



Government
Equalities Office

Return to ICT Programme

Evaluation Report

March 2022

Contents

1. Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
Programme Outcomes	5
Learning and Recommendations	5
Evaluation Methodology and Aims	7
2. Programme Overview	9
Background	9
Aims and Targets	10
Programme Design	10
The Effect of COVID-19	11
Evaluation Evidence	12
Data Limitations	13
3. Engagement	15
Communications Campaign	15
Engagement Outcomes	16
4. Recruitment and Onboarding	19
Programme Eligibility	19
Programme Interest	19
Programme Timing	19
Participant Characteristics	20
Participant Motivations	21
Enrolment and COVID-19	24
Withdrawals	25
Introduction to ICT Pathway	25
5. Training, Upskilling and Support	28
Programme Elements	28
Programme Flexibility	29
Reflections on Training	30
Reflections on Support	31
Reflections on Employer Engagement	32
6. Post-Programme	35
Post-Programme Feedback	35
Employment	36
Celebration Event	38
Conclusions	38

Executive Summary

1. Executive Summary

Introduction

In the 2017 Spring Budget, £5 million was allocated to support people back into employment after taking a career break. As part of this, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) set up programmes across the public and private sector to support people to return to work after a break for caring responsibilities.

GEO defines a returner as a person who left employment for at least a year to take on a caring responsibility, and would like to return to paid work at a level that recognises their skills and experience.

Returner programmes were first introduced to the UK in 2014 as a method to recruit and retain skilled professionals. Most returner programmes support a small number of people with training and support to return to work.

The Return to ICT programme (referred to as the RtICT programme from now on) is part of a £1.1 million package of returner programmes managed by the Local Government Association (LGA) on behalf of GEO. The pilot programme was due to be the first returner programme to target the public sector ICT workforce, providing an opportunity to build on the evidence base of what works for those looking to return to work and for councils who are looking to hire and support returners across the profession.

Other funded returner programmes include 2 Return to Social Work programmes and a Return to Planning programme. These programmes aimed to give local councils (as employers) access to a pool of professionals and promote the value of hiring and supporting returners. These programmes would also provide insights into what could work for specific professions within the public sector and would be the first to test this type of support.

GEO awarded around £250,000 of funding to LGA to run the pilot programme to support up to 90 people looking to return to the ICT sector after taking a career break. Participants would be provided with a high-quality training package, to enable them to return to the ICT sector. The programme was originally expected to run between April 2020 and September 2020.

Following the first national COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in March 2020, GEO held discussions with LGA about the potential risks to running the programme. LGA recommended that the programme launch should be postponed until September 2020 so councils could prioritise emergency services relating to COVID-19. It was also considered beneficial to avoid running a programme during the school summer holiday period to ensure those with caring responsibilities were able to fully participate.

It was agreed between GEO and LGA to launch the programme from September 2020, with training adapted from face-to-face to a fully online experience. The eligibility criteria for the programme was also widened to include those with career breaks of less than a year, to support those with prior or ongoing caring responsibilities but had lost their employment through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Programme Outcomes

Outcomes were reported for RtICT programme milestones. In summary:

- the programme surpassed its expressions of interest target (180), generating 1,362 expressions of interest - as a result, 517 full applications to participate in the programme were submitted
- the programme came close to meeting the target of recruiting up to 90 participants - 122 applicants were offered a place on the programme, with 85 applicants accepting a place on the programme and starting training
- for the 85 participants who started the programme, 44% were women, 51% reported having ongoing caring responsibilities, 22% reported having former caring responsibilities, and 75% had been out of the labour market for longer than a year
- the programme did not meet the target of training up to 90 participants, with 67 participants completing training
- a new introductory pathway was created due to a high proportion of the 517 applicants not having the required skills and sector experience to join the main programme - LGA confirmed that 33 applicants were invited to join this new 'Introduction to ICT' pathway, with 6 confirming their interest and receiving learning resources

Learning and Recommendations

Table 1-1 summarises the learning obtained from the RtICT programme and potential recommendations that should be considered for future returner programmes. These are explained in more detail in the report.

Section of the report	Learning	Recommendation
Engagement	High levels of interest in the programme were generated using a range of communication channels	Use a range of channels when promoting a return to work programme. Use analytics data to track interest in the programme
	Recruitment websites and job boards were an effective way of signposting people to the application website	Consider advertising a return to work programme on national recruitment websites and job boards
Recruitment and Onboarding	The programme was able to expand its eligibility criteria and adapt to the	Consider how programmes can be more inclusive by responding quickly and flexibly

	emerging challenges relating to COVID-19	to changing job markets and broader economic circumstances
	Onboarding participants was challenging during periods when participants may have competing priorities, such as the festive period in December	Avoid scheduling the onboarding period over the festive period in December, due to competing priorities for some participants
	Some participants with caring responsibilities who were looking to return to ICT had greater expectations of what the programme could help them with	Consider scoping with candidates what they want from the programme (for example, with surveys) and see if this can be implemented in the programme design
	A high proportion of participants who reported trying to return to work had experienced barriers when attempting to do so	Consider collecting data on the barriers participants may experience when attempting to return to work, so that the programme can offer support to overcome these reported barriers
	Some candidates withdrew from the programme between their initial application and start of the programme	Consider monitoring the reasons for potential withdrawals and support participants with their concerns, where possible
	The programme was able to provide an introductory pathway for those looking to upskill themselves in a new profession	Consider running a pathway that offers introductory training as part of a broader returner programme, to support those who may not have the required skills or experience but are looking to return to work
Training, Upskilling and Support	Participants were able to access additional support that was flexible to their needs, such as staggered start dates and times, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially heightened caring responsibilities	Consider how future return to work programmes can offer participants support, such as flexible and staggered start dates for training, to balance participation with other commitments and caring responsibilities
	Coaching was popular and highly rated by participants	Consider including coaching elements when designing a return to work programme
	Participants reported that they would have wanted more opportunities to engage with councils and employers	Consider how to provide participants with opportunities to get greater insights into current work practises, for example by supporting participants with sourcing work experience or placements with employers
Post-Programme	The programme had difficulty finding employment opportunities to share with participants in all of the geographic areas where they wanted to work	Develop mitigations, such as targeting specific employers in certain locations, where there is more demand from applicants than there are employment opportunities

Table 1-1: Summary of programme learning and recommendations

Evaluation Methodology and Aims

This report presents the findings of evaluation research provided by LGA and Soctim (as the training provider) on behalf of GEO. It is based on evidence reported by LGA up to March 2021.

The evaluation of the RtICT programme ran alongside the programme. The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- monitor the characteristics of programme applicants and participants
- identify the reasons participants left their profession, why they are returning, and any barriers to returning to work experienced by participants
- record and understand the expectations, journey, and experiences of participants
- assess the success of the programme, evaluate the processes used, and identify potential areas for improvement
- provide learning and recommendations to inform any future return to work programmes

The overall evaluation approach was to capture reflections from participants at programme milestones. The evaluation research used online surveys completed by participants to capture data and insights during 2 stages of the programme:

- the application and onboarding stage (through a pre-programme survey)
- completion of the programme (through a post-programme survey)

Survey participation was high for the pre-programme survey (67% response rate), but was significantly lower for the post-programme survey (18% response rate). The post-programme survey was issued after the training was completed in March 2021. Due to evaluation activities needing to be completed before the GEO and LGA contract end date on 31st March 2021, participants had a short timeframe (around 10 days) to complete the post-programme survey. This low response rate may affect how representative the findings from the post-programme survey are.

