most socially isolated, without a supportive network of family or friends to share local labour market information and give informal advice and support.

Research also suggests that people with the fewest qualifications tend to rely more on social networks to exchange labour market knowledge or find work¹¹. But where many people are unemployed or engaged in low-skill or low-paid work within a network, the value of labour market and training knowledge that is exchanged in networks is lower.

Social networks can also reinforce misinformation and strategies and decisions that prevent people moving into work or upskilling. For example, one interviewee explained with confidence that no-one could study at Walsall College while claiming benefits, a view that seemed to have been widely shared among his peers.

Local stakeholders interviewed also believed felt that social networks were an important means of sharing information – and misinformation – about the local labour market, vacancies and employment support and skills provision that is available. Those planning such services in Walsall may wish to consider how they might increase the value of labour market knowledge shared within networks – for example, by recruiting volunteers who can act as training or employment support ‘champions’ in their locality or community¹².

Perceptions about Walsall

Residents were asked about their views of Walsall and if they had considered moving away for work. People balanced their positive views about the town with concerns about crime and town centre decline. There was pride in Walsall’s industrial past, particularly its leather industry, and places such as the Leather Museum and Arboretum. Most people felt that Walsall was friendly, and that housing was affordable, with these two factors keeping

¹⁰ Phillips, A. (2022) *Working Together: the case for universal employment support*, London: Demos.

¹¹ Sumption, M. (2009) *Social networks and Polish immigration to the UK*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

¹² Learning and Work Institute (2019) *Parent champion programmes; A guide for family learning providers*, Leicester: Learning and Work Institute.

people in the town. One resident, quoted below, described her views about Walsall. She has lived in Walsall for 28 years. Although she had the opportunity to leave when her marriage broke down, she decided to remain. She likes living close to Birmingham but does not like the decline in the town centre.

“Well, I’ve stayed. I had the opportunity to leave three years ago when I left my relationship. So, I stayed. So, yes, I must like it...I don’t like some of the areas in Walsall. I think they’re quite run down and poverty stricken.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Perceptions about jobs in Walsall

All the residents who were interviewed held the view that there were relatively few medium- or high-skilled jobs available in Walsall. They said there were few skilled part-time roles available, most of the jobs were low-paid and often insecure, and that seasonal and agency work was prevalent. There was a view that people who wanted better paid work would need to look for jobs in Birmingham and be able to travel there.

“There’s not so much in the area. Birmingham would be the main place. There are not really many jobs within Walsall. It’s quite small. There aren’t that many businesses. Primarily all in Birmingham and then the salaries aren’t as good in Walsall as they are in Birmingham.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Residents tended to see distribution, hospitality and retail as the largest industrial sectors that employed people, with few people mentioning construction, manufacturing or health and social care as industrial sectors employing significant numbers of people in Walsall (see Table 1 above). This perception may mean that people do not consider reskilling in order to find work in these areas. Some people also held the view that the size of Walsall’s labour market was decreasing as a result of redundancies in hospitality, retail and manufacturing.

“At the moment there’s an Amazon warehouse where they employ quite a lot of people and I know that Walsall Council is reducing their services, and ultimately they’re going over to the private sector. In the retail, Marks and Spencer’s closed down, Debenham’s has closed down, and those two shops employed a lot of people and they’ve gone. There’s always jobs going in the pubs, like working behind the bar or to work in the kitchens because they have a high turnover of staff.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

There are proportionally more low-paid, low-skilled jobs in Walsall, compared with the West Midlands’ average. But this does not mean that there are no better paid jobs in the local authority, nor no chances of career progression. Perceptions about the dominance of low-paid, low-skilled employment in Walsall can have a number of negative impacts. Those with higher level qualifications may move away from the area. As previously noted this view also impacts on career planning for those who stay in the area, restricting people’s ambitions and desire to undertake further and higher education or training

courses. One interviewee told us *“there is no point in studying if you want to stay in Walsall”*.

Views about the prevalence of low-paid, low-skilled jobs may also deter or delay economically inactive people from making a decision to look for work. Parents may delay their decision to return to work if they see little value in trying to juggle work and childcare if the jobs on offer are low paid and have no promotion prospects¹³. Among people who are unemployed, views about the prevalence of low paid jobs reinforce a belief that work does not pay and it is not worth their while to upskill and actively look for work. For example, a resident quoted below was long-term unemployed after previously working in construction. He had recently taken part in the Restart programme and now had Work to Work obligations which required him to complete a certain number of job applications each week. Apart from fulfilling this requirement, he did not appear to be taking other steps to look for work, believing that the work he could find would not pay.

“There’s various jobs near the area of Walsall available. Minimum wage all the time, and I don’t really want to go back to factory work because they don’t pay enough. And they expect you to work all day long. They only give you, if they’re paying £9.50 an hour they probably only give you £5 an hour or something like that.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Perceptions about risky jobs

Some residents felt that some jobs or areas of work were too risky to consider, because of the impact that undertaking this work could have on benefits. Taking on a job on a zero-hours contract was felt to be too risky, as a person could be left without any benefits if they did not get work. This perception had led to people not considering work in sectors such as hospitality or retail where they believed zero-hours contracts were prevalent.

“I don’t even know what they’re giving you, like, if you would have a set amount of hours. I mean, one time they’d say, you’d go in for the job and it’s 37 hours. But then it could be like a zero hours’ contract, and the thing is, that’s what would scare me.” (In-depth interview with Walsall resident)

Green jobs

The Government has committed to two million green jobs by 2030. To meet this target and net zero commitment will require Walsall residents to see green jobs as career choices and take part in relevant training or apprenticeship programmes. Residents were asked if they had heard about green jobs being advertised, for example, in recycling, renewable energy, home insulation or heating. Only one person seemed familiar with the term ‘green job without prompting – this was someone who had a family member who had considered a job in waste recycling. For everyone else, green jobs was an unfamiliar term prior to prompting. No-one had considered employment in these industries, with one person

¹³ See Ben-Galim, D. and Thompson, S. (2013) *Who’s Breadwinning: working mothers and the new face of family support*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

saying that a green job would require training at college and that would stop someone working in the short-term.

“I think you have to do college for that [a green job], wouldn't you? Courses and that, college. And it's like, leaving a paid job to go to college aren't you? Probably works out better in the end, but how are the bills going to be paid at the moment?” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Some of the stakeholders who were interviewed also reported that many residents were not aware of the future green job market or had misconceptions about training for them. They felt that there was a need to ‘champion’ green jobs in the local authority – to young people at school, as well as people looking for work or to reskill.

Views about the informal economy

In all parts of the UK, an informal (cash-in-hand) economy sits alongside the formal economy. The hidden nature of the informal economy means that it is difficult to research and measure, with estimates ranging from 95,000¹⁴-2.5 million¹⁵ people undertaking cash-in-hand work in UK. Labour Force Survey estimated 20,000 people working in informal sector in West Midlands in 2018 – 9,000 in agriculture/horticulture and 11,000 outside agriculture. Research suggests that sectors where cash-in-hand work is more prevalent include agriculture and horticulture, cleaning and domestic services, construction, food packing and processing, hair and beauty, hospitality, retail. For people who have the legal right to work in the UK, drivers of informal sector work include economic need and fear of losing benefits (including housing benefit) and greater work flexibility. Informal sector employment in roles such as cleaning can often be fitted around caring responsibilities.

