

New Futures Four Nations Northern Ireland briefing paper

About L&W and our New Futures pilots

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. Our flagship programme, New Futures, supported workers who were looking to change career and reskill as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We uncovered gaps and shortcomings in the existing employment and skills system, which need to be addressed in order to tackle the UK's retraining challenge. This work was funded by the Covid-19 Support Fund. New Futures pilots were delivered in all four UK nations, including one in Belfast. The New Futures team worked with Belfast City Council to run a pilot to support people moving into jobs in the growing tech sector.

This policy briefing considers current provision to support career change in Northern Ireland (NI), exploring whether it is sufficient and how it might be improved. The research for this briefing was led by the independent think tank, Pivotal. It has been informed by desk research about existing NI programmes, along with a stakeholder roundtable and interviews with people with experience and expertise in supporting career change. The briefing focuses on programmes and recommendations specific to NI. For UK-wide programmes and recommendations, please refer to [our UK report](#).

What is career change and why is it important?

Put simply, career change is a change in broad industrial or occupational sector, or a change to the nature of one's work. Career change can be an active choice, or a forced change because of circumstances. Changing careers is becoming increasingly important as patterns of employment change. Changing careers enables people to find better work – for example, work that is more secure, higher paid, more fulfilling or more flexible - which may not be possible in their current sector. It allows individuals to respond to the changing nature of the labour market as the economy and technology develop, including helping people find sustainable work if their role becomes redundant, while ensuring we can meet the economy's future skills needs and priorities.¹ Career change is also a response to the fact that people now have longer working lives, and it may not be realistic for them to stay in the same sector throughout their entire career. Finally, career change is a means by which

¹ In 2021, the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer identified NI's future skills needs as: Level 6 and above qualifications (especially STEM); Level 4-5 qualifications in health, public services and care; engineering and manufacturing technologies; business administration, finance and law; along with a particular need to upskill those with only lower levels of qualifications.

communities can build resilience to negative economic shocks, preventing the scarring effects that can be seen after large employers close.

Our All Change report found that, while career change and reskilling may be in the best interests of both individuals and the economy in the long term, there are significant barriers that may prevent it from happening.² Primarily, these barriers are financial, with an individual facing lower earnings in the short term, earnings foregone in order to retrain, plus the cost of retraining. Moreover, people often report not knowing what their options might be or where to get support with career change, including whether any financial assistance might be available to them.

Our All Change report suggests that support for career change is needed in three broad areas: awareness and advice; flexible and tailored learning and training provision; and financial help. It warns that without this additional support, individuals' opportunities will be limited and the economy overall will be held back.

