

Supporting the progression of low- income workers in Scotland

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March 2026

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Published by National Learning and Work Institute

Unit 1.23, St Martins House, 7 Peacock Lane, Leicester, LE1 5PZ UK

Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

www.learningandwork.org.uk

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Introduction

Funded by the Robertson Trust, Learning and Work Institute (L&W), in partnership with Edinburgh College, carried out research to adapt and test a new approach to supporting in-work progression in Scotland. The project, which ran from February 2025 to February 2026, aimed to support lasting change for individuals in Edinburgh most at risk of, and suffering the consequences of, in-work poverty by enabling them to access better paid, more secure and sustainable work.

Background

Too many people in Scotland experience in-work poverty and find progression out of working poverty difficult to achieve. Just over 10% of workers in Scotland are on persistent low pay, meaning that they have been paid below the Real Living Wage for at least four of the last five years. Very few people are able to sustainably move out of low pay with only 1 in 20 people on low pay moving to pay above the Real Living Wage in the same 5-year period.¹ While Edinburgh is an affluent city with higher average incomes than the rest of Scotland, limited opportunity for progression combined with high housing costs and limited social security, means that despite increases to the minimum wage, in-work poverty persists; 65% of all children in poverty in Edinburgh are living in a family where adults are in paid employment.²

As highlighted in the [report](#) on the initial phase of this work, the causes of in-work poverty are multi-faceted. People may be experiencing, or at risk of, in-work poverty from a lack of guaranteed hours, a lack of flexibility to coordinate work and caring responsibilities, a lack of support to manage a health condition or a combination of these; it's not just an issue of low pay. Solutions to tackle progression at work must look beyond pay and beyond individual action to address systemic barriers. This work and the in-work progression model proposed in this report should therefore be viewed in the wider context of fair work as outlined in [Scotland's Fair Work Convention](#) and the [Edinburgh Fair Work Charter](#).

There is currently one programme in Edinburgh, Advance, that has a specific focus on in-work progression, but employment support programmes in the city are more typically focused on supporting people to find or re-enter work. The proportion of people in the city experiencing in-work poverty is high. Support for them is limited compared with what is available for those out of work, indicating unmet need. Our research confirmed that there is more to learn about how best to support low-income workers progress to better jobs. Stakeholders identified that support to help people

¹ Birt, C., Cebula, C., Evans, J., Hay, D., and McKenzie, A., (2023) Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Poverty in Scotland ,

² Edinburgh Poverty Commission (2020) [A Just Capital](#)

progress in work is an underdeveloped element in Scotland and Edinburgh's implementation of the Fair Work agenda.

Methodology

This project had two key phases, 1) feasibility study and 2) co-design.

An initial feasibility study (February – August 2025) undertook a range of research activities to assess the adaptability of successful evidence based in-work progression programmes in the Scottish context. This included:

- A review of existing evidence on in-work progression programmes.
- Analysis of demographic and labour market data for Scotland and Edinburgh.
- A mapping exercise to identify existing in-work employment support and training in Edinburgh. This ensures that the proposed pilot compliments, rather than duplicates, existing interventions.
- Interviews and focus groups with low-income workers, employers and community organisations. This ensures a holistic understanding of the needs of workers and stakeholders that can inform the co-design phase.

Key learning from phase one

WorkAdvance

The evidence review focused on existing models of support for in-work progression which were identified as having been rigorously evaluated, produced positive outcomes for participants, and were likely to be transferable to the Edinburgh context. These included WorkAdvance, a United States (US) model providing technical training and wraparound support for participants. Core elements of the model are outlined in Figure One.

Our analysis identified five key features of WorkAdvance as key to generating positive outcomes: providers having previous experience of delivering similar programmes; intensive screening of programme applicants; provision of post-employment coaching; placement of participants in high-quality jobs in high-paying sectors; and active involvement of employers.

Figure One: Core elements of WorkAdvance provision

Sector focused pre-employment services	Each participant receives an orientation customised to the targeted sector, meets with a career coach to assess the participant's interest in the sector and to create an individual career plan, and receives job-readiness preparation (in soft skills, CV writing, etc.) tailored to the sector.
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Occupational skills training	Short-term, sector-specific skills training is offered free of charge, accompanied by an industry-recognised training credential or certification. The length of this differed between providers from 2-32 weeks.
Job development and placement in targeted occupations	Programme staff members capitalise on new and existing relationships with employers in the targeted industry to place participants in appropriate occupations, match them with jobs that suit their skills, and help them identify future advancement opportunities in the industry.
Post employment services	Coaching is provided to participants for up to two years after employment to promote job retention and career advancement, assist with reemployment, and address issues that may arise with employers. ³

Following in-depth analysis, WorkAdvance was identified as a model that had the potential to be adapted to the Edinburgh context and successfully target the in-work population. Adaptations made to the model to make it appropriate for Edinburgh, and the sectoral focus of the pilot programme, are discussed in detail in the final section of this report.

Sector specific programme model

The review of evidence on what made in-work progression programmes successful highlighted that a sector specific approach to in-work progression is associated with more positive outcomes and that the choice of sector was also critical to the success of a programme. Our data analysis and scoping calls identified tourism, finance and health and social care as potential sectors to consider with key considerations being the availability of jobs paid above the Real Living Wage and the expertise of our delivery partner. Our decision to choose health and social care was informed by several factors. It is the sector employing the highest proportion of people (13%) in Edinburgh and is expected to see the biggest growth; in 2035, 61,000 more people in Scotland are predicted to work in the sector than in 2025. The choice of health and social care also responds to ongoing recruitment challenges and its role in maintaining in-work poverty in Scotland.⁴ This reflects the number of people employed by the sector that are on low pay (particularly women)⁵ and in poor quality jobs when

³ MDRC, WorkAdvance, Available at: [WorkAdvance | MDRC, Accessed : onWorkAdvance](#) 27 March 2026

⁴ Birt, C., Cebula, C., Evans, J., Hay, D., and McKenzie, A., (2023) Josiph Rowntree Foundation, Poverty in Scotland

⁵ Birt, C., Cebula, C., Evans, J., Hay, D., and McKenzie, A., (2023) Josiph Rowntree Foundation, Poverty in Scotland

assessed against some measures of job quality. An in-work progression programme focused on health and social care has, in this way, greater potential impact than a programme focused on a sector scoring more highly on job quality.

Although implementing a new in-work progression programme in the health and social care sector presents challenges, we think these challenges are outweighed by the significant impact that improved progression opportunities in this sector could have on reducing poverty. Further consideration within the co-design sessions narrowed this focus again, to social care, as discussed in the following chapter.

