

WHAT WE LEARNED & NEXT STEPS



Employment & Skills support provision
from the third sector conference
26th April 2023

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*Nikki-Dee Haddleton,
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Executive Summary

“On Wednesday 26th April 2023 Black Country Futures hosted the Employment & Skills support provision from the third sector conference, a round-table event and conference for Third Sector organisations who provide employment and skills support within the Black Country. Attended by over fifty people from across more than thirty organisations, we held three round-table discussions throughout the day and in this report provide direct feedback, summaries, and recommendations from these discussions.

People spoke at length about how non-work-related issues have a significant impact on people’s ability to consider and move into work, education, or training. Fundamentally, we are all working with people who are experiencing lots of instability and uncertainty, who are in crisis and struggling just to manage day to day. Organisations agreed that meeting basic needs was crucial in supporting people into work.

Help to manage health conditions, recover from injury/illness and other suitable medical and wellbeing support should be prioritised if we want a population that feels fit and able to work. Mental Health related issues and anxiety continue to be a major presenting cause for people accessing support from organisations within the discussions. Their ability to access clinical mental health support is severely limited by lack of available clinical services, defined by long waiting lists and in particular the inability to access crisis mental health support when needed.

The impact of poverty on health is also well-documented – if the number of people in poverty increases, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in people suffering from health problems. One of the key points that came out in discussions was how increased poverty amidst the cost-of-living crisis is impacting on people’s social mobility and economic opportunity. Addressing core financial inequality would help to address unemployment, and deal with root causes of inter-generational unemployment, skills gaps, and accessibility.

For many of the people we meet there are genuine barriers that prevent them from moving into work, education, or training. Often these barriers are not dealt with by statutory provision. Historically, the focus of employment support has been on getting people into work. If barriers are not addressed, ‘outcomes’ are unlikely to be sustainable and we know from experience that this creates a revolving door of people into and out of work. This in turn creates more instability in people’s lives, increasing the barriers to work.

When we in the third sector use the term ‘employment support’ we mean supporting the whole person, so they can create a stable and healthy base for themselves from which to move into and sustain fulfilling employment. There is so much more to our ‘employment support’ than just helping someone write a CV and apply for a job and practice interview questions. However, the services we offer are typically treated as an add on, and not an integrated part of employment and skills pathways.

The end of European funding of employment and skills support has had a significant impact on the funding that is available to support the work we do as a sector. We now have more information about the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and it is clear this will not replace the funding we have lost through ESF. The amount of funding available to the third sector has been drastically reduced. In our survey, we see that four out of five organisations who responded reported that their ability to deliver is being negatively impacted, and alarmingly that over three quarters of respondents cannot maintain delivery of these services when their current funding ends.

Only a quarter of respondents feel that standard employment and skills support models and services are suitable for meeting the employment and skills support needs of their service users. Many third sector organisations reported that national and for-profit providers of employment and skills support often refer their clients to local third sector providers, who are then expected to support these individuals with no funding support. At the same time, the national or for-profit providers are paid for working with these individuals and claim successful outcomes as their own.

When funding is available to the sector, it is often not accessible, and not fit-for-purpose. Funding is focused mainly on supporting new projects to the detriment of established projects. Funders should take a long-term approach to funding, supporting the continuation of services that are proven to work, rather than short-term funding for pilots, and quick fixes. Funding should be designed in collaboration with third sector providers to ensure it meets with organisational and beneficiaries needs. Funding also needs to be available to cover core costs, not just service delivery, and funders need to recognise the significant return on investment offered by the third sector, which goes far beyond what is funded and invests in the organisations embedded within the community. Ultimately, the cost of losing these services is far greater than the funding required to retain them.

Over three quarters of respondents had not been consulted about strategies for investment in employment and skills funding in their area, despite being service delivery providers. The third sectors contribution to delivering support to individuals and strengthening communities is being either underestimated or disregarded. There is a serious lack of understanding of the scale and severity of the impact of decisions affecting the sector, on the sector itself, the people we support, the local communities we are part of and other services people engage with. Plainly put, we are supporting people in serious need at times of crisis, and if we cannot do this, it is literally people's lives at stake.

It is important that government strategy and statutory service providers includes third sector providers in designing and developing strategies and models, and delivery of these. It is hoped that post-event and following the publication of this report, we can start this work together. Local Voluntary Sector Councils are open to supporting this at a local level (if there is demand for it), and the Black Country Futures partnership has offered to help coordinate this at a Black Country level. The sector needs clear representation and inclusion in conversations at a local, regional, and national level and only by working together can we evidence the scale, scope and impact of what we deliver.”

Event Overview

On Wednesday 26th April 2023 we hosted the Employment & Skills support provision from the third sector conference, a round-table event and conference for Third Sector organisations who provide employment and skills support within the Black Country.