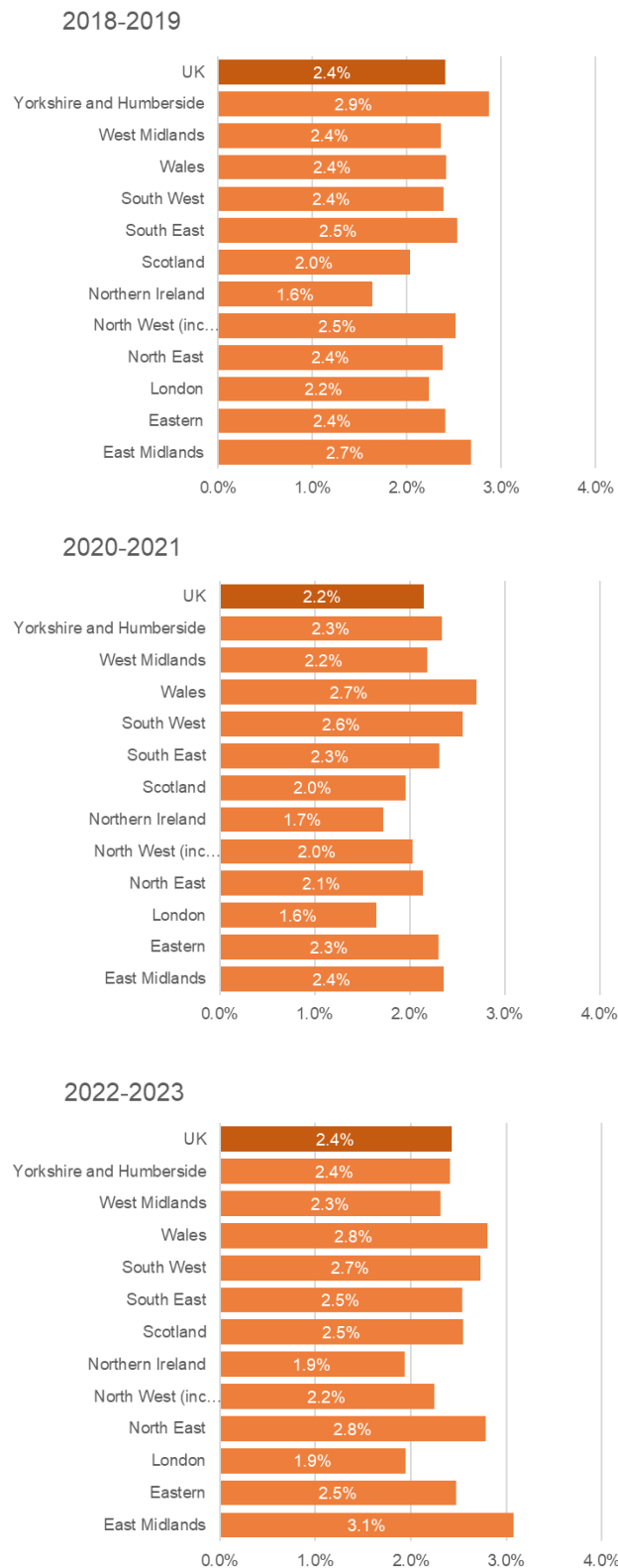
Analysis of career change in NI

In NI, the number of people moving jobs has increased over time since 2018-19. On average, 1.6% of workers moved job each quarter in 2018-19. This increased to 1.7% in 2020-21, and 1.9% in 2022-23. Figure 1 shows the percentage of people in work who change jobs by nation and region for time periods before the Covid-19 pandemic, during the pandemic and a year after.³ It shows the proportion of people staying in the same sector against the proportion moving to a different sector. NI, consistently, has had more movements to different sectors during these time periods than people changing jobs within the same sector. The most recent data available shows that in 2022-23, 56.9% of job moves involved a sector change, while 43.1% of job moves were within the same sector. However, this should be interpreted with care due to the small numbers.

² Learning and Work Institute (2023) [All change: understanding and supporting retraining and career change](#)

³ Data is drawn from the Labour Force Survey.

Figure 1: Percentage of people in work who change jobs by nation and region



Note: revisions by the ONS have introduced a discontinuity in the series from the July to September quarter of 2022 onwards. Therefore, any assessment of changes over time should be used with caution.

In NI between 2020 and 2023, nearly one third of all job moves, including moves within the same sector and moves into a different sector, were into hospitality, the highest out of all nations for this sector. Only 36% of people that previously worked in the manufacturing sector remained in the manufacturing sector, with 21% moving to the transport and communication sector and another 18% moving to the energy sector. Again, this should be interpreted with care due to the small numbers.

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Looking forward, Figure 2 shows the projected employment change in NI per year, by industry sector to the year 2035. ⁴ Our analysis of the projections shows that NI is expected to have the largest proportionate increase in education employment compared to any other nation or region in the UK.

