

Supporting individuals to progress in work: lessons from programmes in London

Overview

This guide has been produced by the Better Work Network and draws on lessons from previous initiatives to create an accessible resource for funders, commissioners and providers designing and delivering support for in-work progression. The programmes reviewed focus on individual-led support and test different approaches with the aim of developing understanding of how best to support in-work progression.

Better Work Network

The Better Work Network is a policy and practice-based initiative, hosted by Learning and Work Institute and Trust for London, dedicated to tackling the issues of low pay and poor quality of work within London and across the wider United Kingdom. The network brings together a range of stakeholders and influencers, including central and local government, think-tanks, charities, employers, funders and organisations involved in the delivery of support.

Through an innovative programme of research and development, our aim is to build upon the growing number of existing initiatives which support good work and in-work progression by testing what works, promoting best practice and providing a coordinating role to support stakeholders to bring real and long-lasting change and improve earnings and work quality.

What is individual-led support?

Individual-led support focuses on working with individuals to help identify what progression means for each participant. A personalised pathway to progression is then developed and instigated. This can include a range of support options, including one-to-one adviser contact, employability-related advice, and wider provision such as training, health, housing or financial support. Whilst employers can play a role within individual-led programmes, this tends to be focused on work placements and job brokerage, rather than the direct provision of support to the employer.

In contrast, employer-led support focuses on engaging with employers to identify opportunities for the training and development of existing staff. While employer-led support is important in developing internal progression routes, individual support focuses on what is important to the individual.

The four individual-led programmes included in this review are the Step Up pilot, Timewise Foundation's Earnings Progression Trial, West London Alliance Skills Escalator pilot and the ESF progression programme.

Four individual-led support programmes for in-work progression

All four programmes aimed to improve low paid workers' earnings or employment situation, either by moving to a different job or through their existing employer. Provision included a mix of different components including access to personal adviser support, skills training and wider support offers. All four programmes have been delivered as pilots within London. The specific target group varied by programme.

Step Up pilot:

Location: Lambeth and neighbouring boroughs

Funder: Trust for London and Walcot Foundation

Provider(s): Six voluntary sector providers: The Creative Society, High Trees Community Development Trust, Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO), The Springboard Charity, Thames Reach, Women Like Us (part of the Timewise Foundation)

Eligibility: Residents in continuous employment for 12+ months and earning less than London Living Wage

Type of support: Participants were provided holistic, tailored support from an adviser, focusing on addressing employability skills and wider barriers that may hinder progression. This included one-to-one advice and guidance, employability support, a skills offer and a wider package of provision.

Full evaluation available:<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Step-Up-Evaluation-Report-1.pdf>

Timewise Foundation's Earnings Progression Trial

Location: South London

Funder: Department for Work and Pensions

Provider(s): Timewise Foundation

Eligibility: Working parents living in the South London District, earning between £76 and £220.85 per week

Type of support: Participants received one-to-one adviser support focused on helping them to progress in work. This included emotional and motivational support, employability-related provision, for example job search, application and interview support, and links with wider support and job opportunities via a brokerage service.

Full evaluation available:<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Evaluation-of-Timewise-Foundations-Earnings-Progression-Trial.pdf>

West London Alliance Skills Escalator Pilot:

Location: Harrow and Hounslow, London

Funder: Transformation Challenge Award, then European Social Fund (ESF)

Provider(s): West London Alliance

Eligibility: Working Residents living in private rented or temporary accommodation in receipt of partial Housing Benefit

Type of support: Participants were offered personalised adviser support, alongside a funded skill offer and a wider package of support designed to help them tackle underlying barriers to progression. This included coaching, employability and careers guidance.

Full evaluation available: <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evaluation-of-the-Skills-Escalator-Pilot-FINAL.pdf>

ESF In-Work Progression programme:

Location: London

Funder: ESF & Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)

Provider(s): Prospects and InterLearn (formerly Manley Summers)

Eligibility: Individuals earning 10% below the London Living Wage who had been in such employment for at least four consecutive months

Type of support: The programme was largely employer-led, with participants recruited through and receiving support chosen by their employer. Support for individuals engaged through their employer was primarily made up of the provision of accredited or non-accredited training opportunities. A small number of individuals joined independently of their employer, receiving a wider offer of support. Alongside learning provision, the individual-led model included regular contact with an adviser and additional support, for example employability guidance.

