

# Returners Grant Fund Evaluation

## Grant Fund Report



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**Date: 31/03/2021**

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# 1. Introduction

## Introduction

- 1.1** In the 2017 Spring Budget, £5 million was allocated to support people back into employment after taking a career break. As part of this, Government Equalities Office (GEO) set up schemes across the public and private sector to support people to return to work after a break for caring responsibilities. The Returners Fund (referred to from now on as ‘the Fund’) launched in 2018, and awarded around £1.5 million to 16 pilot returner projects that would engage and support returners and employers in the private sector.
- 1.2** 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 equal to their skills and experience.
- 1.3** The Fund sought to understand the challenges people experience on their return to work journey, potential solutions to these challenges, and how returners could be best supported by returner schemes. In addition, the Fund sought to understand the perceived barriers employers face in recruiting returners, potential solutions to these barriers, and how employers can be engaged through returner schemes. Funding was provided to 16 projects across England with the ambition that some of these projects would become self-sustaining and continue to support returners and employers beyond the funding period.
- 1.4** GEO provided strategic oversight of the Fund, including design, implementation, reporting and evaluation. A grant administrator was appointed through a tendering process to promote sector engagement, raise awareness of the Fund, and then assess funding applications during the funding rounds. The grant administrator also managed the Fund through monitoring of agreed project activity and the administration of payments. Following a tendering process, research organisation SQW were appointed as grant evaluators to provide guidance to applicants and support to funded projects on evaluation requirements, to undertake evaluation fieldwork, and to report on evaluation findings from the 16 pilot projects.

## Purpose of the report

- 1.5** This report provides an overview of the Fund. An evaluation report for each of the 16 projects has been prepared and these provide further detail about the scope, activities and outcomes for each project. This report presents an account of Fund achievements and learning from the 16 project reports. It provides a brief account of the Fund’s policy origins, processes, barriers and achievements. Its purpose is to provide a wide range of stakeholders (including policymakers, practitioners working with returners and employers, and other partner organisations) with a set of lessons or considerations for future support activity and advocacy of returners and employers.

## Main research questions

- 1.6** The Fund was designed to embed evaluation from the start and organisations were required to consider the role of evaluation research within their applications. The evaluation team presented at events during the application phases, supported logic model development across the funding rounds, and presented evaluation approaches and expectations alongside GEO at the 3 project inception meetings.
- 1.7** SQW produced a logic model for the Fund, which was based on the premise that a series of structured actions taken by project organisations would change behaviours of both employers and returners, leading to offers of paid employment to returners. The research questions arising from this model therefore applied to all 3 participating groups:
- **For returners:**
    - Do returners require a focussed and supported intervention that is personalised to their circumstances?
    - How can interventions be tailored to their needs?
    - What motivates a return to paid work?
    - What skills, experiences, and opportunities can support them to re-enter the labour market and enter rewarding employment at an appropriate level?
  - **For employers:**
    - What tools or support do employers need to rethink their recruitment policies and practices relating to returners?
    - What practices can be adapted that suit returner engagement?
    - Are there creative and cost-effective ways to address employer skills gaps that bring returners back to paid employment?
  - **For providers:**
    - Why is the initiative needed for this group of employers, or for groups of returners in the geographic or sectoral context?
    - Is a relationship broker or intermediary necessary to bring returners and employers together?
    - Which delivery models are helpful to make local labour markets work more efficiently?
- 1.8** The success of the Fund would be affected by a number of external factors:
- **For returners** this would include ongoing caring responsibilities, financial issues, the health of a family member or themselves, transport costs and availability of support for other issues such as domestic abuse or housing

- **For employers** this would include market changes, changing management priorities, business restructuring or environment changes (such as new physical developments in their area), the effect of Brexit on local labour markets, and general economic up or downturns

