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# SUPPORTING POSITIVE PATHWAYS: EMPLOYABILITY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY FOR BERWICKSHIRE:

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY COMMISSIONED BY BERWICKSHIRE HOUSING ASSOCIATION (BHA), BERWICKSHIRE ACTION FOR VOLUNTARY SERVICES (BAVS) AND YOUTH CONNECT

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## BACKGROUND

In March 2017 Berwickshire Association of Voluntary Services (BAVS), Berwickshire Housing Association (BHA) and Connect Berwickshire Youth Project created a partnership and applied for Big Lottery Investing in Ideas funding to investigate the fragmentary/ stop-start nature of employability support work in Berwickshire in which all three partners were in some way engaged. This enabled a 6-month research period for the partnership development workers to interview employers, statutory support workers, community projects, employability support users and training providers. Following on from this initial work, the partnership sought independent research input from consultants to test the findings and strengthen the consultation with wider stakeholders. This action research study was subsequently commissioned to provide useful information to help capacity building agencies formulate employability work which meets the needs of the Berwickshire community and to provide a developmental opportunity to the services involved. The study was centred on a range of community-based employability activities, statutory employability services and local employers, businesses and industry.

### The key findings were:

A strategic, coordinated and cost-effective approach to developing employability with some individual or agency in an overall leadership or facilitation role is required. This would avoid overlaps and duplication of services, address the gaps in service provision and meet the needs of local employers. A central information point or hub for all existing services would help to:

- (1) Avoid duplication of services and the resultant waste in public funding;
- (2) Support and advise the existing employability services where to refer their clients onto and ensure sustainable career progression;
- (3) Co-ordinate the recruitment of participants from across the area into essential group learning programmes, professional careers guidance, pre-vocational and vocational training that is delivered by Momentum, Job Centre Plus, Skills Development Scotland and Employment Support and ensure a comprehensive employability service for the area;
- (4) Give employers the central information point that they request, meaning they wouldn't need to orientate themselves around the maze of fragmentary employability services across the area;
- (5) Implement a coordinated PR and Marketing Plan to ensure that those delivering employability or those who could potentially benefit, know where to find them and who to contact;
- (6) Deliver a consistent focus on developing Core Skills as requested by employers and necessary training and development support for those community agencies who require it;
- (7) Develop an accessible central database of employers across the relevant geographical areas;
- (8) Facilitate and support an Employability Forum for Berwickshire – bring stakeholders together to share: good practice, planning and work priorities, information and guidance on emerging or current employability initiatives; strategies and policies and labour market intelligence. This would represent the best use of resources (inc. financial resources) and ensure that services are meeting the needs of priority target groups;

If employability services are to support individuals into sustainable employment that supports positive career development, they must address some of professional skills gaps which employers highlight.

If the statutory agencies are to meet the employability needs of people in Berwickshire there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure some group work activity, given the issues facing those outside the labour market (isolation, social exclusion, loneliness) and the challenges faced by employers with gaps in 'work ready' behaviours including confidence, motivation and communication skills.

The solution to this is better and more regular communication between agencies to ensure they are meeting the needs of people in the local area and taking a strategic approach to delivery of services for those out with the labour market.

Employability which is not well thought through or a bolt-on to other services – sometimes driven by funding opportunities is not meeting need. Community-based organisations who may see an anecdotal need from small numbers of clients presenting, seem often (from a place of good intention), to set-up employability work without the necessary expertise, careers guidance knowledge and reflective practitioner ethos and without investigating the options for referring them onto other agencies who are better resourced or equipped to support them.

A number of key additional areas to were identified as priority focus. These priorities included:

Career Guidance and Reflective Practice

Business and Employer Links

Career Development and Employability Support with Young People

The Significance of Further Education in Providing Routes Into Employment

The impact of Geography and Related Public Transport Issues

Cost Efficiency and Funding for Employability Services to meet the needs across the Area.

*Each of these areas is précised within this Executive Summary and expanded upon within the main report 'Supporting Positive Pathways – Employability Action Research Study for Berwickshire.*

## Careers Guidance and Reflective Practice

A qualified approach to career guidance needs to be informed by an understanding of career choices and the necessary interventions to guide clients towards labour market opportunities which reflect their interests, skills and aspirations - balanced with an informed understanding of labour market opportunities. Careers guidance is a professional role and not something anyone can walk into and undertake effectively. Job Coaches for JC+ and Careers Advisors within SDS have the appropriate qualifications and training.

With the best will in the world, it is not possible for other workers to provide career development support which reflects the labour market context without the appropriate skillset, experience and knowledge. If practitioners are to effectively work with others to help them understand their barriers and challenges as well as clarify their aspirations and goals, then they themselves must be clear on their central purpose and responsibility.