Additional data, beyond the surveys sent to participants, has also been captured through programme application forms and governance reporting provided by LGA (as the programme manager) to GEO (as the funder). LGA also shared further qualitative feedback from 9 participants who gave additional insights into their experiences on the programme, which is referred to as 'case study feedback' within the report.

Programme Overview

2. Programme Overview

Background

GEO identified ICT as a public sector workforce that could benefit from a returner programme for the following reasons:

Supports women back into work: unpaid care work, including childcare and informal adult care, is disproportionately performed by women, and women are more likely to have time out of work for caring. Taking time out of work or limiting work hours, often for unpaid care work, can affect pay and progression. Establishing a programme that supports women to return to ICT could prevent occupational downgrading (whereby people return to a lower paid occupation after their career break).

Supports returners as a talent pool: LGA reported retention and recruitment difficulties for ICT roles across local councils in England. Supporting experienced ICT professionals to return to ICT roles can expand the talent pool available to employers. Returner programmes provide an alternative recruitment pathway, reducing the need to hire agency workers, or employ those who need further professional training. The programme would also offer councils the opportunity to hire from a national pool of skilled and experienced ICT professionals, without the associated costs of running recruitment campaigns themselves.

Reduces barriers to returning to work: LGA reported that time out of the labour market and changing technology can act as a barrier for people looking to return to ICT roles. The programme aimed to support people to return to work by providing a free high-quality training package, and a way to connect with councils.

Increases opportunities for public sector employment: a RtICT programme would increase the opportunity to test what works for returners across a range of roles in terms of the support they may require when looking to return to work and provide opportunities for returners who may have previously worked in the private sector to join the public sector workforce. The programme could develop a proof of concept, demonstrating an effective way to recruit for local government roles.

Around £250,000 of GEO funding awarded to LGA would support the costs associated with advertising and promoting the programme, recruitment and training, as well as evaluation activities for up to 90 returning ICT professionals.

The programme would be run and managed by LGA and involve stakeholders such as local councils and a training provider, who were procured and subcontracted through LGA to give training to programme participants. Society for innovation, technology and modernisation (Socitm), who are a professional network for digital leaders in public services (and referred to as the training provider from now on), were successfully appointed in August 2020. A third-party contractor was

also sourced to run a paid advertising campaign for the programme. TMP Worldwide, now known as Radancy, was successfully appointed for this role in September 2020.

Aims and Targets

The aim of the RtICT programme was to recruit and retrain experienced ICT professionals with a career break of at least a year, to gain the skills and practice they needed to return to work. The programme also aimed to raise awareness of the value that returners bring to the workplace, and support councils to overcome recruitment and retention difficulties by sourcing skilled and experienced ICT professionals on their behalf. Table 2-1 outlines the targets and the actuals of the programme.

Milestone	Target	Actual
<u>Engagement</u> Any form of communication by people enquiring about the programme	Up to 180 expressions of interest	1,362 expressions of interest (limited to one per person)
<u>Recruitment and Onboarding</u> Using best endeavours to recruit a target number of candidates onto the programme	Up to 90 participants recruited	122 applicants were offered a place on the programme 85 participants accepted a place on the programme
<u>Training, Upskilling and Support</u> Procuring and managing the training provision to support participants back into ICT	Up to 90 participants complete training	67 participants completed training

Table 2-1: Programme targets and actuals
Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

Programme Design

LGA planned a joint communications campaign to promote both the RtICT and Return to Planning (RtP) programmes, which were running simultaneously. The initial plan was for the programmes to be announced by a press release in March 2020, and for paid advertising to take place between April and May 2020. The planned communications campaign would feature:

- a RtICT website, where prospective applicants and councils could access more information, express interest in the programme, and apply to take part in the programme
- video case studies from senior ICT staff and employees within councils, for use across social media platforms and the RtICT website
- paid social media advertisements across a number of channels (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram) to direct potential applicants to the RtICT website

- toolkits and communications guidance for stakeholders and councils - LGA shared these resources by email as well as hosting them on the RtICT website to encourage the sharing of the campaign within their networks
- targeted and regular email bulletins to share campaign messages with stakeholders, such as directors of ICT, council HR and workforce development professionals, and regional LGA employers
- a press release promoting the programme with a quote from an LGA representative

The programme was designed to provide free training and support to participants so that they could return to ICT roles within local councils. This was planned as follows:

Stage 1: Recruitment and Onboarding

- April 2020 to May 2020: candidates submit applications to join the RtICT programme
- June 2020: eligible applicants would be shortlisted by the training provider, and successful applicants would be offered a place on the programme - places on the programme would prioritise applicants with former or ongoing caring responsibilities and career break of at least a year
- June 2020 to July 2020: councils provide LGA with available vacancies in ICT and LGA sends councils updates on participants who are interested in vacancies

Stage 2: Training, Upskilling and Support

- July 2020 to August 2020: participants complete classroom training and workshops

Stage 3: Post-programme

- August 2020 to September 2020: participants apply for available ICT roles within local councils
- September 2020: participants would be invited to attend a celebration ceremony, to receive a certificate and reflect on their successes

The Effect of COVID-19

The RtICT programme coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated national lockdown restrictions, which affected programme timeframes and design. It was anticipated that recruitment onto the programme would be complete by June 2020 and training would commence shortly after. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, GEO agreed to delay recruitment from April 2020 to September 2020, and for training to be provided virtually rather than face-to-face. Programme eligibility was also widened so that the programme could support those who were unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is discussed further in the 'Recruitment and Onboarding' section.

Evaluation Evidence

The evaluation of the RtlCT programme ran for its duration and a range of different data was used to assess the extent to which the programme's aims had been met. Evaluation evidence (Table 2-2) included:

- application data relating to 517 applicants, including their caring status
- pre-programme survey data relating to 57 participants, including their caring status
- post-programme survey data relating to 12 participants, including their caring status
- programme documentation, including the proposal, monthly governance reports, and the contract between GEO and LGA
- case study feedback from 9 participants
- insights from LGA's programme manager and the training provider

Data source	Duration	Total	People with ongoing caring duties	People without ongoing caring duties
Application	September to December 2020	517	135	382
Pre-programme survey	December 2020 to January 2021	57	31	26
Post-programme survey	March 2021	12	7	5

Table 2-2: Evaluation evidence from the programme

Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

GEO were keen to understand whether there were any significant commonalities or differences in the experiences of participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities. This report analyses survey findings and data and reflects on any trends in findings for participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities. Where there are notable differences between those with and without ongoing caring, these have been discussed in the report.