Figure 2: Employment by sector, 2020 to 2035, Growth (% per annum)

	Eastern	East Midlands	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Midlands	Y&H	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Agriculture	0.2	-0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.1
Mining and quarrying	-4.4	-3.2	-3.3	-1.7	-3.7	-1.5	-4.0	-4.7	-4.7	-0.4	-0.9	-2.8
Food drink and tobacco	0.9	1.2	0.0	-0.1	-0.7	1.3	-1.7	-0.1	-1.7	1.0	-0.1	0.0
Engineering	-1.1	-1.3	2.0	-0.3	0.3	-2.0	-1.5	-0.2	0.2	-2.5	1.2	-1.3
Rest of manufacturing	-1.2	-1.0	-1.5	-1.0	-0.9	-1.2	-0.5	-0.7	-1.3	-1.2	-1.1	-0.6
Electricity and gas	-0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.8	-0.1	-0.6	-0.4	-0.3	-0.6	-0.6	-0.6
Water and sewerage	1.0	0.6	1.5	0.3	0.3	1.2	1.0	0.4	0.6	1.3	0.4	1.0
Construction	1.2	0.4	1.6	-0.3	0.1	0.9	1.2	0.2	0.1	1.3	-0.1	0.1
Wholesale and retail trade	0.2	0.3	-0.1	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1
Transport and storage	0.7	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.2	0.2	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.1
Accommodation and food	1.0	0.4	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.3	1.5	0.6	1.7	0.4	0.6
Media	-0.3	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.1	-0.4	-0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Information technology	0.6	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.1	0.7	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.2	0.9
Finance and insurance	-0.9	-0.5	0.2	0.2	-0.2	-0.7	-0.3	-0.3	-0.1	0.2	0.3	1.0
Real estate	1.1	0.3	0.0	0.9	1.1	0.7	-0.7	0.9	-0.4	-1.4	0.2	-0.4
Professional services	0.9	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.7
Support services	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.4	0.8	0.9	1.3	0.8	0.9	1.1	0.9	0.6
Public admin. and defence	0.8	1.0	0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.1	0.1	-0.2	0.0
Education	0.0	-0.1	0.0	0.6	0.8	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.1	1.0	0.5	0.6
Health and social work	1.2	0.8	0.4	0.9	1.1	0.3	1.4	0.7	1.1	0.9	1.5	1.1
Arts and entertainment	-0.1	-0.4	1.3	0.8	-0.1	1.1	2.0	0.0	-0.2	0.6	1.4	0.6
Other services	0.0	-0.5	1.2	-1.4	-0.1	-0.4	0.4	-0.2	-0.9	0.3	-0.3	-1.0
All industries	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.4

Note: Red is the lowest growth in a sector for that region and green is the highest growth sector.

The current support landscape in NI

NI's economy has lower levels of qualifications compared to the rest of the UK, including more people with no or low qualifications, and fewer people with degrees or higher.⁵ Moreover, NI's higher rate of economic inactivity is markedly raised amongst those with lower qualification levels. NI also has a lower rate of participation in adult learning for those who are in employment compared to Great Britain.

The new Economy Minister appointed in February 2024 announced four key economic priorities: good jobs, regional prosperity, productivity, and reduced carbon emissions. The Skills Strategy for a 10X Economy remains relevant though in setting out important foundational principles.⁶ It includes strategic aims to increase the

⁴ Department for Education (2023) [Labour market and skills projections: 2020 to 2035](#)

⁵ Ulster University (2024) [Labour Market Intelligence Portal](#)

⁶ Department for the Economy (2022) [Skills Strategy for a 10X Economy](#)

percentage of the population with a degree or higher level qualification in narrow STEM subjects; level 2 or above qualifications; and level 3 or above qualifications. However, while there is a significant focus on career development and careers advice, it is notable that supporting career change is not mentioned explicitly in the 10X Skills Strategy.

Current support for career change and reskilling in NI is largely delivered through broader skills programmes, rather than any provision specifically targeted at career change. In the past, there was more funding for re-skilling while in employment, but this has fallen away in recent years.

