



Government  
Equalities Office

# Return to Planning Programme

Evaluation Report

March 2022

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# 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 Planning programme (referred to in this report as the RtP programme) 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 planning 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.

Other funded returner programmes include 2 Return to Social Work programmes and a Return to ICT 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 planning sector after taking a career break. Participants would be provided with a high-quality training package to enable them to return to the planning sector. The programme was originally expected to run between April 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. This was to support people with prior or ongoing caring responsibilities who had lost their employment through the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Programme Outcomes

Outcomes were reported for RtP programme milestones. In summary:

- the programme surpassed its expressions of interest target (180), generating 1,615 expressions of interest - as a result, 336 full applications to participate in the programme were submitted
- the programme did not meet the target of recruiting up to 90 participants - 28 applicants were offered a place on the programme, with 14 applicants accepting a place on the programme and 13 participants starting training
- for the 13 participants who started the programme, 7 were women, 4 reported having ongoing caring responsibilities and 2 reported having former caring responsibilities - 12 reported at least a career break of a year
- the programme did not meet the target of training up to 90 participants, with only 12 participants completing training
- a new introductory pathway was created due to a high proportion of the 336 applicants not having the required skills and sector experience to join the main programme - 89 applicants were invited to join this new 'Introduction to Planning' pathway, and 29 participants were sent learning resources

## Learning and Recommendations

Table 1-1 summarises the learning obtained from the RtP 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 emerging challenges relating to COVID-19	Consider how programmes can be more inclusive by responding quickly and flexibly to changing job markets and broader economic circumstances
	Despite high levels of interest and applications submitted, the	Ensure programme eligibility criteria are clear when advertising a return to work

	programme was only able to identify a small portion of eligible candidates	programme to reduce the volume of ineligible applications
	Some participants looking to return to planning had a range of 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
	One candidate withdrew from the programme due to a change in circumstances 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, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially heightened caring responsibilities	Consider how future return to work programmes can offer participants support to balance participation with other personal factors, such as caring responsibilities
	Coaching was most 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, however due to COVID-19 pandemic, councils were prioritising providing emergency services within their local communities	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 Planning Advisory Service (PAS) on behalf of GEO. It is based on evidence reported and analysed by LGA up to March 2021.

The evaluation of the RtP 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 fairly high for both the pre-programme survey (92% response rate) and the post-programme survey (83% response rate). While the response rate remained high for the post-programme survey, the overall sample size is small and only 30% of respondents had ongoing caring responsibilities, so findings may not be representative of all returner experiences.

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 6 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 planning 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 planning could prevent occupational downgrading (whereby people return to a lower paid occupation after their career break).

Supports returners as a talent pool: LGA provided evidence of retention and recruitment difficulties for planning roles across local councils in England. In February 2021, more than a quarter (26%) of councils in England and Wales reported having recruitment difficulties for planning professionals. Supporting experienced planning professionals to return to the planning sector 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 planning 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 legislation can act as a barrier for people looking to return to the planning sector. 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 RtP 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 planners.

The programme would be run and managed by LGA and involve stakeholders such as local councils, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). PAS, who are part of the LGA and offer training and support to councils with their planning services, were appointed as the training provider (PAS are referred to as the training provider from now on). A third-party contractor would also be sourced to run a paid media advertising campaign

for the programme. TMP Worldwide, now known as Radancy, was successfully appointed in September 2020.

## Aims and Targets

The aim of the RtP programme was to recruit and retrain qualified professionals who had left the planning profession for at least one 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 planning professionals on their behalf. Table 2-1 outlines the targets and 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	1,615 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	28 applicants were offered a place on the programme 14 participants accepted a place on the programme
<u>Training, Upskilling and Support</u> Procuring and managing the training provision to support participants back into planning	Up to 90 participants complete training	12 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 RtP and Return to ICT (RtICT) programmes, which were running simultaneously. The initial plan was for the programme to be announced by a press release in March 2020, and for the paid advertising to take place between April and May 2020. The planned communications campaign would feature:

- a RtP 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 experienced planning staff and employees within councils, for use across social media platforms and the RtP website
- paid social media advertisements across a number of channels (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram) to direct potential applicants to the RtP website
- toolkits and communications guidance for stakeholders and councils - LGA shared these resources by email as well as hosting them on the RtP 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 planning, 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 planning roles within local councils. This was planned to happen as follows:

#### Stage 1: Recruitment and Onboarding

- April 2020 to May 2020: candidates submit applications to join the RtP 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 breaks of at least a year
- June 2020 to July 2020: councils provide LGA with available vacancies in planning 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 planning 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 RtP 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 RtP programme ran for its duration and a range of 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 336 applicants, including their caring status
- pre-programme survey data relating to 12 participants, including their caring status
- post-programme survey data relating to 10 participants, including their caring status
- programme documentation, including the proposal, monthly governance reports, and the contract between GEO and LGA
- case study feedback from 6 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	336	102	234
Pre-programme survey	December 2020 to January 2021	12	3	9
Post-programme survey	March 2021	10	3	7

Table 2-2: Evaluation evidence from the programme  
Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

GEO was keen to understand whether there were any significant commonalities or differences in the experiences of participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities. However, due to the small number of participants who reported having ongoing caring responsibilities on the pre-programme survey (3 out of the 12), it is not possible to make meaningful comparisons between those with and those without ongoing caring responsibilities. Where there are significant similarities in the survey responses from all participants with ongoing caring responsibilities, these have been discussed in the report.

## Data Limitations

Size of the survey samples: The programme relied on participants completing a survey at the start and end of the programme. Although response rates from both the pre-programme and post-programme survey were good, the overall sample size is small (between 10 and 12 respondents per survey). While the responses may be representative of the programme participants, there are limitations to applying these findings more widely to the experiences of returning planners. In addition, qualitative data obtained by survey respondents, including the 6 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 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 RtP 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 Planning (RtP) and Return to ICT (RtICT) programmes and generate applications. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the communications campaign was postponed by approximately 6 months. The RtP 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 digital assets included static quote cards from current planning professionals working in local councils (some of whom had ongoing caring responsibilities), animations providing programme information, and video interviews with the training provider and a professional planner employed by a council. The core message of the RtP campaign included:

- encouraging eligible candidates to return to planning roles within councils through a free training programme
- promoting the flexible working offer of councils and personal experiences of those who have returned to planning with ongoing caring responsibilities
- the benefits of working for councils, including the variety of work associated with planning and making real change within local communities



Figure 3-1: Example RtP 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 RtP 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 RtP website	The campaign received 14,492 unique visits to the RtP website
	500 views of campaign videos	Video content for the RtP campaign was viewed 8,270 times across Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Google Ads platforms
Applications	Targets	Actuals
Audience	Obtain a minimum of 180 expressions of interest	1,615 expressions of interest were received Of these, 336 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)

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

A wide range of social media platforms and other communication channels were used to promote the campaign. As of 4 November 2020, it was reported that the main source (47%) of traffic to the RtP website had come from direct traffic<sup>1</sup>. Indeed (a recruitment website) was also one of the main channels of traffic to the RtP website (30%).

The most common way pre-programme survey respondents heard about the programme was through a recruitment website (4 of the 12 respondents selecting this option). When asked to name the specific site, the 3 responses given all cited the recruitment website “Indeed”. 3 respondents reported hearing about the programme either through LGA’s website or bulletin. The

<sup>1</sup> Direct access (direct traffic) to a website occurs when a visitor arrives directly onto the website without having clicked on a link through another site or post



remaining respondents heard about the programme through a council website, workingmums.co.uk, or through the Job Today website. It is unclear why there were differences between the survey responses and campaign data on how participants found out about the programme, but it is possible that applicants saw the advertisement(s) through a social media platform, but decided to find out more information about the programme afterwards, choosing to access the RtP website directly rather than through the advertisements.

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**Learning**

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

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**Recommendation**

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

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# 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 apply to join the programme. GEO recognised the exceptional circumstances presented by COVID-19 and approved this proposal. However, priority was to be given to experienced planning professionals who had been out of the labour market for at least a year due to caregiving responsibilities, or who left paid employment for at least a year due to caregiving responsibilities but who 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.

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**Learning**

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

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**Recommendation**

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

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### 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 1,615 people expressed an interest in joining the programme, and a total of 336 applications were submitted.

Following a shortlisting process, the LGA reported that 28 applicants were offered a place on the RtP programme in December 2020. This is significantly less than the 90 positions available on the programme. From the 28 offers issued, a total of 14 applicants accepted a place, 1 participant withdrew prior to the start of the programme, and 13 participants commenced onboarding at the beginning of January 2021. Another participant subsequently withdrew from the programme during training.

Through the shortlisting process, LGA and PAS identified that only a small portion of the 336 applicants had the professional planning experience and skills required to join the programme (the LGA reported that only 41 applicants were shortlisted and invited to complete a video interview, as the final stage of the application process). LGA felt the high volume of ineligible applications may be due to:

- some applicants not reading the skills and experience section of the programme advert correctly, or not understanding the specialised nature of a planning role

- the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in more unemployed people looking for roles unrelated to their prior employment experiences

To reduce the number of ineligible applications for future programmes, LGA recommended being clearer in the programme advertisement on the eligibility criteria required to join, potentially by including a checklist of “essential criteria” or a set of questions that participants complete as part of their application to check their suitability for the programme.