Some residents interviewed for this research were undertaking informal, cash-in-hand work, as cleaners, drivers, handymen, in hospitality, as fitness coaches or counsellors. Those undertaking this work included economically inactive people and people who defined themselves as employed.

Residents believed that it was easy to find informal sector work in Walsall, particularly in domestic services, construction or hospitality. Other evidence supports this assertion; the research team found advertisements that specified ‘cash-in-hand’ jobs Walsall on the jobs noticeboard Indeed, as well in an employment agency in the town centre.

“There's a lot of home working jobs. I'm on local Facebook groups for Aldridge and there's quite a few people always advertising on there for labourers and things.” (in-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Policy responses to the informal economy falls under the remit of HMRC, the Home Office, and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority. From an employment support and

¹⁴ ONS Labour Force Survey, 2019.

¹⁵ Katungi, D., Neale E and Barbour A. (2006) *People in low-paid informal work*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

skills perspective, it is important to acknowledge the role that informal employment plays in decisions about employment. Those receiving benefits may perceive informal sector work as a viable survival strategy and this may decrease their motivation to look for work in the formal economy. Most informal sector work is low-paid with very limited routes to career progression. There is a risk that people can become trapped in such forms of employment.

Policy and practice implications in Walsall

Careers education in schools and colleges needs to make sure that students receive information about the local labour market, including future employment opportunities through the creation of green jobs. Those offering employment support and careers advice to adults need to cover local labour market opportunities, taking time to address misconceptions that most jobs are low-paid and low-skilled. This information also needs to reach people who are economically inactive, particularly parents of young children and social landlords. Sure Start children's centres may have a role to play in disseminating this information, through a jobs and skills champion scheme which we discuss later in this report.

Those planning employment support and skills provision in Walsall need to make sure that services enable people to move into secure forms of work. As discussed later in the report, this involves making sure that people know about and take up skills provision. In-work training and mentoring also needs to reach self-employed people.

Barriers to finding and progressing in work

This section draws together evidence from the qualitative research with residents on their barriers to work, demonstrating that Walsall residents face multiple and inter-related barriers to work on different levels:

- (i) Personal capability barriers to work, for example, a lack of relevant skills, qualification and experiences, low motivation and confidence, poor career planning capabilities or poor health.
- (ii) Structural barriers to work. These include, for example a mismatch of a person's experiences and skills with the local jobs on offer, limited transport or childcare, a lack of appropriate employment support provision.
- (iii) Informational and perceptual barriers to work with residents lacking information about sources of help, or their perceptions about the local labour market deterring them from taking up work or training. Residents' perceptions about the local labour market are explored in greater detail in Section Five of this report.

Personal capability, structural, informational and perceptual barriers interact with each other and influence people's job-seeking and career planning decisions.

Qualifications, skills and experiences

The possession of qualifications and skills are strongly associated with the likelihood of people finding work¹⁶. In Walsall, as in other parts of the UK, there is a skills mismatch between those who are out of work (whether unemployed or economically inactive) and the jobs available, with many workless people lacking the required skills to fill vacancies. Almost all of the residents who were interviewed lacked higher level qualifications (Level 4 and above). Some people possessed lower level academic and vocational qualifications while others had no qualifications.

Most residents, however did not put much emphasis on a lack of qualifications or training as a barrier work, in comparison to employment experience and other barriers to work. They did not describe training as a means of addressing these barriers and finding work. Most people believed that it was possible to find work in Walsall without needing to study. They placed much more emphasis on the importance of having relevant work experience making to find employment.

“I’m sure there are courses that you can go on to improve your self-esteem and confidence boosting...but I haven’t really looked for them.” (in-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Overall, the resident interviews suggested there was a lack of engagement with Walsall’s skills. Some people felt that “going back to college” was not for them, and some people did not know about the range of courses on offer or know that there was free provision. Some people did not think that they could balance study with work or caring obligations. Some residents believed that availability for work conditions associated with receiving benefits meant that they could not study.

Clearly, addressing the lack of engagement with the local skills offer is an issue that the Pathfinder and the proposed employment support and skills hub needs to address.

Functional skills: literacy, English language fluency, numeracy and digital skills

Local stakeholders interviewed for this research believed that digital exclusion and a lack of soft skills and functional literacy were barriers to finding work for at least 30% of the adult population of Walsall, a view supported by a range of local and national data including Census 2021.

Across the UK there are an estimated 9.2 million people who lack the functional literacy needed to read a train timetable or complete a job application¹⁷. Evidence from the resident interviews concurs with these national trends and shows that some people struggled with basic literacy. For example, one focus group participant was unable to read

¹⁶ Office for National Statistics Unemployment Scarring: Predicted probabilities of returning to work by demographic dataset, 2007-2021.

¹⁷ National Literacy Trust estimate, 2019.

the instructions he had received from the recruiter, asking the research team to read it for him. This person was unemployed and required to look for work but did not appear to have been referred to a course to boost his literacy skills. Yet contact with Jobcentre Plus and preparation for work requirements are opportunities to address deficits in basic skills. Another person had very limited digital skills, saying she “*did not know how to use a computer.*” She knew this was a barrier to work but seemed unable to access help to address this. These examples highlight missed opportunities to address barriers to work. An assessment of basic skills when a person first comes in contact with Jobcentre Plus would help to address this issue.

Stakeholders felt that digital exclusion was a significant barrier to work for many people in Walsall. Ofcom data suggests that approximately 13% of the adult population in the UK – around one in eight people – are internet non-users, a figure that remains almost unchanged since 2014¹⁸. A further 10% of the UK are limited users, facing barriers which restrict their engagement with online life on a day-to-day basis, such as limited skills or sharing devices. A lack of fluency in English may compound digital exclusion. Yet job recruitment practices have seen a revolution over the last 15 years with the shift to online job applications.

Digital capability and exclusion emerged as significant barriers to work for many residents who were interviewed. Some people had been sent on courses to improve their digital skills by their Jobcentre Plus or Restart coaches but still appeared to lack the ability to make best use of digital jobs platforms such as Indeed¹⁹. Some unemployed residents had to fulfil DWP obligations that required them to complete specified numbers of job applications each week, and they talked about the challenges of fulfilling this obligation without access to technology. Some residents told us that they could no longer afford internet packages at home, which made it difficult to apply for jobs. Some people did not own a tablet or laptop. Interviewees said that there were time limits placed on internet use at public libraries, which also made it difficult to apply for jobs. Residents explained that they sometimes visited McDonalds or the bus station, specifically for the wifi connection that would enable them to complete an online job application.