The need for staff working with people who have complex barriers to engage in reflective practice is standard good practice. Careers Guidance Professionals learn the value of this approach within formal training but others coming from non-related professional background may not.

## Business, Industry & Employer Perspectives

Employers reported consistently that key skills or behaviours were often missing, including:

- (1) Social and communication skills;
- (2) Ability to work on initiative;
- (3) Take decisions or problem solve;
- (4) Digital Skills
- (5) The ability to work as part of a team
- (6) Reliability.

They also highlighted that individuals coming in through referrals from employability services didn't always understand the opportunities for career progression. Consequently, their motivation and enthusiasm for work was often lackluster. Employers want applicants with confidence, motivation, transferable skills, good interpersonal skills combined with clear expectations of what is required in a formal employment situation. These are the areas which all employability services must focus on

A greater awareness of the needs of employers would seem beneficial for clients and employers. Employment and recruitment days combining the participation of clients, employability agencies and businesses were suggested (these types of activities are already delivered by Developing Young Workforce and could be readily adapted to support adults into work)

## Key Success Features of Career Development and Employability with Young People

**Developing Young Workforce (DYW)** is a comprehensive, highly professional and effective model which combines strategic intelligence, specialist skills and a central point for schools and employers to work with. There are elements of the work being done by DYW that could be applied to employability services for all. The Career Fairs, Taster Events, Core Skills Sessions and the Business and Employer Links works are all directly transferrable activities. The latter recommended by two of the employers interviewed as part of this study.

Businesses value the opportunity of engaging with their potential labour force in a supported and structured manner – where the organisation and the objective-setting is facilitated by the professionals. Without exception, all business taking part, positively review their experiences of DYW. The staff employed with DYW appear to be exceptionally responsive to employers and are able to build the activities for the young people around the labour market needs. They were evidently skilled, reflective practitioners who balanced the needs of children, young people, teaching staff and the business community to provide real opportunities for all.

The staff member interviewed for this study had a high level of strategic intelligence around the curriculum and the local labour market (if these skills and this model were transferrable to adult or generic employability work, then Berwickshire could be in a strong position of leading good practice in delivering employability)

In contrast to traditional welfare to work programmes, **Tomorrow's People** adopt a gentle and person-centred approach to supporting young people to access and sustain employment. They invest heavily in personal development and help young people tackle the barriers which prevent them making progress. They aim to provide holistic support for young people who are vulnerable and face multiple challenges.

A well-established programme, **The Works** has been operating successfully in Galashiels over a number of years. However, with low numbers in Berwickshire, the challenges of very poor transport links and the rurality of the area, the standard programme is being adapted to respond to those specific issues and best meet the needs of the young people in this area. This rolling programme will run over 3 months, with a combination of small group work and 1:1 support. The programme is based around standard employability models which incorporate personal development and career development activities with a creative bent. For example, confidence building utilises imaginative approaches like arts projects and photography.

There is a particular emphasis on sharing personal journeys where the young people identify the barriers to progressing their lives or careers and explore solutions in an environment of mutual support, thus reducing the personal sense of isolation and cultivating positive and supportive friendships. These foundations, they believe, are imperative to ensuring sustained progress towards and into employment.

## Further Education

The Action Research event and over 70% of the interviewees highlighted the negative impacts of having no Further Education in Berwickshire. A concerted and coordinated campaign to secure FE in Berwickshire is required.

Interviewees believed that it was no coincidence that Berwickshire had the lowest household income alongside no access to Further Education.

Further Education delivers core skills and competencies. Most FE courses include elements of: communication and interpersonal skills, initiative, team working, decision-making, problem solving, personal presentation, understanding of the workplace, health and safety, planning and goal setting and a commitment to self-improvement through knowledge and skills development.

These are the areas which employers consistently highlighted as gaps in 'work readiness'.

It is important to highlight that a patchy approach from various agencies including for example, Splash, ReTweed and Health in Mind had reaped some opportunities. However the potential to sustain and maximize opportunities for Further Education needs to come collectively from Berwickshire or through one single agency.

*"The value of accredited learning as part of an individual's journey towards the best possible employment opportunities cannot be underestimated – it is an essential not an option in a fragile rural area where broad skillsets and professional behaviours are essential to meet the needs of the local economy."* Judith Johnstone Chief Executive Langholm Initiative

## Geography and Transport

The lack of public transport was the key barrier identified by employers and employability services.