80 people booked to attend this event, hosted by Black Country Futures, and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, from a range of organisations including Registered Charities and CICs (majority), DWP, NHS, Local Authorities, the Crown Department, The National Lottery Community Fund, Local Voluntary Sector Councils, and WMCA. Approximately 55 people attended on the day.

The event highlighted how we as a sector play a vital but often overlooked role in providing both direct employment and skills support to people, but also support that directly contributes towards people's ability to move into sustainable and stable employment.

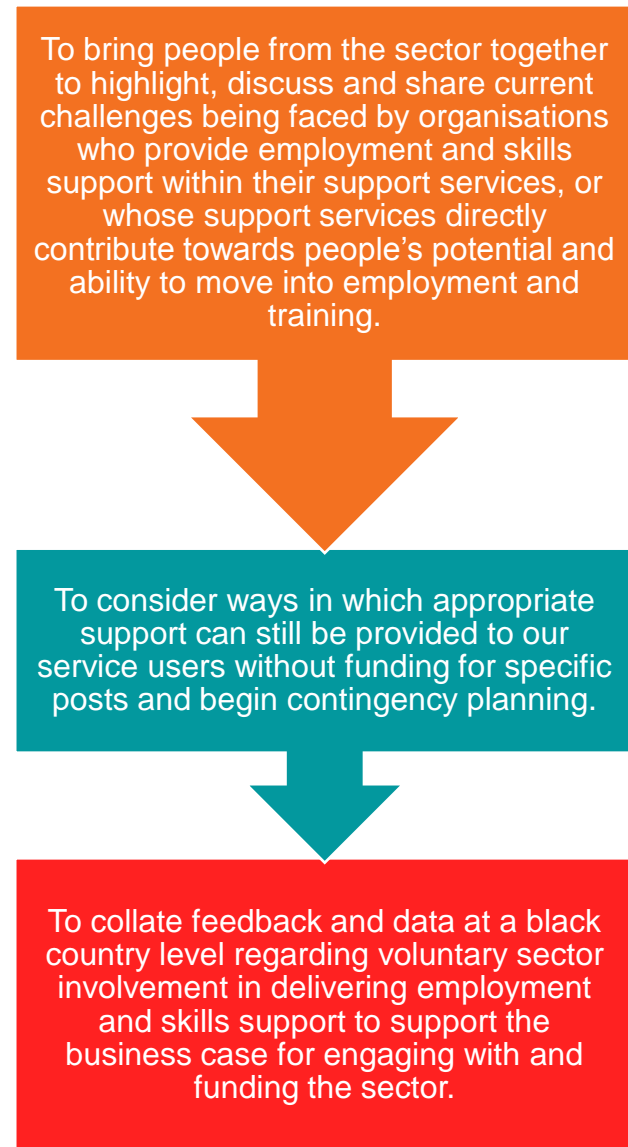
Feedback from the event was overwhelmingly positive and we hope this is just the beginning of more collaboration on this theme across the Black Country and increased recognition of the role of the third sector in delivering and facilitating employment and skills support.

Overall, the event highlighted that across the board we are all facing some extreme challenges in the current funding landscape. Unless we can find solutions many of us may not

be able to continue delivering the support we know is needed by the people we are here to help.

This has real life-changing impact for individuals and it's crucial that the depth and scale of this impact is understood by those who have the power to provide solutions. That's why we are encouraging and supporting organisations to come together to collaborate and combine our voices to evidence this.

The purpose of the event was:



To bring people from the sector together to highlight, discuss and share current challenges being faced by organisations who provide employment and skills support within their support services, or whose support services directly contribute towards people's potential and ability to move into employment and training.

To consider ways in which appropriate support can still be provided to our service users without funding for specific posts and begin contingency planning.

To collate feedback and data at a black country level regarding voluntary sector involvement in delivering employment and skills support to support the business case for engaging with and funding the sector.

Event Format

During the event we heard more from our speakers about the employment and skills landscape at a national level and at a regional level, and how Third Sector organisations are integrated into support models. We also held a panel interview and multiple round-table discussions, as well as taking breaks and lunch together with time and opportunities for networking built in.

We held three round-table discussions throughout the day and in this report provide direct feedback, summaries, and recommendations from these discussions. One Walsall, WVCA - Wolverhampton Voluntary & Community Action, SCVO (Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations) and Dudley CVS, joined us in hosting and facilitating one of these round-table discussions which focused on local needs and opportunities.