“You can go to the library and use the computer for 15 minutes but that’s it, you can’t do anything with that if you’re not very good with a computer.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Employment support and skills provision in Walsall will need to address broader digital exclusion rather than just gaps in people’s digital skills. The proposed community hub may wish to provide access to a computer and wifi connection; the Refugee and Migrant Centre already offers such a service for its clients and has found that this helps them move into

¹⁸ Ofcom (2020) *Adults’ media use and attitudes report 2020*, London: Ofcom.

¹⁹ Indeed’s selection processes use keywords to filter candidates who most closely match a role where large numbers of applications are received for a most. Applicants who do not use these key words in their online applications are usually not selected for interview.

work. Walsall Housing has also piloted alternative recruitment practices that do not disadvantage those with limited digital skills or connectivity, organising 'pop up' employment support, setting up a stall and at a community event or in places that had a large public footfall. Here, job applicants were given help to apply for work in a simplified process. Employers could work with the proposed community hub partners to increase this type of recruitment practice.

Soft skills and social confidence

Time management, motivation, confidence and communication skills were considered by local stakeholders to be key barriers to employment among Walsall residents. Residents may lack confidence in their ability to apply for a job, undertake an interview or return to formal learning settings to upskill or reskill. Repeated setbacks in looking for work also dented people's motivation to carry on looking for work.

The resident interviews supported this assertion and some residents described their lack of confidence in interviews.

"Being able to express myself in an interview is a big challenge for me.. it makes me really anxious." (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

"I do think that these days, it's very difficult to get a job. I mean, to be honest, I think I would lack confidence going for a job, I do. I think I would lack confidence. Even going for a Morrison's job...I wouldn't know how to act in an interview anymore, I wouldn't know what to do." (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Confidence also appeared to have an impact on some residents' desire to undertake training; one resident stated that he did not want to go back to college because he did not have the confidence to go back into the classroom and study with young people. Such a lack of confidence tends to be felt most acutely by people who had negative experiences of education or who left school with few or lower-level qualifications. Confidence is also associated with social connectivity and age, with younger and more isolated people often being less confident²⁰. Pre-employment courses, employment support and apprenticeships need to make sure that they address participants' low confidence. Those planning and delivering skills provision need to be aware that a lack of confidence may prevent people from taking up education and training opportunities.

Career planning skills

Career planning is another soft skill that impacts on people's ability to find work or progress in employment. Most residents broadly knew what types of work they wanted to do and what they wanted to achieve, but most did not have a clear career pathway or the skills and motivation to meet their goals. There also appeared to be differences between residents in and out of work in relation to career planning skills and aspirations. People who were not working had much less specific job aspirations and usually did not have

²⁰ Savage, M. (2015) *Social Class in the 21st century*, London: Pelican Books.

clear paths to achieve them than those who were in employment. For example, one long-term unemployed resident who had previously been a sheet metal worker stated that he wanted a job in retail, as he felt that this type of work would be compatible with his health. He had taken part in the Restart scheme, where he had received more intensive coaching and a two-week course to improve his basic digital skills, but had not been sent on any retail-related training or encouraged to undertake voluntary work in a charity shop. He had no relevant work experience in the retail sector and he was applying for retail jobs online and without any success. Making sure that everyone who comes into contact with Jobcentre Plus is helped to develop their career planning skills would help to address this barrier to work.

Health and disabilities

In October 2022, nearly nine million people were economically inactive, with some 2.6 million of whom saying they were inactive because of a health condition or disability, a figure that has increased since the start of the pandemic. The Office for National Statistics' Over 50s Lifestyle Study²¹ showing that of people who had left work since the start of the pandemic, 13% had left because of illness or disability and 10% had left for stress or mental health reasons. Having a disability or long-term health conditions are strongly associated with worklessness, with both being significant barriers to work.

Some of the residents who were interviewed had health conditions which included severe anxiety, other mental health conditions, addictions, and physical health conditions. Some people talked openly about their struggles with their mental health, particularly anxiety and depression. For some people, these conditions had contributed to periods of economic inactivity.

One interviewee with severe epilepsy last had a job 12 years ago, working in a music studio but he was let go without reason. He still had the ambition of finding work, ideally offering private music lessons as he would enjoy it and could manage it around his condition. Yet he had not been able to access any advice and help in to achieve this aim; his status as economically inactive meant that he was excluded from Jobcentre Plus and DWP-commissioned provision.

“Everything I could probably think of doing would be going self-employed because I've been my own boss doing my own hours.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

For the most part, however, people with health conditions were required to look for work. At the same time, poor health, particularly poor mental health, impacted on their ability to find and secure employment. Health or disabilities impact on the type of job people look for, and their engagement with job-seeking support²². Conditions such as anxiety and depression can impact on people's motivation to look for work. The job search strategies

²¹ This study included 13,803 responses from individuals who had previously taken part in the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, as well as individual in-depth interviews.

²² Wilson, H. and Finch, D. (2021) *Unemployment and mental health: Why both require action for our COVID-19 recovery*, London: Health Foundation.

of some of the residents who described their poor mental health appeared to comprise fulfilling Jobcentre Plus obligations to apply for a set number of jobs and little else. This highlights the need for intensive and motivation-focused employment support for people experiencing poor mental health.

Caring obligations

Census 2021 showing 9% of males and 11.4% of females in Walsall providing unpaid care each week to children and older or disabled adults. Some of the women taking part in the research had caring obligations for children, disabled or elderly relatives and for all of them these duties had an impact on their career decisions. For example, some carers described staying in jobs that had few career prospects because it fitted around their caring obligations.

“I don’t work on Friday and spend my time caring for my disabled sister. I generally look after her over the weekend, to help out my parents who are in their seventies.... I’ve stayed in a job where I can take Friday off.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

For some parents, perceptions that childcare was unaffordable stopped them looking for work. Some parents also felt there was a shortage of affordable provision, for example, school holiday childcare. Carers who were looking for work tended to look for jobs that were part-time work and close to their home.

“I remember applying for a job once at Tesco and they wanted me there from 9:00 until 4:00. It didn’t fit with me because I’d got to get my children to school and I’d got to pick them up from school, so I couldn’t do anything like that, I couldn’t do any of those hours.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Some carers had remained in part-time, low-paid or precarious work because this could be fitted around caring responsibilities. The interviews suggested that caring obligations were a driver of informal employment in Walsall.

Local stakeholders interviewed for this research believed that a lack of flexible and affordable childcare is a barrier to training and work. Local residents, again usually women, are also caring for elderly or disabled adults, with four of the residents who were interviewed having these responsibilities. These carers balanced their options, with the least-qualified opting not to work, not to upskill or reskill, or to remain in part-time work with limited opportunities for progression. But unlike people who are caring for children, there is much more limited support for those caring for elderly or disabled adults, who may face long-term barriers to their labour market participation.

