

A Work, Health and Skills Plan for Wales

Delivering a more inclusive labour market for women

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Introduction

Employment support in Wales is changing, with the UK Government committing to the devolution of all non-Jobcentre Plus employment support programmes. Learning and Work Institute (L&W) analysis indicates an estimated £47 million per year could be provided through devolution to deliver employment support in Wales.

This shift comes at a time when 15.8 per cent of the working age population in Wales are considered economically inactive, a rate that is higher than that of England (14.2 per cent).¹²

Wales faces other labour market inequalities too. Women are significantly more likely to be economically inactive than men (at a rate of 18.8 per cent compared with 12.7 per cent). Economic inactivity is also more likely to affect people from ethnic minority groups compared to those from White backgrounds, at rates of 18.0 per cent and 15.7 per cent respectively.³

The move towards devolution provides an opportunity for the next Welsh Government employment strategy to address specific challenges at a regional and local level. To inform a new approach to employment support in Wales, L&W have been conducting research, funded by Serco, focused on boosting employment and closing gaps faced by women, people from ethnic minority groups, disabled people, and people with long-term health conditions.

This briefing paper explores the employment gap in Wales for women. It draws on employment gap analysis for the four economic regions in Wales using Annual Population Survey and 2021 Census data.

It also presents findings from a series of qualitative fieldwork conducted in June and July 2025. This included two focus groups with women. The first group was held online

¹ Throughout this paper economic inactivity refers to adults (16-64 years of age) who are listed as economically inactive through disability or long-term health condition, looking after home or family, or for 'Other' reasons. It does not include students or retired people.

² 2021 Census

³ 2021 Census

with women living in and around Denbighshire. All five participants in this group were employed but had previous experience of economic inactivity. The second group was held in-person with women living in and around Blaenau Gwent. It was attended by three participants, all of which were economically inactive. Participants across both groups were later invited to attend an online feedback session to help shape recommendations. Three participants joined this session.

While the qualitative findings offer valuable insights, the small number of participants means they may not be representative of the broader population. It is important to note that all participants identified as being from White backgrounds. The age of participants ranged from 24-59.

A stakeholder workshop was hosted in June 2025 with 14 attendees from private, public and third sector organisations involved with skills and employment support in Wales. This workshop focused on stakeholders' experiences of supporting women into employment.

Stakeholders who attended this workshop, and stakeholders who attended two other workshops (focused on people from ethnic minority groups and disabled people and people with long-term health conditions) were invited to join an online feedback session in July 2025. Eight stakeholders joined this feedback session to discuss potential policy recommendations.