Key considerations for co-design

Research in the initial phase of the project identified key considerations to inform the development of the model in the co-design phase. These included consideration of the relationship between the chosen sectoral focus and the target population; how to reach and recruit participants and employers; design and delivery of a flexible person-centred support offer; and evaluation design to assess the outcomes of the pilot across the different dimensions of fair work.

Co-design phase (September 2025 – February 2026) Drawing on learning from the feasibility study, L&W worked closely with Edinburgh College and other stakeholders to co-design a pilot in-work progression programme for Edinburgh. This involved programme design, resource requirements, implementation steps, and evaluation metrics. Partners in the co-design phase included two low-income workers, two employers, and three providers.

Key activities completed in this phase included three in-person workshops in Edinburgh, led by L&W. The workshops used a range of tools to guide and support the participation of all stakeholders in each session (see Appendix one).

Low-income workers were recruited from interview participants in phase one who had responded positively to an invitation to take part in the co-design phase. Each worker was invited to participate in all three workshops and paid £70 for each session attended as a thank you for their contribution, plus travel costs.

- Workshop one introduced the different elements of the WorkAdvance model and its applicability to Edinburgh. 'If-Then' statement cards were then used to guide discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of different elements of the model and consider adaptations needed.
- Workshop two focused on establishing the details of the support offered through the proposed pilot programme, the roles it would lead to and the target group. Using exemplar personas, participant journeys were tracked to explore how different people might experience the support the pilot programme would provide.

- Workshop three aimed to review and refine the draft programme model and used personas and employer profiles to consider ways to reach and attract different types of people and employers to the programme.

An advisory group of national and local government and sector representatives continued to provide expert insights and advice on in-work progression, and input to the development of the model, throughout phase two. Two further advisory group meetings, in September 2025 and January 2026, informed considerations for the co-design phase, and refinements to the final pilot programme model.

This report presents findings from the co-design phase and sets out a proposed in-work progression programme model, Step Up In Care, for a demonstration project in Edinburgh.

Pilot programme delivery model

This chapter explains the programme delivery model, the approach to engagement, steps needed to implement the programme, and high-level metrics that will be used to measure the success of the programme. The explanation of the model is interspersed with key insights from the co-design stage to illustrate the decision-making process.

Insights from co-design: Sectoral focus

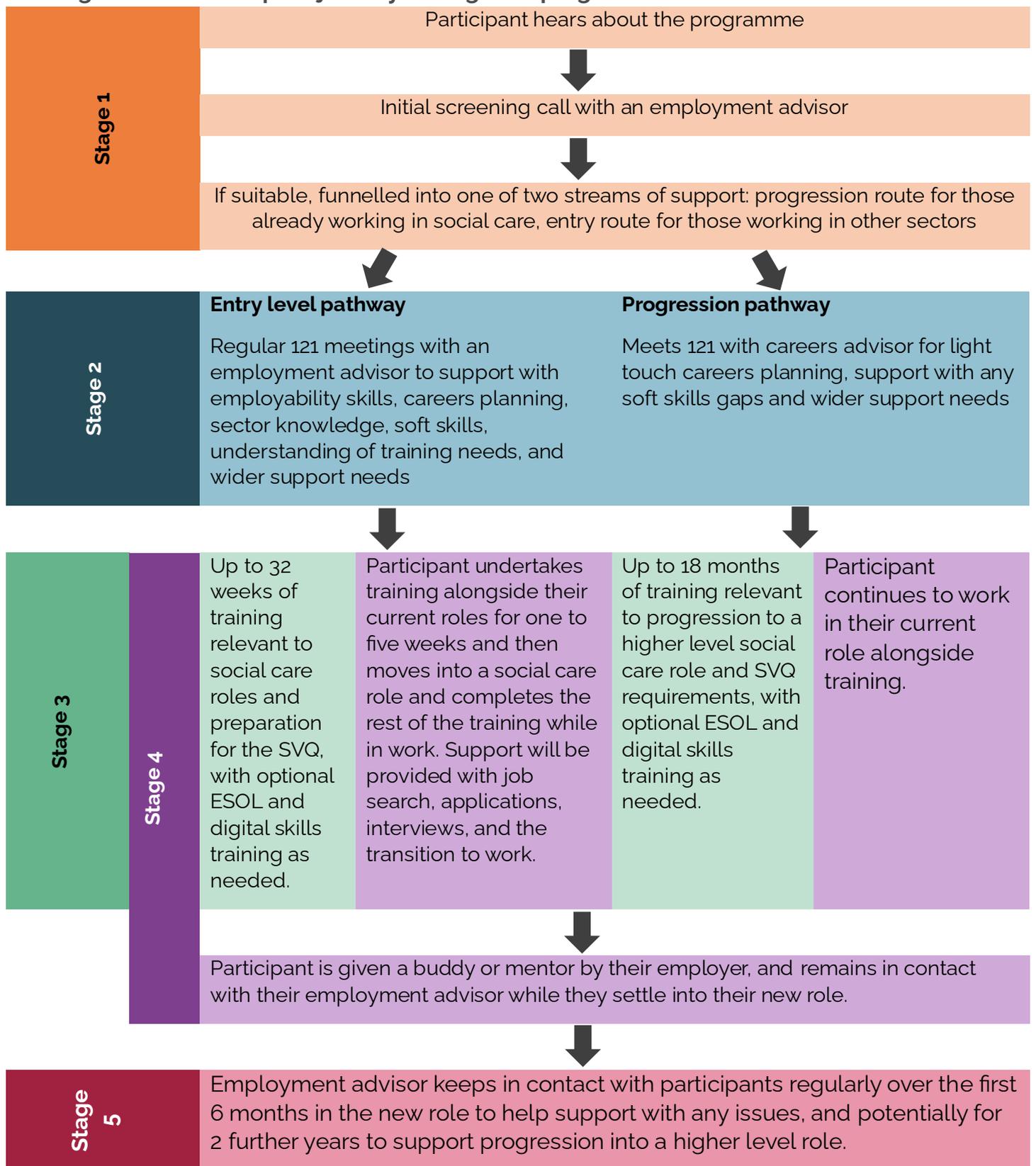
Attendees agreed that the health and social care sector provided opportunities in terms of the number and breadth of available roles and the potential job satisfaction of a career that makes a difference. However, it was also recognised as a sector with recruitment challenges where attracting potential participants to a programme could be difficult. The workers felt that the potential benefits of a career in health and social care had never been marketed to them, while employers and training providers felt that there was a need to challenge negative views of the sector given the media narrative of underpaid roles and people at risk of burn out.