Data Limitations

Size of the survey samples: The programme relied on people completing a survey at the start and end of the programme. 57 participants (67% of the 85 participants who accepted a place on the programme) completed the pre-programme survey but only 12 participants completed the post-programme survey (18% of the 67 participants who completed the programme). As such, findings from the post-programme survey only represent a small proportion of those who completed the programme, and may not be representative of all participants who completed the programme. In addition, qualitative data obtained by survey respondents, including the 9 returner case studies received from LGA may not be representative, but does provide a range of perspectives from participants about their experiences of the programme.

Calculation of caring responsibilities: The number of participants recruited onto the programme with ongoing or former caring responsibilities was calculated from responses to the application form. However, where other survey data is discussed or reviewed, ongoing caring responsibilities refers to participants' responses to the survey in question and not from the application form. Participants were not asked about their former caring responsibilities on the surveys (only on the application form). It is possible that caring responsibilities changed for some participants during the course of the programme, and so the participants described throughout the report as having ongoing caring responsibilities may vary from the application stage through to when respondents completed surveys.

Completeness of demographic data: Personal characteristics were collected through initial applications. This included age, ethnicity, gender, caring responsibilities, and length of unemployment. However, it should be noted that a small number of participants chose not to provide an answer for some of the demographic information on the application form. This may affect the analysis of participant characteristics.

Outcomes beyond programme closure: In addition, data collection from the post-programme survey captured the views of respondents at one point in time and so the survey results are unable to capture future activities that participants may have been involved in beyond March 2021.

Limited council feedback: It was originally planned that councils would be asked for high level feedback on their involvement with the RtICT programme. However, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that councils were prioritising providing emergency services to local residents and it was not possible to secure council involvement in evaluation activities.

Engagement

3. Engagement

Communications Campaign

LGA designed and launched a joint communications campaign to promote the Return to ICT (RtICT) and Return to Planning (RtP) programmes and generate applications. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the communications campaign was postponed by approximately 6 months. The RtICT website, where people could submit their application to join the programme, went live on 20 September 2020, instead of the original planned date of March 2020. A 4-week paid advertising campaign started on 6 October 2020, instead of the original planned start date of April 2020, and was run by a procured advertising provider, Radancy (formerly known as TMP Worldwide).

LGA developed a variety of digital assets for social media platforms, and also shared internal newsletters and emails with councils and existing members of staff to help promote the campaign (Figure 3-1). The training provider also supported the promotion of the RtICT programme via their own channels and networks. Digital assets included static quote cards from current ICT professionals working in local councils, animations providing programme information, and video interviews with senior ICT council staff and employees. The core message of the RtICT campaign included:

- encouraging eligible candidates to return to ICT roles within councils through a free training programme
- promoting the flexible working offer of councils and personal experiences of those who work in ICT roles
- the benefits of working for councils, including the variety of work associated with ICT, including innovation, and being able to work collaboratively with others on projects



Figure 3-1: Example RtICT digital asset for the campaign
Source: LGA

The paid advertising campaign included targeted advertisements on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram news feeds and Google Ads. The RtICT programme and campaign materials were also posted on recruitment websites, including Indeed. To attract those with ongoing caring responsibilities, programme and campaign materials were placed on Working Mums, a specialist platform for those with parental caring responsibilities.

Engagement Outcomes

Targets relating to unique visits, campaign views and expressions of interest were set by LGA and based on previous return to work campaigns. While no targets were set for reaching a specific audience, the campaign surpassed all targets shown in Table 3-1.

Campaign	Targets	Actuals
Objectives	2,000 unique visits to the RtICT website	The campaign received 10,810 unique visits to the RtICT website
	500 views of campaign videos	Video content for the RtICT campaign was viewed 12,932 times across Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Google Ads platforms
Applications	Targets	Actuals
Audience	Obtain a minimum of 180 expressions of interest	1,362 expressions of interest were received Of these, 517 full applications were submitted

Table 3-1: Programme engagement targets and actuals

Source: LGA data reported up to 4 November 2020 (unique visits) and 31 March 2021 (audience data). Advertising provider data reported up to 3 November 2020 (video content views)

Learning	High levels of interest in the programme were generated using a range of communication channels
Recommendation	Use a range of channels when promoting a return to work programme. Use analytics data to track interest in the programme

As of 4 November 2020, it was reported that the main source (42%) of traffic to the RtICT website had come from direct traffic. Indeed (a recruitment website) was also one of the main channels of traffic to the RtICT website (27%).

The most common way pre-programme respondents (23 of the 57 respondents) and case study respondents (5 of the 9 respondents) heard about the programme was through a recruitment website. It is possible that applicants saw the advertisement(s) through a social platform, but decided to find out more information about the programme afterwards, choosing to access the RtICT website directly rather than through the advertisements.

Learning Recruitment websites and job boards were an effective way of signposting people to the application website

Recommendation Consider advertising a return to work programme on national recruitment websites and job boards

Recruitment and Onboarding

4. Recruitment and Onboarding

Programme Eligibility

In Summer 2020, LGA provided GEO with a proposal to widen the programme eligibility criteria, so that those who were unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and had career breaks of less than a year could join the programme. GEO recognised the exceptional circumstances presented by COVID-19 and approved this proposal. However, priority was to be given to experienced ICT professionals who were unemployed for at least a year due to caregiving responsibilities, or who left paid employment for at least a year due to caregiving responsibilities but had since returned to paid work at a lower skill level. Candidates who were unemployed due to COVID-19 and had shorter career breaks would only be considered eligible if they had ongoing or prior caring responsibilities

Learning

The programme was able to expand its eligibility criteria and adapt to the emerging challenges relating to COVID-19

Recommendation

Consider how programmes can be more inclusive by responding quickly and flexibly to changing job markets and broader economic circumstances

Programme Interest

The recruitment period was originally planned to end in June 2020, but was rescheduled to take place between September and December 2020. LGA reported that in total 1,362 people expressed an interest in joining the programme, and a total of 517 applications were submitted.

Following a shortlisting process, LGA confirmed that 122 applicants were offered a place on the RtICT programme in December 2020. From the 122 offers issued, a total of 85 applicants accepted a place, which was slightly less than the 90 positions available on the programme.

Programme Timing

Onboarding commenced for participants from December 2020, ahead of training beginning in January 2021. LGA felt that onboarding participants over the festive period in December 2020 was challenging, as this was a busy time for some participants. LGA recommended that future programmes should avoid onboarding and induction across December. Findings from previous returner programmes have also indicated that the time of year is an important factor when making plans to seek work, for example, those with childcare responsibilities were not looking for work just before the school summer holidays, or during the festive holiday period in December.