Our speakers and panel were:

Elizabeth Taylor, CEO, Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)

‘The employment and skills sector and landscape’

- Then and Now
- Needs of the future
- Challenges and Opportunities for providers

Fiona Aldridge, Head of Insight and Intelligence, West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

‘The Black Country’

- What is the employment and skills landscape like now in the Black Country?
- Is the Black Country unique? What is different to other areas?
- What is the forecast for the Black Country economy and employment landscape?
- Challenges and Opportunities

Nikki-Dee Haddleton, Partnership Strategic Lead, Black Country Futures (BCF)

‘Third Sector provision of employment and skills’

- What, how and why we deliver and how we connect with other provision
- Where we are now – funding challenge and reality check
- Survey results

Panel members

- Steven Bayliss – Regional Employment, Training and Education Programmes Manager @ Refugee and Migrant Council
- Kate Beale BEM – Managing Director @ Just Straight Talk
- Adam Bhardwaj – Operations Manager @ Bilston Resource Centre
- Stephanie Hammond – Head of Operations @ Steps to Work
- Khatija Patel – CEO @ Ideal for All

How the third sector delivers employment and skills related support services

The term 'employment support' can mean different things to different people. Most often you will see it used to describe services that help people to find and apply for jobs.

This includes things like help with CV writing, job applications and interview techniques. It may also include help with finding vacancies and preparing for work. This might be training in employability skills and building work experience through other routes such as work placements and volunteering. For some people, this is all the help they need. But for many, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

For people experiencing life crisis, poor health, lack of confidence, financial issues, accessibility issues and more, the support they need is far greater.

That is why when we in the third sector use the term 'employment support' we mean supporting the whole person, so they can create a stable and healthy base for themselves from which to move into and sustain fulfilling employment.

We understand that to job search, people need motivation and aspiration. They need good mental health. They need stability and not to be in crisis or survival mode as they need to be able to plan ahead. If they have any issues which are preventing them doing this, these will need to be addressed.

It is obvious to say that to apply for jobs and interview well, people need

self-esteem and confidence. They need to be able to see and express their value to an employer. They need good communication skills and IT literacy. They need emotional resilience. They may need to increase their skills set or build work experience in other ways.

Across the sector, we know from our many years' experience supporting people into work that to succeed in employment people need all of this. People also need to be able to manage their finance, their working life, their caring and family responsibilities, their home, their health, and other things.

There is so much more to our 'employment support' than just helping someone write a CV and apply for a job and practice interview questions.

In the sector, we provide a whole array of support services to help people who are thinking about work to help them get there (see the [Depth of Employment support](#) ice-berg graphic image).

We are not focused on ticking a box saying someone has gone into work and don't think of this as job done.

We want to ensure that going into work is just part of a positive future for people. And that is why we offer in-depth, holistic, and tailored support to our participants. And why we are so successful in creating positive change in people's lives.

However, the services we offer are typically treated as an add on, and not an integrated part of employment and skills pathways.

In our round-table discussions we asked, 'how is the support we deliver different to other services?'

We provide bespoke, person-centred services

- We don't offer a 'one-size fits all' service - our services are client focused and tailored to meet individual needs.
- We can be flexible and go the extra mile, engaging and working with people in ways that suit them.
- We include people with lived experience in designing and delivering services.
- Our staff have the right skills and experience to support people with multiple and complex needs.
- We dedicate time to breaking down barriers for people and take an holistic approach to support.
- We build trusted relationships, treating people with respect and working alongside them towards their goals - not our targets.

We are part of the community

- We are rooted in the community, providing lots of different services and support to people locally.
- We know our area and understand the needs of the people we support.
- We offer place-based support, meeting needs where they are.
- We exist to support people and have no obligations or agendas which might impact on how we work.
- We have strong local networks, and are trusted by people and other providers.
- We engage people in community venues that they know and feel safe in.
- People come to us for support.

We currently receive referrals from statutory services and other providers and there is some recognition locally that we do provide services that can add to and compliment statutory provision.

At the event were some representatives from local Jobcentre Plus services who echoed this, and they want to continue to refer people to third sector partners for this individualised, holistic support.

There were also discussions about how national providers of employment and skills support often refer their clients to local third sector providers, who are expected to support these individuals with no funding support whilst the providers are paid for working with these individuals and claim successful outcomes as their own.

What issues are we facing as a sector?

The end of European funding of employment and skills support has had a significant impact on the funding that is available to support the work we do as a sector. Many projects are now coming to an end because of this. Since the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was first mentioned in the 2017 Conservative election manifesto, we have been waiting to see what this would look like. We now have more information, and it is clear this will not replace the funding we have lost through ESF. The amount of funding available is lower, and the priorities and allocation processes are different. Here in the Black Country the funding will first go the combined authority WMCA, and then be filtered down to local authorities who can use this funding for internal resources and to commission external resource. The amount of funding available to the third sector has been drastically reduced.

This is an issue affecting all those in the voluntary sector who provide employment and progression support. Initially we were advised that the employment and skills strand of this funding would not be available until 2024, However, following campaigning by ERSA and other organisations this restriction has been lifted and authorities can now allocate funding this year. Whilst this seems like good news, in real terms this is unlikely to make any significant difference locally. The budget allocations have already been completed for 2023 and did not include this, and the amount of funding overall has not changed.