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**Learning**

Despite high levels of interest and applications submitted, the programme was only able to identify a small portion of eligible candidates

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**Recommendation**

Ensure programme eligibility criteria are clear when advertising a return to work programme to reduce the volume of ineligible applications

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## Participant Characteristics

### Demographics

Of the 14 participants who accepted a place on the programme, 1 participant withdrew prior to the start of the programme. For the 13 participants who began the programme in January 2021, the demographic profile from their application form data was as follows:

- 7 were women, 4 were men and 2 preferred not to disclose their gender
- 5 reported they were from a White ethnic group, 2 were from a Black ethnic group, 1 participant reported being from an Asian ethnic group, 1 reported being from another ethnic group, and 4 participants did not specify their ethnic background details
- no participants reported having a disability
- the most common age range for participants were between 30 and 39 years and 50 and 59 years, with 4 participants in each of these age groups - there were also 2 participants aged between 20 and 29, and 1 participant aged between 40 and 49, while 2 participants did not provide details of their age range
- 5 of the 13 participants had been out of the labour market for over 2 years - 7 participants had been out for 1 to 2 years, and 1 participant had been out of the labour market for less than 6 months

### Caring Responsibilities

In total, there were 4 participants on the programme who declared ongoing caring responsibilities at the application stage.

As part of the application form, applicants were asked if they were currently employed, and if they were not, to provide details on why. Of the 13 participants on the programme, 4 participants stated they were not currently employed as a result of having taken time out to care for others. Other

participants reported not being employed for reasons unrelated to caring responsibilities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, relocating to support a spouse's career, or personal reasons such as a lack of experience.

## Participant Motivations

### Hopes for joining the programme

Participants were asked in the pre-programme survey what they hoped to achieve by taking part in the RtP programme (Figure 4-1). Participants were able to select more than one answer. All 12 respondents to the pre-programme survey stated that they wanted to update skills and knowledge, with 11 wanting to regain their professional identity. Qualitative feedback from 5 pre-programme respondents had some common themes, including the opportunity to restart a career in planning, employment related factors such as connecting with employers or gaining references, and personal factors such as having a role that was sufficiently flexible to have around caring responsibilities.

“I saw (the programme) as an opportunity to update my planning knowledge and skills, rebuild my confidence and connect with local authorities and fellow returners”  
**Quote from participant**

What do you hope to achieve from the programme?

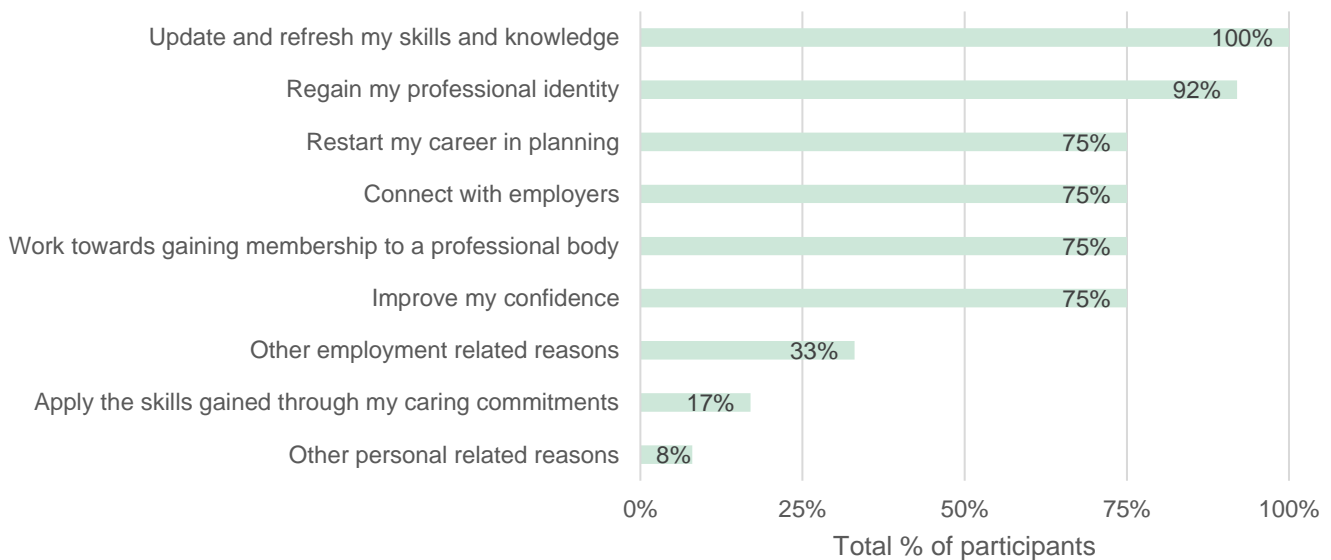


Figure 4-1: Participant hopes from the programme (n=12)  
 Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