Learning	Onboarding participants was considered challenging during periods when participants may have competing priorities, such as the festive period in December
Recommendation	Avoid scheduling the onboarding period over the festive period in December, due to competing priorities for some participants

Participant Characteristics

Profile

For the 85 participants who accepted a place on the programme, the demographic profile from their application form data was as follows:

- 54% were men, 44% were women and 2% preferred not to disclose their gender
- the majority were from a White ethnic group (58%). 21% of participants were from an Asian ethnic group, 11% were from a Black ethnic group, and 2% from a mixed ethnic group - 7 participants (8%) did not specify their ethnicity
- 4 participants reported having a disability (5%) - 13 participants preferred not to disclose this information (15%), meaning the vast majority reported not having a disability (80%)
- participants ranged in age from 25 to 64. Participants were most likely to be aged between 40 and 49 (39% of all participants) or 50 and 59 years old (31%)
- the majority of participants had not previously worked (82%) or were unsure whether they had worked (5%) in local government - 1 participant did not provide a response to this question
- the majority of participants (84%) had 5 or more years of experience in ICT

Caring Responsibilities

In total, 43 of the 85 (51%) who accepted a place on the programme declared ongoing caring responsibilities within their application. 19 people (22%) also reported having former caring responsibilities.

When asked on the pre-programme survey what type of caring responsibility they had, 39 respondents declared ongoing caring responsibilities. Of these:

- 30 respondents were a parent or guardian of a child or children under 18
- 1 respondent was a parent or guardian of a disabled child under 18
- 4 respondents were primary carers of adults
- 2 respondents were primary carers of disabled adults

- 3 respondents were secondary carers

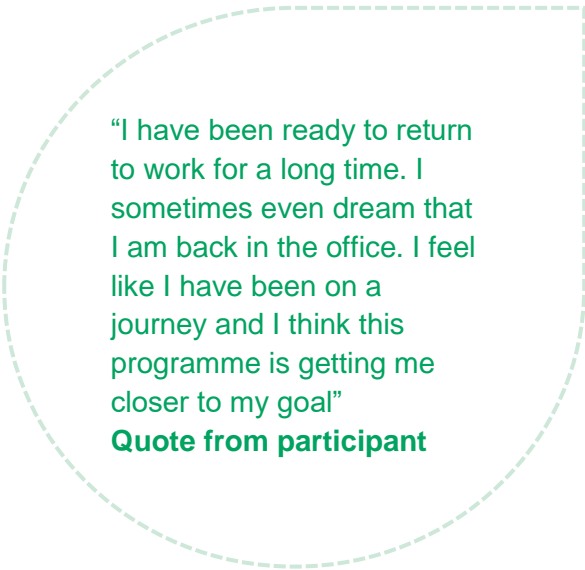
Only 1 respondent declared multiple caring types (being a parent of a child under 18 as well as a secondary carer).

As part of the application form, applicants were also asked if they were currently employed, and if they were not, to provide details on why. All programme participants noted that they were unemployed on the application form, and nearly half (41%) stated they were not currently employed as a result of having taken time out to care for others.

Participant Motivations

Reasons for applying

Participants were asked in both the pre-programme survey and case study forms which aspects of the RtICT programme encouraged them to apply (Figure 4-1). The most commonly reported aspects mentioned by pre-programme respondents were to restart a career in ICT (86%) and to access training and coaching (82%). Connecting with councils was also a common selection (75%). From case study feedback, the main reason for applying to the programme was the opportunities to improve and develop ICT skills and to find employment.



“I have been ready to return to work for a long time. I sometimes even dream that I am back in the office. I feel like I have been on a journey and I think this programme is getting me closer to my goal”

Quote from participant

What are your reasons for applying?

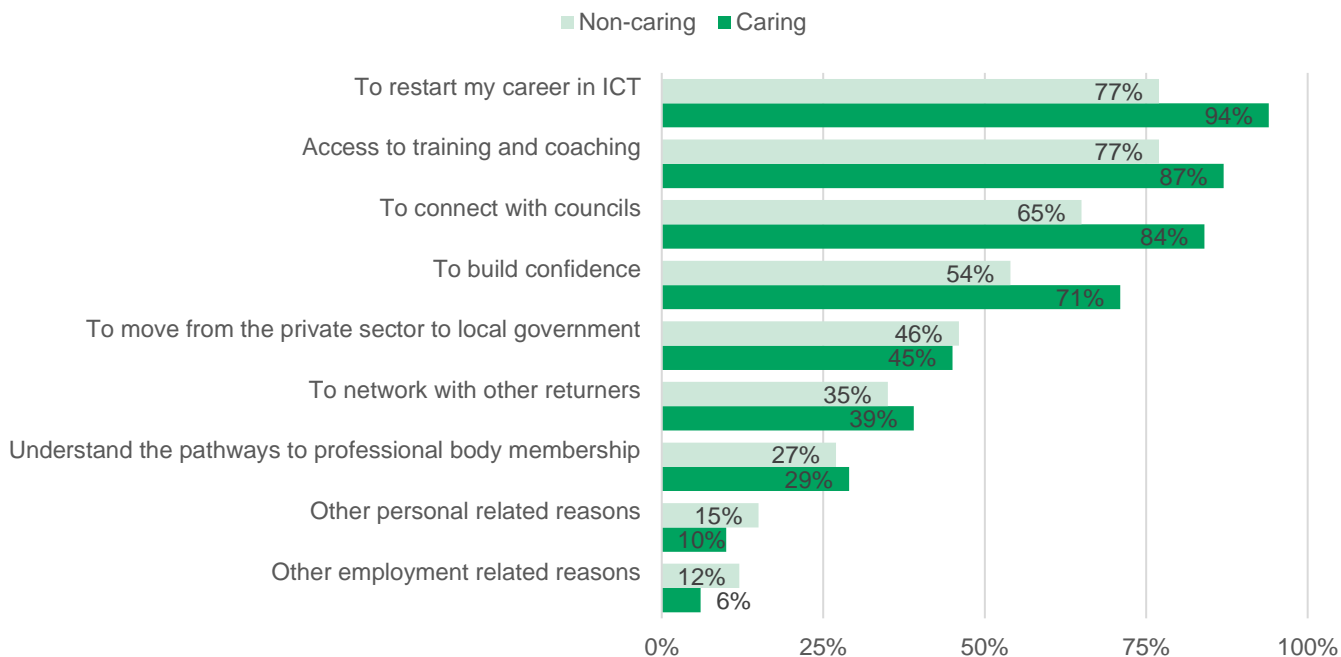


Figure 4-1: Participants’ reasons for applying to the programme (n=57)
 Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

Hopes for joining the programme

Participants were asked in the pre-programme survey what they hoped to achieve by taking part in the RtlCT programme (Figure 4-2). The majority (95%) of pre-programme survey respondents hoped to improve their skills and experience. Other common options selected by respondents for what they hoped to achieve included restarting a career in ICT (86%) and connecting with employers (84%). In addition, 72% of respondents hoped to regain their professional identity by participating in the programme, while 60% hoped to increase their confidence. Smaller proportions of respondents hoped to work towards gaining membership to a professional body (32%) or to demonstrate and apply skills gained through caring responsibilities (21%). The latter option was mostly selected by those with caring responsibilities, although it was also selected by 12% of those without ongoing caring. This indicates that participants without ongoing caring may have had prior caring experiences that changed or reduced before starting the programme. It should be noted that participants were able to give more than one reason for this question.