Prior to the event we asked all our delegates:

Question	Yes	No
Do you provide direct employment and skills support to your service users?	85%	15%
Do you provide support services which directly contribute towards people's potential and ability to move into employment and training?	93%	7%
Has your / will your ability to provide these services be negatively impacted due to funding changes?	81%	19%
Can you maintain this type of support to your service users when current funding ends?	22%	78%
Do you feel standard employment and skills support models and services are suitable for meeting the employment and skills support needs of your service users?	16%	84%
Are you concerned about future sustainability of employment and skills support services that meet the needs of your service users?	96%	4%
Have you been consulted about strategies for investment in employment and skills funding in your area?	22%	78%

We know that we face an uphill challenge and need to improve our sustainability overall, but the third sectors contribution to delivering support to individuals and strengthening communities is being either underestimated or disregarded.

As seen in the survey results, here in the Black Country, the third sector's ability to provide this type of support, is being greatly affected due to funding changes. In essence we see that four out of five organisations who responded reporting that their ability to deliver is being negatively impacted, and alarmingly that over three quarters of respondents cannot maintain delivery of these services when their current funding ends.

We are keenly aware that there are statutory services that provide employment and progression support, but tellingly, only a quarter or respondents feel that standard employment and skills support models and services are suitable for meeting the employment and skills support needs of their service users and almost everyone is concerned about future sustainability of employment and skills support services that meet the needs of their service users.

The statutory provision generally focuses employment support on the 'tip of the iceberg' and looks to us to support people who need more in-depth holistic support. If we are unable to secure future funding, we will be unable to continue offering this support which is used widely by statutory services providers such as JCP's and local authorities.

Our concern is that lack of funding will result in these services closing, as our organisations cannot deliver them without funding support. This is a crushing blow to those we support and will have a profound impact in both the communities we serve and on other support services who refer to and rely on these services. The knock-on effect this has on our economy, our communities and our society at large must be considered and factored into decision making and the allocation of resources.

Whilst there are a significant number of third sector organisations who deliver these services and they have a potentially huge reach (for example organisations within the Black Country Futures Partnership support over 26,000 people per year between them), engagement with the sector on this theme is patchy at best. Over three quarters of respondents had not been consulted about strategies for investment in employment and skills funding in their area, despite being service delivery providers.

The sector needs clear representation and inclusion in conversations at a local, regional, and national level. The services we provide should be recognised and integrated into employment and skills support models. The impact we deliver needs to be measured and funding should be directed to the sector to ensure this can continue.

Ultimately, the cost of losing these services is far greater than the funding required to retain them.

Meeting Basic Needs

We asked, 'what are the basic needs that need to be met before people can / will consider progressing into employment / education or training?' Three Key themes came out of our round-table discussions:

a) Physiological needs

People spoke at length about how non-work-related issues have a significant impact on people's ability to consider and move into work, education, or training. One of the key points that came out in discussions was how increased poverty amidst the cost-of-living crisis is impacting on people's social mobility and economic opportunity.

Many examples were discussed and given of people lacking the most essential things such as secure, safe, and stable accommodation, regular nutritional meals, heating, and clothing. Whilst work can be part of the solution to these as it may increase financial income, it's often impractical or out of reach whilst people are mid-crisis and lacking stability.

Fundamentally, we are all working with people who are experiencing lots of instability and uncertainty, who are in crisis and struggling just to manage day to day. Whilst we know work and education can have a positive impact on people's lives and can help to resolve some of the issues people face, ultimately, people in these types of situations find it extremely difficult to focus on looking for, applying for, securing, and sustaining work, whilst they are in an unstable and chaotic situation. If we can help them to

stabilise their situation and meet their basic needs, they are much more likely to succeed.

This is a factor which is overlooked and not built into current statutory employment support services. We receive high numbers of referrals from statutory employment support services and primes for us to deliver this support to their clients, so in many areas it is recognised as being a vital part of the journey at a front-line level, but there was a consensus that this isn't reflected in the strategy, modelling and commissioning of services.

b) Health needs

People who have problems with their physical health may find this has a significant impact on their ability to work. Medical appointments, pain, medication, and side-effects are just some of the things which might make it difficult to think about starting employment or training. The impact that poor physical health or injury can have on your emotional resilience and energy is not to be underestimated and is now increasingly evident when we see the impact of Long-Covid as one of the clear examples of this.

Physical health assessments of jobseekers and people on benefits have focused on 'what people can do' to the detriment of considering what and how much people feel able to do. Help to manage health conditions, recover from injury/illness and other suitable medical and wellbeing support should be prioritised if we want a population that feels fit and able to work.

The impact of poverty on health is also well-documented – if the number of people in poverty increases, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in people suffering from health problems.