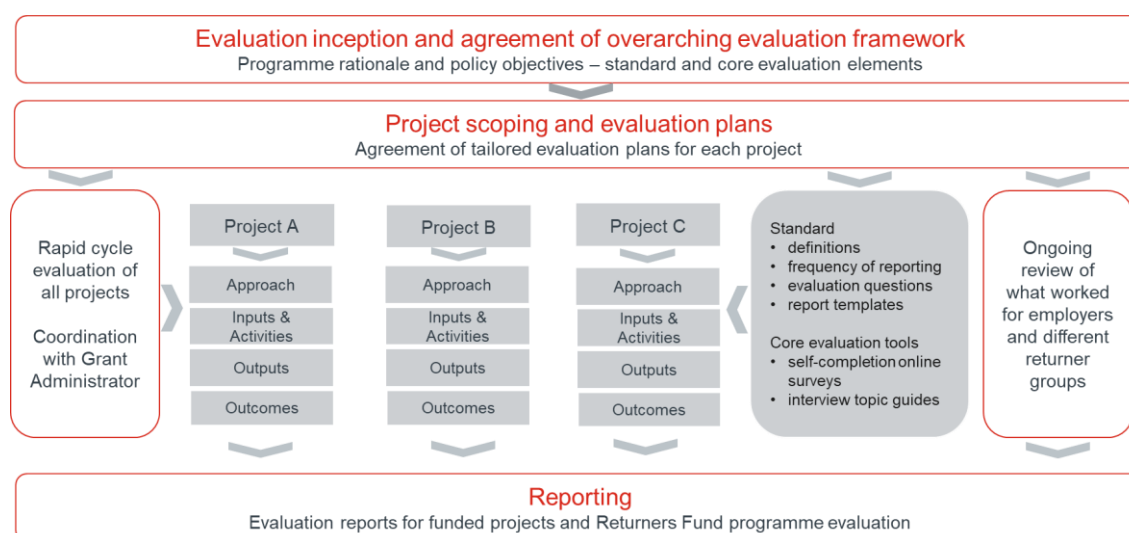
**1.9** The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Fund was an unexpected external factor. Most projects were either complete or coming to an end when lockdown restrictions were put in place in March 2020. However, 9 projects were affected by reduced capacity in project organisations, changes to employers' recruitment plans, and changes to caring responsibilities for many returners.

## Evaluation methodology

**1.10** The evaluation ran alongside project selection and delivery. The overall approach was to give strategic formative insights to GEO as the 16 projects were running, and summative insights at important milestones. These strategic, project level insights would be informed by evaluation work with each of the funded projects.

**1.11** This overall approach to the evaluation is summarised in Figure 1-1. The evaluation research used standard tools which included interview topic guides (for interviews with returners, employers, and project managers), self-completion online surveys for employers and returners, and standard monitoring data requirements. These were designed to provide data and insights to inform responses to the research questions outlined previously. The overall approach and relevant tools were presented to each project and an individually tailored evaluation plan was agreed with each project manager.

**Figure 1-1: Research approach used in the evaluation of the Fund**



Source: SQW

**1.12** SQW then worked with each project, alongside the grant administrator, to provide the evaluation plan. The evidence informing this evaluation is derived from:

- Project documentation including project applications (each with its own logic model), grant agreement letters, and monthly progress reports provided to the grant administrator
- Monitoring data capturing the number and type of returners and employers that each project engaged
- Surveys capturing 'pre-project' and 'post-project' responses to standard questions from returners, and post-project responses from employers in 9 projects
- Qualitative interview data from at least 2 interviews with each project manager, and samples of returners (from all projects) and employers (from 14 projects)

**1.13** Evidence from each project varied in its completeness. Survey participation was lower than expected during the earlier phases of the Fund and projects that were part of later funding rounds included groups for whom self-completion surveys were not appropriate (such as people who do not have English as their first language, or who have lower literacy skills). Surveys were therefore replaced by qualitative approaches for 7 projects. In other cases, employer engagement was more limited than projects had planned, and in addition, was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Employer participation in both evaluation interviews and surveys was lower than expected with no participation from employers in the case of 2 projects.

**1.14** Data analysis was undertaken for each project. Survey data was analysed using Excel to produce simple frequencies. Interviews were structured to follow the evaluation logic model and data was thematically analysed to draw out important findings regarding processes, inputs, outputs and outcomes alongside highlighting any verbatim comments of interest.

**1.15** A project report was prepared for each of the 16 funded projects. These reports captured the rationale for the project, involvement of main partners, components of delivery, and the effect of the project on participating employers and returners. They also included any effect on employers' recruitment behaviour, as well as returners' training outcomes, skills, experiences and access to paid employment opportunities. Each report included a set of main learning points. Drafts of these reports were shared with project managers for clarification and to check factual accuracy.

**1.16** These 16 reports were then used as the evidence base for this Fund level evaluation report. Near final drafts of each of the 16 reports were uploaded to specialist qualitative analysis software. The reports were coded to capture findings relating to delivery models, outcomes and the main learning points from each project. Additional coding was used to capture specific issues such as the issue of transplanting models from London to other parts of the country, corporate social responsibility and accredited qualifications.

**1.17** This report brings together thematic findings and learning from this analysis. It can be read as a standalone summary of the Fund, with further details about individual projects in the project reports.

## 2. The 16 funded projects

### An overview

- 2.1** The Fund was launched through a series of events in London and Birmingham with training, voluntary and third sector organisations in attendance. During the first and second funding rounds, organisations were invited to submit an expression of interest and shortlisted applicants were selected to prepare a full bid. The third round of funding invited all interested bidders to submit a full bid. To make funding decisions, bids were reviewed and scored by the grant administrator and a GEO panel, which included an independent assessor. All funding decisions were reviewed and ratified by the Minister for Women and Equalities. In total 16 organisations were funded (Table 2-1).
- 2.2** While the Fund operated across England, activity was particularly concentrated in London, the South East and the North West of England (Liverpool and Manchester city regions). The Forces Employment Charity RFEA project operated nationally, although it was focussed on military bases in Plymouth. Some areas had little or no coverage, such as the South West, the Midlands and the East of England. It was reported that fewer applications from organisations operating in these areas were received over the funding rounds and typically scored less than bids received from other regions. It was also notable that 3 projects were running concurrently in a relatively small area within Liverpool.