Over the last 20 years much progress has been made to increase the amount of affordable childcare that is available. Currently, some two-year-old and all three and four-year-old children receive some free early education. The Spring 2023 Budget announced an extension of free early education. By September 2025, every child over the age of nine

months (when parental leave ends) will receive 30 hours free early education every week for 38 weeks of the year until they start school, unless a parent earns more than £100,000 a year. Parents in receipt of Universal Credit can have up to 85% of their childcare costs covered by this benefit up to a monthly cap which is being increased to £951 per month. Parents not receiving Universal Credit are able to claim a 20% childcare subsidy through the Tax-Free Childcare scheme.

Shortages of childcare may mean that these new initiatives have a limited impact on parents' ability to work. There are already shortages of holiday childcare in Walsall, with the council's most recent childcare sufficiency assessment undertaken in 2019 stating "*a third of registered provision (36%) is only available term-time, largely as a result of the predominance of maintained nursery provision for children accessing their free early learning entitlement.*"²³ There has been no expansion of holiday childcare provision since 2019.

Childcare providers across the UK have also highlighted a severe recruitment crisis in nurseries, mirroring the experiences of those delivering adult social care. This staffing crisis is being driven by historically low unemployment, changes to immigration policy which make it more difficult to recruit staff from abroad and more attractive pay and conditions in other work. In 2020 the [Social Mobility Commission](#) reported that the average wage across the early years workforce was £7.42 an hour, with 13% of the workforce – usually apprentices - earning less than £5.00 an hour²⁴. Ofsted's most recent annual report highlights the severity of the childcare staffing crisis, stating "*nurseries have closed because they cannot recruit or retain high-quality, qualified and experienced staff*". Walsall Council might consider undertaking a new childcare sufficiency assessment, which is an obligation required by the Childcare Act 2009. Where staff shortages are causing gaps in provision, the Walsall Council should consider working with the West Midlands Combined Authority to examine ways to make childcare and adult social care a more attractive career proposition, looking at options such as offering free public transport, training bursaries and keyworker social housing for childcare staff²⁵.

Travel and transport

While there are good transport links into Birmingham, stakeholder interviews identified poor transport public links across Walsall and to neighbouring local authorities as a barrier to work²⁶. Stakeholders also stated that many jobs in construction and social care require that people have access to a car and are able to drive. Some stakeholders were

²³ Walsall Council (2017) Childcare Sufficiency Plan, Walsall: Walsall Council.

²⁴ Social Mobility Commission (2020) *Stability of the Early Years Workforce*, London: Social Mobility Commission.

²⁵ Keyworker social housing is being offered to NHS workers in Birmingham in a move to recruit and retain staff.

²⁶ See also Hawksbee, A., Fraser, F. Tanner, W. (2022) *Levelling Up in Practice, Walsall Interim Report*, London: UK Onward.

concerned that the high cost of fuel and the pressures of inflation would mean that fewer young people would learn to drive. Half of the people who were interviewed in the focus groups were non-drivers and talked about how this restricted their ability to take up work. There was some debate in the focus group discussions about the quality of bus transport in Walsall, with some residents saying that the bus service was frequent and reliable and others disagreeing. Generally, residents are willing to travel to work, but weigh up transport costs with pay, meaning transport costs deter people from taking up low-paid work.

“It’s not worth going to Wolverhampton if you just get the minimum wage.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

“When my daughter was working at the same hotel as my son. My son’s been there for three years and he got a moped so he could easily get there and back, whatever he was doing. But my daughter was having to rely on the public transport... the buses are terrible at the moment. My daughter in the year that she was there, she spent over £1,000 on Uber taxis because of the buses not turning up for her.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Logistics/warehousing, hospitality, retail and health and social care jobs often require shift work. Residents talked about the lack of public transport late in the evening and at night making it difficult for people without cars to take up these jobs. Research participants said that Amazon provided a staff bus to take workers out to Rugeley in South Staffordshire, but the bus only went travelled once a day and did not fit around everyone’s shifts. A journey by train involves a lengthy walk from the station to the warehouse. This warehouse employs nearly 2,000 permanent staff and usually takes on an extra 2,500 staff in the run up to Christmas. Significant numbers of Walsall residents work in in the warehouse and public transport links from Walsall do seem poor for such a large employer.

Residents also stated that some employers would not take people on if they did not own a car. Distance to work was a barrier for people with caring obligations who felt they needed to be nearby to their child’s school or nursery, or an elderly relative *“in case I might be needed.”*

The interviews with residents suggest gaps in public transport, for example, to Amazon at Rugeley. It may be worthwhile for the West Midlands Combined Authority to undertake research that identifies gaps in public transport provision to work. Another intervention might be a taskforce involving the combined authority, employers, councils and transport operators to look at ways to address transport barriers to work. Some employers have supported carpools and online platforms such as Liftshare for Work. The Carers Trust and Motability run schemes to cover the cost of driving lessons for their respective client groups and these schemes should be publicised.

Structural barriers to employment and skills support

Some 21.2% of Walsall residents are economically inactive and research shows that economic inactivity is associated with a lower likelihood of finding work. This can be because economically inactive people often have different social characteristics to people who are unemployed, for example, caring responsibilities or physical and mental health conditions. But conditionality criteria also bar economically inactive people from Jobcentre Plus provision and most DWP-commissioned employment support, a policy that acts as a barrier to employment. None of the economically inactive participants in the focus groups of workless residents knew anything about local employment support and skills provision.

“If you're not signing on you don't get help. I don't [sign on] because I get Income Support, so I don't have to. But I want there to be a choice because I don't know who to approach if I want a job now. I look online, I do it myself but I haven't got a CV, that's where I'm finding it hard to get a job.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Organisations involved in the development of the Walsall community hub – which will target economically inactive people – need to consider how they reach economically inactive people who will not have Jobcentre Plus coaches to signpost or refer them to these services. Most economically inactive people in the focus groups were social housing tenants; social landlords could potentially play an important role in reaching out to and referring tenants to employment support and skills provision.

Discrimination

Some residents felt that different forms of discrimination acted as barriers to work. They believed that ageism was a barrier to work, both for school-leavers and for those over 50. A lack of relevant experience on a person's CV disadvantaged young people, irrespective of their qualifications and potential, and that older people would find it very difficult to get back into work if they were made redundant. This view is backed up with a wide range of evidence that shows evidence of age discrimination in employment, particularly in recruitment practices²⁷.

“People, in their late 50s, early 60s, of they lose their job they are on the scrap heap or whatever. They seem to think that they're not as good for the job as somebody, say, in their 30s or 40s.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident)

Some residents believed that word-of-mouth information and recommendations were still the best way to find work, particularly in sectors such as hospitality or retail. But it was felt that a disadvantage of word-of-mouth recruitment is that employers favoured people that they already knew or had connections with, or who came from their own community.

²⁷ A representative survey of more than 600 workers aged 50 or over for the campaign Stop Ageism showed that 44% said they had experienced ageism at work, with 48% of this group singling out the recruitment process.

“If you know someone, it is easier to get your foot in the door.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Some residents mentioned a further form of discrimination, believing that the long-term employed or economically inactive were treated unfairly in recruitment processes. For example, they said that gaps of more than six months in people’s employment record led to people’s job applications being dismissed without consideration.