The main skills programmes in NI in which career changers might participate include:

- **Skill Up:** Free short courses to retrain and reskill for over 18s, set up as part of the Covid-19 recovery programme. Delivered by local further and higher education providers, these focused on skills identified by industry, linked to priority sectors. In total 23,000 people participated, including a high percentage with caring responsibilities and a good geographical spread, suggesting that cost has been a big barrier to individuals taking up training. However, funding for Skill Up finished at the end of March 2024, and it is not yet clear whether it will be continued.
- **Step Up:** Help for those at most risk of economic inactivity, set up as part of the Covid-19 recovery programme. Step Up aims to increase an individual's workplace confidence, build on existing skills and gain qualifications, provide mentoring and work experience. Step Up funding finishes at the end of March 2025, and it is not yet clear whether it will be continued afterwards.
- **Assured Skills Academies:** Short, fully funded, pre-employment training programmes, to upskill individuals and help them compete for job vacancies in new Foreign Direct Investment companies and expanding local businesses. This funding remains in place, although the linkage to one employer means it is less flexible than Skill Up or Step Up.
- **Apprenticeships:** ApprenticeshipsNI aims to provide the opportunity to take part in Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships and Higher Level Apprenticeships for Levels 4-7.
- **All Age Apprenticeships:** Off-the-job training element is fully funded in an effort to promote lifelong learning. These were previously only funded for those aged 25 and over in certain priority sectors. The extension for older workers has been welcomed, as is the modular, flexible approach taken to training.
- **Careers Service NI:** A wide range of advice and other resources are available including a phone helpline, webchat and email queries. The service is hosted on NI Direct, the NI government information portal.

- **Work Experience Programme:** offers short work experience placements to people aged 16 – 65 years who are unemployed or in receipt of benefits. Placements, which last two to eight weeks, are organised in a variety of real work environments to help a jobseeker develop or update their work skills or habits. Employers who provide a person with a work experience placement may receive an incentive payment of £250.
- Government-funded employment programmes for disabled people, such as **Workable**.
- **Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs):** funded by the Department for Communities in each council area, LMPs bring together employers and those seeking jobs and training, to help connect those looking for employment with employers, and consider local training needs.

In addition, in NI there are good examples of employment and retraining support funded by individual businesses or partnerships between businesses (for example [MEGA](#)), together with programmes delivered by social enterprises (e.g. [Timely Careers](#), [Press Refresh](#)). These programmes may be targeted at individuals whose jobs have become redundant, or at those returning to the labour market after some time away from employment, such as women returners.

Discretionary financial support is available to address some barriers for unemployed people to get into and start work including training costs. The **Adviser Discretion Fund** is a non-repayable grant available through Work Coaches in local Jobs and Benefits offices, which awards up to £1500 within a 12-month period.

Our research with stakeholders identified several challenges with current provision. While programmes to support retraining and career change in NI have improved in recent years, they are still not fully meeting need. One issue is that people don't have sufficient information about the programmes that exist. For example, Careers Service NI has a statutory responsibility to provide careers advice to all ages, but it has limited resources and is not yet sufficiently visible or perceived as a service suitable for adults at later stages in their careers. Rather, it is often seen as a service for young people only. A new careers portal is currently under development, which may help increase the visibility of these services.

Stakeholders said that, while employers want to support reskilling, they don't know how to go about it, and often lack the time and capacity to do so. Employers often don't know where to access information about supporting career change and find engaging with multiple public agencies time-consuming and frustrating. This is a particular problem for smaller firms, which make up most of NI's economy. Government support for training can appear too focused on big firms, rather than smaller ones. Stakeholders suggested an additional challenge of employers tending to neglect information about future jobs and how the labour market is changing when

they consider their skills needs. It was suggested that information from a labour market observatory could be a useful way to support employers.