**Table 2-1: Funded organisations and locations**

Organisation name	Project location	Type of organisation
Adviza Partnership	Thames Valley	Adviza is a registered charity working in the Thames Valley area inspiring people to make better learning and work decisions.
Beam	London	Beam is a London-based charity that supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness by crowdfunded employment training.
Carer Support Wiltshire	Wiltshire	Carer Support Wiltshire is a local charity supporting unpaid carers in Wiltshire.
Changing Lives	Gateshead and the North East	Changing Lives is a nationwide charity helping people facing challenging times to make positive change.
Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)	Yorkshire and the Humber	CIPD is a professional association for human resource management professionals.
We Are Creative Equals (Creative Equals)	London and Manchester	Creative Equals is a not-for-profit consultancy that works to create more pathways to success for female creative talent.
F1 Recruitment	London and surrounding counties	F1 Recruitment is a recruitment consultancy for marketing, PR and sports marketing in London.



Organisation name	Project location	Type of organisation
Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO)	Greater Manchester	GMCVO is a voluntary, community and social enterprise sector support and development organisation covering the Greater Manchester city region.
Liverpool City Council	Liverpool	Liverpool City Council provide employment and skills services through the Liverpool in Work project.
Livv Housing Group (Livv Housing)	Liverpool	Livv Housing is an independent housing association providing homes in Knowsley, Merseyside.
Mpower People CIC (Mpower People)	Liverpool	Mpower People is a not-for-profit company, which provides community-based education and training in Liverpool.
The Forces Employment Charity RFEA (RFEA)	National with a base in Plymouth	RFEA provides specialist training and employment support to service leavers, reservists, veterans and their families nationally.
Shpresa Programme and Twist (Shpresa and Twist)	London and Hastings	Shpresa is a registered charity that promotes the participation and contribution of the Albanian-speaking community in the UK. Twist is a consultancy based in east London specialising in the delivery of projects to support migrants.
St Helens Chamber of Commerce (St Helens Chamber)	St Helens	St Helens Chamber provides services, training and support for businesses and jobseekers.
Westminster City Council	Westminster, London	Westminster City Council provide adult and community learning through the Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES).
Women Returners	Manchester and Leeds	Women Returners works across sectors to enable returners to restart after career breaks.

Source: SQW

## Timing

- 2.3** There were 3 separate funding rounds. The first round launched in March 2018, the second in August 2018 and the third in February 2019. The first projects began in September 2018 and it was anticipated that the final projects would finish in July 2020 (Figure 2-1).
- 2.4** When the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions began in March 2020, most projects were in their final stages. GEO held discussions with all active projects about risks and mitigations and mutually agreed extensions with 5 projects. These extensions meant that overall, the Fund ran for 2 years. Individual projects were in operation for an average of 12 months, the shortest running for 7 months and the longest for 16 months (due to COVID-19 delays).



**Figure 2-1: Delivery periods of the funded projects**

	2018				2019												2020									
	Sep-18	Oct-18	Nov-18	Dec-18	Jan-19	Feb-19	Mar-19	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jul-19	Aug-19	Sep-19	Oct-19	Nov-19	Dec-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	
Adviza																										
Beam																										
Carer Support Wiltshire																										
Changing Lives																										
CIPD																										
Creative Equals																										
F1 Recruitment																										
GMCVO																										
Liverpool City Council																										
Livv Housing Group																										
Mpower People																										
RFEA																										
Shpresa and Twist																										
St Helens Chamber																										
Westminster City Council																										
Women Returners																										

Source: SQW

## Funds awarded

- 2.5** A total of up to £1.39 million was awarded by GEO to the 16 projects from the Fund. The awards ranged in value from £32,000 to £186,900. Most of the funding was spent (£1.33 million).

## Delivery models

- 2.6** The funded projects offered personalised delivery, cohort delivery, or a combination of both:
- **Personalised delivery** involved one-to-one support for returners that was tailored to their needs and aspirations – this took the form of informal conversations, mentoring, careers counselling and coaching in person and online
  - **Cohort delivery** involved returners participating in training and employment support and activities as a group – this offered advantages such as peer support, where returners could give each other advice and encouragement
- 2.7** 9 of the projects offered a blend of cohort delivery and personalised delivery. For example, following their bootcamp and speed-networking event, the F1 Recruitment project offered returners personalised, practical help to find contract work and permanent career roles through one-to-one guidance from their recruitment consultants. 4 projects focused on personalised delivery, while the remaining 3 chose a cohort model.
- 2.8** Some of the projects redesigned their delivery model after they started. For example, the Carer Support Wiltshire project had planned to run training for a series of cohorts that would include 12 returners per cohort. However, they found that returners were cancelling at the last minute. The team commented that some returners may have found large groups and

formal venues off-putting and needed smaller, less formal sessions to build their confidence. The project subsequently adapted their offer to one-to-one support by phone and in person.

