



# Employer Engagement Learning Paper



# Introduction

---

This learning paper draws on evidence gathered as part of Ecorys' ongoing evaluation of the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) programme. It is aimed at supporting BBO projects with ideas on how best to engage employers. The paper begins by defining what is meant by employer engagement and why it is important to explore. It will then provide examples of how employers are being engaged across the BBO projects, highlighting the benefits of these approaches for participants. Finally, this paper will conclude with key points of learning from the evaluation which will include an examination of the challenges projects face when engaging employers and how best to overcome these.

## What is Employer Engagement and why is it important?

---

The BBO programme is ultimately a programme that seeks to provide support for participants to enter and sustain employment. As such, employer engagement is a key activity for projects. However, given the nature of the BBO target groups and the additional needs and barriers that many face, the nature of the employer engagement work undertaken is somewhat different from that on other employment programmes, building on what has worked elsewhere.

The National Lottery Community Fund have previously highlighted the importance of employer participation in their Talent Match programme. Learning from this programme provides useful materials to understand what is meant by employer engagement.

Professor Anne Green from the Talent Match evaluation team<sup>1</sup> highlighted that there are distinct differences between employer involvement, and employer engagement, within employment programmes.

**Employer involvement** is characterised as more strategic inputs to a project or delivery partnership or an employer forum that allows employers to take a role in strategic decision-making or providing general advice.

In contrast, **employer engagement** is more focused on the practical issues of making contact with employers to raise awareness of the project and to encourage them to offer jobs, work placements and other opportunities to participants. Employer engagement may be either:

- **Proactive (demand-side led)** - Finding out where there are vacancies and directing young people to those vacancies.
- **Reactive (supply-side led)** - Identifying the job preference of a young person and finding a vacancy that 'fits',
- **Or a mix of both**

In the main activity across the BBO programme can be characterised as employer engagement in nature but there are examples of employer involvement. The aim of this paper is to highlight the ways that employers have been engaged in BBO project activity, the benefits there have been and some of the learning points from project's experience of facilitating this activity.

# How are employers engaged in BBO projects?

The different approaches that projects have taken to engaging employers can be categorised into four categories:

- **Changing attitudes and raising awareness**
- **Job brokerage – Individual**
- **Job brokerage – Collective**
- **In work support**

## Changing attitudes and raising awareness

One of the ways that employers have been engaged by BBO projects is by actively working with local employers to change attitudes towards certain groups and raise awareness of how best to support them as employees.

One example of this is the [Rise](#) project being run by Renaisi London, who felt that it was essential to get employers on board. The Rise project focuses on helping refugees to find work. They identified that combatting perceptions and assumptions around refugees as potential employees was very important. While it was felt that generally there is lots of goodwill from organisations and businesses, it is often not being tapped into and so projects need to take a more pro-active and collaborative approach to employer engagement. Staff at the Rise project also felt that employers regularly require support in understanding potential employees' immigration status and refugees' right to work. Stigmas and stereotypes associated with refugees and immigrants mean that employers may perceive them as lacking the skills and education that other candidates may be able to offer.

This perception may be blocking employers from offering work experience, training or employment to participants with refugee status. As a result, educating and informing local businesses of the value that refugees can bring to their organisation is a worthwhile investment of time and resources.

It has also been highlighted that careful consideration must be paid to striking a balance when approaching employers and encouraging engagement on a humanitarian or corporate social responsibility agenda, with encouraging it on a business agenda.

Participants at the [Who Dares Works](#) project have also been supported to make a film called "Give us a Go" which aims to change attitudes towards a diverse workforce by breaking down barriers and showing the skills they have<sup>2</sup>. The film was shared through social media, the project's existing employer networks and played at employer events



[South Yorkshire Housing Association's \(SYHA\) BBO project](#) targets individuals with mental health conditions, learning disabilities and other complex needs. Part of their efforts to engage employers are through changing attitudes to and raising awareness of individuals with learning disabilities or mental health conditions. SYHA not only deliver training to their participants to get them ready for the workplace, but also for employers. They offer employers health and disability awareness training as well as support and advice on how to best promote health and wellbeing within their existing workforce. For example by holding a Business Wellbeing breakfast, where local employers were invited to attend and find out more about how to best promote wellbeing within their business, while also finding out more about the BBO employment programme. SYHA have also created a link with the Institute of Work Psychology (IWP) at the University of Sheffield to hold events with them. At these events the IWP have presented some of their research into workplace wellbeing and the SYHA have discussed the work that they have done in improving access to employment through the BBO project. These events provide an opportunity for links and networks to be built and strengthened. By providing local employers with the knowledge and skills, SYHA enable organisations to become more aware not only of the needs of potential employees, but also of the value that individuals who might be living with these conditions could bring to employers. To strengthen their impact, SYHA also engage 'peer ambassadors' to accompany them to employer training and co-deliver it. They have found that it is much more powerful and impactful to have a participant alongside them to emphasise the message to employers.