An approach to the relevant departments within Scottish Borders Council and their strategic partners to co-ordinate an initial round table discussion with employers and businesses in the area would provide the essential first step for a considered response to the issues around access to public transport. There is some merit in undertaking an economic impact assessment to measure the effects on the economy as a whole.

Some collective campaign from all relevant stakeholders to ensure that Local Government and their partners understand the implications of the lack of transport on local people and on local businesses and industry is necessary.

## Volunteering

Where individuals are volunteering as part of journey back to paid work, opportunities for career guidance and employability support would help them to make progress. Some people also see volunteering as a destination when in fact there is a latent aspiration to be in paid work. There is an opportunity to provide support into paid employment where there is motivation but a lack of confidence with access to the right information and support.

Agencies delivering volunteering projects don't generally have the resources or links to employability services that would help their volunteers continue to make progress. A central point for volunteering services to refer clients onto employability opportunities that included access to training and career development would help them progress to employment where this was possible or appropriate

## Funding

This research study has provided an aerial view of the current provision and the funding resources available to the large employability providers through central and local government

What is clear is the untapped potential for community-based services to access significant and expert support including financial support to work with people outside the labour market.

A complete 5 stage Employability Service is not needed. There are some strong services in certain areas, although by focus and geography there is a great deal of variability in what is available to people in different places and at different stages of need.

What is needed above in Berwickshire all is a joined-up approach between all those concerned to ensure the career development needs of people across the whole of Berwickshire are being met as well as better meeting the recruitment needs of our employers.

To ensure the best use of any future funding for employability the following priorities are imperative:

1) A strategic and coordinated approach across the employability 'sector' with a central information hub to ensure no further duplication of services and to ensure we add value to the work already being done. Delivery in existing projects/ services can benefit from a more networked and connected approach. This could be achieved by recruiting an 'Employability Coordinator' for Berwickshire. This role would focus on gathering and sharing intelligence around services, providing link-ups between services, supporting recruitment for group programmes as recommended and providing some capacity building support or brokering similar opportunities for training and professional development.

2) To ensure connectivity we require a clear PR and Marketing Plan for employability

a. PR and Marketing work is essential to facilitate better employer and business links and ensure that any employability work is cost effective and balanced with sound labour market intelligence

b. Awareness raising - there are wide-ranging opportunities for the larger statutory or government funded employability programmes (based in Galashiels) to be delivering in Berwickshire. However the community-based providers were not clear what these were.

3) A mature and collective approach to ensure that any leadership approach on delivering further education is for all and not specific to one area of Berwickshire i.e. the previous piecemeal approach by Health in Mind, ReTweed and Splash in Eyemouth. These small-scale interventions while valuable, only met the needs a small number of individuals in and around Eyemouth.

4) Capacity building for existing community-based providers incorporating relevant training and personal and professional development,

As the employability challenges across Berwickshire are largely based around infrastructure, capacity, coordination and partnership, then any effective development and support would be

best placed within a regeneration or capacity building agency with a brokering and collaboration role within networks. An area-wide and not community-based approach is imperative. Berwickshire Association for Voluntary Services (BAVS) would be the logical agency to facilitate better use of funding across the area and support the development of better service delivery, including the issues around training and development for the staff involved in employability work.

CVS's and Regeneration Agencies across UK are responsible for overseeing, managing and coordinating economic development, training and capacity building functions as standard. Every mission statement for a CVS or Regeneration Agency includes, the provision of services and support to the third sector and their partners to advance shared values, learning and interests - as well as improving the capacity of their members to better deliver services for common good.

The approach adopted by Langholm Initiative, the local regeneration agency for D & G represents the best use of expertise and resources and maximizes the potential of the larger and statutory agency interventions.

Langholm Initiative has a Development Officer whose central role includes coordinating and managing employability opportunities across the various providers, maintaining records and facilitating effective partnership working. Langholm Initiative has also developed a database of local employers which is shared with all agencies and services supporting routes into employment. This ensures the most efficient and cost effective use of statutory and grant funding in their area and avoids any duplication of services.

A similar scale and style of co-ordination with appropriate financial resources which are not excessive and less than £50k PA would create a huge step change and deliver a highly effective service to job seekers and our business community.

The key to building on existing employability provision and having a more medium term sustainable plan is to develop a collaborative partnership with a lead holding partners and to seek support for a 3 year plan that will build networks and capacity.

#### Key Funding Options:

- LEADER / SBC Economic Development
- The Robertson Trust
- The Big Lottery
- Voluntary Action Fund: Workplace Equality Fund
- Service Level Agreements/Partnerships with Prime or Sub Provider of Fair Start (in Berwickshire that would be Momentum)
- Skills Development Scotland Employability Fund supports services which have been developed to address the specific needs of local areas.