**Learning**

Participants looking to return to planning had a range of expectations of what the programme could help them with

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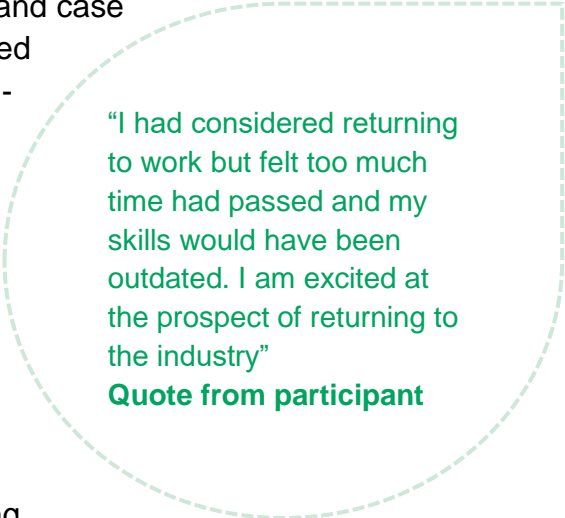
**Recommendation**

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

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**Reasons for applying**

Participants were asked in both the pre-programme survey and case study forms which aspects of the RtP programme encouraged them to apply. The 2 most common aspects reported by pre-programme respondents were access to high quality training and coaching, and an opportunity to restart a career in planning (reported by 11 of the 12 respondents). Support to build confidence was also selected by 10 respondents. Qualitative feedback from 3 pre-programme respondents noted how the ability to update and refresh skills and knowledge, particularly around new legislation, encouraged them to apply. These participants also mentioned that the opportunity to work flexibly on the programme and to gain references were reasons for applying.



“I had considered returning to work but felt too much time had passed and my skills would have been outdated. I am excited at the prospect of returning to the industry”

**Quote from participant**

The most common reasons for applying mentioned by case study respondents were to upskill and improve knowledge of planning (3 out of the 6 case study respondents), followed by the ability to connect with others, such as networking with councils and other programme participants (2 respondents).

## 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 (Figure 4-2). From the 12 responses, 5 respondents reported that they had previously tried to return to work and all 5 respondents reported having faced barriers when trying to return to work. Respondents reported a wide range of barriers, including a lack of vacancies, a 2-year career gap due to childcare, a lack of relevant experience, and recruitment bias. The majority of case study respondents also reported barriers when trying to return to work. The main barrier reported was in relation to people with overseas planning experience who lacked planning experience within the UK.

“I am a chartered architect and I couldn’t find a job because I didn’t have UK experience and none was willing to give me a job, even on a voluntary basis”