Mental Health related issues and anxiety continue to be a major presenting cause for people accessing support from organisations within the discussions. Their ability to access clinical mental health support is severely limited by lack of available clinical services, defined by long waiting lists and in particular the inability to access crisis mental health support when needed. Organisations shared stories about people who they are working with who have been suicidal but unable to access the appropriate support, and organisations have been left trying to source suitable emergency support and provide whatever support they can to these individuals.

The number of people experiencing anxiety appears to have increased considerably since COVID began and social anxiety appears to be rising. Many people we work with are telling us that their anxiety is preventing them from engaging with work and other activities in the way they would have done previously. Third Sector organisations have been and continue to adapt and diversify what they offer and the way they offer it to ensure these individuals can still access support, but this has not been mirrored by other service providers who continue to deliver in ways which exclude these individuals. A notable example is group therapy sessions being offered to people with social

anxiety who are unable to overcome their anxiety sufficiently to attend group sessions.

People need their mental health to be sufficiently well enough to participate in activity. This needs to be recognised, and resources designed to address this need to be available, if we want to support people to progress into employment, education, or training. Whilst we know that work, education, and training can all have a positive impact on people's mental health and well-being, trying to push people into work whilst they are experiencing mental health issues can be counter-productive and may have a negative impact on people and actively worsen mental health conditions.

c) Aspiration and motivation

Intergenerational unemployment was highlighted as a significant contributing factor to unemployment by the organisations in the room. They gave many examples of intergenerational unemployment and a culture of worklessness within their client groups.

We know that when people are surrounded by others who are not working, they can lose the motivation to work. If they have never been encouraged to work, or had working lives modelled, they may never develop the motivation to work or aspire to work.

Alongside this, they spoke at length about the issue of criminal behaviour as a source of income. When people can profit more from criminal activity, and when this is the 'norm' in their peer groups, they lack the incentive to enter traditional work.

Removing Barriers

We asked, ‘What are the barriers to work/ education/ training people we work with are facing?’ This generated a lot of discussion, and the barriers were numerous. We identified from these discussions three key themes which are summarised here but there were so many barriers identified. For many of the people we meet there are genuine barriers that prevent them from moving into work, education, or training. Often these barriers are not dealt with by statutory provision and the emphasis is on the individual to overcome these. We meet many people who want to work, but in reality cannot, because of these barriers.

Some of these barriers include:

Practical barriers	Skills and knowledge	Accessibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lack of affordable and/or suitable childcare, caring responsibilities and family commitments •Debt and financial issues which would be made worse if they started earning •Medical or other regular appointments which must be attended •Travel costs and availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Knowing where and how to look for work •Applying for work and interview skills •Lack of role related skills and experience and/or not having the skills employers are asking for •Low IT skills levels •Low confidence/self-esteem •Not having a clear path and plan and not knowing where to start 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Digitally excluded •Disabilities and / or health related issues •Alcohol or drug misuse and / or dependencies •Language barriers •Right to work •Lack of required identification / documentation •No bank account •Neurodiversity •Gaps in work history •DBS checks and criminal history •Racial discrimination

If barriers are not addressed, then whilst it is possible for people to move into employment, education, or training, ultimately it is unlikely to be sustainable. Historically, the focus of employment support has been on getting people into work. We know from experience that this creates a revolving door of people into and out of work. This in turn creates more instability in people’s lives, increasing the barriers to work.

Employers can play a significant role in helping to address barriers. Practices such as flexible working and working from home opens opportunities to a far wider pool of potential talent, particularly where individuals have practical barriers to work. They can also make changes to their recruitment processes which will help to address many of the barriers identified. Most recruitment processes are designed to make it easier for the recruiter to filter potential candidates. Although many recruiters have equality and diversity policies in place, their recruitment processes are quite often not applied effectively and serve to discourage diversity of applicants.

The effect of poverty and social inequality on opportunity

People discussed the impact poverty and social inequality is having on limiting people's choices and opportunities. It was felt that addressing core financial inequality would help to address unemployment, and deal with root causes of inter-generational unemployment, skills gaps, and accessibility.

For example, access to free full-time childcare would mean parents or guardians would have better access to employment and progressive opportunities, unrestricted by childcare availability and affordability. This would not only address one of these identified barriers, but it would also address the intergenerational unemployment rates by providing working role models, and this being part of people's cultural upbringing.

Funded public transport for people with limited income and better public transport links would have a significant impact on social mobility and inclusivity.

The need for in-work financial support was highlighted in the round-table discussions. Whilst there is provision through Universal Credit to 'top-up' low income, we find that financial support is not available when it is most needed and can have the greatest impact on whether someone is able to accept a job offer or manage until their first payment date.

Many people wait for up to 4 weeks for their first pay packet, and during this

time have insufficient money to cover their increased costs when working.

Ensuring childcare and travel costs are covered during interviewing and application processes, and for the first 3 months in employment as people adapt to their new circumstances, have a positive impact on people's ability to move from benefits and sustain jobs.