Full evaluation available: <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ESF-In-Work-Progression-Final-Report.pdf>

Lessons for practitioners

The following sections set out the lessons from the four in-work progression programmes, along with key considerations for existing or future interventions. It is set out in three parts: 1) engaging low paid workers, 2) designing and delivering support for low paid workers, and 3) monitoring and evaluating programme performance.

1) Engaging low paid workers

Traditional methods used to engage individuals in employment support programmes are often not suitable for individuals that are in employment. This is because low paid workers may not come in to contact with the same services as those who are unemployed; for example, Jobcentre Plus and other employment related services. Low paid workers are also likely to be 'time poor' due to work duties, irregular shift patterns and other commitments, such as caring responsibilities – limiting their capacity to engage. They may also be less familiar with employment-related support and not convinced of the potential benefits, instead feeling that it involves too much risk. It must also be recognised that low-paid workers are a diverse group, with different needs and aspirations.

Providers in all four programmes invested considerable resource in identifying and engaging potential participants. This involved identifying the target group, building and tailoring engagement pathways and developing effective messaging.

Identifying and defining target groups

There is no one definition of low pay, and the prevalence and impact of low pay vary across different demographic groups, geographic areas and sectors. The definitions and criteria used within a programme will impact on who is eligible and have implications for approaches to engagement.

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- Specific definitions of low pay, such as a set wage or earnings threshold, can exclude individuals in need of support. For example, those earning a low hourly wage but working a high number of hours or those whose earnings regularly fluctuate because of sporadic work patterns.
- Welfare entitlement may represent an alternative eligibility criterion. However, it is important to note that some benefits are determined at the household level rather than the individual. This may introduce eligibility difficulties where the programme is targeted at individuals.
- Narrow eligibility criteria, for example targeting specific demographic groups, can make it difficult to identify potential participants and lead to challenges with recruitment.
- Eligibility criteria should consider the nature of modern work and ensure that support is not restricted from individuals that may experience hardship in relation to their level of pay, hours worked, job security or quality of work.
- Commissioners should be mindful of the means to identify excluded groups, particularly those whose characteristics may be ‘hidden’. For example, lone parents and individuals with disabilities and health conditions.
- It is important to assess the local context and profile of low paid workers within an area when identifying and defining target groups (and defining at what level participants will be considered to no longer be in low pay).

Options to consider when setting eligibility criteria

- Measurement of low pay by hourly pay or attaching ‘healthy hours’ limits to earnings amount, to prevent the exclusion of people working a high number of hours
- Considering average earnings over a set period of time, to account for earnings instability
- Accounting for zero hours contracts and other indicators of insecurity
- Stipulating a length of time in low pay to target those ‘stuck’ in low pay
- Determining or widening eligibility to include measures such as access to certain income related benefits or measures of poor quality work
- Targeting support to groups likely to be stuck in low pay locally or nationally, such as lone parents or people in low paid sectors

- Considering whether to include self-employed participants – some self-employed people may benefit from progression support (Skills Escalator Evaluation) but this may generate the need to include specialist self-employment support in the service design

Building engagement pathways

Individual-led models for in-work progression support require specific approaches to reach individuals, typically away from their employer.

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- Engaging potential participants can be a time-intensive process, exacerbated by a lack of awareness and understanding of in-work progression support amongst the target group.
- Providers have used a variety of means to target participants, including marketing, community outreach, signposting through local partnerships and referrals or direct invitations through lists compiled through providers or partners (including Local Authority housing benefit lists, Housing Associations and Jobcentre Plus).¹
- Trusted networks are an important way of reaching and engaging potential participants. For example, most participants to engage with Step Up were recruited through friends and family or through an existing relationship with the provider or a partner organisation.
- Specific invitations with dates, times and locations built around participants' existing commitments and including specific staff contact details and guarantee of a fast response, were highly valued by participants. Such techniques led to better response rates than impromptu invitations.
- Engagement via employers can be challenging for individual-led progression programmes as employers may have concerns about the potential for staff to leave.
- A range of referral pathways should be developed and tested. These should be tailored according to the target group and their needs, and the aims and structure of the programme.
- Providers and commissioners should seek to utilise their existing capacities and capabilities to maximise the success of their engagement strategies, for example, making full use of partnerships, local knowledge, user-voice and access to relevant data.
- Consideration needs to be given to providers' existing relationship with support services accessed by low paid workers and other key stakeholders. In order to encourage success, where possible, referral pathways should be coordinated to include warm handovers.