**Quote from participant**

### What are the main barriers you faced when trying to return?

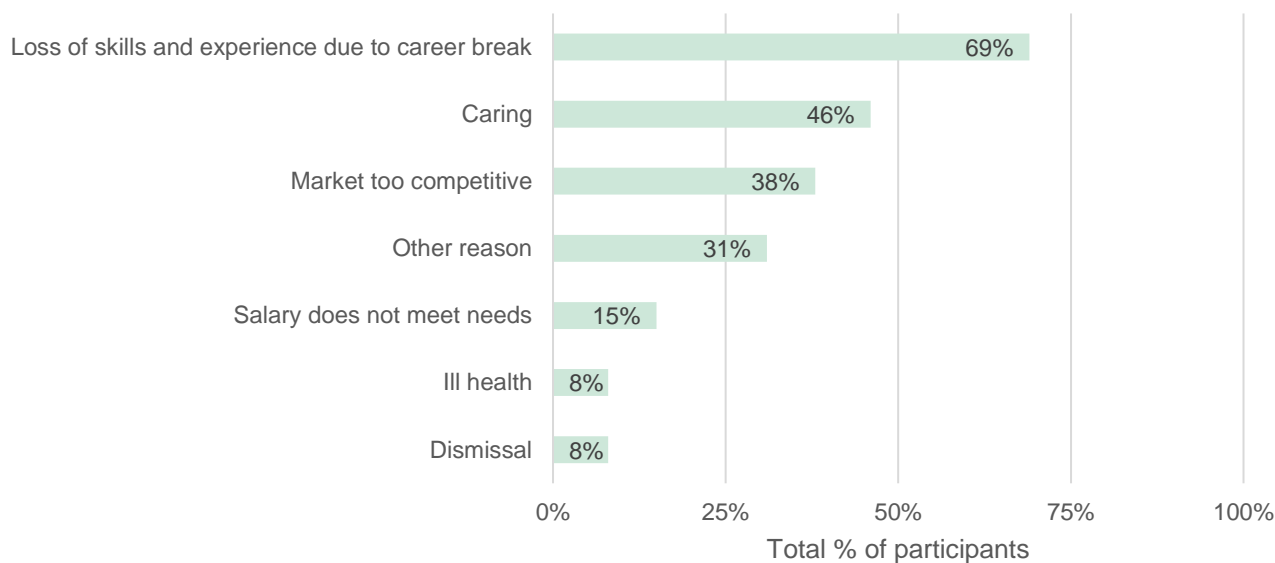


Figure 4-2: Participants’ main barriers when trying to return to work (n=10)

Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

## 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. 5 of 12 respondents stated that COVID-19 had influenced their decision to enrol on the programme and mentioned in further qualitative feedback that there were limited job opportunities due to the pandemic. LGA felt that this meant

the programme was seen as an opportunity to boost employability and improve the chances of securing a role in planning.

## Withdrawals

From the 14 participants who accepted a place on the RtP programme, 12 participants completed the programme. LGA wanted to understand why the 2 participants withdrew from the programme (one who withdrew before the start of training and one during training), and received feedback that both had experienced changes in their circumstances. One participant provided further detail and noted challenges with balancing childcare commitments with participation on the programme during the national lockdown. In light of this, LGA offered this participant the opportunity to transfer onto the introductory pathway, which provided flexible access to a range of free online learning resources and may have suited this participant more than the formal taught training programme.

<b>Learning</b>	One candidate withdrew from the programme due to a change in circumstances between their initial application and start of the programme
<b>Recommendation</b>	Consider monitoring the reasons for potential withdrawals and support participants with their concerns, where possible

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## Introduction to Planning Pathway

LGA identified that the majority of applicants to the RtP programme did not have the required experience in the planning sector, 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 PAS to introduce an 'Introduction to Planning' pathway, which provided access to learning materials to support those without a background in planning to upskill themselves in the planning profession. The learning resources included information specific to planning, such as Town Planning Law and Community Engagement, as well as broader employability skills, such as communication and interview skills.

89 applicants for the RtP programme were invited to join the Introduction to Planning pathway. Of these, 29 people accepted (including the participant who transferred from the RtP programme), and 1 later withdrew. 22 had ongoing caring responsibilities and 7 had former caring responsibilities. The majority were women (22 people) and from a White ethnic group (20). The most common age range was between 30 and 39 years old, with 13 people in this age group. 11 people were aged between 40 and 49. 2 people reported a disability.



Participants on the Introduction to Planning pathway were asked to provide feedback on their experiences through a survey. Only 1 response was received, therefore it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the pathway. However, LGA does recommend offering an introductory pathway alongside a broader returner programme to support a wider range of people, with appropriate advertising for each programme pathway.

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**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

### Training 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 planning. Training was provided by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), who are part of LGA and offer training and support to councils with their planning services.

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, 12 participants completed a 6-week online training programme. This included:

- induction: an induction pack contained details of the programme, programme timeframes, programme content, learning objectives, and contact details
- an online session on working in local government: participants were invited to attend an online session to gain insights about working in local government, to meet PAS and other participants on the programme, colleagues from LGA, senior officers working in planning, as well as councillors with planning responsibilities in councils
- an online workshop on planning systems in England: participants were invited to a session about current planning systems and the importance of planning - the session included a recording from the chief planning officer at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now known as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)
- professionally led training modules and workshops on planning specialisms: participants had access to technical training modules on a range of subjects from planning law, community engagement, project management, and decision making in planning - there was a blend of mandatory core modules and optional modules, with most sessions being run by a tutor, while some sessions were recorded
- a soft skills workshop: participants were invited to attend an online workshop on updating their CV, interview preparation, and confidence building, helping participants with their personal and professional development to support their return to work
- coaching support: participants were provided with an opportunity for a one-to-one coaching session to support their personal and professional development
- membership advice to the Royal Town Planning Institute: participants were invited to attend an online session on how to become a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute

Participants were encouraged by PAS to network with other programme participants to share updates, discuss their experiences, and support each other's learning. PAS measured participants' engagement in sessions, and provided support with any queries with assignments that accompanied some of the training modules.