A key insight was the difference between roles within the NHS and roles within social care in terms of opportunities for career progression. This was particularly the case in relation to how training is aligned with social care roles and the failure to professionalise these roles in comparison to their NHS equivalents. A narrower focus on social care was therefore seen as a chance to contribute to real change by creating smoother progression pathways for those at risk of poverty.

Model overview

The proposed programme model brings together findings from the research and co-design phases. The programme, adapted from WorkAdvance for the Edinburgh context, will primarily focus on moving people who are in low paid, insecure, or otherwise unsustainable work into fair jobs in the social care sector (the entry level pathway). However, as a secondary aim, it will support those already working in the sector to progress into higher level roles (the progression pathway). Figure Two shows how participants are expected to move through the programme.

Figure Two: Participant journey through the programme



Key principles

Figure three provides an overview of the model. It will have five strands underpinned by four key principles:

1. The programme will take a person-centred approach with support at every stage offered flexibly to allow working people to participate alongside their other commitments.
2. Employer partnerships will be embedded in the programme design and set up to ensure that participants have a strong likelihood of moving into a high quality, sustainable job.
3. The programme will be sector specific, focused on social care roles in the health and social care sector, and advisors will have specialist knowledge of the sector.
4. The end goal will be to move participants into a job that meets the criteria of fair work in the broadest possible sense, rather than just focusing on increasing earnings.

Adaptations from the WorkAdvance model

Insights from co-design: Understanding the need for a new programme

A key point of discussion was how a new programme would work alongside the current landscape of employment support provision in Edinburgh. The intended purpose of the pilot was to use the best available evidence of what works to design a scalable intervention and not to design a programme that filled in the gaps around existing provision in Edinburgh.

We considered this question over and between the co-design sessions with different potential models being explored, modified and compared. While there was already a programme that delivered sector specific skills training in Edinburgh that catered for in and out of work populations, it did not follow all the principles of WorkAdvance. The training was delivered within a short time frame to move someone rapidly into work rather than the substantial training delivered as part of the WorkAdvance model. Equally, while there was pre-and-post employment support available for people, this was not fully integrated with the training offer to provide ongoing sector specific guidance. These elements, together with an emphasis on employer engagement, became essential components of our proposed pilot programme.

The five strands of the model, explained in more detail below, are based on the four core strands of the WorkAdvance model. However, there are four main adaptations made to the model to make it appropriate for the social care sector in Edinburgh. The first of these is the inclusion of workplace exposure in the form of work shadowing or

taster sessions. This has been included to ensure that participants understand the reality of roles in the sector.

Insights from co-design: Early exposure to the workplace

Employers raised the importance of early exposure because they had experienced new staff dropping out of roles after a short period of time due to a lack of understanding of what the job would entail day to day. Low-income workers also felt that having as much insight into a new career path as possible would help them feel more comfortable to commit to a programme like this one.

The second key difference is a move away from the intensive screening and participant selection element of the WorkAdvance model. The pilot programme model instead has a broader screening and signposting stage focused on helping potential participants overcome any barriers to participation, building understanding of the health and social care sector, and exploring their motivations for career change. The purpose of this stage is not to select participants with a high likelihood of success, but rather to ensure participants are suitable for the programme and supported to succeed. This would result in a broader intake to the programme than WorkAdvance.

The programme will take a dual approach to eligibility. WorkAdvance focused on moving people who did not currently work in the target sector into a new role in a new industry. This programme will move new people into the social care sector but will also work with employers to support them to upskill existing staff to progress to higher level roles. To do this, the training element of the programme will be closely aligned with SVQ requirements at relevant levels to support progression in care sector roles.

Insights from co-design: Defining our target population

We started the co-design sessions with an agreed focus on supporting people in low paid work to progress. Attendees were keen that the programme focus on those with significant barriers to progression as this was where support would have the most impact in addressing poverty. They were also keen to keep the entry criteria as broad as possible to not exclude anyone who might benefit. For example, one of the workers spoke from their own experience of being paid more than the living wage but for only a few hours a week. This could still lead to financial insecurity so these people should still be eligible for the programme as well as those who are paid less than the living wage.

It was also agreed that there would be benefit in extending the target population from those who are moving into a career in social care to those who are progressing in their existing social care career. This was in recognition of how challenging progression to more senior roles could be both in terms of addressing the barriers that prevent an individual taking on more responsibilities as well as the challenges of committing to training while in work. Finally, the model includes built-in English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) and digital skills training. While the WorkAdvance model includes

career-readiness and barrier reduction support, ESOL and digital are not standardised components of the model. However, these were two key areas that the co-design phase identified as essential for success in health and social care careers and skills that some, otherwise promising, candidates currently lack. Data also shows that Edinburgh has slightly lower levels of English proficiency than Scotland as a whole, suggesting the need for ESOL provision is likely to be higher.⁶

Insights from co-design: A focus on supporting with English language needs

All attendees felt that people with English language needs were a core group who needed further support to progress in work. There were a significant number of people in Edinburgh in low paid roles because their English proficiency was stopping them progressing at work. This included health care professionals trained overseas who were resident in the UK, but working in other occupations because of their language skills. Training providers reported there was an unmet need for ESOL provision and employers identified that limited proficiency in English was one of the main reasons they could not employ people in the sector. The English language requirements for health and social care are also relatively high which means that short training courses do not provide sufficient time to develop English language skills.

Stages of support in the model

Stage one: Screening and signposting

The purpose of the first stage is to explore a potential participant's current employment situation, motives for career change/progression, and suitability for social care roles to help establish if the programme is right for them.

Entry level pathway

If someone is not suitable for the programme, they would be signposted to other employability services or programmes that better meet their needs. Employment advisors will identify any barriers a participant has to both participation in the programme and working in social care. They will then signpost to appropriate support to help overcome obstacles to participation. For example, working parents might be signposted to childcare support. Those on benefits would also be supported with 'better off in work' calculations at this stage to understand the impact of participating in the programme and moving into a new role, on their benefits claim.

Progression pathway

For those already working in the sector, the first stage will similarly explore a participant's career goals and motivation for progression. Advisors will identify and address any concerns about taking on more responsibility and help facilitate

⁶ Scotland's Census (2022), English language skills (all people aged 3 and over). For more information on ESOL needs and migrant populations in Scotland see Appendix One.

discussions, in collaboration with their current employer, about skills gaps or experience an individual might need to progress in the sector.