“If a company gets a your CV it just gets put in the bin because of how long you've been out of work. They don't even look at it.” (Focus group interview, long-term unemployed Walsall resident).

Perceptions about being better off in work

There is extensive literature about factors that influence job and career choices. These include intrinsic factors such as personal interest and skills, as well as extrinsic factors such as remuneration, job security, job accessibility and hours. Different factors are balanced before people make a decision – for example, a job may be better paid, but it may be more difficult to balance with childcare, resulting in decision not to apply for this job.

Many residents talked about this balancing process. Some people had used a ‘Better Off in Work’ calculator to balance their financial gains through employment against losing benefits. But factors other than just remuneration influenced people’s decisions. Residents talked about balancing the disadvantages of low-paid job with the desire to be positive role models for their children. As previously noted, job security was a major consideration. People were worried that taking a job with a zero-hours contract would risk leaving them without benefits should they not be given sufficient hours of work. For people with caring obligations, low paid jobs with few promotion prospects were not sufficiently attractive to make it worthwhile to return to work.

The experience of one research participant illustrates how people balance their options. The resident was a 48-year-old woman with children and an elderly mother. Before starting a family she had spent over 20 years working in factories. She was now undertaking cash-in-hand work as a cleaner because she was able to fit this in with her caring obligations. She also enjoyed social aspects of this work. She had previously been claiming Universal Credit, but had declared her earnings which resulted in her benefits being stopped.

“I think I'd probably be better off not working, to be honest, because, the more I've declared what I do, the more I've been honest about it, the more it's, sort of like, made me worse off. Well, not so much worse off, but now I'm having to work for my money and I know that sounds really bad but, it's like, some people probably choose not to work because it's easier not to.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Summary

Walsall residents may face multiple and inter-related barriers to work and career progression on different levels. These relate to their personal capabilities, but there are also deep-seated structural barriers to work in Walsall, which will require a long-term commitment to levelling up. There is also much that those planning and delivering employment support and skills provision can do to increase people's chances of finding and staying in work. The opportunity of contact with Jobcentre Plus could be used to address gaps in functional skills. Addressing barriers to work will also require boosting people's job search skills, motivation and confidence through employment support programmes. Many people would benefit from health and wellbeing activities offered as part of an employment support package. This support needs to reach people who are economically inactive but want to work, as well as those who are unemployed.

There are also informational, perceptual and attitudinal barriers to work which those involved in the planning and delivery of employment support and skills provision need to address. Save for knowing that Walsall College offered training, almost all the residents we interviewed had very little awareness of sources of advice, employment support or free training. Put simply, people will not take up employment training opportunities if they do not know what is on offer. Perceptions about the Walsall labour market also impact on job-seeking strategies and the uptake of training.

Residents' experiences of using employment support and training provision

Most people move into work through their own actions, through online job searches, help from recruitment agencies word-of-mouth information and then applying for jobs without additional help. Some people need and receive further assistance, from Jobcentre Plus, DWP-commissioned programmes and a wide range of additional provision offered – by councils, colleges, social landlords, charities and independent training providers. This section focusses on the experiences of Walsall residents who were interviewed in using employment support and employment-related skills provision.

Services used by Walsall residents

Everyone who was interviewed was asked about the employment support services they had used to help them look for work. All knew about Jobcentre Plus. Some people who were long-term unemployed had taken part in the Restart programme, although it had not resulted in them moving into work. Outside Jobcentre Plus, people mentioned and had used:

- Ablewell Advice Centre – a church-run project that offers advice (on debt, housing) runs a foodbank and a job club. It also offers one-to-one employment support and basic IT skills. One person had received help with their CV alongside financial advice.

- Job Change –a Wolverhampton-based community interest company which also has an office in Walsall. It offers courses, mostly at Level 2 and below, as well as basic job-search and employability advice, for example, help with writing a CV.
- Performance Through People (now part of the BCTG Group) - a training provider, also supporting employers to provide and recruit apprenticeships, which started as an initiative from the then Walsall Chamber of Commerce.
- Steps to Work –a registered charity with an office in Walsall. It offers job search, careers advice, CV writing, computer points and information about training. The organisation also provides employment support to armed forces veterans. Steps to Work is a sub-contractor for the DWP Restart Programme and was the lead organisation for two European Social Fund Building Better Opportunities employment projects.
- The Thrive into Work programme (delivered by the Shaw Trust in the West Midlands), which offers intensive coaching and supported job placements for people with health conditions or addictions.
- One person had received help from a charity (presumably YMCA from the description). He has been given help to write his CV – he had been referred through an addiction charity. They had also given him help with his finances and referred him on to Steps to Work

Older people recollected employment support they had received in the past, mentioning the Youth Opportunities Programme (running from 1978 to 1983) and the Youth Training Scheme (running between 1983 and 1989), which suggested they had been unemployed in the past.

Some residents also mentioned Tudor Employment and Extra Personnel in the focus groups. The role of online platforms and recruitment and employment agencies is discussed below.

We asked people if they had heard of Walsall Works with one person knowing about this provision after looking on the council website. We explained to people who did not know about Walsall Works that this was a project to help people find work – similar to Steps to Work – but run by the council. This statement led to people to giving their opinion of the council services, particularly long waits for its telephone helpline. Confidence in the ability of the council to run a high-quality employment support service seemed low. Just one person in one group thought they had heard of the National Careers Service, again after prompting, but struggled to describe the services it offered.

These accounts suggest that there is a lack of awareness of the full range of employment support provision that is on offer, with residents unaware of potentially useful provision. The interviews also highlight the importance of a high street presence in reaching people;

Job Change, Performance through People and Steps to Work are all located in central Walsall.

Views about employment support

Residents were asked about their experiences of using employment support and how useful it had been in helping them find work. People who had used Jobcentre Plus usually spoke highly of individual Jobcentre Plus and Restart coaches, believing that they had gone out of their way to help them and that the support that they had been given had helped them move into work. This was balanced with the view that their relationship with their coaches felt transactional, and mostly influenced by compliance with benefit requirements, or by meeting Jobcentre Plus targets. People felt they did not get enough time with their job coach, or that their coach wanted them “*off their books*” to meet Jobcentre Plus targets.

“Jobcentre was most helpful, I think really, because they’re the ones who get you the qualifications and get your foot in the door in that way.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

“Performance Through People, they were lovely they gave me help with interview skills.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Some residents also believed that their work coach’s caseload was too high to offer them enough support. This group of residents wanted more frequent meetings with their coach and a more relational service of the type offered by some charities. They wanted someone that they could turn to when they experienced setbacks in looking for work. One resident felt that older people needed more intensive provision than younger people who may have been taught to write a CV at school.

“It would be good to have someone to phone you regularly.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

“The Jobcentre is sending me all these courses to do to learn these new techniques, but sometimes what people need is more like a life coach.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

“Because I think a lot of the services for things like that are aimed at younger people, fresh out of school. There are loads of people, there could be people who have been made redundant and they’re 45 and they have no idea how to write a job application. I just don’t know where they’d go for help.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Two residents had received financial advice alongside employment support, through by charities working in Walsall. Apart from these two examples, there seemed few cases of people receiving co-located help, for example, help to address health needs in the same place as employment support.