The gender employment gap in Wales

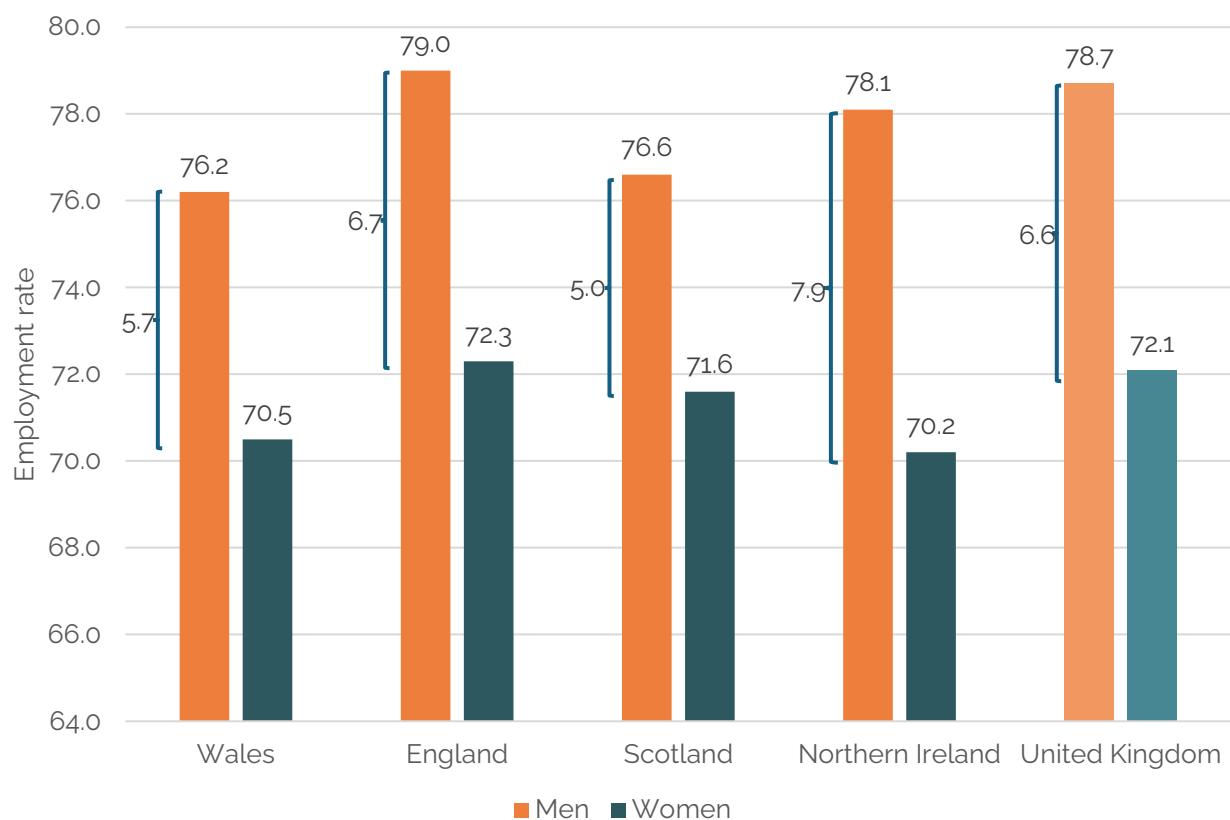
This first section compares the difference in employment rate for men and women in Wales and across the UK. It draws on Annual Population Survey data covering April 2024 to March 2025.

How Wales compares to the rest of the UK

The employment rate for men in Wales was 76.2 per cent, while it was 70.5 per cent for women. **This gives Wales a gender-based employment gap of 5.7 percentage points.**