### Personalised delivery model

- 2.9** Most projects (13) offered one-to-one support to returners. This was done either in person, phone or online by project staff or externally recruited advisers, such as specialists in employment, mentoring or other areas of support. Much of this was formal, regular support available to returners at the beginning of the project (for induction and development planning) and throughout the project (for ongoing personal or employment advice).
- 2.10** The support provided was tailored to the needs of each returner. Broadly, returners received practical job search support such as CV reviews, interview skills help, and support for completing job applications. They also received coaching and advice designed to build their confidence, self-belief and motivation, and support for other needs such as financial advice and English language skills. The professionals providing the one-to-one support would also refer some participants to further training or support services. In addition, some returners had one-to-one support from work coaches, which included a consultation and a tailored needs assessment, followed by a personalised development plan and employability support. Depending on the project, one-to-one support was either organised for returners at the beginning of the project or once they had undertaken a training programme to develop their employability and personal skills.
- 2.11** There were instances of project team members getting in touch with returners informally following the main project activity, to provide personalised, practical help to find employment. There were also occasionally friendly, encouraging phone calls and catch-ups between project team members and returners during the lifetime of the project to keep them engaged and motivated. Following measures put in place due to COVID-19, there was a shift in the emphasis of some of these conversations towards checking in on returners' welfare and wellbeing.

### Cohort training programmes

- 2.12** Most projects (13) also offered training programmes to returners. Some of the projects had in-house training teams and were well placed to run training programmes themselves. For example, the Creative Equals project ran their London based 2-week bootcamp using in-house expertise. In other cases, projects partnered with external training providers to run employability skills programmes or other specialist employment training. For example, the Westminster City Council project partnered with local training provider Adult Education Employment and Training (AEET), while the Adviza project partnered with Clearwater Training, a Security Industry Authority (SIA) accredited training provider.
- 2.13** Training programmes varied in duration, ranging from 2 days of training (Changing Lives project) to 10 weeks (Liverpool City Council project). Some programmes were intensive,

providing back-to-back, full-day activity. Others were less intensive, requiring a modest amount of time from returners spread over a few weeks. Across the projects, it became evident that short, intensive interventions seemed to be more suitable for those with fewer and less complex barriers to returning to work. Less intensive support over longer timeframes was seen to be better suited to returners with multiple barriers to returning to work.

**2.14** The topics covered by the training included workplace-related skills, job searching skills, confidence and mental wellbeing (noting that the topics offered were decided by individual projects). The frequency and types of topics covered within each project differed depending on the needs of the returners who were recruited, and whether additional needs were identified as the returner progressed. Examples of additional content included customer service skills and dealing with difficult situations at work. Within the training programmes, time was also allocated for additional support such as benefits checks, debt management advice and getting DBS checks. In addition, some projects provided returners with opportunities to secure formal qualifications, such as:

- The SIA Door Supervision Level 2 qualification gained by all returners completing Adviza's training programme
- Teaching Assistant qualifications at Level 1 or 2 for returners participating in the Shpresa and Twist training programme
- Food Hygiene and Safety for Catering at Level 2 for returners taking part in the Westminster City Council training programme

**2.15** Within the training programmes of some projects, employers, employment support organisations and returner alumni were invited to run sessions for returners. This included workshops by Google and Facebook at their premises, a workshop run by LinkedIn on creating a powerful online profile and a session with 8 'Back2businessship' alumni. Sessions with employers either included or were followed by discussions with returners, where they were able to ask questions and network with employers.

**2.16** Some projects also included employer activities as part of their training programme. For example, the Shpresa and Twist project offered returners networking opportunities through workplace visits with employers and entrepreneurs with similar backgrounds and experiences to the returners. The Livv Housing project included returners carrying out research with employers, the Creative Equals project invited employers to give presentations and run workshops with returners, and the CIPD project offered mentoring and coaching to returners by trained HR professionals.

### **Employer placements**

**2.17** 11 projects offered work placement opportunities to returners. Some of these projects saw placements as learning opportunities that would help returners become work-ready during

the lifetime of the project, while other projects planned to help returners find placements at the end of core project activity. These projects saw placements as employment outcomes and expressed their hopes that placements would lead to permanent work for returners, either with the employer offering the placement or with a different employer. For example, 2 returners within one project gained work placements within a large retailer which led to employment contract offers.

**2.18** Some placements were affected by COVID-19. For example, one project was setting up placements for returners before the first national lockdown occurred in March 2020. After lockdown measures were introduced, engaged employers were not able to offer the planned work placements and recruitment activity was paused. Other projects targeted sectors such as hospitality and retail, where recruitment fairs were cancelled and businesses forced to close. The closure of schools also meant that returners with childcare responsibilities often had to prioritise looking after children over securing placements or employment. The risk of contracting COVID-19 in a workplace was also a specific concern for returners caring for vulnerable adults with health conditions.