In work support

Some ten of the residents were employed in insecure work, which included cash-in-hand work, agency work, zero hours contracts and low-paid and insecure types of self-employment.

“I’ve got three jobs. One is a [self-employed] strength and conditioning coach, so like, a personal trainer doing group sessions. That’s what I want to do, I want to build up my number of clients. I just finished my Masters, I have two chef jobs, at two different pubs which is what I did while I was studying.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Other Walsall residents who were mostly unemployed or economically inactive described their experiences of insecure work.

The 2023 Spring Budget announced an increase in the Administrative Earnings Threshold: the minimum amount a person can earn without being asked to meet regularly with their work coach from the equivalent of 15 to 18 hours of earnings at the National Living Wage for an individual claimant. Jobcentre Plus has expanded its voluntary in-work employment support provision to those in work to cover all Jobcentres. A number of other DWP programmes also offer in-work employment support. Locally, in Walsall, civil society organisations also offer employment support to people in employment. Yet interviews with residents suggest low levels of awareness of this provision.

There are an estimated 14,300 self-employed people in Walsall²⁸, making up 7.9% of the working age population. We interviewed a self-employed handyman, cleaner, counsellor and fitness coach, all of whom worked as sole traders. For some of this group, their self-employment fitted around their caring responsibilities, and they did not currently want to take on extra hours. Other people did want to build up their hours and earnings.

There are a number of organisations who do provide business support advice and guidance to self-employed people who want to grow their businesses, including Walsall Council, the Black Country Growth Hub and the Black Country Chamber of Commerce. However, this support seems to be targeted at people with a more developed and high value business proposition than the cleaner, handyman and fitness coach sole traders. A particular gap in employment support provision is business support advice for sole traders or those who are starting out in lower value enterprises.

Links between employment support and skills provision

Jobcentre Plus had referred a number of people to training provision to increase their chances of work. People had mixed views about the value of these courses. Some people

²⁸ ONS Annual Population Survey, October 2021-September 2022.

had found them useful; one person talked about a two-week course he had been sent on to improve his digital skills. He felt that this had been useful, but he had also received a travel pass to enable him to travel outside Walsall. Getting out of his flat, meeting other people and travelling at weekends had boosted his wellbeing.

While some people had positive experiences of training they had attended though Jobcentre Plus advice or referrals, others had less positive experiences. One person had been sent on an employability course to improve his CV, which he did not feel he needed. He was also sent on a catering course but had no interest in pursuing a career in hospitality.

“For example, they say, 'What job do you want in what like service, if it's in this service,' and I said to them things like, a call centre maybe, or retail, but then they're trying to send me on some food course. It doesn't make sense. They want to send you where they want to send you, like they're just trying to force it upon you.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Residents' accounts suggest that Jobcentre Plus clients are not systematically being referred to free skills provision by Jobcentre Plus. Opportunities to address gaps in their basic skills had been missed by Jobcentre Plus. A closer working relationship between Jobcentre Plus, Walsall College, other skills provision and the National Careers Service would help to address this issue.

“So with the Jobcentre, they directed me to Job Change and an appointment to update my CV. So that was the only assistance. With the Jobcentre, they never told me about any, sort of, free courses I could potentially go on whilst I was looking for a job. So that would have been useful.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

“I did look at HR qualifications but it was over £1,000 but obviously I couldn't fund that. I did ask at the Jobcentre if there was any, sort of, available funding and they said no.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Lack of engagement with the local skills offer

Save for knowing that Walsall College offered training, most of the residents we interviewed had very little awareness of sources of advice, employment support or free training. There are number of reasons for this, some of which we have already noted:

1. Some people believe that the prevalence of low-skilled jobs in Walsall means that it is easy to find work that does not require qualifications
2. There is an inconsistent approach from Jobcentre Plus in relation to giving clients advice about training opportunities or sources of funding for training
3. There were misconceptions about being able to undertake a training course while receiving benefits

4. People who had dependents felt that they would have to leave paid employment if they wanted to upskill or reskill, which they could not afford to do
5. Some residents did not feel confident enough to go back to a classroom setting, particularly if they had a negative experience of schooling. College was seen as the preserve of young people and not for people like them
6. Most people lacked information about the courses that were available in the area.

Nearly one in ten working age adults in Wasall have no qualifications, and just 26.9% of 16-64 year old adults have higher level qualifications (Table 3). Analysis undertaken by UK Onward highlights the skills divide from east to west across the local authority, with almost all of Birchills and Leamore and Blakenall wards sitting in the bottom national decile for adult skills, while large parts of the east of the borough sit in the top two deciles for adult skills nationally²⁹. Meeting the targets of the WMCA’s Regional Skills Strategy will require these skills disparities to be addressed. The interviews with residents suggest that this will require public information strategies to address misconceptions and a lack of information about skills provision. Such public information campaigns need to reach and engage people who are not working or are in precarious or low-paid work. As noted above, social landlords have an important role to play in public information campaigns about skills, significant numbers of whom will be economically inactive, unemployed or in low-paid or insecure work.

“There’s a lot of external courses now that you can apply for online. There’s a lot of free courses that you can apply for online for specific things, if you were interested in that. But I don’t know what they are, it would just be a matter of Googling and having a look to see what’s out there.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Table 3: Qualification levels – Walsall residents, 2021

Qualification Level	Percentage of adult population skilled at this level – Walsall	Percentage of adult population skilled at this level – WMCA	Percentage of adult population skilled at this level – Great Britain
Level 4 or above (higher level)	26.9%	36.9%	43.6%
Level 3 (A-Level equivalent)	48.9%	54.9%	61.5%
Level 2	68.2%	72.1%	78.1%
Level 1	79.5%	81.8%	87.5%
Other qualifications	10.7%	8.5%	5.9%
No	9.8%	9.6%	6.6%

Source: ONS Labour Force Survey, 2021

²⁹ Hawksbee, A., Fraser, F. Tanner, W. (2022) *Levelling Up in Practice, Walsall Interim Report*, London: UK Onward.

Job fairs

Some residents mentioned that they had attended job fairs. Views about such events were mixed. Some people felt that sector-specific job fairs – for example, for those interested working in healthcare – were useful. Other people, generally those facing more barriers to work, believed that attending job fairs would not help them find work.

“They're a bit limited, maybe, in what they're offering people, to be honest. Some of them are just trying to sell their service to you, not exactly offering you a job, kind of thing, or get you into the Army.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Use of platforms and recruitment and employment agencies

Most residents interviewed were using apps and platforms such as Indeed to find vacancies, particularly if their benefit conditionality required them to apply for a specified number of jobs each week. In most cases, applications made had been unsuccessful. There was scepticism about the value of using Indeed, with some people feeling that the jobs that were advertised often did not exist. Some people appeared to lack the digital skills to make the best use of a job platform – a gap that could be remedied through better job-search support.

