

Top Tips: Employer engagement

The Supported Employment 'place, train and maintain' model relies on effective engagement with employers to help people into the right job, and help them to stay in work.

As part of Connect to Work (CtW), Employment Specialists will engage with employers to identify job opportunities that are a good match between the needs and aspirations of programme participants and employers. They will also engage with employers to support programme participants to stay in work.

Effective engagement can lead to:

- employers having higher awareness of the programme and more confidence to employ programme participants
- better knowledge of the local labour market and employers' needs to facilitate the process of matching programme participants with vacancies.

You can find more information about the context in which this document was developed [here](#).

Lessons learned

The lessons below are drawn from evaluations of Supported Employment programmes to understand how employer engagement has been effectively introduced, including [IPS Grow](#), [Health-Led Trials](#), and [supported internship programmes](#).

Similar programmes have shown that:

- Identifying and building relationships with main employers is key to finding the right jobs for participants and match to employer needs.
- Delivery areas and/or commissioning organisations need to effectively promote CtW, including how it fits within other employment and skills programmes offered in the area, and how Employment Specialists can be supported to lead effective employer engagement.

Identify and build strong relationships with key employers in your area

- **Using available Labour Market Information (LMI) data to strengthen your knowledge of the local labour market.** This will help to understand which employers to approach, the current and future skills demand, the sectoral differences to better tailor the support and interventions to employers' needs, where the vacancies are, and whether some employers and industries need recruitment drives. This information can be drawn from a range of sources, such as existing council support for the business community, Jobcentre Plus, Local

Skills Improvement Plans, local business support services, and employer stakeholder groups, as well as looking at Office for National Statistics local area profiles for example on their [Nomis website](#).

- **Using existing local government networks to identify and engage employers.** Local government can leverage their own services, such as Economic Development teams, Growth Hubs, local Chambers of Commerce, and local Federation of Small Businesses. Other networks to consider include housing associations, further education colleges and providers, and Business in the Community. Local government as one of the largest local employers could also consider taking on programme participants and consider upcoming recruitment in appropriate roles.
- **Identifying and engaging potentially receptive employers.** Disability Confident employers and other schemes, such as Mindful Employers, can be used to identify those employers. It is worth mobilising local employers who already engage with local government on good work and inclusive employment initiatives. For example, local government that have introduced [Good Work charters](#) can engage with signatories to promote CtW.
- **Using a two-stage approach to engagement.** As suggested in the guidance on [supported internships](#), the first stage can help with securing interest and willingness to be involved with supported employment programmes. The second stage of the engagement can be focused on getting agreement to specific placements and support for participants with fully engaged employers.
- **Maintaining engagement with employers.** Once initial connections are established, delivery areas need to maintain regular engagement. Networks also provide opportunities to engage employers with potential participants in a more strategic way for instance developing shared understanding to measure impact. The [Leeds Anchor Organisations Network](#) enabled employers to identify shared strategic aims of engaging people from marginalised communities and to develop a diversity dashboard to measure impact.

Promote the programme to employers

- **Making the business case to employers, particularly SMEs.** Employers are more likely to engage with the programme if they see the benefits for their business, such as helping with recruitment challenges, reducing recruitment costs, creating a more diverse workforce, and bringing additional skills to the business. Delivery areas can draw on existing guidance, such as the [Government guidance](#) and from the [Chartered Institute of Personnel Development](#) (CIPD), to highlight the benefits of the programme. Promoting and sharing the positive experience of employers involved with similar programmes can also help with further making the case to other employers.
- **Creating opportunities for employers to promote the programme themselves.** Business to business promotion is one of the most effective ways to encourage more employers to engage with a programme. While having CtW

promote the positive experience of employers is helpful, identifying employers who can be a champion for the programme and share their experiences with other employers is critical.

- **Ensuring employers understand the programme and how CtW fits with other employment support and skills programmes.** The way delivery areas communicate the programme will influence employer engagement. Examples of communication channels include: the introduction of an employer forum (see the Salford City Council example below), creating and sharing marketing materials to promote supported employment programmes, an [Employers Road Map](#) to demonstrate to employers all stages involved with supported employment.
- **Build the capability of Employment Specialists.** Employment Specialists are central in engaging and maintaining the relationships with employers. Ongoing support and training for Employment Specialists can help with supporting development of this capacity. The recruitment of Employment Specialists with experience of engaging with employers is another way to ensure effective engagement with employers. More considerations on the skills and staff required to deliver CtW can be found in the [Top Tips: Skills and experience of staff](#). Employer engagement is a specialist and time-consuming part of the Employment Specialists role, requiring sufficient investment and support to be a success.
- **Work with employers to ensure the right in-work support is provided so that the placement works well for the employer as well as the participant.** In-work support is provided for up to 4-months after the start date. IPS programmes have found that a positive ongoing relationship with the employer has increased the chances of employers coming directly to programme again to fill a vacancy. The Employment Specialist can consider what ongoing support will work best for both the client and the employer, which may include providing a variety of follow-along assistance such as regular check-in calls, contributions to plans or strategies to help clients thrive at work, reasonable adjustment requests, and attendance at performance reviews.

Key considerations

How can you identify and engage employers?

What are the LMI data available? What are the opportunities for job growth in your areas? Do local employers struggle to fill some vacancies? What are the challenges in your areas? For example, particular sectors or smaller or rural employers that may need a different approach.

Who are the main employers and what are the key sectors in your areas? Do you have existing relationships with employers that could be built on? Do other local authority services or partner organisations like housing associations, have existing employer relationships that could be useful? Do you know which employers have already engaged with other supported employment programmes (for example supported internships or Individual Placement Support Primary Care)?

Are there existing forums to engage employers? Can you create a strategic network of anchor organisations that can use their collective leadership and leverage for change? Could you host events to bring employers in, such as Business Breakfasts?

How can you promote CtW with employers?

Have you got a compelling business case that will bring employers into a conversation with you? Are you able to tailor the business case to different employers based on the information gathered in your initial engagement with them?

Do you know how learning and training organisations and other services are engaged with employers? How do you provide employers with the broader picture of how CtW fits with other training and placement programmes?

Are there opportunities to establish networks to facilitate learning among employers about what works for them and for participants?

How can you ensure Employment Specialists have the capacity and ability to successfully engage with employers? How are you supporting your Employment Specialists to convert receptive employers into specific placements with support? How will you support Employment Specialists to maintain an on-going interaction with employers that engages them at all stages of the participants' employment journey?

How will you ensure that you recruit and on-board the right people to be Employment Specialists? What training and support will be in place to ensure Employment Specialists have the right skillset at every stage of the employment journey to maintain credibility and engagement with employers?

How will you ensure Employment Specialists have the time to engage with employers effectively?

Example of what is working well

Sharing information with employers

What works well will vary according to what type of employers you want to engage with, and what aspect of employer engagement you want to focus on. Some local authorities and mayoral authorities have set up forums to share information with employers about the different supports they offer in their area.

Salford City Council has established a Supported Employment Employer Forum to bring together local employers and partners and raise awareness of supported employment opportunities for young people and adults with learning difficulties and/or autism. By bringing employers together they were able to raise awareness of the training and support available to employers, increased the number of employment opportunities available, shared good practice in relation to recruitment and supported the retaining of young people and adults with learning difficulties and/or autism in paid employment. The forum meets online every quarter, and employers can sign up to receive regular updates.