



# ASSOCIATION OF NORTH EAST COUNCILS EMPLOYABILITY TASK & FINISH GROUP: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SPEAKING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE REGION

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## Introduction and Background

1. Local government in the North East plays a vital role in people's lives, as a driver, shaper and contributor to economic, social and community development. The local government sector is also a major employer in the region, providing and promoting employment opportunities across a wide range of services. Improving employment opportunities and skills is outlined in the Association's 2006/07 Manifesto as being vital to both the economic and social well-being of the region.
2. The decline of heavy industry coupled with an under-developed business and service sector has provided the North East with a challenging legacy; exacerbated levels of inactivity due to higher unemployment rates than the national average, coupled with significant concentrations and high overall levels of individuals incapacitated through ill health and disability. Consequently, the North East has a high number of people who are economically inactive; it also has a large proportion of places (wards and communities) where levels of worklessness are significantly high.
3. All of the evidence shows that paid and voluntary work make an important contribution to an individual's physical and mental well-being. The Association has a dialogue with the wide range of organisations and agencies working at a local, regional and national level to address employability.
4. The aim of the Task and Finish Group was to add value to the work that is already happening, and to use the experience, political voice and lobbying capability of the Association to help progress employability issues.
5. Members were particularly keen to bring a balance to the debate, by moving away from target driven approaches, by looking at the needs of individuals and the wider social agenda, linked to employability. Members agreed, therefore, that the focus of the Group should be to influence the debate and future policy by recognising the linkages between employability and health, transport, skills and education.
6. The relationship between health and employability is symbiotic. Ill health in the form of incapacity and the symptoms of some disabilities are a key factor in preventing people from working, whilst work can also bring a range of health benefits. The Task and Finish Group focused on two features of the debate around work and health, namely: the causes and consequences of incapacity benefit claimants; and the preventative role healthy workplaces play in employability.
7. Transport can play a pivotal role in ensuring clients' access to employability services and work opportunities. Transport and the wider notion of 'connectivity' present both physical and psychological barriers for people who are economically inactive. Lack of effective, accessible, affordable and reliable public transport can limit people's ability to access services and jobs. Perceptions of distance can also present psychological boundaries, which need to be addressed as a

first step in encouraging people to think more widely about the employment opportunities open to them.

8. Lack of skills or low skills levels are both a characteristic and a cause of worklessness. In addition, cultural attitudes can, as much as skills deficits, affect an individual's propensity to pursue new and varied forms of work. The role of individual attitudinal change can be as important as training and educational opportunities when understanding the relationship between employment, employers and skills.
9. In taking forward its remit, the Employability Task and Finish Group gathered evidence and case studies through various contributions from a range of organisations and individuals with a role, experience and expertise in addressing employability.

## Summary of Recommendations

10. Based on the evidence gathered through the Task and Finish Group, a series of key recommendations were agreed, which Members felt should be targeted at the three core tiers of governance; central Government, regional partners and agencies and local government. The full '*Report on Key Findings and Recommendations*' provides a much more detailed contextual background and comprehensive set of recommendations, than those summarised below.

### Central Government

1. The Association will urge the Government to further consider opportunities to improve the consistency in funding regimes that underpin the complementary work of local authorities in the employability field. Local authorities are able to make a unique and effective contribution by utilising discretionary funding for the purposes of harnessing local expertise to address local need. The Association will look at ways to lobby central Government for commitments to more consistent and longer-term funding for councils. Short-term, piecemeal funding is one of the key obstacles to getting the most out of councils' discretionary activity on the ground.
2. Alongside this we will look at ways to work towards better recognition and reward for successful pilot strategies in the region, and to help ensure the lessons of good practice identified are disseminated, and where appropriate, sustained.
3. Councils in the North East will ask the Government to work with authorities to consider the options for the re-introduction of successful initiatives, in particular Action Teams for Jobs where there is interest, alongside opportunities to enhance successful job linkage services. Such discussions will also need to take account of the City Region approaches towards employability that are being developed, and the ways in which any further enhancements to local authority provision can be enabled to align and engage with provision at levels above local areas.