“They are always emailing me, they say they've got jobs in Walsall but when you click on it it's everywhere else... I've got this app on my phone called Job Search and they're all Tipton and Warwickshire and Worcestershire jobs.” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

Tudor Employment and First Personnel were mentioned in a few in-depth interviews and in both focus groups, with everyone agreeing that they had heard of these organisations and one person stating that they had found work through Tudor Employment. Both organisations are employment agencies and have offices in Walsall, with shop front job advertisements. Some jobs advertised through this organisation are permanent, but Tudor Employment and Extra Personnel also provide agency staff (often at the minimum wage) and are registered with the Gangmaster and Labour Abuse Authority. As previously mentioned, people felt that taking on agency work or a zero-hours contract risked leaving people without benefits if they did not get enough hours of work. Some people were also sceptical that taking on agency work helped people progress their careers.

“Sometimes the jobs they [employment agency] stick on the board don't seem to exist because you go in there and say, 'I've seen the job on the wall.' Then they have you fill out all these forms and nothing happens. They push this specific thing but they want you to do anything. They'll phone you on a Tuesday, 'Any chance you can get to Cannock in the next five minutes?’” (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

The interviews suggest that it important to widen some residents' knowledge of recruitment and employment agencies, nationally and locally, as well as increase people's ability to use online platforms.

Population segmentation

National government sometimes uses profiling or population segmentation of unemployed people to help plan interventions, based on administrative and survey data. Some employment support providers have used caseworker notes to segment unemployed clients³⁰. Drawing on the interview findings, we propose an **employment support and skills population segmentation model** below, which could be developed and be used inform the planning of employment support and skills provision in Walsall. This segmentation suggests that people fall into seven groups, based on their possession of risk or protective factors on their need for employment support and skills provision.

1. Unable to work

This group of working-age people are unable to undertake work due to severe disabilities or health conditions, or long-term caring responsibilities. Some 9,000 people are economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability in Walsall and 8,800 were estimated to be inactive due to caring responsibilities. Most of this group are likely to be in the Universal Credit 'no work-related requirements' category and not be obliged to look for or prepare for work as a condition of receiving their benefits. They are unlikely to take up employment support provision and were not the focus of this research.

2. Long-term unemployed or economically inactive with many barriers to work

Long-term unemployment is usually defined as being unemployed for 12 months or longer, with 1.2% of the Great Britain working age population estimated to be in this category in 2021³¹, an historically low figure. Assuming national trends are repeated at a local level, this segment would number 5,600 people in Walsall³². Research shows that disabled people, those with long-term health conditions, young people (aged 18-24), older people, some minority ethnic and migrant groups and people without higher level qualifications are more likely to be long-term unemployed³³. Many people who are long-term unemployed will need intensive and long-term employment support if they are to find and stay in work, as the research case study below shows. The interviewee was a 41-year-old male who had worked as a bricklayer until he was 35 but was now unable to find work after an injury. He had participated in the Restart programme, but had not found employment, nor had he identified the type of work he wanted to do in future or have a career plan. He had also struggled with drug addiction but had been successful in addressing this problem with support from a national charity.

"I used to be a brick layer but got laid off a couple of years ago and now I'm on the dole because I've got difficulties getting about and that. I'm trying to like, trying to do something else, sort of like, manual, do you know what I mean? Because there's no

³⁰ Loxha, A. and Morgandi, M. (2014) *Profiling the Unemployed: A Review of OECD Experiences and Implications for Emerging Economies*, Washington DC: World Bank.

³¹ Labour Force Survey data.

³² Calculated from 2021 Labour Force Survey data.

³³ See Office for National Statistics Unemployment Scarring: Predicted probabilities of returning to work by demographic dataset, 2007-2021.

way I could do bricklaying anymore or anything like that". (Focus group interview, Walsall resident).

A larger group, but with similar characteristics to the long-term unemployed, are economically inactive people who may want to work, but who face many barriers to achieving this. (Economic inactivity is itself an adverse factor making it less likely a person will return to work³⁴). This group are likely to be target groups for

3. Unemployed or economically inactive with some barriers to work

A further sector of the population faces fewer adverse factors but making it less likely they will be fall into long-term unemployment or economic inactivity. This segment usually has some employment support or skills training needs, as the case study below shows. The interviewee was a 29-year-old woman who was made redundant from a routine administrative job. She also had a health condition. She had never been out-of-work before so did not have an up-to-date cv or job search skills. She also lacked confidence when it came to interviews and received help from Jobcentre Plus to improve her job search and interview skills.

"I was made redundant last November [2021] and so I've had health issues as well. So I went to the Jobcentre to see what was available, because that was the first time I've ever made redundant... The process was pretty good. I always saw the same person. He was very pleasant, and they just took me step by step of I'd have to apply for like a minimum of four or five jobs a day. (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

4. Unemployed or economically inactive people with few or no barriers to work

This group of people will usually be able to find work without intensive employment support provision, although might stand to benefit from 'light touch' help with cv writing or job search. People in this group may also want to reskill or upskill, so the local skills offer needs to be accessible and relevant to their needs. The research did not focus on this group of residents.

5. Precarious workers

Zero hours contracts, low-paid seasonal work, low-paid self-employment, agency work, casual work and informal work would usually fall under the definition of insecure or precarious work³⁵. Analysis of data from Understanding Society longitudinal dataset, suggests that in 2021, 9.7% of the UK workforce is employed in precarious work³⁶. In Walsall this proportion would amount to 12,900 people if national trends are reflected at a local level. Frequent periods of unemployment or economic inactivity were also a common experience among this group, who may move in and out of different types of temporary

³⁴ Office for National Statistics Unemployment Scarring: Predicted probabilities of returning to work by demographic dataset, 2007-2021.

³⁵ Posch, K., Scott, S., Cockbain, E., Bradford, B. (2020) *Scale and nature of precarious work in the UK*, London: UCL.

³⁶ 2021 update to Posch, K., Scott, S., Cockbain, E., Bradford, B. (2020) *Scale and nature of precarious work in the UK*, London: UCL

work in ongoing low pay-no pay cycles. One interviewee had worked in a large number of pubs and restaurants jobs over a 10-year period, with employment and warehouses and supermarkets and periods of unemployment in between temporary or agency work in hospitality. Some people who were unemployed were also undertaking casual, cash-in-hand work.

“I’ve been a chef for 10 years and had lots of jobs. I’ve also worked in bars, done retail, agency work, warehouses, but always I go back to being a chef.” (In-depth interview, Walsall resident).

Some forms of precarious employment are more flexible and can be fitted around caring responsibilities. Four research participants had taken on informal sector cleaning or driving jobs because this work could be fitted around caring or studying. They did not currently want to look for more secure work, although some expressed a desire to do so in future. Those in precarious work should be a priority group for Walsall’s employment support and skills provision.