“It offered the training I needed to catch up on what had happened in the IT market and offered a potential way through the net of getting into the public sector from the private sector”
Quote from participant

What do you hope to achieve through the programme?

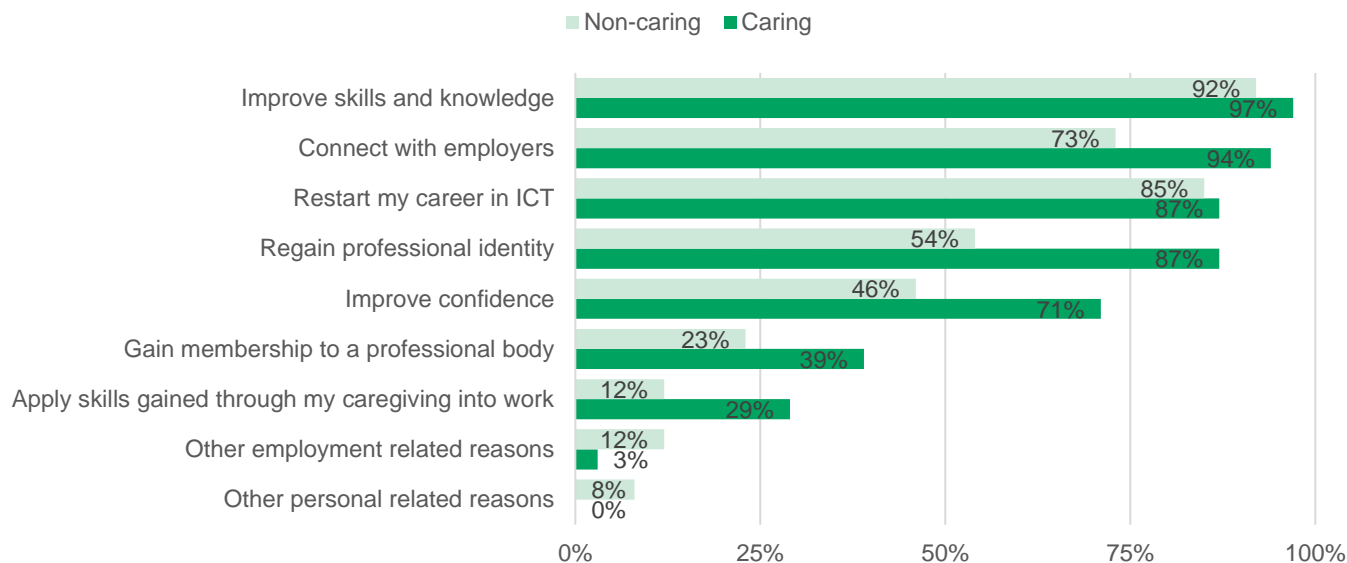


Figure 4-2: Participants' hopes from the programme (n=57)
 Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

Further analysis of pre-programme responses also found that those with ongoing caring responsibilities selected more reasons for enrolling on the programme and also what they hoped to achieve when compared to those without caring responsibilities.

Learning	Participants with caring responsibilities who were looking to return to ICT had a broader range of expectations of what the programme could help them with compared to those without caring responsibilities
Recommendation	Consider scoping with candidates what they want from the programme (for example, with surveys) and see if this can be implemented in the programme design

Barriers to returning to work

The pre-programme survey asked participants whether they had previously tried to return to work prior to the programme, and if so, whether they had experienced any barriers when looking to return to work. From the 57 responses, the majority of respondents (65%) reported that they had previously tried to return to work, and of these, 95% reported experiencing barriers to returning to work. The majority of case study respondents (8 of the 9 respondents) also reported one or more barriers to returning to work. This suggests that ICT professionals who try to return to work after a career break will face some barriers when trying to do so.

Pre-programme respondents and those who submitted case study feedback were able to give qualitative feedback on the barriers they had faced when returning to work. Some common themes from the pre-programme survey included that respondents felt they were often overlooked due to their age, that there was a lack of flexibility, and that they did not have recent work experience due to their career breaks. The main barriers to returning to work listed by case study respondents were also their age (4 out of 9 case study respondents) and career gaps (3 respondents).

“Having spent a large period attempting to find work, I realised that my age had become a problem with employers and I needed to enter a programme where skills and experience were taken into account above everything else”

Quote from participant

Learning

A high proportion of participants who reported trying to return to work had experienced barriers when attempting to do so

Recommendation

Consider collecting data on the barriers participants may experience when attempting to return to work, so that the programme can offer support to overcome these reported barriers

Enrolment and COVID-19

As part of the pre-programme survey, participants were asked whether the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their decision to enrol on the programme. Half of the respondents stated that COVID-19 had influenced their decision to enrol on the programme (51%). When asked to provide further detail on how COVID-19 had influenced their decision, many stated that there were fewer employment opportunities due to the pandemic. Others noted that they had become unemployed due to the pandemic, were finding it more difficult to secure employment, and that the labour market was competitive because of the effect of COVID-19. Some also noted that they might need further skills development or a career change as a result of this. Other respondents highlighted the importance of ICT and the work of local councils during COVID-19.

Withdrawals

From the 122 participants who were offered a place on the RtICT programme, 85 participants accepted a place on the programme, and 67 participants completed the training. In total, there were 18 withdrawals (10 were participants with ongoing caring responsibilities and 8 were participants without ongoing caring responsibilities). LGA wanted to understand why participants withdrew from the programme, and received the following feedback:

- of the 10 withdrawals who had ongoing caring responsibilities, 4 provided additional details and reported that they withdrew either due to a change of circumstances or the effect of the national lockdown on childcare
- of the 8 withdrawals who did not have ongoing caring responsibilities, 5 provided additional details and reported reasons including internet connection issues, the programme not meeting their expectations or being too difficult, and accepting offers of employment

Learning

Some candidates withdrew from the programme between their initial application and start of the programme

Recommendation

Consider monitoring the reasons for potential withdrawals and support participants with their concerns, where possible

Introduction to ICT Pathway

LGA identified that there were applicants to the RtICT programme who did not have the required ICT experience to join the programme. However, there were some applicants with former or ongoing caring responsibilities who could potentially benefit from support to return to work. LGA worked with GEO and the training provider to introduce an 'Introduction to ICT' pathway, which provided access to learning materials to support those without a background in ICT to upskills themselves in the ICT profession. The online learning resources included signposting to entry level ICT, technical, and digital skills, productivity tools, employability skills and job interview preparation materials, and personality profiling tools.

LGA confirmed that 33 applicants for the RtICT programme were invited to join the Introduction to ICT pathway. Of these, 7 people accepted, and 6 were supported following 1 withdrawal. 5 of the 6 participants from this pathway had ongoing caring responsibilities, with the remaining participant having former caring responsibilities. 5 participants were also women. In addition, half of the participants (3) were from a White ethnic background, with 2 participants from Asian ethnic background and 1 participant from a Black ethnic background. The participants on the Introduction to ICT pathway were also a slightly younger age range compared to the RtICT participants, with 5 of the 6 participants aged between 30 and 44 years old.