Developing effective messaging

¹ Most participants enlisted on the ESF In-Work Progression programme were recruited via their employer. These participants typically followed an employer-led model, whereby the support offer was made within the remit of their employer. The small proportion of participants that followed an individual-led model were recruited independently of their employer, through outreach and local partnerships.

Effective messaging is a crucial part of engaging low paid workers. Messages need to be meaningful to low-paid workers, taking account of the variety of circumstances potential participants may be in and their different motivations.

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- The most effective messaging was positive, jargon-free and focused on change with a clear pathway and timescale for achievement. The Step Up pilot found ‘progression’ to be too complex, instead focussing on terms such as ‘earning more’, ‘quality of life’ or ‘work-life balance’.
- Clarity around eligibility criteria helped participants to reason the support was for people in their situation, encouraging them to engage with the support.
- Participants were receptive to person-centred approaches, whereby support was introduced and described in a way that reflected their individual circumstances, needs and aspirations. Progression may involve considerable risk from a participant’s perspective. Messaging needs to be tailored to address concerns that will arise from this.
- In-work progression support is a novel concept for many low paid workers. Language needs to be clear and provide assurance, not only of the relevance of the support but also of the wider possible impact.
- Providers should seek to provide a clear definition of the support available and the tangible outcomes that could be achieved, personalised for each participant.
- The support offer should be clearly articulated and differentiated from existing support. This is particularly the case when support includes provision available elsewhere, for example training, whereby the overarching objectives and wider support offer available could get lost.
- User voice should be utilised when communicating the support offer to potential participants. This includes making full use of informal networks within communities, as well as the use of case studies and testimonies in marketing the support offer.
- There is significant additional behaviour insight research on how to maximise impact from individually targeted interventions and this should be used to inform future communication.

2) Designing and delivering support for low paid workers

Low paid workers have diverse support needs and a variety of progression goals. Some participants have high, multiple or complex needs, which do not directly relate to the purpose of the programme but act as a key barrier to progression.

Understanding the barriers faced by target groups

Participants tend to have diverse needs, but different demographic groups and communities can face common barriers to in-work progression. The identification of these common barriers can help to ensure that the programme, its core components and partners offer the necessary support to participants. It is important to understand where barriers are more prevalent amongst groups, for example there may be geographic and demographic variance in needs, such as the need for ESOL or childcare support.

Barriers faced by low paid workers

While participants of programmes had diverse needs, there were common constraints that can be summarised in the following categories:

- Behavioural or emotional barriers, including lack of confidence, lack of time, motivation and energy
- Limited labour market and employability knowledge, including understanding of search and application process and opportunities to progress
- Poor work history (including years of underemployment resulting in a lack of experience to match previous qualifications or potential)
- Skills and qualifications gaps (including basic skills, overseas qualifications and limited English proficiency)
- Financial barriers (including debt and concern about continued benefit eligibility and housing)
- Limited time to access support and focus on progression (as a result of work commitments and parental or caring responsibilities)
- Health constraints including mental health
- External barriers (including lack of flexible and inclusive work opportunities for people with impairments, caring or parenting responsibilities)

Assessing need and developing action plans

Taking a personalised approach based on individual need, rather than following a prescribed process, is critical to addressing participants' diverse needs and maintaining engagement. Needs assessments and action planning play a crucial role in identifying barriers and structuring support for individuals to meet their progression goals.

Key Lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- Disaggregating barriers and assessing needs is viewed as a fundamental and early requirement of programme delivery. Needs assessments may be conducted on an ongoing basis to monitor change over time.
- Needs assessment and action planning needs to be conducted by skilled advisers with an advanced understanding of the barriers faced by participants and the support available to them.
- Co-creating action plans provides a structure to early meetings between advisers and participants. It provides a framework for activities, and a way of identifying whether and how to work with other organisations.
- It may be necessary to bring partners in at the needs assessment stage and to sequence additional support into the participant journey to address more complex needs and maximise available resource.