## Flexibility of Training

LGA reported that the third national lockdown from January 2021 had affected participants, but also that the training provider was able to provide wellbeing support for the participants, which included holding extra sessions to help with participants' training and providing out-of-hours support. Some of the training sessions were also recorded and shared with participants so they could manage their training with other priorities, such as caring for others. 2 additional coaching sessions were also made available during the programme.

“To be given the opportunity to work with such dedicated, committed individuals was such an honour and a privilege for me. It's testament to your determination to achieve what you want to achieve”  
**Quote from participant**

<b>Learning</b>	Participants were able to access additional support that was flexible to their needs, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially heightened caring responsibilities
<b>Recommendation</b>	Consider how future return to work programmes can offer participants support to balance participation with other personal factors, such as caring responsibilities

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## Reflections on Training Activities

All 6 case study respondents provided positive feedback on the training and support offered as part of the RtP programme. The majority (4) mention connecting with others and peer support as the most valuable element of the programme, with 2 respondents positively reporting on specific training tutors. 3 case study respondents also felt more knowledgeable and equipped with skills, and 2 mentioned feeling sad that the programme had ended. The case study feedback also indicated that the personal development and employability skills training was valuable to participants.

“Despite the impact of COVID-19, the RtP programme was a great success in upskilling participants and building their confidence to return to work. Many of the participants didn't want the training to end, which is testament to the excellent high quality of training and support provided by PAS”  
**Quote from LGA**

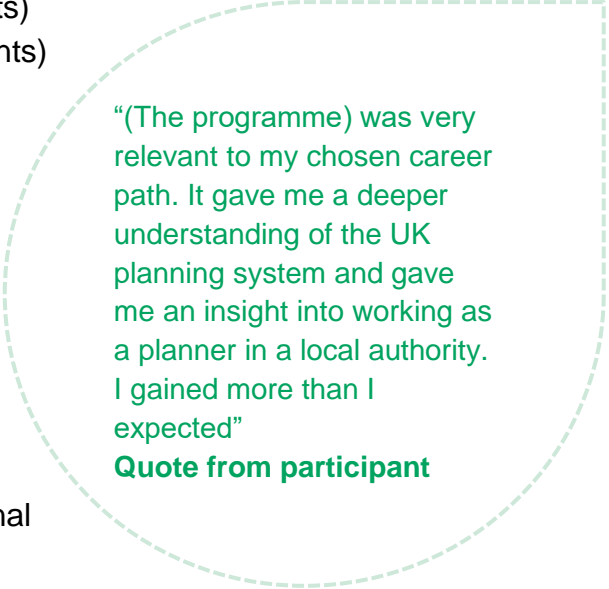
As part of the post-programme survey, participants were asked to reflect on their training experiences. The majority of survey respondents reported that the training fully met their expectations (8 respondents) with the remaining 2 respondents saying that the training largely met their expectations.

The post-programme survey also asked participants for feedback on the most and least useful modules. It is worth noting that 1 respondent provided 2 modules as the most useful module.

Most useful modules:

- development management process (3 participants)
- delivery and funding of infrastructure (3 participants)
- personal and professional development (2 participants)
- overview of the planning system in England (1 participant)
- town planning law (1 participant)
- design codes and guidance (1 participant)

For the modules listed as most useful, respondents found that modules linked to their prior experience and their areas of interest were useful, along with modules that supported their job applications, such as the personal and professional development module.



“(The programme) was very relevant to my chosen career path. It gave me a deeper understanding of the UK planning system and gave me an insight into working as a planner in a local authority. I gained more than I expected”


**Quote from participant**

Least useful modules (to note 5 participants did not mention any modules as least useful):

- skills for planners (2 participants)
- overview of the planning system in England (1 participant)
- design codes and guidance (1 participant)
- working in local government (1 participant)

Qualitative feedback from some post-programme respondents noted that modules were a bit repetitive. One post-programme survey respondent also noted that they would have wanted longer timeframes to complete the programme, which was echoed in one of the case studies.

The post-programme survey also asked participants to rate how helpful the coaching sessions, networking with other people returning to work, and online workshops were (Figure 5-1). All but one of the 10 respondents said coaching was very helpful. Networking with others returning to work and the virtual workshops on employment skills were also considered to be very helpful, with 8 respondents reporting this for each question.