**The programme lead at SYHA stated that delivering training alongside a peer ambassador (in this example on building rapport) was "much more powerful than me just standing up and saying 'this is the theory of rapport'".**

Petroc College's project [Empowering Enterprise](#) focuses on helping young people aged 18 to 24 who need help to get into work, training or education. In an effort to combat assumptions about young people with complex needs who are unemployed, staff at Empowering Enterprise have produced an Inclusive Opportunities Toolkit for employers. Alongside the information, the toolkit offers an insight into why young people are often excluded from the workplace and the steps that employers can make to become more inclusive. The toolkit has been handed out to employers in the local area to help change attitudes and raise awareness about more inclusive practices.

Through this approach to employer engagement, BBO projects like Rise, SYHA, and Empowering Enterprise have been seeking to encourage more organisational-level change within employers. By educating local organisations, these projects have been changing attitudes and misplaced assumptions about employing groups such as refugees and those with mental health issues. This approach however, is likely to require more time and resources being allocated, and may take longer to see actual job-outcomes.

### **Benefits of changing attitudes and raising awareness**

- Encouraging wider change in attitudes to certain groups – this means that benefits can extend beyond the reach of the programme.
- Work can help employers to understand the needs of their employees better e.g. mental wellbeing, which may catalyse a change or improvement in the company's culture.



## Individual job brokerage

---

Another method that BBO projects have engaged employers is through individual job brokerage – working with employers based on the individual requirements of their participants.

The [Money Sorted in D2N2](#) project highlighted the value of individual job brokerage as well as the role that employability partners can play in bridging the gap between the project and local employers. For Money Sorted, the intended employability partner withdrew from the partnership (due to unforeseen circumstances) very early on in the programme. This left a significant gap in the partnership, and although the Personal Navigators (essentially key workers) were able to provide a good level of support for participants to find work, it was identified that some participants ultimately would require more detailed interventions as

part of the project. It became clear that the lack of an employability partner left a sizeable gap in service provision, informing the need to engage a replacement provider. At the end of 2017, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Futures was secured as the approved providers to deliver employability support and engage employers for Money Sorted participants until the end of the project. The impact that the lack of a specific employability partner had on the Money Sorted programme emphasises the value that having someone dedicated to job brokerage and employer engagement can have for BBO projects.

### Benefits of individual job brokerage

- Provides participants with a greater sense of personalisation concerning their job choices and preferences.
- The job opportunities can be better tailored to suit participants needs which will therefore help to increase engagement.
- Having one member of staff as a 'job broker' allows a personal relationship with employers to be built. These relationships may be drawn upon in future to further benefit the project and participants.

The [South Yorkshire Housing Association's BBO project](#) had multiple approaches to individual job brokerage, and they utilise the IPS model<sup>3</sup> (Individual Placement and Support) for supporting individuals with severe mental health difficulties to find employment. The IPS model provides quite strict guidelines, including targets for face-to-face engagement with employers and that the engagement happens based on the participants preferences. By following the IPS model guidelines, SYHA are out in the community and talking to a number of employers every week.

## Collective job brokerage

---

Job brokerage was also found to be a successful method of employer engagement for BBO projects when it was done collectively, rather than on an individual basis, i.e. working directly with employers to understand their needs and how their participants may be a good fit.

The operations manager at Business in the Community, a partner on the [Stronger Families project](#) highlighted how they worked with Marks and Start to amend their existing provision through the Marks and Starts programme<sup>4</sup>. Marks and Start is a work placement programme to help people get into work when they have faced barriers, including single parents, people who are homeless, and people with disabilities or long-term health conditions. Once accepted onto the programme, participations receive coaching and support while undertaking a two to four-week job placement in a Marks and Spencers' store. Participants also get paired with a buddy to support them through the role, and those who perform well may be offered a permanent role. Business in the Community suggested revisions that would suit their client group better, ensuring that participants with more challenging needs were being provided for. With the help of Business in the Community. Marks and Spencers' made the programme much more appropriate for these individuals through both job creation, and job carving (analysing work duties performed in a given job and identifying specific tasks that might be assigned to an employee with severe disabilities). Thanks to these amendments six participants have been able to enter the programme and into employment upon completion.

Engaging directly with employers and working with them to create or adjust jobs to best fit your participants can prove to be highly effective in getting participants into work. However, as Business in the Community have also highlighted, it can be difficult to get employers to engage on this level.

Another example of collective job brokering is in the [Building Bridges project](#). This project focuses on targeting local people who are the furthest from the labour market, with a particular emphasis on young people and NEETs. The project has taken many different approaches to engaging employers, including developing a full 'employment pathway'. This employment pathway was with a local forklift truck company. The pathway allowed participants to follow a constructed route from a taster day, through an experience placement to finally gaining full employment with the organisation. Due to its success, Building Bridges are now looking into creating other pathways in different industries including construction, farming and agriculture, adult social care and warehousing.