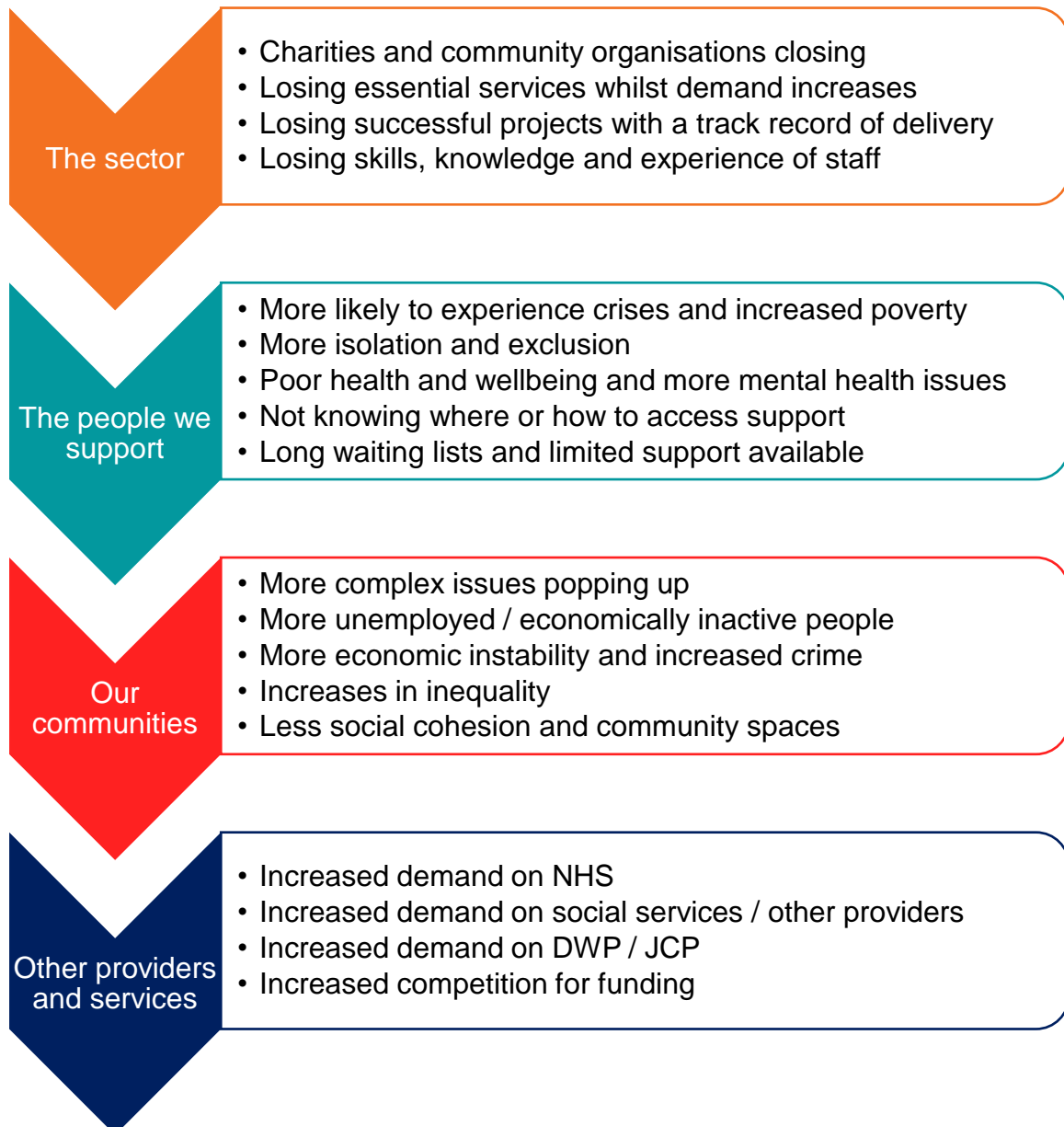
Access to free training or subsidised training is crucial in helping to address skills gaps. This should not just focus on addressing skills gaps in industry but also on addressing the skills gaps for individuals who are not able to apply for better paid roles due to lack of specific skills or qualifications. The concept of 'Any job, Better job, Career' cannot be achieved unless people in any job can afford to upskill.

Similarly, in the Black Country we have a lower rate of people achieving higher level education and qualifications than in other areas. More needs to be done to enable equal access to higher education for people who cannot afford university fees and other related costs. Funded access to higher-level education could help to level the playing field, ensuring our future workforce has the skills and knowledge we need, and that people can fulfil their potential.

Whilst much work has been done to 'make work pay' there is still a gap between minimum wage and living wage for the under 23's and the living wage needs to increase at the same rate as the cost of living.