Insights from co-design: Wrap around support

A screening and signposting stage before training commenced was seen as essential. This could be delivered within Edinburgh's existing provision to ensure continuity and draw on existing expertise. Caring responsibilities and financial challenges were the key reasons why people drop out of provision, and so early support with childcare or benefit calculations were seen as essential.

"What I tend to see over and over and over again is a very distinct pattern. At the moment, the main reasons for withdrawal are care commitments and financial challenges, people need to live, work and learn at the same time. And the way that you're set up at the moment in Scotland, they cannot do that. Generally speaking, the way that we're funded in colleges doesn't support that at all. That's a massive problem". -*Training provider*

Stage two: Employability skills building and career planning

Once a participant has decided to commit to the programme, they would start having regular one-to-one meetings with a dedicated employment advisor. For those not currently in the sector, this stage aims to support participants with careers planning, build soft skills for the workplace, support with CV writing and interview skills, and familiarise them with local employers and possible roles in the health and social care sector. Advisors would also carry out an assessment of digital, English language, and other essential skills to identify any training needs. The length of this stage would be tailored to each participant's needs but would ensure a trusted relationship with the advisor was built before a participant progresses onto the training element.

Progression pathway

For those looking to progress to higher level roles in social care, this stage would be light touch, with most participants only meeting with an advisor once or twice before transitioning to the training phase.

Stage three: Training

Insights from co-design: Designing the support offer

The challenge between delivering training that was substantial enough to support progression, and training that was compatible with work commitments was highlighted. Any training offered needed to be flexible and potentially asynchronous so it could fit around people's lives. Edinburgh College identified that this was an area where they were keen to innovate as their current funding models did not allow this flexibility. Another priority identified for the support offer was delivering ESOL and digital skills provision over a sufficient time frame for sufficient progress to be made.

Training provided through the programme will be technical and tailored to the social care sector. Training will take place while a participant is in work for both the entry level and progression pathways. This is to support participants to gain the appropriate SVQ and PDA qualifications needed to work and progress in the social care sector. These qualifications can only be achieved while working in the sector as a portfolio of relevant experience is needed to pass.

While participants are engaged in training, all employers involved in the programme will be provided one-to-one mentoring. This mentoring will help employers to strengthen the way they support the development and progression of their staff.

Training will be delivered flexibly to accommodate participants' work schedules and wider commitments. Planned strategies include:

- online delivery
- evening delivery (so outside standard working hours)
- asynchronous content for participants to access at a time that suits them.

However, some face-to-face engagement at the College Digital Care Hub will also be required. This will be discussed and agreed in advance with employers and participants. The mentoring support offered to employers will be an opportunity to work constructively with employers to ensure they support their staff's progression by, for example, paid time off for training. Training will be on a part time basis with the hours and intensity to be agreed during the development of the full pilot.

Entry level pathway

Training will support those who are new to the social care sector to gain the skills needed for entry level roles. There will be a period of pre-employment training (one to five weeks) which will introduce the sector and core skills for social care. Participants will then be supported to find a job (see Stage Four) and complete the rest of training while working.

Progression pathway

The second route through training will support those already in the sector to progress to higher level roles. Training will be provided while a participant continues to work in their current role.

The key components of both programmes are outlined in Table One below.

Table one: Overview of routes through training

Training level	For entry level roles	For higher level roles
Length	Up to 32 weeks	Up to 18 months
Course components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction to health and social care ▪ Core Care Skills and Communication ▪ SVQ Preparation and Reflective Writing ▪ Digital Skills and Professional Practice ▪ Wellbeing, Burnout Prevention, and Career Pathways ▪ SVQs mandatory qualification for SSSC registration ▪ Sector Specific ESOL programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foundations of Leadership ▪ Communication & Team Management ▪ Operational Leadership & Compliance ▪ Strategic Thinking & Decision-Making ▪ Preparing for SVQ 4 & Personal Development ▪ SVQ and PDA qualification ▪ Sector Specific ESOL programme
Qualifications training leads to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SVQ Social Services and Healthcare 2 SCQF Level 6 ▪ SVQ Social Services and Healthcare 3 - SCQF Level 7 ▪ PDA Promoting Excellence in Dementia Skilled Practice ▪ PDA Health and Social Care Supervision ▪ PDA Mental Health Peer Support <p>PDA Approaches to Trauma Informed Practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SVQ Social Services and Healthcare 4 SCQF Level 9 ▪ SVQ Care Services Leadership and Management SCQF level 10

Stage Four: Job development and placement

Entry level pathway

Alongside completing training, participants will be supported with their job search, applications, interviews, and placement into a role. The partner employers engaged in the programme would be expected to provide a certain number of entry level roles, with participants matched to appropriate opportunities. Once in work, employers would provide a buddying or mentoring system to ensure participants are supported in the transition into their role and the sector. Throughout this stage participants would

have ongoing contact with their advisor to ensure they are supported both inside the workplace and out.

Progression pathway

Those already in the sector would be supported to apply for a more senior position. Once in post, they would be offered a buddy or mentor appropriate to their new position, and as with the entry level pathway, would have ongoing support from their advisor.

Stage Five: Post-employment services

Support from a programme advisor will continue after a participant has moved into a new role. This support will be provided flexibly, on an ad hoc nature to ensure a participant is supported to progress once they are in their role and help if there are any issues once in work. The intensity of support at this stage would be tailored to the needs of the individual, with those already working in the sector having lighter touch support while those who have moved into a care sector role for the first time being provided more intensive support. Advisors would reach out to participants 4, 12, and 20 weeks after they start their role, but can also be contacted proactively by participants if there is an issue or they want to check in. Contingent on funding, advisors would remain available to participants for up to two years to support progression from their initial role.

Insights from co-design: Post employment support

Workers welcomed the offer of post-employment support as something new and different. However, training providers highlighted it was difficult to maintain participants' commitment to post employment support. The opportunity to further test how to deliver successful post-employment support was therefore welcomed.

The key identified elements to delivering successful post-employment support were:

- a trusted advisor with continuity of support
- ad hoc support when needed including outside of working hours, and
- an advisor who is skilled in employer engagement including dispute resolution and case work.

Figure Three: Step Up In Care Edinburgh programme overview

Focused on routes into social care roles at various levels

Support workers in Edinburgh and the Lothians typically start in roles such as care at home, housing support, or care homes, and must register with the Scottish Social Services Council while working toward an SVQ Level 2 qualification. Career progression includes moving to senior support worker, team leader, and management roles through SVQs at Levels 3–4, PDAs in supervision, and HNC Social Services, which can also lead to university pathways for nursing or social work. Specialisation is possible in areas like dementia, mental health, and trauma-informed practice.