**"When you can get companies to listen and do the job carving thing it's really effective."**

- Operations Manager (North), BITC

The [Who Dares Works](#) project in Cornwall has a series of employment-focused interventions that participants can join depending on where their employment interests or goals lie. Who Dares Builds, Who Dares Cares, Who Dares Repairs, and Who Dares Serves are delivered as interventions to provide participants with experience of working in particular sectors. They are delivered in several formats from a one-day taster to more in-depth session involving structured placements offered by employers. Several participants have successfully secured employment because of their participation in these employer-led interventions having been given the opportunity to prove their potential to an employer.

The construction of these pathways requires that projects have built a strong and positive relationship with local employers, providing them with the opportunity to voice their thoughts and requirements from employers, as well as projects being able to highlight the strengths their participants can bring to a role.



## In-work support

The final approach to employer engagement that BBO projects have utilised is in-work support. This involves continuing to work with participants once they have secured work and providing them with support alongside their employer. This support may involve simply informally keeping in touch while the participant adjusts to working life, or may be more structured in the form of joint meetings between an employer and participant.

At the [Tackling Multiple Disadvantage project](#), two of the partners including the lead, Crisis and their mental-health partner, Mind, provide ongoing in-work support beyond getting their participants into employment. For Crisis, this is in the form of a periodic check-in at 3, 6 and 12 months to see how the participant is getting on with their job. This provides Crisis with the opportunity to ensure that the participant has transitioned well into the organisation and if any issues or problems arise, Crisis can be on hand to help and support to ensure that the participant is able to remain in work as far as possible. Their partner, Mind, also offer a form of in work support in their 'Well @ Work' programme. This is a support group for Mind participants who have found employment, and provides them with ongoing support from both peers and Mind staff. The support focuses on maintaining mental and emotional wellbeing whilst at work, with the aim of helping people to stay in work whilst dealing with mental health issues. Mind also stressed the importance of employer engagement for their participants, as employers would often say no to initial applications. Once they talked to staff face-to-face or over the phone and heard about all the support that their participants were offered, it often encouraged them to give the participant a chance.

### Benefits of in-work support

- Longer-term support can help with the sustainability of participants' employment - being able to still access support even when they have secured work increases the likelihood of issues and problems being resolved.
- The offer of in-work support may also result in better job offers such as a permanent position or progression opportunities early on due to a greater sense of security, both for participants and employers

**“Around  
75% of  
employers  
say no at  
first”**

– Mind



# Key learning points

---

Based on information from the BBO projects so far, and how they have attempted to engage employers, we have identified some of the common challenges that they faced. Here we highlight some of the problems experienced by BBO partnerships as well as some potential solutions to them.

## Staff resources

---

Having a key member of staff whose role is primarily focussed on engaging employers and building relationships was found to be something that was particularly useful. However, this requires careful consideration when

allocating the budget and making choices about staffing. A partner who focuses on employment could also take on this role. Where this can become complicated is when projects have struggled to recruit for this role or a partner.

## Time requirements

---

Building a relationship with a local employer takes time and requires effort, meaning that activities contributing to this should be carefully planned accordingly. Employer engagement should be factored in from the beginning of the project, and if possible, any pre-existing links with or leads to, employers, should be identified and drawn upon as early as possible. The Rise project reported that they felt only small pockets of employer engagement was taking place, suggesting that

more time would have helped them to build better relationships with employers and create more opportunities for their participants to get involved. Naturally it is also important to note that time spent on employer engagement has the potential for widespread benefits across the project. Likewise, once a positive relationship with a local employer has been created then this can be drawn upon into the future.

## Making things official

---

Many of the projects reported that they had 'informal' or 'unofficial' leads with employers, but that they would have preferred to have had a more official structure in place. Designing a formal policy or approach will mean that contacts are not lost if there are staff or partner changes, and provide a guide for new staff to use when

approaching employers. One of the partners on the Accelerate project, Watch, emphasised that "Staff are in contact with employers all the time", though they felt that it would be nice to have more of a specific person to take on an official connector role to cement these employer relationships.



# Summary

---

This learning paper has aimed to provide an overview of employer engagement for BBO projects and those working on other employment programmes to share best practice and common obstacles. It drew on information from the Talent Match programme to outline the definition of employer engagement, before looking to the individual BBO projects and the different types of employer engagement that they have utilised. Drawing upon this analysis, the following questions have been put together to help projects to think about different approaches to employer engagement. The list may be drawn upon as a starting point for discussion or further thought on the subject.

- What type of employer engagement would be most useful for your participants?
- What are the key employment issues or barriers that exist locally that need addressing?
- What new employers or types of employers need to be engaged to meet the needs of participants?
- What are the organisational requirements for effective employer engagement?
- What existing resources or contacts already exist within the partnership?
- Are there any major developments happening locally that could be used as a route to engage employers?
- What support may employers need?
- What will success look like, and how will this be evaluated?



For more information on the evaluation contact us at [BBO@ecorys.com](mailto:BBO@ecorys.com)

Or visit:  
[www.buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk](http://www.buildingbetteropportunities.org.uk)

Published in October 2019