#### Networking events and interview days

**2.19** 4 projects offered employer networking events or interview days to returners. Of those, 3 launched a speed-networking event at the end of the core returner activity. This involved employers and returners attending an in-person event and having a short, set amount of time to network with each other. The hope was for employers to come with job vacancies and to recruit some of the returners they met. Returners and project teams reported that fewer employers than hoped had attended these types of events with current vacancies, and subsequently, fewer returners were recruited than anticipated. Nevertheless, the contacts made at these events continued, with one project reporting that they followed up with employers to share returners' CVs. Employers reported that they left these events with a positive perception of the project and its partners.

**2.20** One project also ran 2 full assessment days where returners had full-length interviews with prospective employers for 6-month placement opportunities. These returners had been preselected for interview by the employers based on written applications submitted before the assessment days. In total, 50 returners were interviewed with 15 gaining placements, and 10 securing permanent jobs on completion.

#### Targeted sectors

**2.21** Projects could choose whether they wanted to target employers in particular sectors:

- 9 of the funded projects did not target a particular sector – instead they supported returners into a wide range of sectors depending on the returners' previous work experience, skills and aspirations

- 4 projects chose to run a training programme that provided sector-specific training and employment opportunities – sectors included tech and fintech, creative and media, hospitality, and law
- 3 projects targeted a number of sectors that they considered either to have skills gaps and shortages (so likely interested in new forms of recruitment) or, to be suitable for returners based on prior experience and labour market research – this included hospitality, health and social care, administration, education, retail, law, manufacturing and engineering, creative and media, customer service, logistics, and science and technology

### Targeted returners

**2.22** In their application for funding, projects described the characteristics of returners they hoped to work with. The mix of returners targeted by projects were as follows:

- 7 projects expected returners to be mostly women, or targeted women specifically
- 5 projects sought to support Black, Asian, or minority ethnic communities
- 5 projects sought to support returners aged 50 and over
- 4 projects sought to support returners out of work for 10 or more years
- 3 projects sought to support returners with disabilities
- 3 projects sought to support highly educated returners (those with degree or Level 6 equivalent or higher qualifications) and 4 sought to support returners with lower levels of educational attainment (those with less than 5 A\* to C or 9 to 4 grades at GCSE, or without equivalent Level 2 qualifications)
- 1 project sought to support returners who were first generation migrants or from Albanian communities
- 1 project sought to support homeless women or women at risk of homelessness
- 1 project sought to support the female partners of serving armed forces personnel and veterans
- 1 project sought to support women who may be prevented from returning to work due to multiple or complex needs, such as victims of domestic violence or women with a history of substance misuse

**2.23** While projects anticipated supporting a particular group, they welcomed applications from anyone who fitted the returner definition. It is also noted that the groups listed previously are not mutually exclusive, and a returner could have several or none of these characteristics.

## 3. Returner profile

### Returners Fund participants

- 3.1** While the Fund supported different types of returner, across projects returners did share some characteristics. They had all taken time out of work due to caring responsibilities, mainly for children but sometimes for other family members. All had been out of work for a number of years, mostly more than a year but often less than 10 years (although some people had been out of work for longer).
- 3.2** The majority were women, White and without disabilities. However, as would be expected<sup>1</sup>, there was a broad range of people needing support to return to work in terms of their gender, ethnicity, disability status, age, and level of education.
- **Gender** - The majority of returners were women, as many projects targeted women – at least 7 projects were known to have recruited at least 1 man and 1 project (Adviza project) recruited mostly men
  - **Ethnicity** - Most of the returner cohorts across the projects were White British – for 2 of the projects, the majority of returners were Black African, Black Caribbean or Black British
  - **Disability** - All returner cohorts across the projects included disabled people<sup>2</sup> - this ranged from just 1 person per project, to over one third of a project's returners
  - **Age** - Returners ranged from those in their early 20s to those in their mid-60s, although returners were most commonly in their 30s, with almost half of returners aged between 30 and 39 years old – around one third of returners were reported to be aged between 40 and 49 years old, and while some projects had targeted older age groups, returners of all ages were accepted by all projects
  - **Education level** - In the majority of projects, the education levels of returners spanned a wide range – these projects supported a mix of returners, including those with no formal qualifications, those with GCSE level qualifications or those with degree level qualifications or higher (the returners in 3 projects mainly had degree level qualifications or higher and were projects that had specifically targeted highly educated, highly skilled returners)

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<sup>1</sup> GEO commissioned research which showed that women and men are more likely to be potential returners if they have dependent children, live in a household with an adult with a health problem, have a lower level of qualification and have a health problem which affects the amount or type of work they do. GEO (2018) [Quantitative analysis of those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others](#)

<sup>2</sup> Projects asked returners to state whether their day-to-day activities were limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted or is expected to last, at least 12 months

- 3.3** Some of the projects were designed for specific groups, and largely recruited those people. For example, the Women Returners project recruited qualified solicitors, the Shpresa and Twist project recruited first generation migrants with a significant history of paid work, and the RFEA project recruited female partners of armed forces serving personnel and veterans.