Delivering flexible provision

Low paid workers are often time poor, with different responsibilities impacting on their availability including work, parental and caring commitments. It is important that the means and availability of support reflect the needs and circumstances of participants, with different methods of communication and provision available.

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- The limited time availability of participants means that programme delivery must be flexible – both in terms of location and hours. Different working patterns will mean that support needs to be available outside 9am to 5pm working hours (i.e. evening and weekend provision) to enable participants to engage.
- People working on demand or with irregular hours will require flexibility and may have to make changes to appointments at very short notice. Timetabling of appointments will need to be very flexible to allow for sudden changes due to work demands.
- Support may need to be provided over a long period – and people may need to dip in and out of support over time. It is important to build a flexible service where participants can engage at different points in time as circumstances change.
- Delivering out of hours support at locations that meet the needs of participants will require consideration of logistics, safeguarding and team building and support.
- Additional support, such as childcare, and types of contact and support, for example phone appointments or online provision, may need to be provided to enable people to access support on top of existing working hour requirements
- It can be difficult to ensure there is sufficient adviser time to deliver support flexibly. Peer mentoring and other volunteer provision (e.g. IT support) can be used to reduce pressure on adviser time but worked best for specific needs rather than holistic adviser support. Group mentoring was less successful due to differences in participants' working patterns and aspirations, which meant that support often had to be delivered one-to-one.
- Effective needs assessment and triage can be used to group/rate the level of support required by participants to ensure that the flexible support is targeted to those who require targeted adviser intervention most and at pertinent times e.g. to support application/interview prep, with more longer term needs being triaged to wider support.

Offering one-to-one support

Advisers tend to play a central role in the provision of in-work progression support, providing a key contact to support participants' engagement and helping to guide participants' journey via personalised advice and coaching. This includes providing specific support, plus signposting to additional options that may benefit participants. A quality relationship between participants and their adviser can help to drive success.

The role of advisers in IWP programmes

The support provided by advisers is varied and includes:

- Job search and employability support – for example, support with CVs and interview skills
- Career and labour market guidance
- Emotional and motivational support
- Employer negotiation techniques (focused on flexibility)
- Benefit advice, including better off in work calculations
- Signposting to additional support

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- It is important that participants have the opportunity to build a relationship and maintain regular contact with their adviser. Commissioners should consider adviser caseload and the frequency of communication.
- Coaching and mentoring help to develop participant motivation and confidence, which are important in sustaining engagement with support.
- While face-to-face support is generally considered to be an important feature of in-work progression programme, online and phone support can also be effective ways to maintain contact.
- Advisers need a wide range of skills and expertise that needs to be kept up to date, as well as strong interpersonal skills.
- Devolution of decisions to adviser level help to ensure autonomy in the role and localise decision making at an individual level.
- Advisers need access to up-to-date, reliable local labour market intelligence to advise participants on potential careers and earnings, and the skills required in different roles.

Holistic support

As outlined, the needs of participants vary according to their current situation and their immediate to long-term aspirations. A wide range of options ensures that provision can be tailored to meet the requirements of each participant. These should be identified and structured through the needs assessment, according to the preference of the participant and professional advice of the adviser. Support options may be provided directly through programme staff or arranged through partner services.

Support options

A wide range of support may be provided:

- Emotional and motivational support, for example one-to-one adviser support and coaching
- Career and labour market guidance, for example careers advice, brokerage and jobs clubs
- Job search and employability support, for example job search advice, CV workshops and linking to online resources

- Interview support, for example interview advice and interview workshops
- Skills advice and training opportunities, for example internal classes or funding and signposting to external accredited and non-accredited courses.
- Employer brokerage, for example shadowing, work placements and linking participants with suitable job opportunities
- Housing, debt and welfare advice, including better off in work calculations, money and welfare advice and housing support.
- Physical and mental health support, including practical support and specialist provision, and advice and support for employers

Working in partnership

Different partners bring different strengths and depths to a programme. Close working with key services can build on the service offer, developing a holistic focus. Partnerships may include co-located services, drop-in sessions or referral and signposting agreements.