There is also an information gap between employers who can offer jobs and job seekers themselves, including those looking to change careers: neither group currently has sufficient information about each other's needs. Stakeholders said that more needs to be done to close this gap. Councils are well placed to lead the work locally connecting employers with potential employees, and there are good examples of Labour Market Partnerships doing this. However, councils noted that they lack the resources to fulfill this role as effectively as they would like.

Stakeholders reflected that, in NI, formal qualifications are still the primary route into a job, in part because employers can lack flexibility in their entry requirements. Stakeholders suggested that employers should review their entrance requirements to adopt a more flexible approach, for example, taking on apprentices rather than graduates. In addition, the value of years of experience should be more widely recognised. It was suggested that more recruitment and selection should involve aptitude tests rather than setting minimum qualification levels.

Meanwhile, there is a perception that training and job roles are not yet flexible enough: more flex is required to encourage people to join, or rejoin, the labour force. This could include providing support for childcare costs, noting that many people face considerable barriers to changing jobs or accessing training programmes. In addition, 'bitesize learning' should be more highly valued, since many employers and potential employees lack the time for longer courses. Stakeholders were clear that both employers and employees need to adopt a flexible approach, being open to new options and ways of working.

Policy priorities to help people change career

There is considerable interest, enthusiasm and goodwill for greater support for career change in NI among government departments, local councils, employers and training providers. However, while there are some examples of good practice, there is insufficient focus on career change and its increasing importance to individuals and the economy in the current policy approach.

Below are recommendations drawing on the conclusions from our research:

- **Better signposting** is needed towards guidance and support for career change. Most people change careers without government help, but need access to the right information, advice and guidance to do so. At present, too few employers and employees feel that they have the information they need. The new careers portal under development needs to engage audiences of all ages and ensure that Careers Service NI is not seen as only supporting young people.

The support people may need to change jobs or switch sectors will depend in part on whether the move is a choice or a necessity. People may also need more support if they are looking to make a bigger change, particularly if there are significant costs associated with this, or if they have more limited networks to help them identify options. The focus of public intervention should target people who need more help to change career or who are at greater risk of falling out of work, alongside better financial support to reduce the costs and risks of career changing. To do so in Northern Ireland, we argue the government needs to focus on the following:

- Most existing skills interventions in Northern Ireland provide advice about training opportunities, but without explicit targeting or tailoring for career changers. We recommend that the Department for Economy takes the lead in considering the issues raised in this report and **develops an action plan** to ensure that career change in Northern Ireland is more clearly recognised, prioritised and supported.
- In the short term, clarification is needed about **the future of Skill Up and Step Up**, which are popular Department for Economy retraining programmes whose future funding is not confirmed. We recommend that evaluations of these two programmes are used to determine whether all or some elements of these programmes should be continued.
- **Information about future jobs** and the likely future skills needs of the economy should be more accessible and current to potential employees, employers and training providers. Smaller employers should be particularly supported with this information, since they may not have the time, resource, knowledge or networks to do this work on their own. This could involve wider dissemination of the information already provided in the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre's Skills Barometer¹¹.
- **Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs)** offer a successful local mechanism that can build effective and responsive connections between employers and potential staff. LMPs need to be more fully resourced in order to have greater impact.
- Employers should be encouraged to be **more flexible in recruitment methods**, particularly looking beyond requiring formal qualifications when experience could be just as relevant. Employers and training providers should also be flexible in how training and jobs are structured, recognising the barriers many people face to employment and training.

Moving forward

The restoration of the NI Assembly and Executive in early February 2024 offers a revived opportunity to influence policy about career change and reskilling. In the first instance, the Department for Economy and the Department for Communities, as well as the Economy and Communities Committees of the Assembly, will be sighted on these recommendations. The recently re-established NI Skills Council can also help in providing advice to the NI Executive on skills policy. NI's budgetary position is

extremely challenging, and it is not yet clear the priority or funding that will be given to improving skills either in funding allocations or in a programme for government. It is imperative that the importance of supporting career change and reskilling is recognised, both for individuals and the economy as a whole.