### Profiles of participating returners

One returner left work when their daughter was born prematurely and with health conditions that are still present. Since the birth of the child, the returner's mother passed away, and subsequently, their father committed suicide. The returner had been diagnosed with mental health issues which made them unfit to be employed. After a recent medical assessment, the returner was declared ok to work and wanted to become employed so they could provide for their daughter.

Another returner had previously worked in the advertising industry before they had a career break to raise their child. During their break, they did some freelancing in digital design. However, this had become out of date as they had not worked full-time in the advertising industry for 6 years. Getting overlooked was their main barrier to returning to employment, but they also found many advertising companies were not open to flexible working. They wanted to return to work as they enjoyed the creativity in their previous job and they missed the salary.

### Barriers to participation

- 3.4** Commonly, returners supported by the Fund had tried to return to work previously but had not been able to overcome the barriers they faced. Some returners identified 1 or 2 barriers such as confidence, job availability, or navigating the job search process. Other returners faced multiple and complex barriers, for example, the returner cohort on the Beam project faced barriers to work caused by homelessness, caring responsibilities, having refugee status and having prior criminal convictions. In addition, some returners had issues related to obtaining leave to remain in the UK, not having recourse to public funds and domestic violence.
- 3.5** Some projects supported returners with very specific challenges to returning to work. These were the projects that recruited very specific cohorts, such as the RFEA project. This project recruited female partners of armed forces serving personnel and veterans, who tend to move area often, whose partners don't live in the household for months at a time, and who cannot therefore share childcare responsibilities.
- 3.6** Across the funded projects, 5 common barriers were reported by returners and project teams. These were (and outlined in the following sections):
- A lack of confidence



- A lack of flexible working options
- Childcare costs
- Unpractised or dated skills and knowledge
- Employer perceptions

### **Lack of confidence**

- 3.7** Low confidence and low self-esteem among returners were commonly identified as barriers to work. This was said to mainly be the result of being out of the workplace for a length of time and losing confidence in their own skills and abilities. Some reported such low levels of confidence that they had felt unable to begin looking for work independently. For others, frequent job application rejections, negative interview experiences, and negative relationships with their local Jobcentre had damaged their confidence and self-esteem.

### **Lack of flexible working options**

- 3.8** Returners reported that flexible working options such as flexible full-time hours or part-time work contracts were important to enable them to manage both work and caring responsibilities. Some returners also noted that their needs were likely to change as household circumstances changed, for example, as children started school, or if their relationship status or own health changed. However, many said that flexible working options were not often advertised when searching for jobs.

### **Childcare costs**

- 3.9** Many returners had taken time out of work to care for their children. The high cost of professional childcare was often cited as a barrier to their return to work. Where employers require different shift patterns or extra hours at short notice this creates a childcare challenge. Some returners feared that this would mean they needed to book and pay for more hours of childcare than they needed (for example needing to block book nursery places to be able to assure cover).

## Unpractised or dated skills and knowledge

**3.10** Returner's workplace skills and their industry-specific knowledge were affected by their career breaks. Those returners with longer periods of unemployment often commented on how different the workplace had become, and how outdated they felt their skills and knowledge to be. This was especially the case with digital technology which has transformed work places in recent years, making some roles unrecognisable for returners.

**3.11** Returners who were looking to work in a new industry often had to gain new knowledge and skills. One example was in the Adviza project, where returners were looking to take up security work for the first time.

**3.12** Returners also commented that their time out of work meant that they didn't always have up-to-date knowledge around the latest trends in their industries, or job-specific knowledge needed to carry out their work. For example, some participants from the Women Returners project who wanted to return to the law sector said they had outdated professional knowledge as laws had changed since they were last working.

**3.13** Returners commented that their job searching skills were not to a high standard and prevented them from returning to work. These skills included CV preparation, interview skills and completing application forms. Others lacked knowledge that would help them in their job search, for example they:

- Were unaware of how employers recruit for roles, and said that this had hindered them in returning to work
- Lacked confidence to ask about flexible working options if they weren't specified in job descriptions, and this dissuaded them from applying to some roles
- Were unsure about how to approach communicating their career breaks to employers



**My job 10 years ago used pen and paper. Now they use tills and computers which I have no experience with**



**Returner**



**I know I have tonnes to offer but I didn't know how to put that down and convey that to someone else**



**Returner**

## Employer perceptions

**3.14** Returners reported that when looking for a job they found that some employers were wary of recruiting them due to their career break. This was a particular issue for those looking to return to high-skilled roles. They highlighted that their job market was competitive, and many

job applicants who didn't have a career break on their CVs might be more attractive to employers as a result. A second issue was highlighted by those returning to the creative sector (as part of the Creative Equals project), who said that their position and age worked against them, as employers may prefer to employ junior staff with fewer domestic responsibilities who could, without notice, work longer hours to meet client needs.