Screening and signposting	Employability skills building and career planning	Training	Job development and placement	Post-employment services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial meeting/call with an employment advisor with specialist knowledge of the care sector, as well as being an expert in general employability, wider local provision, and having strong interpersonal skills Explore the participant's current situation, motives for career change/new role within health and social care, and suitability for social care roles to help establish if they are right for the support Signpost/refer to other services that might be able to provide wider wraparound support the participant needs e.g. childcare support, or that might be able to support if this programme is not suitable for them Support with benefits calculations to understand how much better off participants would be in a new role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Length of this stage tailored to the participant's starting point but long enough to build trust One-to-one meetings with an employability advisor to provide careers and wider holistic support Career planning including understanding pay, conditions, long term career prospects in a health and social care career, what level they would be likely to enter at, transferrable skills Soft skills support CV writing and interview skills Familiarising participants with roles within social care including introductions to employers in the sector who have bought into the programme Assessment of digital, English language, and other essential skills to prepare for training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sector specific and fully funded Substantial training leading to certification (or accreditation where appropriate) and preparing participants for their SVQs Offered at different levels for those coming into the sector and those progressing within it Employers involved in the design Delivered flexibly including options for online, asynchronous delivery Include wider exposure to the industry as part of training e.g. through conferences and networking events What training participants are offered to be tailored to their needs but include access to sector specific ESOL and digital if needed Work shadowing/taster sessions to ensure participants understand the reality of the role/sector & experience of care settings through Edinburgh College's Care Hub 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support with job search, applications, interviews including tailored job suggestions based on training and career planning Job matching with employers who have bought into the programme Mentoring/buddy system within the workplace to ease transition into work in a new sector and role Ongoing access to industry related workshops and seminars with other people at a similar career stage to build networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ad hoc, flexible check ins with advisor to offer support with settling into new job, dispute resolution, income maximisation, and continued job search if initial job placement does not work out Advisors to reach out to participants after 4, 12, and 20 weeks in the job to offer support. Participants also able to contact advisors themselves if needed.
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Underpinning principles</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Flexible delivery to meet the needs of working people</p>			
	<p style="text-align: center;">Partnerships with employers to ensure support leads to fair work and sustained job outcomes</p>			
	<p style="text-align: center;">Sector specific programme and advisors with specialist knowledge</p>			
	<p style="text-align: center;">Focused on moving people into good work in a broad sense, rather than just focusing on increasing pay</p>			

Outreach and engagement strategies

The success of the programme will rely on engaging the right participants and employers. The methods and messaging used to reach participants will be varied to attract a range of different people to the programme and accommodate different routes into support. Recruiting employers will primarily rely on existing relationships but employers will be vetted to ensure they offer roles that meet the criteria of fair work and can commit to the level of involvement needed for the programme.

Participants

Insights from co-design: Reaching and recruiting workers

Attendees agreed that engaging low-income workers could be challenging but suggested a range of useful strategies to promote a career in health and social care. Key suggested messages were:

- It's a job that makes a difference
- It's a job that is needed everywhere
- It's a future proof job.

Workers suggested that wider messaging was needed to manage people's fear and anxiety around committing to a training programme, and to reassure that the investment of their time would be worthwhile. Having a supportive adviser was seen as a key selling point that needed to be widely promoted.

"So, if there's some way of maybe giving some more visibility to who the advisors are through some kind of a short video for someone to have the opportunity to kind of explain why they're passionate about being an advisor and the kind of support that they can offer as well". - *Worker*

The importance of marketing the programme to individuals was highlighted but referrals from Jobcentre Plus (JCP) were also seen as essential to delivering a successful programme. Training providers highlighted their ongoing efforts to engage effectively with JCP to create progression pathways for people in receipt of Universal Credit who do not meet minimum income requirements. There was agreement that successful delivery of this programme would need a coordinated approach with other training providers to develop stronger links with DWP.

Participants will primarily self-refer into the programme. To ensure that a wide range of people hear about the support, the programme will use a mix of digital and physical outreach. Digital outreach will include targeted advertising on social media, local radio, and posts in local Facebook groups such as Edinburgh Gossip Girl. Posters on local public transport such as buses and trams and articles or adverts in local media such as the free Metro newspaper or the Edinburgh Minute will complement engagement on

digital platforms. To increase the likelihood of participants finding the programme it will have a dedicated webpage and search engine optimisation will be used to make sure the page is a top hit when searching relevant keywords online. The programme will also be promoted by having posters or flyers in public and community spaces. This would include libraries, GP practices, pharmacies, care homes, and schools. As with all programmes of this kind, word of mouth will also play a role in supporting outreach and engagement.

Edinburgh College already has strong links with key local organisations who can refer people into the programme. Referral partners will include voluntary and community sector organisations such as those supporting refugees and asylum seekers, carers, or neurodiverse people, faith organisations, and employability organisations. Another key referral partner will be JCP to help working people who claim Universal Credit (UC) hear about the programme. This relationship will need to be developed as part of the inception stage. However, it is important to note that UC claimants who are in work meet less regularly with a work coach than those out of work, and the frequency of meetings decreases as earnings increase (with those earning above the 'administrative earnings threshold'⁷ not meeting with a work coach at all). The programme will therefore not be able to rely solely on referrals through JCP because only those currently in work will be eligible.

Outreach materials will include messages designed to appeal to a wide range of people. Positive elements of care sector roles will be highlighted such as offering stable employment, with the option for full or part time hours, flexibility, and a meaningful career that makes a difference. The wraparound support and access to technical, ESOL and digital training available through the programme will also be highlighted. All promotional materials will make it clear who is eligible for the programme and that it is free to access. Low-income workers emphasised the value of endorsements from previous participants.

"I think hearing from others about that they've maybe gone on to get a job through this, that kind of thing. That firsthand experience is really crucial for me." – *Worker*

Once the first cohort has progressed through the programme, engagement materials will include case studies or quotes from previous participants. Longer term, previous participants may also be recruited to act as 'programme champions', spreading the word within their communities about the support they received and how it helped them.

⁷ At the time of publication, the threshold was £952 a month for a single person or £1534 a month for a couple.

Employers

While employer partnerships will be key to the success of the programme, those involved in the co-design phase felt that engaging employers should not pose a significant challenge. This was, in part, because of the recruitment challenges many employers in the health and social care sector face. However, it will be necessary to ensure that employers involved in the programme offer good quality jobs that meet the dimensions of fair work set out in the Fair Work Framework.⁸ They will also need to be able to commit to the level of involvement required for the programme including supporting training design, offering work shadowing, tasters, and job opportunities and working with employment advisors once a participant moves into work.