Participants on the Introduction to ICT pathway were asked to provide feedback on their experiences through a survey. Only 2 responses were received, therefore it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the particular pathway. The 2 responses stated the most helpful learning resources they were signposted to were in relation to the productivity tools and technical skills training. The respondents agreed that the learning resources were of high quality and supported them to develop their knowledge of ICT, and that they felt better prepared and confident in applying and interviewing for ICT roles.

The Introduction to ICT pathway launched as the training for the RtICT programme was drawing to a close in March 2021. LGA reported that the time lapse between submitting applications and when people were contacted about the pathway (approximately 3 months) could have been the reason for the low take up (7 places accepted from 33 offers). LGA also felt the low take up could have been due to applicants not being interested in a programme that did not involve a formal or taught training element. LGA has recommended offering an introductory pathway alongside a broader returner programme to support a wider range of people, with appropriate advertising for each training offer.

Learning	The programme was able to provide an introductory pathway for those looking to upskill themselves in a new profession
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Recommendation	Consider running a pathway that offers introductory training as part of a broader returner programme, to support those who may not have the required skills and experience but are looking to return to work
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Training, Upskilling and Support

5. Training, Upskilling and Support

Programme Elements

As part of the programme, participants were provided with a high-quality training and upskilling package to support them to return to work in ICT. LGA awarded the training provider contract to Socitm, who are a professional network for digital leaders in the public services. LGA chose to award Socitm the training contract due to their knowledge of local government, prior work with LGA, and their national body membership which includes UK councils.

It was originally anticipated that all participants would receive classroom training between July 2020 to August 2020. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions introduced in March 2020, training was postponed and changed to an entirely virtual experience.

Between January 2021 and March 2021, 67 participants completed the training element of the programme. This included:

A RtICT induction pack: prior to training, participants received details of the programme timeframe, programme content, learning objectives, points of contact, and a learning agreement confirming participation in the programme.

An introduction webinar about the Cloud Academy: prior to their training, participants were invited to attend a webinar on how to navigate and make best use of the training platform (Cloud Academy). A recording of the webinar was also shared with participants for those that were unable to attend the event.

A technical skills pre-assessment: prior to their training, participants were invited to complete a technical skills pre-assessment conducted through the Cloud Academy platform to identify their ICT knowledge, expertise and skills, and to determine the type of technical training they should complete. The outcome of the assessment, including personal preferences, informed their training plan.

Technical skills training: participants completed technical training on the Cloud Academy platform. The type of training was dependent upon the results of the pre-assessment and personal preferences, but courses available included IT Technical Support, Software Developer, Data Analyst, Technical Architect, and Security Specialist. Participants also had the opportunity to select additional training modules if they chose to do so. Training was expected to last for around 4 weeks, depending upon the pathway and number of modules chosen.

PRISM profiling and support: participants were invited to complete a questionnaire on the PRISM platform to understand their strengths and behaviours and how to deploy these in the workplace. Following completion of the questionnaire, participants had access to one-to-one coaching sessions to discuss their results in more detail.

Soft skills training and support: participants were invited to attend an online workshop to develop their confidence, assertiveness, personal brand and networks. The workshop also enabled participants to meet and network with other programme participants looking to return to work, and to confidently speak about the value they could bring to a local government ICT role.

Coaching support: participants were provided with individual coaching sessions following their technical training, with the option to access more or less coaching support depending upon their preference. Coaching sessions were tailored to the needs of each participant and included personal and professional development as well as support for job interviews.

Socitm membership: participants were also provided with a free membership with Socitm up until the end of 2021, that would enable them to access additional ICT-related learning resources, webinars and opportunities to build networks.

Participants were grouped into 6 cohorts and received personalised training plans based on their preferences, ICT skills and experience. They were also able to access a wide range of training modules on the Cloud Academy platform unrelated to their training plan. A total of 4,290 hours of Cloud Academy technical material were accessed by participants, and 160 hours of soft skills training was delivered, according to the training provider. Participants were also encouraged by Socitm to engage in networking with other programme participants through LinkedIn, Microsoft Teams and Whatsapp groups, to share updates, connect and discuss experiences and support each other's learning.

Programme Flexibility

LGA reported that up to 22 participants were unable to join their designated training cohort in January 2021 and were reallocated to other training cohorts that started later in the month. Staggering the dates and times for starting training was considered to help participants to manage their competing priorities.

LGA reported that the third national lockdown from January 2021 had affected participants, but that the training provider and coaches were able to monitor participants' wellbeing and participation with training during this time and make adjustments where required. In addition to participants being able to join later training cohorts, webinars were recorded and shared with participants so they could flexibly manage the training with other priorities, such as caring. 18 additional coaching sessions were also made available during the programme and a wellbeing contact was assigned to each participant to provide support where required. Case study feedback showed that some participants found it challenging to prioritise and focus on the training programme due to increased caring responsibilities associated with the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, although one respondent was pleased that the programme could fit around their other priorities.

Learning

Participants were able to access additional support that was flexible to their needs, such as staggered start dates and times, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially heightened caring responsibilities

Recommendation

Consider how future return to work programmes can offer participants support, such as flexible and staggered start dates for training, to balance participation with other commitments and caring responsibilities

Reflections on Training

As part of the post-programme survey, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the training provided on the RtICT programme. It is worth noting that only 12 of the 67 participants who completed the training provided post-programme survey feedback. This means that results may not be representative of the wider cohort.

LGA reported that the opportunity for participants to choose from a wide range of training modules for technical skills on the Cloud Academy platform, beyond their personalised training pathway, worked well and was a positive aspect of the programme. The majority of post-programme respondents stated that the training provided through the Cloud Academy platform mostly met their expectations (7 out of 12 respondents), while the remaining respondents said that it had partially met their expectations (5 out of 12 respondents). No respondents said that the training provided on the Cloud Academy platform did not meet their expectations at all.

In addition, the majority of case study feedback was positive about the training (7 out of 9 case study respondents provided positive reflections). Case study feedback highlighted that participants felt the programme offered a great opportunity to upskill themselves, to move into the public sector from the private sector and return to the labour market after a career break. One case study respondent also felt that the programme recognised the variety of skills people can bring to local government ICT services and delivery.



“(The programme was) excellent. Great access to training material and soft skills support. I had no expectations but was pleasantly surprised. A great concept”
Quote from participant

However, some post-programme respondents provided suggestions as to how the training could be improved, which included access to gaining a professional qualification or certification at a discounted price, and providing more training sessions on employment related skills, such as writing CVs and completing interviews.

The post-programme survey also asked participants for feedback on the 2 most and least useful modules:

Most useful modules:

- Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) (5 participants)
- Agile (5 participants)
- Scrum (4 participants)
- Introduction to Cloud computing (3 participants)

For the modules listed as most useful, respondents found that these were because they linked to their past experience or future career plans.

Least useful modules:

- DevOps (4 participants)
- Agile (3 participants)
- Scrum (2 participants)
- Introduction to Cloud computing (2 participants)


There were some commonalities given as to why respondents had found these modules least useful. These included that respondents thought they were less relevant to the expected career or sector, or for working in local government.