## Motivations to return to work

**3.15** Returners across the projects had a range of different motivations for returning to work. The most common reasons for returning were:

- **To increase their household income** - This was a large motivator for returning to work. For some, this was out of financial necessity, where increased income would make a notable difference to personal and family living standards. Some were seeking the sense of pride and confidence that comes with financial independence and being able to provide for their children
- **To improve their daily lives** - A common narrative told by returners was that they enjoyed working but took a career break due to caring responsibilities, mainly to have children. As their children grew older and more independent, they grew increasingly bored, felt "stuck" at home, and felt that they had lost their sense of identity. They felt the need to "do something for themselves" after spending many years caring for others, which motivated them to return to work
- **To be a positive role model for their children** - Some returners wanted to demonstrate the positive attributes outlined previously to their children: being financially independent, and pursuing self-fulfilment in their daily lives. Other reasons given were to show their children that it was possible to take an extended career break and also have a long and rewarding career



**I can't sit around doing nothing, I need to be earning money and I've always wanted to do security work**



**Returner**

## 4. Returner outcomes

### Returner experiences

- 4.1** The Fund aimed to support returners into paid employment, and projects adopted a range of different approaches to support returners to achieve this. They helped returners to understand the modern workplace and the types of skills that are valued by employers, as well as advising them about the roles that might be available locally, and providing guidance to explore their career ambitions. Projects also sought to build returners' confidence, provide practical advice and support to ensure their wellbeing, and to help returners apply for jobs.

### Workplace knowledge and skills

- 4.2** Returners increased their workplace knowledge and skills through participation in a range of activities including training programmes, one-to-one support, employer placements, and employer talks. Examples include:

- **Digital knowledge and skills** – such as general computer skills, Microsoft Office skills, online job search skills and social media skills
- **Business knowledge and skills** – such as setting-up a business, business improvement techniques and change management
- **Vocational knowledge and skills** – for example, undertaking vocation-specific training required to become teaching assistants, beauticians or chefs
- **Communication skills** – including public speaking, team building, self-promotion and networking, and understanding different leadership styles
- **Language skills** – returners who faced difficulties with their English language skills reported that they improved these skills through the targeted language support offered by their projects
- **Qualifications** – such as the SIA Door Supervision Level 2 qualification and the Level 1 qualifications offered by the Open College Network

- 4.3** Often, returners reported surprising themselves because they already had good skills in the areas previously mentioned. Some project activities helped returners to recognise other transferable skills they already had, such as caring, motivation and resilience, budgeting, and emotional intelligence.

### Job searching knowledge and skills

- 4.4** 10 projects reported that their returners improved their job searching skills by participating in the projects. In addition, returners from 3 of the projects reported that their CV writing and

interview skills had improved through participation in the project. For example, some returners from the F1 Recruitment project had said that the project had taught them effective approaches to communicating with organisations in an interview setting and pitching themselves. A participating employer confirmed this, observing that the returners were better able to “market” themselves and explain their career breaks following their training.

- 4.5** Projects supported returners with job searching so that they would be more aware of the options available to them in terms of sectors, job roles and flexible working. Returners on the Changing Lives project who were interviewed said that this had broadened the scope of the type of work they would consider applying for.

### Confidence

- 4.6** Growth in returners’ confidence was an important outcome reported by all of the funded projects. Returners interviewed for the evaluation said they felt more confident in their own workplace skills and abilities having taken part in their project. Firstly, the support received helped them to upskill and learn new things. Secondly, the projects encouraged returners to acknowledge their existing skills. This happened through project activity and employer placements. Returners who took part in placements with employers or who met employers through the projects often felt reassured that their skills were still useful to employers, as it was clear to them that the employers valued returners and wanted to recruit them. Within one project, employers met returners at the project launch event – they encouraged returners to apply to their organisation, invited them to interview and recruited them.

“  
**They gave me confidence that I could do something with myself after so long without employment**  
 ” **Returner**

- 4.7** Another vehicle for increasing returners’ confidence were some of the one-to-one sessions, workshops, and training sessions which were specifically designed to address confidence issues. The Shpresa and Twist project offered workshops covering topics such as inspiration, ambition and confidence, as well as wellbeing. The Mpower People project offered training modules to returners on anxiety management and confidence building – the trainer who led this module commented that the returners had become more confident in their communication skills and their ability to talk about their emotions.