Figure 1 shows how the gender-based employment gap in Wales compares to other UK nations. While Wales has a larger employment rate gap than Scotland (a gap of 5.0 percentage points), it had a smaller gap than both England (gap of 6.7 percentage points), Northern Ireland (gap of 7.9 percentage points), and the UK as a whole (gap of 6.6 percentage points).

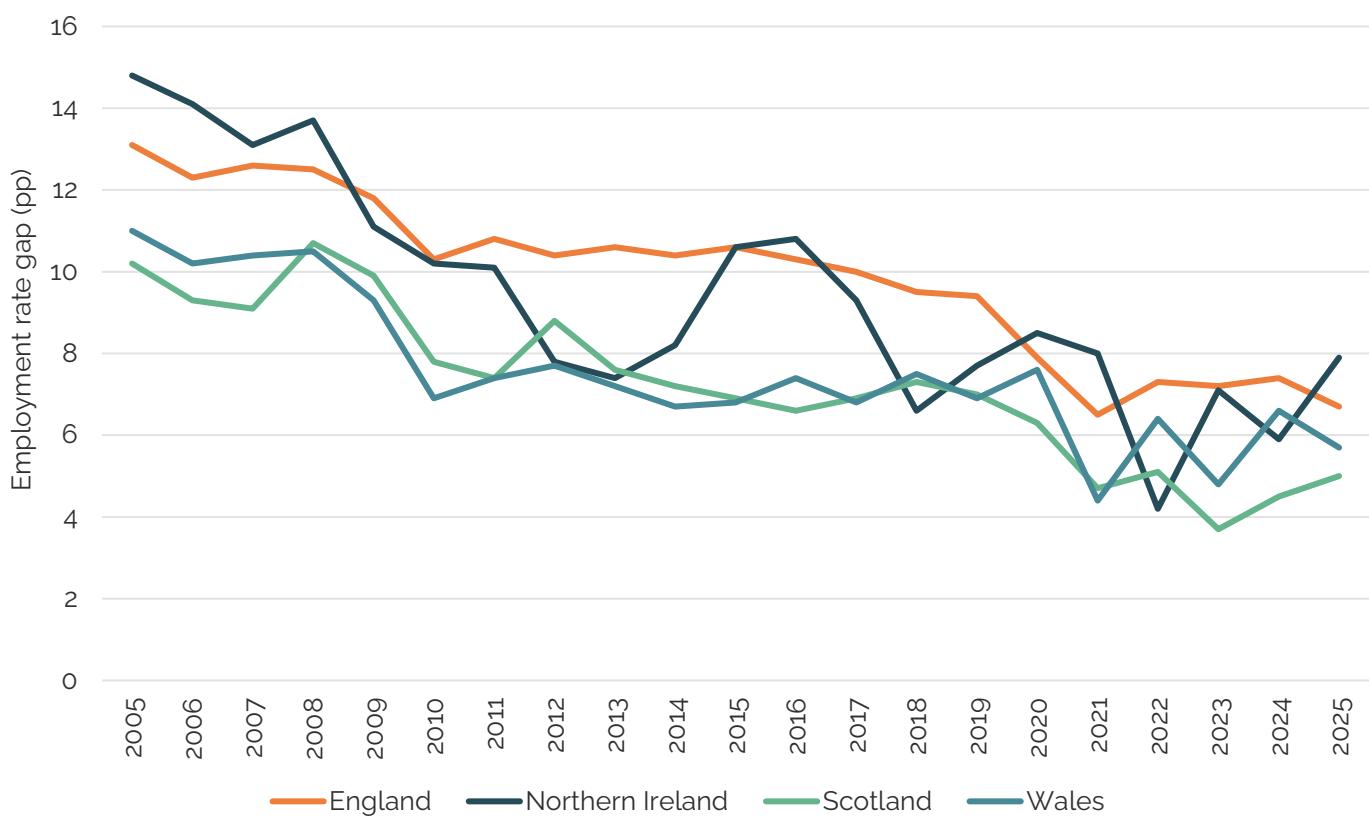
Figure 1: Employment rate gap between men and women aged 16-64 in each UK nation (percentage point difference)