“My fellow classmates and I were very supportive of one another and remain friends. Having such a great relationship with the others on the course has been a highlight for me”

**Quote from participant**

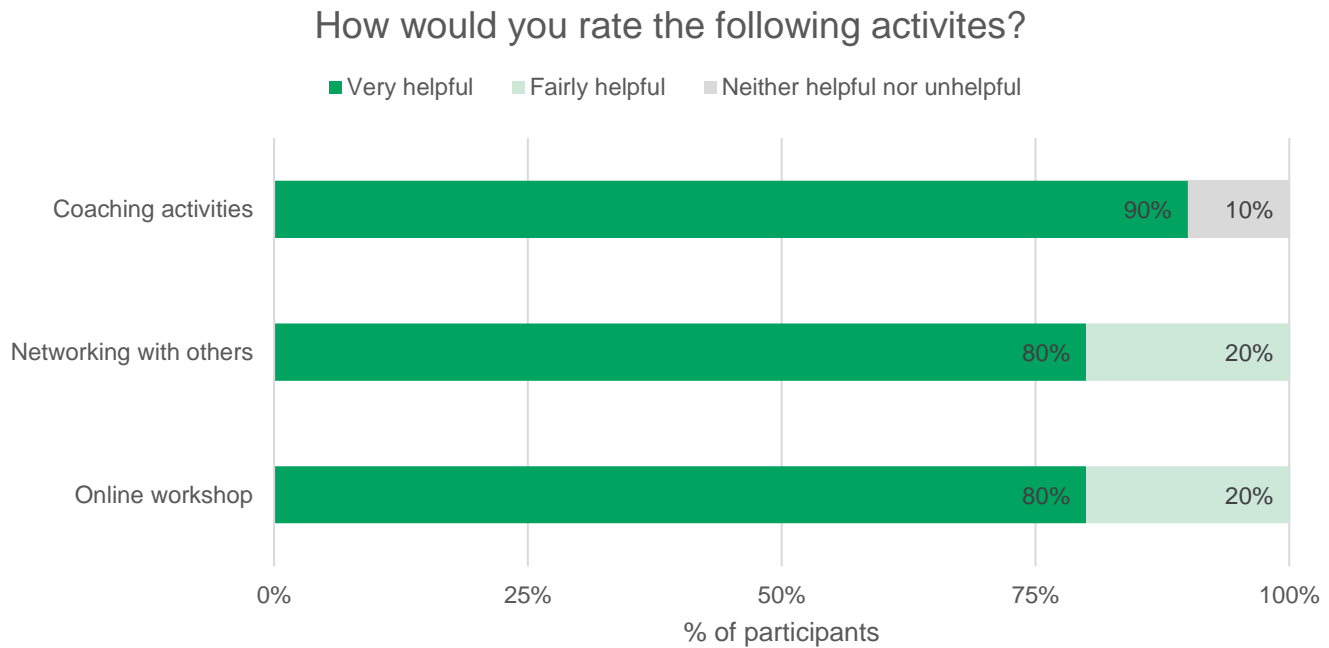



Figure 5-1: Participants’ rating barriers when trying to return to work (n=10)  
 Source: post-programme survey (to note no participants rated any activities as fairly or very unhelpful)

<b>Learning</b>	Coaching was popular and highly rated by participants
<b>Recommendation</b>	Consider including coaching elements when designing a return to work programme

## Engagement Opportunities with Councils

A common hope for the programme listed by pre-programme survey respondents was to connect with councils (9 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.

In the post-programme survey, some respondents reflected on the lack of opportunities to engage with councils and employers, and thought future programmes could include opportunities to gain practical experience through work placements or further involvement with local councils. 5 of the 10 respondents mentioned it would be beneficial to have on-the-job training or placements within a local government setting. The majority of case study respondents (4 of the 6) also mentioned that future programmes could offer more employability support, such as providing work experience, placements, or job searching support. LGA noted that work placements could be introduced on future programmes to provide participants with relevant and recent work experience.



“Some practical local authority planning work experience for a week or two would be very helpful”  
**Quote from participant**

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.

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**Learning**

Participants reported that they would have wanted more opportunities to engage with councils and employers, however due to COVID-19 pandemic councils were prioritising providing emergency services within their local communities

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**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

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# 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 RtP 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.

Of the 10 responses received to the post-programme survey, 3 survey respondents reported having ongoing caring responsibilities.