LGA reported that the mixed feedback on how useful modules were may have been dependent on the mixed ability and previous experiences of participants. This is supported by some respondents stating they had some difficulty with some of the training materials.

Reflections on Support

The post-programme survey also asked participants to rate how helpful broader programme activities were (Figure 5-1). Coaching sessions were most commonly rated as very helpful (8 of the 12 respondents) and was also mentioned as being a positive element of the training programme in case study feedback. All options except the networking and live virtual workshop were rated as very or fairly helpful by the vast majority (at least 75% of respondents).

Networking with others received the least positive feedback from post-programme survey respondents: it was not rated as very helpful by any respondents, with 5 saying it was neither helpful nor unhelpful, 2 saying it was fairly unhelpful, and 4 not engaging in networking at all. However, there was limited qualitative feedback on the rating of programme activities, so it is not possible to report on reasons why respondents did not engage with, or rate this activity very highly.



“The training was perfect and the coaching was just on point”
Quote from participant

How would you rate the following programme activities?

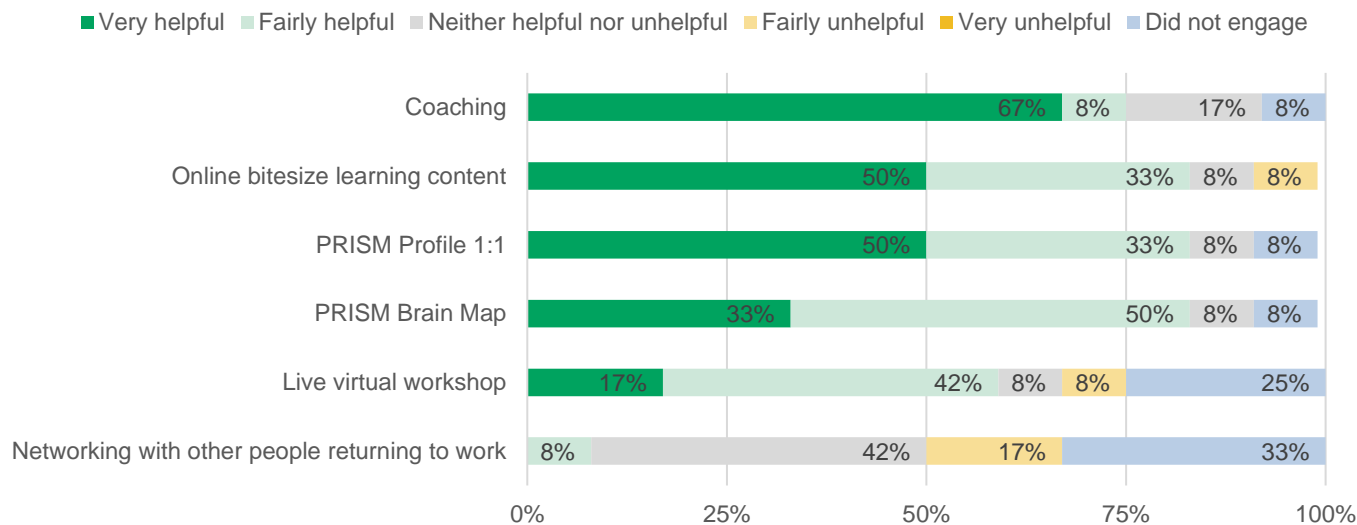


Figure 5-1: Participants’ ratings on programme activities (n=12)
 Source: post-programme survey

Learning Coaching was popular and highly rated by participants

Recommendation Consider including coaching elements when designing a return to work programme

Reflections on Employer Engagement

A common reason why respondents applied for the RtICT programme was to connect with councils (75% of pre-programme respondents reported this). When advertising the programme, LGA noted that participants would be able to upload their skills and experience onto an online platform that would be accessed by prospective local government employers. Employers and participants would then be able to connect with each other to discuss potential employment opportunities. However, in practice, this type of connection between councils and participants was not possible, primarily because councils were prioritising providing emergency services relating to COVID-19 to their local communities to be able to participate in this activity.

“It would be good to be introduced to people within the local government doing the sort of role I want”
Quote from participant

Some post-programme survey respondents reflected on the lack of opportunities to engage with councils and employers, and stated that future programmes could include more involvement of local councils in the training. For example, including a ‘working for the council’ session as part of the programme, receiving support to secure placements or work experience within local authorities, and providing greater opportunities to network with employers. One third of case study respondents (3 out of 9) also mentioned that greater employer engagement would improve the programme. LGA noted that work placements could be introduced on future programmes to provide participants with experience of the workplace.

Involving councils in the training could have allowed participants the opportunity to engage with prospective employers, learn more about their expectations, and potentially broker employment opportunities. Increased employer involvement in training might also offer a valuable opportunity to engage employers in evaluation activities, and help to understand employers’ needs and recommendations.

Learning

Participants reported that they would have wanted more opportunities to engage with councils and employers

Recommendation

Consider how to provide participants with opportunities to get greater insight into current work practises, for example by supporting participants with sourcing work experience or placements with employers

Post-Programme

6. Post-Programme

Post-Programme Feedback

As part of the post-programme survey, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences on the RtICT programme. Some participants had only recently completed training at the point of the post-programme survey, and may not have begun their search for employment. In addition, only 12 of the 67 participants who completed the training provided post-programme survey feedback, which may not be representative of the wider cohort.

Of the 12 responses received to the post-programme survey, 7 survey respondents reported having ongoing caring responsibilities. The post-programme survey results on the following areas were positive:

Programme satisfaction: 8 respondents reported being fairly satisfied with the RtICT programme. One respondent stated that they were very satisfied, and the remainder said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. No respondents said they were dissatisfied with the programme. 5 of the 7 of those with caring responsibilities stated they were fairly satisfied, with the remaining 2 stating being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Meeting expectations: All 12 post-programme respondents said the RtICT programme had either partially (8) or largely (4) met their expectations. 2 respondents with caring responsibilities said their goals had been largely achieved, and the remaining 5 respondents with caring responsibilities said their goals had been partially achieved. Some of the qualitative feedback from participants who felt that the programme had only partially met their expectations suggested this was mainly due to them not yet securing employment.

Participant confidence: 8 of the 12 respondents said that their confidence to return to work had slightly increased. One respondent felt their confidence had greatly increased. Of the remaining respondents, 2 stated that the programme had not affected their confidence levels, and 1 stated that their confidence had slightly decreased. All those with ongoing caring responsibilities felt their confidence had either slightly (6 respondents) or greatly (1 respondent) increased. The respondent whose confidence had greatly increased explained that they felt as though the programme had boosted their technology skills and would make them more employable, whereas 1 of the respondents who felt they had a slight increase in confidence explained that they would have liked to have been able to experience a work placement opportunity to be able to incorporate their training into practice. The respondent who felt their confidence had slightly decreased did not provide additional detail on the reasons why this may be the case.