To recruit employers to partner with the programme a range of methods will be used. Existing relationships, such as those built during the research and design phase of the project, and those already held by Edinburgh College, will be leveraged. Word of mouth and engagement at networking events will also be used. If needed, Edinburgh Council will be asked to connect the programme with local employers. Any engagement materials for employers will emphasise the potential increase in staff retention, the ability to help fill vacancies with high quality candidates, the provision of coaching and mentoring to help identify ways to strengthen their approach to developing staff, and the availability of funded training for prospective and existing staff.

Insights from co-design: Engaging employers

Employers and training providers both felt the programme would be attractive to employers and so there could be a substantial ask in terms of their engagement (for example committing to activities such as talks, mock interviews and work experience tasters) and in terms of the support they offer new recruits. Key suggested messages were:

- Recruit and retain staff who are committed to training and development
- Recruit and retain staff who understand the realities of a career in social care
- Receive ongoing support with staff development.

The programme needed to involve substantial engagement between employer and the training provider to ensure positive progression routes. A programme that worked closely with a small cohort of employers was seen as preferable so this support could be delivered sustainably. Edinburgh College were confident they could recruit these employers through their existing networks.

⁸ Fair Work Convention (2016) [Fair Work Framework](#)

Implementation steps

The programme's success will rely on a thorough and well-planned mobilisation and implementation stage. While the details of this would be established at the start of the demonstration phase, we anticipate that the key steps to implementation would be:

- **Secure the right partnerships for delivery.** This would build on the relationships established through the research and co-design phase and include organisations such as Capital City Partnership and local employability providers.
- **Recruit staff with appropriate sector knowledge and wider skillset for the advisor role,** if delivery organisations do not already have staff with the right skills or need to increase capacity to deliver the programme.
- **Engage employers who offer fair work.** Engaging the right employers and getting their buy in early on will be crucial to ensuring the programme prepares participants for roles in the health and social care sector and leads to sustainable, high-quality jobs. Employers will be asked to sign up to Edinburgh's Fair Work Charter as part of their onboarding process.
- **Establish referral routes into the programme.** This will include using Edinburgh College's existing networks, as well as building a strong relationship with local JCP work coaches and other voluntary and community sector organisations.
- **Refine and finalise the delivery model,** especially the training element, with employer involvement.
- **Ensure data collection processes are set up** to support programme monitoring and evaluation.

Evaluation metrics

Evaluation metrics will be fully developed as part of the evaluation design should this project move to the demonstration phase. Outcome metrics will be closely aligned with the dimensions of fair work set out in the Fair Work Framework. These are the ability to have an effective voice, opportunity to access and progress in fair work, job security, fulfilment, and respect.⁹ The feasibility of developing robust metrics aligned with the Framework would be included as part of evaluation set up and with stakeholder input.

Beyond this, the programme will aim to move participants into higher paid roles and changes to income will therefore be one of the outcome metrics alongside other elements of fair work. Previous work by L&W on in-work progression in the care

⁹ A more detailed description of each element of the Fair Work Framework can be found in our [report](#) on the initial stage of this project.

sector¹⁰ would form the basis for these metrics and for participants would likely include:

- Hours worked
- Contract type (zero-hour, fixed-term, permanent)
- Hourly wage
- Flexible working arrangements
- Level of SVQ qualification held
- Benefits received
- Household income

For employer's outcome metrics are likely to include:

- Turnover levels
- Open vacancies
- Number of agency staff used
- Sick leave rates
- Staff morale

Analysis will acknowledge that some people may be willing to take a pay cut for a job that meets their needs in other ways, such as offering flexible working to fit around caring responsibilities. Any reductions in income will therefore be carefully considered in relation to other metrics to understand the full picture. Ultimately, an evaluation will focus on the distance travelled for each individual, rather than applying strict, blanket success metrics which may undermine the person-centred nature of the programme.

Insights from co-design: Measuring impact

Pay should not be the only dimension of fair work to be measured. Instead, the emphasis should be on distance travelled, with the recognition that someone might take a pay cut for a job with other benefits. This was felt particularly strongly by the low-income workers who felt satisfaction was the most important measure.

"I think how you measure it has got to be down to speaking to people. Is her life better? How does she feel about it? I don't think you can put just an amount of time she was in the job or amount more money. Yes, this has improved my life. I'm glad I did this". - *Worker*

¹⁰ See reports from the Step Up pilot evaluation at <https://www.walcotfoundation.org.uk/step-up.html>

Systems change

The demonstration phase of the pilot programme has the potential to contribute to systems change by developing a successful model of in-work progression for the social care sector that could be rolled out to other areas of Scotland and the UK more widely. Different funding models would need to be explored to enable this expansion, including local authority support and employer contributions. Because it is a pilot, it also comes with the risk of failure. However, there is the opportunity of learning from potential failure in terms of deepening our understanding of what works and doesn't work to support in-work progression and identifying where future effort should be targeted.

Insights from co-design: Making a difference

Workshop attendees identified several pathways to impact for a successful pilot programme including opportunities to:

- Develop and deliver innovative training that meets the needs of working people
- Learn how to successfully deliver post-employment support
- Learn how to support people with ESOL needs to progress in the social care sector
- Build understanding of effective employer engagement in the social care sector

Conclusion

Significant numbers of people in Scotland and Edinburgh are experiencing in-work poverty and facing barriers to moving beyond low pay and poor quality jobs. At the same time, the fair work policy agenda in Scotland and Edinburgh is committed to tackling the systems and factors that cause and perpetuate in-work poverty and is working towards ensuring fair work that benefits everyone.

Effective employment support and training to help people to progress in their jobs has a key role to play in achieving this aim. There is a wide range of existing employment support provision in Edinburgh, however this is primarily focused on people who are unemployed. The number of residents who are in employment yet still unable to progress shows that there is a clear need and opportunity to expand support for people who want to overcome barriers to better work and to drive career progression.

This report sets out a proposed model Step Up In Care, a new, evidence-led, in-work progression programme in Edinburgh, designed in close collaboration with low-income workers who live and work in the city, along with training providers, employers and sector experts. We recognise that further testing and design work will be required, and we anticipate challenges in implementation that will need to be overcome. However, it has the potential to help more people in Edinburgh to move out of working poverty and into high quality jobs.

Piloting Step Up In Care will also help to build evidence on what works to support people into better and fair work. The size and predicted growth of the social care sector means that sector-specific implementation could make a meaningful contribution to reducing in-work poverty in Edinburgh. Testing of the model will provide useful transferable learning although further research would be needed to understand how the model could be adapted for different sectors or geographies.