The post-programme survey results on the following areas were very positive, with the majority of respondents reporting high levels of satisfaction with the programme, increased confidence to return to work, and that their goals have been met or largely met:

Programme satisfaction: 9 respondents reported that they were very satisfied with the RtP programme, with the remaining respondent stating they were fairly satisfied. All respondents with ongoing caring responsibilities said they were very satisfied, with additional qualitative feedback saying the programme was interesting, informative, and a great experience

Meeting expectations: 9 respondents stated they had met all of their goals or largely met their goals, with the remaining participant stating they had partially met their goals

Participants' confidence: 9 respondents stated that the programme had greatly increased their confidence, with 1 respondent saying their confidence had slightly increased. All participants with ongoing caring responsibilities also stated that their confidence had greatly increased

Overcoming barriers: 6 respondents reported that they had previously tried to return to work and said that they had experienced barriers in trying to return. When asked whether the RtP programme had supported them to overcome these barriers, 3 said the programme had partially helped them to overcome these barriers, 2 respondents said it had helped them to overcome barriers, and 1 respondent said it hadn't. Qualitative feedback from 2 respondents who said the programme had either not helped or partially helped them overcome barriers stated that they still lacked UK planning experience or that their previous experience of return to work placements had not provided the experience to be able to use their skills and "test their worth".



"I feel more confident going back into the industry as I feel I have a road map of how it all fits together and works. I feel the programme has given me a sense of direction"

**Quote from participant**

## Employment

As at the end of March 2021, LGA reported that 34 councils had signed up to the RtP programme, with 18 councils choosing to share a total of 30 vacancies. 2 offers of employment were made to participants (who did not report having ongoing caring responsibilities), and a further 2 known job interviews were secured. From the post-programme survey, 1 respondent was able to secure a voluntary role through being able to connect with a council on the programme, albeit this voluntary role was unrelated to planning.

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 planning 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 vacancies for planning roles within councils from March 2021, and planned to continue sending vacancies to participants up to the end of April 2021, 1 month after the formal completion of the programme. 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. One post-programme survey respondent who reported being connected with councils felt that being referred by LGA gave “weight” to their applications for roles in local government.

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 over 10 vacancies were available in the South East but only 2 participants wanted to work in this region, whereas there were no vacancies available at this time for participants who wanted to work in the South West, West Midlands, North East and North West.

<b>Learning</b>	The programme had difficulty finding employment opportunities to share with participants in all of the geographic areas where they wanted to work
<b>Recommendation</b>	Develop mitigations, such as targeting specific employers in certain locations, where there is more demand from applicants than there are employment opportunities

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When asked on the post-programme survey why they had not gained employment, 3 respondents reported that they hadn't started their job search, 3 felt they continued to face barriers, and 2 stated that there were limited opportunities for roles in planning (respondents were able to select more than one answer). 4 respondents also gave more detailed feedback as to why they felt they had not gained employment. This feedback was mixed: one respondent stated that they still did not have experience working in a planning role in the UK which job vacancies were requesting, one respondent felt their age was a barrier, while another respondent had not found any local job opportunities.

## Celebration Event

To celebrate participants' achievements, the LGA held a virtual 'celebration ceremony' for participants in March 2021, for participants to share their experiences and receive certificates to use when applying for roles in the future (Figure 6-1). The event was organised by PAS and all participants attended.



Figure 6-1: Example of the certificate presented to participants completing the RtP programme

## Conclusions

The RtP programme was a pilot to support professional planners who were looking to return to work, with an aim of attracting and helping those who had left employment for caring related reasons. The post-programme feedback indicates that the majority of RtP programme participants felt positively about the programme, reporting high levels of satisfaction and confidence to return to work.

The majority of participants who began the programme did not report having ongoing or former caring responsibilities and the overall recruitment targets were unmet (14 participants accepted a place on the programme, which was designed to support up to 90 participants). However, as the programme was a pilot, GEO, LGA, and PAS could flexibly introduce an alternative learning pathway for those who did not have professional planning experience. This introductory pathway had high levels of interest from those with ongoing or former caring responsibilities (all 29 candidates interested in this pathway). This may indicate that people are keen to transfer their existing skills and experience into new professions, and would benefit from relevant training and support.

“It has been a real privilege being part of the RtP programme. The class of 2021 were a fantastic cohort of learners who all embraced the programme with continued energy, enthusiasm and full participation. This was recognised by all of the professionals that were involved in the training with positive feedback throughout. The programme included modules that provided a real range of disciplines that make and create town planning practice in England. The learners fully participated in them all and the confidence that they gained throughout the programme was clearly evidence. They are a strong collaborative group and I have no doubt that they will stay in touch with one another and support each other in their next steps. We will miss them and wish them every success in their future careers”

**Quote from the training provider**



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