6. Low-paid, low-skilled worker

Some 20% of the 100,000 employee jobs in Walsall provided gross weekly earnings of £298 per week or less³⁷. Moving more people into high-skilled, high paid work is a national and regional priority set out in the WMCA’s Regional Skills Plan and Plan for Growth. The employment support and skills offer needs to reach low-paid, low-skilled workers if the aims of these strategies are to be achieved. Although many people in this group will be able to find employment under their own initiative, they will need to know about the employment support and skills provision that is on offer to them, should they want to reskill or upskill.

7. Medium- and high-skilled workers

Although not a focus for this research, this group also need to know about the provision that is on offer to them, should they want to reskill or upskill. They should need job-search skills and know where to find help should they be made redundant.

Different responses to different needs

The segmentation suggests that employment support and skills provision will need to respond to the needs of these seven groups. Walsall residents will therefore need a universal employment support and skills offer, where all residents receive information about sources of help, reskilling and upskilling. This universal offer needs to sit alongside targeted provision, focusing on those with the most barriers to employment, people in precarious or low-paid work.

³⁷ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2022.

Towards better and cohesive employment support and training provision in Walsall

Does current provision meet Walsall residents' needs?

The research shows that many Walsall residents face significant barriers to finding or moving up in work. These barriers include a lack of relevant skills, digital exclusion and poor job-search and career planning capabilities. Caring obligations, poor mental and physical health and disabilities are also barriers to work for some residents. Perceptions about a lack of better-paid and secure employment disincentives some residents from moving into work or undertaking training. These factors mean that there is a high level of need for employment support and skills provision in Walsall – for people who are unemployed, economically inactive or are in low-paid or precarious work.

We estimate that there are 5,600 long-term unemployed people in Walsall, a group who are likely to require the most intensive forms of employment support and must be a priority group for support. A further 7,100 people are economically inactive in Walsall, but say they want to work.

An estimated 20,000 people are undertaking low-paid and precarious work in Walsall and would benefit from employment support as well as opportunities to upskill or reskill to help lift them out of poverty. Yet few the residents who were employed knew about or had taken advantage of local training opportunities. The ambitions of the WMCA's Regional Skills Plan and Plan for Growth will also not be fulfilled unless this group of Walsall residents know about and are able to access skills provision. This group of people should also be priority targets for employment support and skills provision.

Gaps in provision

Walsall Council, Walsall College, the WMCA and the Black Country Chamber of Commerce recognise the importance of employment support and skills provision and its key role in inclusive growth. Along with national government, the WMCA and these Walsall-based organisations have commissioned and delivered a wide range of employment support and skills provision. Existing employment support provision largely meets the needs of residents who have few or some barriers to employment, although there is a need to increase awareness of the National Careers Service. But there are some significant gaps in provision.

- In Walsall, 7,100 economically inactive people say they want to work, but regulations prevent this group from taking up Jobcentre Plus or DWP-commissioned employment support. While some of this group use employment support from charities, there is a gap in provision for this group.
- There is an unmet need for more intensive employment support provision that is accessible for long-term unemployed and economically inactive people. This includes

informal coaching, drop-in and job club provision. A number of local charities, including the YMCA and the Ablewell Advice Centre, are currently providing such forms of support, but some stakeholders who were interviewed felt the charity sector often worked in isolation to other employment support providers. The charity sector and volunteers have an important role in offering this more relational³⁸ form of employment support in the planned community hub.

- There is a need for a better employment support and skills offer to people in work, particularly those in precarious forms of employment, building on the new work being undertaken by Jobcentre Plus. This in-work progression offer should involve careers advice and job search skills to enable people to apply for better paid and more secure jobs. There is a range of upskilling and reskilling provision available in Walsall, but it is not always being used by people in low-paid or precarious work. They may not be aware of this free provision or they feel that further training nor for them. Courses are usually delivered in daytime working hours, making it difficult for those who work full-time to attend.
- There is a need for more Level 3 and above skills provision that is accessible to Walsall residents. Addressing this gap will require that people know about what is on offer, that they want to take it up, can afford it and it is compatible with their work or caring obligations.
- There is a big information gap about the skills provision that is on offer. Again, local residents often do not know what is available and that much of the provision is free.

Most stakeholders also believed that there were too many employment support and skills providers in Walsall and that provision needed to be rationalised, with greater collaboration between organisations to deliver services. Ensuring greater collaboration is an aim of the Pathfinder and the planned community hub. At the same time, stakeholders providing employment support or training were keen to protect the role of own services and unable to explain how a more collaborative model might emerge.

Recommendations

Drawing on the research findings, we propose eight areas for action for the Pathfinder working group, the West Midlands Combined Authority and the organisations involved in planning and delivering the community hub and Walsall's employment support and economic development strategies.

1. Walsall residents should be offered a universal and targeted employment support and skills offer, informed by an understanding of residents' needs. The universal offer should aim to make sure that all local residents know where to get help to look

³⁸ Phillips, A. (2022) *Working Together: the case for universal employment support*, London: Demos.

for work, a range of upskilling and reskilling provision and business support that is available to them. Its targeted offer needs to focus on (i) people who are employed or economically inactive who face the most barriers to work and (ii) people in precarious or low-paid work, including people in low-paid self-employment.

2. Building on practice elsewhere in the UK, Walsall Council, Walsall College and Jobcentre Plus need to be lead partners in the proposed hub which needs a clear brand and high street presence. The hub should act as a single sign-posting and referral point for people who need employment support and skills provision, as well as being a single contact point for employers who may have vacancies or the capacity to offer work experience placements or apprenticeships. It could also provide co-located health promoting activities, financial advice and other support, and involve the charity sector and volunteers in activities such as a job club.
3. Organisations involved in developing the proposed community hub should aim to increase the involvement of Walsall's civil society sector and of volunteers in this provision.
4. Walsall Council, the West Midlands Combined Authority, the Black Country Chamber of Commerce and relevant employers should look at ways to increase the business development support to self-employed workers. Organisations involved in developing the community hub should work with the National Careers Service, the WMCA, employers, the local Chamber of Commerce and social landlords to review and improve the employment support and skills offer to people in work, with the aim of offering more training in workplaces.
5. Walsall Council should undertake a childcare sufficiency assessment and take steps to fill gaps in provision. Where staff shortages are causing gaps in provision, interventions might include working with the West Midlands Combined Authority to examine ways to make childcare and social care a more attractive career proposition, looking at options such as offering free public transport, training bursaries and keyworker social housing for childcare staff.
6. The West Midlands Combined Authority should undertake research that identifies gaps in transport provision. Drawing on its findings the West Midlands Combined Authority should set up a taskforce involving employers, councils and transport operators to look at ways to address transport barriers to work.
7. Organisations involved in the Walsall employment and skills hub work with the DWP and the WMCA to explore ways to co-commission local provision that makes sure

that those using Jobcentre Plus provision receive a formal assessment of their basic skills and are referred to courses to address skills gaps.

8. Organisations involved in the proposed hub should work with the WMCA and social landlords to develop a region-wide public information campaign to raise awareness about employment support and skills provision that is on offer. It should also involve the charity sector to deliver a skills champion programme, where volunteers talk about the range of skills and employment support provision that is available.

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