

Public sector impact studies

Employment Support: Belfast's Employability Academies





The problem

The labour market in Northern Ireland has undergone a profound shift. With unemployment sitting at a record low of 1.8%, traditional work coach models focused on mandatory job-seeking are no longer effective. The real challenge lies in economic inactivity. Some 21.8% of Belfast's non-student population are of working age but not seeking work due to health issues, caring responsibilities, or a lack of relevant skills.

Previous large-scale programmes, such as Steps to Success, were largely mandatory (93% of participants were mandated to attend) and delivered via prime contractors. These programmes struggled with sustainability. For instance, while 29% of participants found work, only 20% of those stayed in their jobs for six months. In a high-vacancy, high-inactivity economy, a punitive, one-size-fits-all approach was creating a cycle of failure for both residents and employers.

This public sector impact study is based on a talk at **Productivity Pitches**, a series of events hosted by the **Institute for Government** and **The Productivity Institute**, which aims to share and support ways to improve public sector performance levels. The talk is available to watch on the [Institute for Government's website](#).



The innovation

The Department for Communities (which led on the Steps to Success programme) decided that a new local intervention was required for Northern Ireland. It asked local councils to form **Labour Market Partnerships** and act as neutral brokers between residents and the city's job vacancies. One core element of this innovation is the **Employability Academy** model, which departs from the traditional model in three key ways:

1. *Employer-led triggers:* Academies are only launched when there is a verified, collective demand for at least 10 roles. This ensures that training is never for the sake of training but is a direct pathway to existing vacancies.
2. *Benefit-assured participation:* Historically residents feared that joining a training programme would risk their benefit or readiness for work status. The Council negotiated a benefit-assured window of up to 16 weeks, allowing residents to retrain without the fear of financial instability.
3. *The guaranteed interview contract:* While legislation prevents guaranteed jobs, the Council ensures every participant who completes the academy receives a guaranteed interview. Employers are involved from the screening process to the final handshake, co-designing the curriculum to meet specific needs.

By focusing on non-traditional candidates, such as those without degrees for tech roles, the model opens up good work in high-growth sectors rather than just entry-level service roles.





The impact

The shift from a mandatory to a voluntary, partnership-led model has delivered a dramatic improvement in outcomes:

- *Superior employment rates:* The academies achieved an average employment rate of 52%, nearly doubling the 29% achieved by the predecessor programme.
- *High sustainability:* Once in post, 75% of participants sustained their employment for six months or more, compared to the previous rate of just 20%.
- *Proven impact in technology:* In a pilot with a major technology firm, the Academy took 16 candidates without degrees, 14 of which were successfully hired into high-skilled roles, proving that localised screening and training can replace traditional credentialism.
- *Efficiency gains:* By removing the top-slice costs of prime contractors and utilising the local voluntary sector as delivery agents, the programme achieved these better outcomes despite a 20% reduction in overall funding.

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Takeaways

This case illustrates three key lessons about the key role of ‘organisational capital’ in public sector organisations, which is here defined as the trust and shared norms required to drive productivity.

First, strong relationships with residents proved to be a key driver of efficiency. By making participation voluntary and protecting benefit status, the council replaced an adversarial dynamic with a genuine partnership. This allowed residents to be honest about their skills and barriers to work, enabling far better job matching. Higher-quality matches reduce wasted time and resources, increase job retention, and raise workforce productivity in a sustainable way.

Second, reliable connections with local businesses helped to clear longstanding labour-market blockages. Employers often struggled to identify candidates with real potential and relied on costly proxy requirements, such as university degrees, which excluded capable workers and left vacancies unfilled. By screening candidates and co-designing training with employers, the council provided credible signals of job readiness. This de-risked hiring decisions and encouraged firms to look beyond traditional credentials, opening access to higher-skilled roles for a wider range of residents.

Finally, this case highlights a vital lesson on how to govern well. Trust and deep local networks cannot be manufactured by distant central offices or temporary contractors. Outsourcing control risks reducing complex social challenges to transactional exchanges. Belfast’s success shows that productivity gains depend on placing authority with actors best positioned to build and sustain trust. By devolving power to the local council as a neutral broker, the programme empowered it to bridge communities, employers, and residents in ways that external providers could not.



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