Source: UK Annual Population Survey April 2024 to March 2025

Time series data highlights that in Wales, as in most other UK nations, the employment gap between men and women has generally fallen. Figure 2 shows that in the last 20 years between April 2004 – March 2005 and April 2024 – March 2025 the gender employment gap in Wales fell from 11.0 percentage points to 5.7 percentage points.

Figure 2: Employment rate gap between men and women aged 16-64 in each UK nation (percentage point difference) from April 2004-March 2005 to April 2024-March 2025



Source: UK Annual Population Survey April 2004-March 2005 to April 2024-March 2025

Variation across regions

Comparing employment rates of men and women at regional level reveals some significant variation. Figure 3 shows the gender-based employment gap for each of the four regions in Wales.⁴

Mid-Wales had the largest employment gap between men and women at 9.9 percentage points. Notably, of all regions, it had the highest proportion of men in employment at 78.1 per cent contributing to the large employment gap, while 68.2 per cent of women were employed.

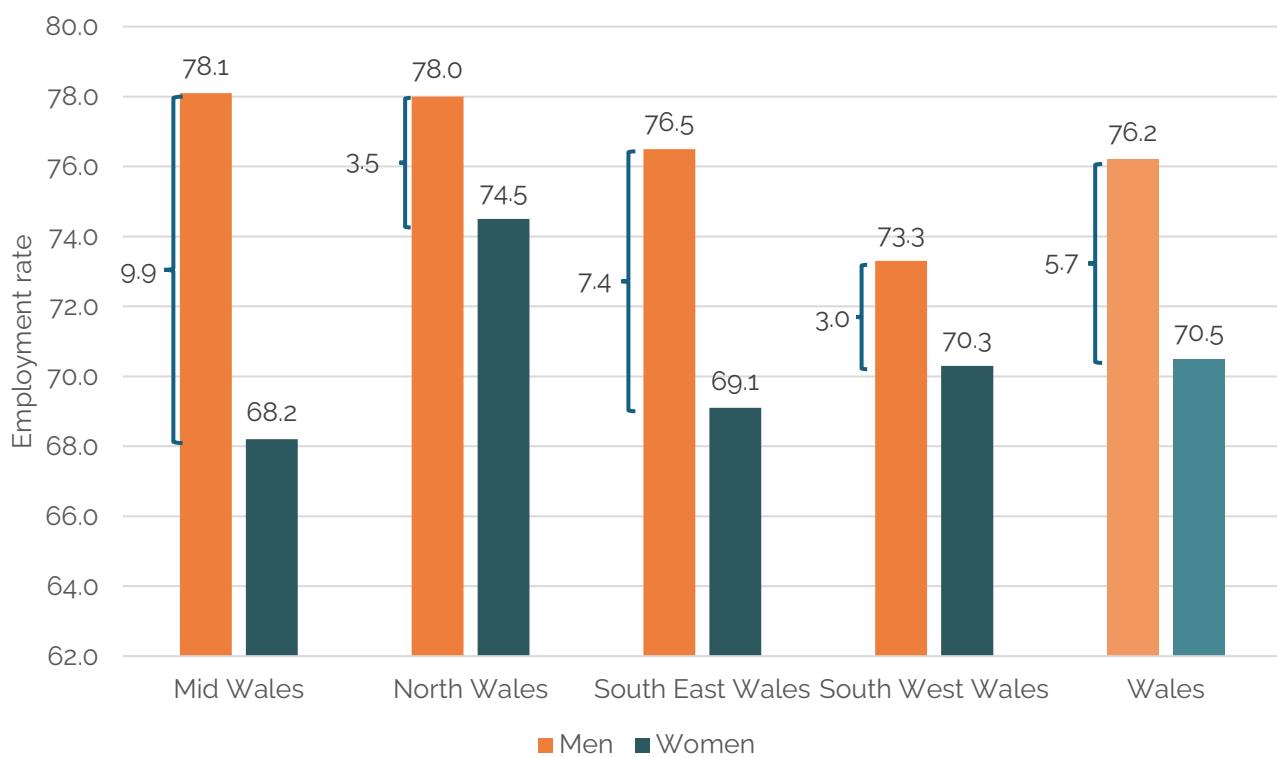
⁴ Wales has four regions. South East Wales includes the local authorities of Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Newport, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen and the Vale of Glamorgan. South West Wales includes Carmarthenshire, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire and Swansea. North Wales includes Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, the Isle of Anglesey and Wrexham. Finally, mid-Wales includes Ceredigion and Powys.

South East Wales had the next highest disparity in employment rate between men and women at 7.4 percentage points. Here, 76.5 per cent of men were employed compared to 69.1 per cent of women.

The employment gap between men and women was considerably smaller in North Wales at 3.5 percentage points. In North Wales, 78.0 per cent of men were employed in this time period, compared to 74.5 per cent of women.

The employment gap between men and women was smallest in South West Wales, at 3.0 percentage points. However, while the disparity between men and women was smallest, this region has the lowest proportion of men (73.3 per cent) and women (70.3 per cent) in work of all the Welsh regions. The small employment gap is therefore linked to the low employment rate among men, rather than the strength of the labour market for women.

Figure 3: The gender-based employment gap in the four Welsh regions



Source: UK Annual Population Survey April 2024 to March 2025

Employment gaps at the local authority level

Table 1 draws on data from the 2021 Census to show employment rate by gender for each of the 22 local authority areas in Wales.

Pembrokeshire stands out as having the largest gap in employment rate between men and women at 7.8 percentage points. Notably, Pembrokeshire has one of the highest

rates of employment for men, the third highest of all local authorities, but ranks fourteenth for women.

At the other end of the scale, Swansea has the smallest gap in employment, at 2.6 percentage points. It is important to note that while the employment gap in Swansea is the smallest in Wales, the local authority has the lowest rate of employment for men (66.0 per cent) and the fourth lowest for women (63.4 per cent).