The impact of doing nothing

We asked ‘What is the impact on our organisations, our beneficiaries and our area if our organisations are unable to deliver services?’ We all felt at a strategic and decision-making level there was a serious lack of understanding of the scale and severity of the impact of decisions affecting the sector, on the sector itself, the people we support, the local communities we are part of and other services people engage with.



Organisations in the room emphasised the drastic and dramatic impact losing these services would have. It was expressed that it is literally lives at stake as we are providing essential support to people in serious need.

What can we do as a sector?

The Black Country has 1.26 million residents and there are 4,000 organisations comprising our Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE – which includes the faith sector, sports, and leisure groups as well as charities and community groups) but we also face many challenges. It is unknown how many of these organisations are providing people with employment and skills support or support which directly contributes towards positive outcomes in these areas. There is currently no collated information for the Black Country which measures specifically the number of people these third sector organisations help, nor the scale and scope of what is being provided within the sector. In the round-table discussions we explored what we can do as a sector to help mitigate some of the impact that lack of funding is likely to have. The key themes that came out of these discussions were:

Reducing costs

Organisations expressed how difficult it would be to reduce costs and shared that they are already ‘cut to the bone’. In the main, we have lower core costs and lower staff costs than most other providers. However, when assessment criteria is based on a ‘per-head’ cost for delivery we may look less competitive than ‘Prime Contractors’.

These cannot be compared like for like however, as the support offered is different. For the level and intensity of individualised support we provide we provide exceptional value for money. In fact, the Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessments done by organisations in the event, demonstrated very clearly the cost-effectiveness of procuring delivery of services from the third sector. For example:

Bridges Project	Just Straight Talk
SROI of £9.85 for every pound ¹	SROI of £5.09 for every pound ²

One of the ways in which we could reduce costs are to deliver services through volunteers only. However, there are strict rules around volunteering and what constitutes a volunteer role and a staff role.

Our current services and roles require people with specific experience, knowledge and skills, so we would also need to reduce and redesign services. It would also be difficult to ensure consistency and availability of services with a volunteer workforce.

Other options include the sharing of resources and resource costs, such as sharing premises and back-office functions, and having shared staffing. This is something that some Black Country Voluntary Sector Councils are already exploring, but it is in early development.

Local Authorities could have a significant impact on reducing costs through the provision of free premises.

¹ <https://www.stepstowork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/BBO-Bridges-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

² <https://juststraighttalk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Just-Straight-Talk-report-final-version.pdf>

Partnership and integration

There are many great examples of local collaboration within the sector (such as Black Country Futures, Bridges, Community Matters, Sandwell Consortium and the Wolverhampton Learning Platform). It was felt that further collaboration would be beneficial. The benefits of partnership working vary but may provide opportunities to:

- Access project funding collectively and new opportunities, through offering a collaborative, multi-agency delivery approach.
- Work together to develop and deliver collaborative projects and joined up services and support innovation.
- Help more people across the Black Country, with a wider range of support and services.
- Have a bigger presence and are more influential, enabling our participants voices and stories to be heard by decision makers.
- Combine resources, leading to time and cost savings.
- Share skills, learning and knowledge.

The importance of expanding these partnerships, so they include other services from other sectors, was highlighted within the discussions. Third sector provision is not integrated into employment and skills support models, which generally focus on the 'tip of the ice-berg' (see - The Depth of Employment Support). There are many Third Sector Organisations that deliver direct employment and skills support and more who are delivering support which directly contributes towards positive outcomes in these areas. Despite this we are underrepresented in the employment and skills space.



Many people expressed that we as a sector 'need a seat at the table' so we can help to shape services which meet people's needs and ensure that the third sector is integrated into third sector services and providers within delivery frameworks. It is important that government strategy and statutory service providers includes third sector providers in designing and developing strategies and models, and delivery of these.

To support us in achieving this representation, organisations within the sector could form an 'employment and skills service provider network' for the VCS in the Black Country. This network can work collaboratively to identify where we have gaps in representation and work together to address these. Working together we can evidence the scale and scope of what we deliver and share this with strategy and policy leaders. We can encourage the use of the ['Depth of Employment Support'](#) ice-berg model for modelling of employment and skills support services and be involved in developing employment and skills models and frameworks.

Funding recommendations

Resources for delivery have a cost (Premises, staff, skills, equipment). These need suitable and sustained funding. It is difficult for many third sector providers to access funding opportunities for employment and skills support delivery. When funding is available, it is often not accessible, and not fit-for-purpose.