Overall, the programme represents a timely opportunity to improve outcomes for workers, strengthen the social care sector, and build a stronger evidence base for fair work in Edinburgh and beyond.

Appendix One: ESOL needs and migrant populations in Edinburgh

Edinburgh is a multicultural city. Nearly one in four people in Edinburgh were born outside the UK, compared to only one in ten in Scotland as a whole. Migrants work across all sectors including the health and social care sector; one in ten key workers in the sector in Scotland are migrants.¹¹ A survey by Scottish Care also found that more than a quarter of social care staff in seven local areas in Scotland are migrant workers.¹² However, there are concerns about attracting migrant social care workers in the future because of proposed changes to the immigration system. Under the proposal, the length of time someone on a health and social care visa has to be in the country before gaining settled status would increase from 10 to 15 years.¹³

While diversity brings many benefits to the city, it also increases the likelihood of having a workforce who may have lower confidence in the English language. Despite having a much larger proportion of migrants in the city, English language proficiency is high. 93.7% of people in Edinburgh speak, read, and write English proficiently. This is only slightly lower than Scotland as a whole (94.2%). However, there remains a substantial number of people in Edinburgh who need support to improve their English. For example, there were around 14,000 people (2.9% of total population) who could speak English but not read or write it according to the 2022 Census.¹⁴

Edinburgh's migrant population includes refugees and asylum seekers, with particular increases in the number of Ukrainian refugees. More than 11,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Edinburgh since 2022.¹⁵ Edinburgh college has also seen a large and increasing number of sanctuary-seeking students undertaking ESOL programmes. In 2019/2020, refugees and asylum seekers made up just 2% of ESOL learners but in 2024/2025 they made up more than half of learners.¹⁶

¹¹ Scottish Government (2020) [Non-UK nationals in Scotland's workforce Analysis from the Annual Population Survey January - December 2019](#)

¹² Scottish Care (2024) [International Recruitment in Social Care Survey Findings](#)

¹³ BBC News (2025) [Immigration changes will 'profoundly impact' Scottish care workers](#)

¹⁴ Scotland's Census (2022) English language skills (all people aged 3 and over)

¹⁵ Edinburgh Council Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee (2024) [Support for Refugees Asylum Seekers and Displaced People](#)

¹⁶ Gardiner, N., and Dunno, S., (2025), Reflections on the Role of Edinburgh College's English for Work Programmes , The College Action Inquiry Research Network (CAIRN) Journal , Available at: The College Action Inquiry Research Network (CAIRN) Journal, Accessed on: 27 March 2026

Appendix Two: Materials from the co-design workshops

IF ... THEN statement cards

Eligibility	IF we used a recruitment strategy that only allowed people highly likely to succeed in the programme to participate...	THEN the programme would have high levels of success for those that take part	THEN some people who would benefit from support will miss out		
Eligibility	IF the programme was only open to people paid less than the Real Living Wage (£12.60 an hour or £22,932 for a 35 hour work week)...	THEN it would mean that those most in need would get support	THEN people living in poverty but paid more than this would be excluded	THEN part-time workers might be at a disadvantage	
Sector	IF we focus on the health and social care sector...	THEN there would be lots of potential jobs available for participants to move into	THEN there would be a wide range of roles for participants to consider	THEN those who are not interested in a job in health and social care would	

				be less likely to take part	
Training	IF we provide targeted skills training to give people the skills they need to move into a job in a new sector where there is strong need for employees...	THEN the training will help participants get a job in the targeted sector	THEN the training might not be valuable in another sector		
Career readiness coaching	IF participants were provided with support to help them understand roles in the health and social care sector and plan their career...	THEN participants would know what roles would suit them best	THEN participants would have a clear idea of a possible career path for them		
Career readiness coaching	IF participants were supported to build soft skills for the workplace...	THEN they would be ready to step into a new role	THEN they would feel patronised as they are already working and might already have these skills		

Career readiness coaching	IF participants were supported with CV writing and interview preparation...	THEN they would be more likely to get a job when they applied for it			
Financial support	IF participants were financially supported to overcome barriers to taking part (e.g. the cost of childcare or transport)	THEN they would be more likely to take part and stay on the programme	THEN they might struggle if this support was taken away when they moved into work	THEN those with different barriers might feel like they are not being offered as much support	
Working with employers	IF the programme partnered with employers to understand their skills gaps...	THEN training and support offered to participants could be tailored to fill these gaps	THEN employers would be more likely to hire participants		
Working with employers	IF the programme offered participants work experience with employers...	THEN employers would be more likely to hire participants	THEN participants would get experience of what the job they might	THEN participants would be frustrated if they then weren't offered a job with that employer	

			move into is really like		
Training	IF training was accredited (led to getting a certificate at the end)...	THEN participants and employers would think the training is more valuable	THEN some people might be put off from doing it if they've had bad experiences of learning	THEN participants would be more likely to do it	
Post employment services	IF participants continued to meet with someone from the programme once they'd moved into work to support their transition...	THEN this would be a burden on the time of participants when they're busy in a new job	THEN participants would feel supported in their new role	THEN participants would be less likely to leave their new job if they had any challenges	THEN the new employer would provide less support because they knew the participant was being supported by the programme
Post employment services	IF careers coaches worked with participants to continue thinking about longer term careers planning once they'd moved into a new job...	THEN employers would be less willing to engage with the programme and be concerned it may help employees move to different employers	THEN participants would get a promotion more quickly		

Post employment services	IF participants were supported to quickly find another opportunity if the job they moved into did not work out...	THEN participants would be less likely to be unemployed	THEN participants would be less likely to stay in their original job if it didn't meet their needs	THEN programme staff would be under a lot of pressure to find participants a new job	
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Example personas



Fiona

Fiona, 39, is a retail supervisor working full-time in a stagnant role. She cares for both her elderly parents and children, leaving little time for training or to find a new job, even though she is interested. She knows she needs additional qualifications to access a better paid job in a different sector, but her busy life makes studying challenging.



Jake

Jake, 24, is a part-time kitchen assistant in hospitality. He wants more hours but they aren't available. He is neurodiverse and still figuring out what he wants to do career-wise. He left school with decent qualifications, but didn't go on to university or any other form of higher education. Jake enjoys the social aspect of work but doesn't think it is a job he wants to do long-term.



Ahmed

Ahmed, 45, moved to Scotland from the Middle East two years ago. He works full-time as a warehouse operative in logistics. Reliable and hardworking, Ahmed struggles with English and finds that his previous management experience isn't recognised in the UK. He feels stuck, unable to progress despite his skills.