Table 1: Gender-based employment gap by local authority areas in Wales

Region	Local Authority	Employment rate: Men	Employment rate: Women	Employment Gap (percentage points)
South West Wales	Pembrokeshire	73.7%	65.9%	7.8
Mid Wales	Powys	77.7%	70.9%	6.8
South East Wales	Blaenau Gwent	70.0%	63.4%	6.6
South East Wales	Newport	73.3%	66.7%	6.6
South East Wales	Torfaen	72.9%	66.7%	6.2
North Wales	Isle of Anglesey	73.1%	66.9%	6.2
South East Wales	Caerphilly	72.0%	66.0%	6.0
South East Wales	Rhondda Cynon Taf	70.8%	64.8%	6.0
South East Wales	Cardiff	66.6%	60.8%	5.8
South East Wales	Merthyr Tydfil	70.7%	64.9%	5.8
South West Wales	Carmarthenshire	72.7%	67.1%	5.6
North Wales	Flintshire	77.5%	72.1%	5.4
South East Wales	Monmouthshire	76.4%	71.1%	5.3
North Wales	Gwynedd	71.0%	65.8%	5.2
South West Wales	Neath Port Talbot	67.8%	62.9%	4.9
South East Wales	Vale of Glamorgan	74.9%	70.3%	4.6
North Wales	Denbighshire	71.7%	67.2%	4.5
North Wales	Conwy	72.1%	67.8%	4.3
Mid Wales	Ceredigion	66.2%	62.0%	4.2
North Wales	Wrexham	73.3%	69.3%	4.0
South East Wales	Bridgend	70.6%	66.9%	3.7
South West Wales	Swansea	66.0%	63.4%	2.6

Source: ONS 2021 Census

Economic inactivity through gender, health conditions and other characteristics

This section explores women's experience of economic inactivity, and how this intersects with other characteristics and circumstances. It presents data taken from the 2021 Census focused on adults aged 16-64 who are recorded as economically inactive through looking after home or family, disability or long-term sickness, or for 'Other' reasons. It does not include students or retired people.⁵

As of March 2021, the rate of economic inactivity for the working age population of Wales was 15.8 per cent. The rate of economic inactivity was higher among women (18.8 per cent) than men (12.7 per cent). The data suggests that the largest driver of this difference is the higher proportion of women (8.6 per cent) who are looking after their home or family compared to that of men (2.1 per cent).

In England, the rate of economic inactivity was lower, at 14.2 per cent. The rate of economic inactivity is still higher among women (17.9 per cent) than men (10.5 per cent). However, the rate of economic inactivity is lower for both groups than in Wales individually. Census data highlights that the difference between the rates of women (9.8 per cent) and men (1.8 per cent) looking after their home or family is the largest driver in the overall disparity in economic inactivity rates.

In Wales, 6.9 per cent of the working age population were economically inactive through disability or long-term health conditions. This was slightly more prevalent among women (7.1 per cent) than men (6.7 per cent). By comparison, the rate of economic inactivity through disability or long-term health condition in England is lower at 4.6 per cent. In England, there is less disparity between the rate of women (4.7 per cent) and men (4.5 per cent) that are economically inactive for this reason.

Across Wales, the difference in employment rate between men and women was highest among those from 'Other' ethnic backgrounds (14.6 percentage points), followed by those from Asian backgrounds (12.0 percentage points). The employment rate gap between men and women from Black backgrounds was 8.6 percentage points, and there was a 5.9 percentage point difference for those from White backgrounds. The smallest employment rate gap was observed in Mixed ethnic groups (2.5 percentage points).

As was the case for Wales overall, the data suggests that these differences in employment rates are primarily driven by the higher proportion of women looking after home or family compared to men. For example, the gap between women and men looking after home or family is highest among those from 'Other' ethnic backgrounds

⁵ Adults under 64 years old who reported that they were retired at the time of the 2021 Census have been excluded from analysis.

(16.5 percentage points), followed by those from Asian backgrounds (15.0 percentage points). By contrast, the gap between men and women from White backgrounds who are economically inactive for this reason is 6.1 percentage points.

Looking at regional data, South West Wales had the largest number of economically inactive adults, at 16.8 per cent. The rate was higher among women (20.1 per cent) than men (13.5 per cent). Examining this data further, South West Wales had the largest proportion of adults who were economically inactive due to disability or long-term health conditions, compared to other regions. This stood at 8.1 per cent of women and 7.4 per cent of men.

By contrast, Mid Wales had the lowest rates of economic inactivity of all regions at 12.9 per cent, or 15.6 per cent of women and 10.1 per cent of men.

Gender and qualification level

While women face higher rates of economic inactivity compared to men, they are generally more qualified. At the time of the 2021 Census, 37.5 per cent of women had a qualification at Level 4 or above, compared to 31.0 per cent of men.