Issues with current funding models	Recommendations / options for improving funding models
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Funding is focused mainly on supporting new projects, to the detriment of established projects, which are proven and well utilised. 2) Funding is typically short-term, which means many successful projects end when funding ends. 3) Applying for funding is made very difficult for third sector providers. (i.e. extremely short application deadlines, very restrictive eligibility criteria 4) Funding opportunities are often not communicated out to the third sector – they may only be shared with partners with whom a relationship already exists, or may be on funding portals which limit access. 5) Funding is often results based and doesn't cover the core costs or time and skills invested in delivery 6) Funding competition forces the sector to work competitively, which is detrimental to the people we serve and our communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding could be provided by the local authority and other statutory service providers to cover costs for Third Sector delivery of services • Funding is designed in collaboration with third sector providers to ensure it meets with organisational and beneficiaries needs • Funders take a long-term approach to funding, supporting the continuation of services that are proven to work, rather than short-term funding for pilots, and quick fixes • Funders recognise that quality service delivery by skilled staff cannot be delivered on a payment by results model or ad hoc funding model. We cannot recruit for posts on this payment basis. • Funding is available to cover core costs, not just service delivery, and is based on costs not outcomes. • Funders recognise the significant return on investment offered by the third sector which goes far beyond what is funded and invests in the organisations embedded within the community • Organisations within the sector work together to shape future funding which truly supports collaboration and partnership working • Funders re-model how they fund projects and organisations to enable large-scale collaborative funded delivery • Funders and commissioners advertise funding opportunities to the third sector through open, transparent and accessible means • Greater transparency of funding availability and criteria is required, and criteria and access routes should support applications from third sector providers

What now?

DWP event

In our event many attendees raised that they are finding it difficult to access opportunities through DWP's Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS). One of our attendees was Firoza Kasujee, Black Country Partnership Manager at Department for Work and Pensions and they are now arranging to deliver an overview that will provide support in confidently registering and will also answer any questions people may have around the process. When further information is received about this event it will be shared on the Black Country Futures website and LinkedIn page.

WMCA event

WMCA have been working with the Institute for Employment Studies in hosting a WM-focused event, being run as part of the *Independent Commission on the Future of Employment Support*. The Commission is seeking to develop evidence-led proposals for long-term reform so that we can better meet the needs of individuals, employers, and the economy. There's more on the Commission, its members and work so far at this link: www.bit.ly/employment-commission. Black Country Futures representatives attended this event and provided feedback from this report. A copy of this report will be shared with commission.

ERSA forum

ERSA are establishing a forum for third sector providers of employment and skills support. This is for ERSA members only but could be an opportunity for Third Sector organisations to be included in discussions around employment and skills support services and models. Attendees may consider joining ERSA and taking part in this forum. This forum is chaired by Nikki-Dee Haddleton of Black Country Futures.

Voluntary Sector Councils

The local VSC's have a range of different forums, meetings and events which are great sources of information and create networking opportunities. Not all VSC's currently have an employment and skills specific network or forum but it is recommended that you speak with your local VSC about what is available and if you would be interested in developing something locally.

Black Country Futures

BCF will be sharing this report widely. Please help it to go further by promoting it through your networks. BCF have offered their support in coordinating a Black Country wide forum for Third Sector providers of employment and skills support and offered to collate key statistics and impact data. A survey will be created and shared which will aim to collect some of this data. However, the suitability of this is dependent upon the quality and quantity of responses from other organisations. Once collated this data will be shared with the sector and with key stakeholders and can be used by any organisation to support their business cases.

WHAT PEOPLE THINK EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT IS

FINDING VACANCIES

- Job Searching
- Connecting with employers and recruitment agents
- Understanding self-employment options
- Information, Advice and Guidance

APPLYING FOR JOBS

- CV writing
- Completing application forms
- Creating cover letters
- Practising interview techniques

PREPARING FOR WORK

- Using Universal Credit journals
- Employability skills
- Building transferable skills and recent work experience through placement schemes and volunteering

WHAT EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT ACTUALLY IS

1. In work support

- Affordable childcare
- Support for people on low wages, zero hours or temporary contracts
- Understanding payslips, tax and N.I
- Travel costs and work clothing.

3. Access

- Digital Inclusion
- Access to healthcare and support services
- Advocacy support
- Translators / interpreters
- Identification documentation

5. Health

- Addressing addictions
- Managing chronic pain
- Living with long-term health conditions
- Acute illnesses
- Disabilities
- Anxiety and Depression
- Mental Health issues

7. Financial Support

- Setting up bank accounts
- Dealing with debt
- Budgeting and money management
- Universal Credit applications
- Funding options for entrepreneurs

2. Skills Support

- Training and further education
- Social and communication skills
- Life skills
- Digital skills
- Numeracy and Literacy Skills

4. Pastoral Support

- Crisis support
- Reducing food and energy poverty
- Reducing loneliness and isolation
- Supporting victims of crime and domestic abuse
- Bereavement support
- Support for carergivers

6. Wellbeing

- Dealing with stress
- Confidence building
- Increasing motivation and self-esteem
- Taking care of yourself
- Building emotional resilience

8. Barriers To Work

- Ex-offenders
- Homelessness
- Long-term unemployed
- Lack of qualifications or work experience
- Residency / right to remain
- Neuro-diversity
- Young people and 50+