4. In addition we will support the '*Leitch Review of Skills*' recommendation that DfES and DWP develop an integrated objective of sustainable employment and progression for employment and skills services. Such an objective will help direct a framework in which statutory Government bodies can better align their work, whilst also demonstrating Whitehall's recognition of the direct inter-relationship between employment and skills.

### Regional Partners and Agencies

1. Local authorities are a major convener of discretionary funds which can be 'flexed' to address local needs, and add value to the statutory work of agencies such as Job Centre Plus and the Learning and Skills Council. Alongside this, councils play key roles in the development and support of pilot activities which can tackle employability challenges in innovative ways. The Association will therefore lobby to ensure effective pilots are sustained and the important work delivered through discretionary funds is maintained. We will also work with partners involved in the Regional Employability Framework to identify projects which may be vulnerable to cuts in the longer-term and take to steps to prevent this.
2. In line with the recommendations of the Local Government White Paper, '*Strong and Prosperous Communities*,' support for better data sharing and provision mapping has also emerged as a key priority for local and regional partners alike. The Association will therefore look at ways to improve this and achieve better recognition of early stage outputs and outcomes of projects to support the development of a stronger picture of what works for the region.
3. The Association will support the development of preventative interventions to stop those in employment leaving work, or doing so without an identified progression route back into training, employment or volunteering. In particular, we will support councils' duty as employers to ensure they promote healthy working environments and minimise the negative impacts of staff ill-health.
4. The Association proposes to work with key stakeholders and transport operators to work collectively to develop robust responses to the travel needs of local residents and communities, recognising in particular the voice of young people. Our aim will be to seek to maximise access to employment opportunities both for those looking for work and training, as well as those already in employment, incorporating an effective understanding of the future development of the region's employment, housing and transport infrastructure.

### Local Government

1. As direct employers of over 127,000 people, councils recognise that they have a vital role to play in enhancing their own recruitment processes and practices to better support the access of hard-to-reach groups to local authority jobs. The Association will look at ways to raise the profile of a range of new and established projects aimed at doing this, and help the sector to look critically at routeways into their own organisations.
2. Similarly, local authorities are also significant procurers of services from one of the North East's core industries, namely construction. The Association will therefore support the work of the North East Employer Coalition and North East Centre of Excellence to raise awareness of the good practice going on in this field, develop better demand-led recruitment processes and lever additional value from contracts by supporting the use of both local labour and local businesses.
3. The Association proposes to work with partners around the Regional Employability Framework to investigate ways in which opportunities in markets facing skills deficits, such as the care industry, can be better marketed with the support of local authorities. This could be underpinned by a commitment to delivering the 'portable' skills required by individuals operating in rapidly developing labour markets.
4. Finally the Association will disseminate the outcomes of this work to Government, as well as in the region and locally. As part of this, the Association, in its convening role and as a key partner in the Improvement Partnership for North East Local Government, is keen to communicate the case studies which have informed the Task and Finish Group's work, and explore opportunities for highlighting other examples of good practice which exist in the region.

### Conclusion

11. The Task and Finish Group's work covers several aspects of this wide-ranging and important issue for the North East region. The Association has sought to demonstrate the unique contribution the local government sector can make to addressing employability and improving the lives of citizens and communities. The recommendations and actions contained in this report will be taken forward and widely disseminated as a contribution to the work of local authorities, Government, regional partners and agencies.
12. Finally, the Association wishes to thank all the individuals and organisations with a role and responsibility in relation to employability, whose contributions and advice have informed the Task and Finish Group's work and shaped the final report.



The Association of North East Councils is the political voice for local government in the North East. It represents all 25 local authorities in the region, throughout Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and the Tees Valley on issues of concern to them and the communities they serve.

It is a cross-Party organisation, with all of its Members democratically elected and accountable politicians.

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