Overcoming barriers: 10 of the 12 respondents reported having previously encountered barriers when attempting to return to work. When asked whether the RtICT programme had supported them to overcome these barriers, the majority (7) said that the programme had partially helped them overcome these barriers, 1 respondent said that it had helped them to overcome barriers,

but 2 reported that it had not. Of the 10 who reported encountering barriers, 5 had caring responsibilities and all said the programme had partially helped them to overcome barriers to returning to work. When asked to provide further detail, comments from 4 respondents suggested that while the programme had provided valuable training and insight that went some way to overcoming these barriers, they had felt that it was either too early to tell if the programme would enable them to return to work or that although the programme had been a good starting point, further study and training might be necessary to secure the role they wanted

“Do not hesitate in joining or considering joining a returners programme. It will give you a break from the norm, give you a new perspective and mindset, give you the chance to meet others in similar situations and create a support group, chances to learn, upskill, get one-to-one coaching, and rebuild confidence in yourself and in looking for work”
Quote from participant

Employment

As at the end of March 2021, LGA reported that 32 councils had signed up to the RtICT programme, with 9 councils choosing to share a total of 23 vacancies, and 5 offers of employment were made to participants, with a further 4 known job interviews secured.

It is worth noting that employment outcomes were measured soon after the completion of training and participants may have not started their job search. In addition, while the majority of participants may not have a job outcome during the programme evaluation period, they were potentially in a better position to secure a job in ICT than they might otherwise have been. Therefore, it is anticipated that employment outcomes will increase beyond the lifetime of the programme.

To support employment outcomes, LGA provided participants with a weekly email containing ICT vacancies within councils from March 2021, and planned to continue sending vacancies to participants up to the end of April 2021. Councils were also asked to guarantee participants an interview if they met the criteria of the role they applied for, and participants were encouraged to include the programme on their application forms and CVs to highlight to councils that they had completed a formal return to work programme.

As part of the programme, participants were asked for the preferred regions that they would like to work in. GEO and LGA identified a potential risk in not being able to match candidates' preferred region for employment with the availability of vacancies within councils. To mitigate this, LGA aimed to target certain councils in regions where participant demand for vacancies was higher than the list of vacancies shared. LGA were also due to ask councils whether the vacancies

shared involved the opportunity for remote working, as this could open up the opportunity for participants who did not live within a particular region to still apply for those vacancies should they wish to.

However, despite mitigation strategies being developed, there were still instances of a mismatch between the location of available vacancies shared by councils and participants' demand for roles in a particular region, which may have had a negative effect on the number of employment opportunities secured at the point of evaluation. For example, in March 2021, LGA reported that there was higher demand from participants to work in London, the South East and South West than other regions, but there were few available vacancies shared by councils in these areas at that time.

LGA also noted that external factors may have also had a negative effect on the number of ICT roles advertised by councils and available for participants to apply to, such as COVID-19 related budget restrictions and recruitment freezes within councils.

Learning

The programme had difficulty finding employment opportunities to share with participants in all of the geographic areas where they wanted to work

Recommendation

Develop mitigations, such as targeting specific employers in certain locations, where there is more demand from applicants than there are employment opportunities

When asked on the post-programme survey why participants felt they had not gained employment, the most common response was that they continued to face barriers (7 of the 11 who were unemployed). 5 respondents also said that there were limited employment opportunities in ICT. One respondent said they wanted a career outside of ICT and that the programme had not equipped them with the necessary skills needed to return to ICT. Other participants said they had not yet started their job search (4). 2 participants had started their job search and gave further detail on why they thought they hadn't yet gained employment. One respondent mentioned that local authority employers were rejecting new applications, whilst the other respondent said that it would be good to demonstrate up to date skills to overcome potential issues of older workers being overlooked for job vacancies.

Celebration Event

To celebrate participants' achievements and share experiences of the programme, the training provider held a virtual 'celebration ceremony' in April 2021 as part of their annual Leadership, Diversity and Skills event (Figure 6-1). The Minister for Women, Baroness Berridge, delivered a speech that congratulated participants on completing the programme, highlighting how the skills developed through caring for others can be valuable to employers, and emphasised the importance of returning ICT professionals. Speakers for the event included chief executives of local councils, Learning Solution Matters (a learning and development specialist) and NHS Digital representatives. Representatives from GEO, LGA and the training provider also attended to share information about the successes of the RtICT programme.



Figure 6-1: Invitation to attend the virtual Leadership, Diversity and Skills event held by Socitm

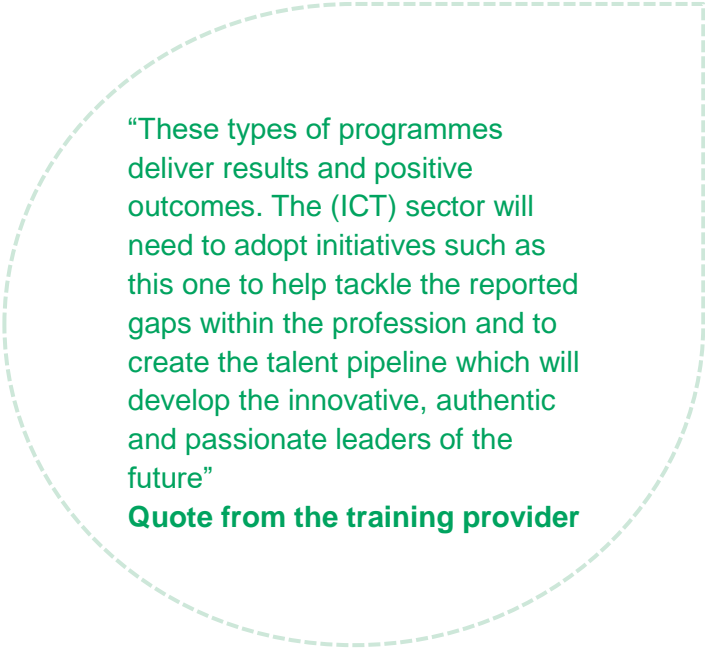
Conclusions

The RtICT programme was a pilot to support experienced ICT professionals who were looking to return to work, with an aim of attracting and helping those who had left employment for caring related reasons. The pilot also intended to support those who might want to transition from working in the private sector to working in the public sector, bringing expertise and talent to local councils. The profile of the participants who accepted a place on the programme indicates that the priority groups were successfully recruited to the programme:

- 51% had ongoing caring responsibilities, with a further 22% reporting having former caring responsibilities
- 75% had been out of the labour market for longer than a year
- 84% had 5 or more years of experience in ICT

- 82% had not previously worked in local government

Overall, the RtICT programme was successful in training and supporting 67 participants. The feedback received after the completion of the programme was positive about the free training offer, particularly in relation to coaching support. The high level of interest expressed in the programme, and volume of applications submitted, indicates that there was an appetite to access training and learning opportunities that could support a return to work into a professional ICT role.



“These types of programmes deliver results and positive outcomes. The (ICT) sector will need to adopt initiatives such as this one to help tackle the reported gaps within the profession and to create the talent pipeline which will develop the innovative, authentic and passionate leaders of the future”

Quote from the training provider



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