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- Programmes need to have a strong network of partners including learning and skills, housing, employers, childcare and Jobcentre Plus, and be able to signpost effectively, with warm handovers where possible.
- Some of these relationships may take time to establish and that needs to be planned into the implementation phase.
- Mapping complementary provision in an area and building alliances at a strategic level will help programmes to deliver a more coherent service that maximises opportunities for participants e.g. working with training providers to facilitate flexible delivery of training.
- Eligibility criteria, performance measurement and funding mechanisms can prohibit shared working – understanding the infrastructure around existing programmes will make navigating this easier for new in-work progression programmes.
- Commissioners should seek to develop models that introduce opportunities for collaborative and shared working rather than one that discourages the exchange of ideas.

Engaging with employers

Employer-facing activity may be limited in individual-led support models as for many people the best way to increase earnings is by moving to a new job. This does not rule out the involvement of employers, and if managed carefully relationships can be effective. Employers can help to enhance the support offer by helping to design and delivery of programmes in a variety of ways. It is important to ensure that this is adding value to what employers are already doing to minimise the risk of displacing employer investment in training.

Role of employers

There are several ways in which employers can be involved, including:

- Supporting the design of the programme
- Inputting into skills and training interventions to ensure they are delivering to market need
- Delivering employability workshops
- Redesigning job roles to increase the variety of positions that are available to those wanting to work flexibly
- Identifying existing staff who might benefit from opportunities to progress within their organisations and building understanding of employees' career aspirations without assuming who might be interested in promotion
- Offering work experience placements to individuals looking to change career
- Offering mentoring with industry specialists
- Offering training opportunities
- Attending networking events and careers fairs
- Advertising job vacancies and employer brokerage

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- Engaging employers at a strategic level from planning stages can help ensure that any training and advice provided is relevant and up to date.
- Work placements and shadowing are valuable but difficult when participants are working, and strategies need to be in place to overcome these.
- SMEs may need a different approach that takes account of small business size which limits progression opportunities.
- Opportunities to link employer-led and individual-led approaches should be used to increase the scale of in-work progression programmes.

3) Programme performance

Tracking programme performance against a set of agreed outcomes provides insight into whether a programme is delivering as intended, enables practitioners to adjust activities and helps to inform future decision making.

Partners should aim to track outcomes over a suitable timeframe. The UK pilots reviewed for this guide measured outcomes over a relatively short period of time in comparison with some US programmes, for example. Examples from the US indicate that income progression is not necessarily linear and can take time – similarly, in some cases, early gains can diminish over time.

Defining and measuring outcomes

It is important to be clear on what outcomes a programme aims to achieve. This means defining what 'progression' means. Progression is often measured in terms of increases in income, overall earnings or pay per hour but if the definition is participant-led it may be broader – for example,

growth in confidence or a better ability to manage work and family life. There is value in measuring the soft outcomes of in-work progression programmes, as participants' progression goals may sit outside earnings increases. A decline in earnings could be viewed as a 'progression' if it satisfied other criteria such as distance, flexible hours, longer term opportunities for development or career change and job security. Within the Timewise pilot, an outcome map was developed from a Theory of Change model identifying a wide range of outcomes achieved from different types of support including soft outcomes such as 'improved family life' and 'independence' alongside employment, education and training destinations.

Outcomes measures

Multiple measures of outcome measurement exist:

- Hourly wage e.g. improved hourly wage
- Weekly earnings e.g. improved weekly earnings
- Disposable income e.g. improved disposable income
- Security, for example moving from zero hours to fixed hours employment contract / minimum guaranteed number of hours, temporary to permanent employment contract, and/or longer notice period for shift changes
- Quality of work, for example whether job constitutes a better job
- Improved skills, for example gained qualification

Key lessons and considerations for future commissioning

- It is important to consider what outcomes are important given the programme's objectives and profile of participants, and how feasible it is to accurately measure them.
- It is likely to be necessary to collect data from all participants at the point of engagement and at consistent intervals.
- Wider evidence suggests that participants may not achieve outcomes immediately, and that the benefits from support may accrue over the longer term.² It is important to decide how long to measure outcomes for.

² For example, Project Quest, which focused on the healthcare sector, the large sustained impact on earnings grew over time as participants were more consistently employed and earned higher hourly wages. The biggest gains were seen in years three to six.