Across Wales, 13.7 per cent of all adults aged 16-64 had no qualifications. Men were more likely to have no qualifications than women (15.0 per cent compared to 12.4 per cent).

Experience of economic inactivity

This section presents findings from qualitative research on the challenges faced by women when it comes to entering or re-entering the labour market.

Lack of affordable childcare

Childcare emerged as the most consistent and pressing barrier to employment for focus group participants, with a notable lack of access to flexible or affordable childcare options. Nearly all participants agreed that the high cost of childcare has made employment financially unviable as the wages they could earn from working would only barely cover the fees, if at all. As a result, most participants had chosen to stay at home with their children and delay returning to work until their children are in full-time education.

"At the moment it's just too expensive... he does qualify for so many free hours, but there's no way that finding a job that would fit around that." (*Participant, Ebbw Vale*)

"Childcare fees just didn't make it feasible to work. I was just paying off the childcare fees or ending up in debt." (*Participant, Denbighshire*)

Yet returning to work is not always straightforward. Stakeholders described how women returning from maternity leave, despite legal protections, can face discrimination and slower career progression due to perceived gaps in recent experience.

Limited local job opportunities

Some participants reported that the lack of local job opportunities, and poor public transport, makes it difficult to access work, especially for those without a car. This was particularly acute in rural or semi-rural areas, where commuting long distances was often impractical or unaffordable. One participant pointed out that the cost and availability of transport is also a barrier to accessing employment support, highlighting that the benefits they receive are not sufficient to cover transport to and from their nearest Jobcentre Plus (JCP) site.

"It's a 24-mile trip to the [Jobcentre Plus] office and you haven't got an income... that's quite far." (*Participant, Denbighshire*)

Awareness of support

Limited awareness of available employment, health and skills support is another key barrier. Few focus group participants were aware of the support services available to them and, where participants are aware of support, they often found out by chance, through word of mouth rather than formal outreach. When it comes to skills support, most participants explained that they feel unsure about what qualifications or training they need to access better jobs. Some have partial qualifications or experience that does not align neatly with job requirements and are uncertain how to identify and communicate transferable skills. Most participants had attempted to search online for advice and guidance but found the volume of information overwhelming.

"I struggle to know what course I need for what job and whether it costs... There's a lot of information out there, but it can be quite overwhelming" (*Participant, Ebbw Vale*)

Experience of support

Some participants described services like Careers Wales as helpful but poorly advertised, while others have found JCP unhelpful or even discouraging when they have asked for more holistic support with preparing for work. Several participants described feeling judged or stigmatised when accessing formal services like JCP:

"I don't like walking into the Jobcentre, I always feel judged." (*Participant, Denbighshire*)

Age discrimination and overqualification

Older women in particular reported feeling disadvantaged by their age or perceived overqualification. Some participants felt disregarded by employment services, while others found that their experience was not valued in the job market.

"Probably age and experience... I'm seen as being expensive and that I won't hang around." (*Participant, Denbighshire*)

Gender roles

In some communities, cultural expectations can limit women's work participation. Stakeholders highlighted that these expectations can impact women's confidence to enter or remain in work.

Stakeholders also reflected that women disproportionately bear the burden of caring for elderly relatives alongside looking after children, which can impact their career choices. In their experience, some employers lack the willingness or organisational capacity to offer flexible working hours that accommodate women's caring responsibilities.

Digital literacy barriers

Stakeholders highlighted that digital literacy is a significant barrier for some women, especially those returning to work after long career breaks or those from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These gaps make it difficult to access online job applications, training platforms, and employment support services. Stakeholders emphasised that digital inclusion cannot be assumed and that tailored, entry-level digital training is needed to avoid exclusion from opportunities due to a lack of foundational skills.

Menopause and workplace support

Stakeholders raised concerns about the impact of menopause on women's ability to stay in or return to work. Symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating can affect performance, yet many workplaces do not offer appropriate support or adjustments. Without awareness or flexible policies, women may feel forced to leave their jobs even when they are capable and experienced. Stakeholders called for better workplace education, menopause-friendly policies, and support mechanisms to help women manage symptoms and continue their careers with dignity and confidence.

What next?

Separate briefings considering the labour market context for people from ethnic minority groups, disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, and a final report setting out options for how Wales can make the most of the opportunity of devolution, are available from [L&W's website](#).