Rajesh

Rajesh, 54, is an Uber driver in the gig economy. He enjoys being self-employed and managing his own schedule, but long hours worsen his back pain. He wants to earn more money but has little time to look for new opportunities between work and family commitments.

Example employer profiles

Bruntsfield HomeCare Cooperative



Description: Bruntsfield HomeCare Cooperative provides personalised at-home care and companionship services for older adults living independently across Edinburgh. They focus on community-led, relationship-based support, and reinvest all surplus into improving local services.

Size: Small (8 employees)

Sector: Third sector (cooperative)

Geographic Scope: Edinburgh only

Type of Services: At-home care, wellbeing support

Crownwell National Care Solutions



Description: Crownwell National Care Solutions provides contract care staffing, specialist nursing services, and emergency cover to care homes and hospitals across the UK, with a regional hub in Edinburgh.

Size: Very large (more than 500 employees)

Sector: Private

Geographic Scope: UK-wide

Type of Services: Care workforce agency, specialist nursing, temporary and permanent staffing

Caledonia Support & Transitions



Description: Caledonia Support & Transitions delivers community-based support for adults with learning disabilities and autism, offering supported-living arrangements and transitional services for those moving to independent housing.

Size: Medium (60 employees)

Sector: Third sector (charity)

Geographic Scope: Edinburgh and the Lothians

Type of Services: Supported living, outreach support, independence skills training

NorthBridge Assisted Living Group



Description: NorthBridge operates a network of modern assisted-living and residential care homes that specialise in dementia care and complex needs. Their Edinburgh facility is one of several across Scotland.

Size: Large (approx. 140 employees in total)

Sector: Private

Geographic Scope: Scotland-wide

Type of Services: Residential care homes, dementia support, long-term care

Journey mapping activity

In-work progression programme for Edinburgh	Sector focused pre-employment services	Training	Job development and placement	Outcome	Post-employment services
<p>Steps High level support at each stage</p>	<p>Job-readiness (eg soft skills, CV writing tailored to the sector).</p> <p>Career coaching in the sector and create an individual career plan</p> <p>Familiarisation with the Health and Social Care sector and roles</p>	<p>Short-term, sector-specific skills training, free of charge</p> <p>Industry-recognised training credential or certification</p> <p>Essential skills training where needed (ESOL, digital, maths)</p> <p>Placement in an appropriate job with good career development and progression opportunities</p>		<p>Full time job</p> <p>Part time job</p> <p>Further learning / training</p>	<p>Reemployment support</p> <p>Ongoing coaching and support from adviser</p> <p>Support with navigating issues with employer</p>
<p>Steps Detailed support at each stage</p>			<p>Job applications</p> <p>Job interviews</p> <p>Probation period</p> <p>Tailored jobs lined up by adviser based on training and career plan</p> <p>Job search support from adviser</p>	<p>How long should a job outcome be sustained for to be considered successful?</p> <p>What other factors would make this person's journey through the programme a success?</p> <p>What kind of change in salary would be considered a success?</p> <p>What kind of job conditions would make a job outcome successful for this person?</p>	<p>Check in calls/meetings with adviser</p> <p>Dispute resolution support</p> <p>Support with job search, applications, etc. if needed</p>
<p>Feelings What your user might be thinking and feeling at the moment.</p>	<p>Highly motivated - connecting with people locally</p> <p>Short course could help her achieve her goal very quickly</p>	<p>May not be interested in ongoing support once in work - burden</p>	<p>Is she happier in her role - metrics might be counter intuitive - how to quantify</p> <p>Needs to feel like a career path</p> <p>Improved flexibility/job fit with lifestyle is a success</p>	<p>Benefit from wider support of 1-2-1</p> <p>Makes for fast times supported in the most time work</p>	<p>May not be interested in ongoing support once in work - burden</p>
<p>Pain points Problems your user runs into.</p>	<p>having time to engage with the initial process might need to be offered to create the conditions so she can engage</p> <p>would need support in place (childcare, care) before she can engage</p> <p>Question about whether HASC is right for her - needs to be able to better position herself in health, social or care profession?</p>	<p>Attending training is a significant time commitment</p> <p>why do people with care and protected conditions funding system does not allow people to join work and learn</p> <p>Why colleges in Scotland are funded does not support flexible delivery</p>	<p>People drop out when they find out about the reality of the job</p> <p>Need flexible employer support</p>	<p>Can't afford to be there if other financial issues and housing</p> <p>Is it possible to track people long term who took the data</p> <p>Way to carry over outcomes</p>	<p>If adviser changes need to keep relationship</p> <p>Childcare - support here is much needed</p>
<p>Opportunities Potential improvements or enhancements to the experience.</p>	<p>Need to think about longer term products</p> <p>Need to think about longer term products</p> <p>Need to think about longer term products</p>	<p>Think about asynchronous delivery eg of CV</p> <p>Training has to be fully funded</p> <p>Options for online and in person exploring hybrid options</p> <p>Has to be flexible - not some hours of hours every week options for self directed learning</p> <p>Wider exposure to industry conferences, events building culture</p> <p>ESOL regulatory requirements in it teaching or training</p> <p>Emphasise how the learning helps reach an end goal</p> <p>There is a need for ESOL provision in it to ensure we reach an end goal</p> <p>EC is launching an online platform soon</p>	<p>Need to think about workplace exposure so people know what to expect</p> <p>NHS eg paid work placement that can lead to job or employment if needed</p> <p>provide mentoring/buddies for transition</p> <p>Need to talk in with employers early in support to make placements and job opportunities</p>	<p>Need to look at whether it's sustained and why/why not</p> <p>NHS long term tracking - how can this be done in SC who holds the data</p> <p>Further training can be an opportunity</p>	<p>Needs to be flexible but not necessarily structured</p> <p>History with data collection</p> <p>Income maximisation</p>

Appendix Three: Expert Advisory Group, qualitative research and co-design participation

The Expert Advisory Group included representation from the following:

- Scottish Government
- Skills Development Scotland
- Edinburgh City Council – Business Growth and Talent Development
- Poverty and Inequality Commission
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation Scotland
- Strathclyde Business School
- Capital City Partnership
- Edinburgh College

The qualitative research included:

- Interviews with 12 low-income workers based in Edinburgh
- Two roundtables with representation from community and voluntary sector organisations and employers from a range of sectors including health and social care.

The co-design workshops were attended by:

- Two low-income workers based in Edinburgh
- NHS Lothian
- Edinburgh College
- Elder Homes
- Capital City Partnership
- Enable Works