“  
**I realised that I could accomplish anything I wanted in life**  
 ” **Returner**

- 4.8** One project team noted that gaining a formal qualification gave returners the confidence to believe in their abilities and move forward with their career. This was particularly true for those with no formal qualifications participating in the project.
- 4.9** All of these factors combined to help returners to feel more confident in applying for jobs, going to job interviews, and expressing themselves confidently in interviews. Some returners also said they felt more confident about discussing flexible working in interviews.
- 4.10** However, confidence can be damaged if returners have negative experiences. Within one project, 2 returners interviewed said that they were less hopeful about finding employment, as they hadn't yet found work despite the support received.

### Mental health and wellbeing

- 4.11** Returners reported that they improved their personal wellbeing as a result of taking part in the projects. Returners from 12 projects volunteered feedback which referenced their improved mental health, specifically around social isolation, resilience, anxiety, and depression. Many reported a more positive outlook and a newfound sense of purpose and hope.

“  
**This project helped me get a job, and more importantly my life back**  
 ”  
**Returner**

- 4.12** The projects offered returners the opportunity to have time away from caregiving to experience new things and meet new people. Some reported that this helped them to develop an identity outside of the home and the carer role. Some returners from the Changing Lives project reported that they were more confident when meeting new people and felt less anxious in new environments as a result. Returners across the projects reported a sense of achievement and accomplishment from taking part in the Fund, particularly those who found employment after participation. Returners who participated in volunteer work had improved self-worth and fulfilment, including a feeling that they were contributing to society. Those who did find employment also reported that returning to work helped them to further regain their sense of identity after having spent years caring for others.
- 4.13** The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures affected 9 of the funded projects. During the period between March and July 2020, projects often changed the emphasis of their activity from employment-seeking to wellbeing support, and from face-to-face to virtual training. Returners with school-aged children were especially affected by the lockdown as they had home schooling to attend to. At the same, many employers were putting their recruitment plans on hold.

## Returner outcomes

**4.14** These experiences mentioned previously have helped returners with their plans to return to employment. Project targets were related both to returner job outcomes, but also intermediary outcomes such as the take up of work experience, work shadowing paid placements, and volunteering. These targets were tailored to each project and quantified the type of support that would be given and the numbers of returners and employers who would benefit. These returners targets have been categorised as follows:

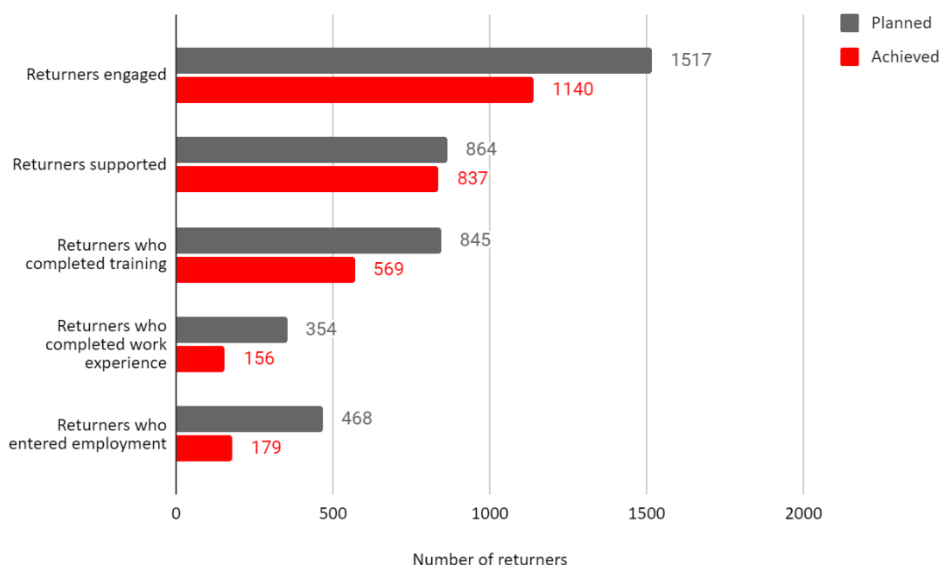
- **Engaged** – those who have had some form of interaction with the project
- **Supported** – those who participated in a project-led activity, including training, mentoring, advice and guidance, employability support, or active referral to other services
- **Trained** – participating in a formal training programme, both accredited and non-accredited training
- **Completed work experience** – including paid and unpaid work experience, placements and ‘returnships’<sup>3</sup>. Some projects identified that these types of workplace opportunities would be dependent upon the needs and circumstances of each returner and was at the discretion of the returner to accept the opportunity
- **Entered paid employment** – meaning work which extended beyond the lifetime of the project

**4.15** Figure 4-1 provides a summary of the outcomes for each of the categories previously mentioned. All projects had returner engagement targets – some defined engaged as registering an expression of interest, attending an event or being referred, while others used stricter criteria, such as submitting a project application or enrolling onto training. Within this range of definitions, the projects planned to engage 1,517 returners and engaged a total of 1,140 (75%). 10 of the 16 projects met or exceeded their returner engagement targets.

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<sup>3</sup> Some projects called these opportunities returnships, which consisted of short, paid placements, designed and paid for by an employer with project support for returners before, during and after the returnship period



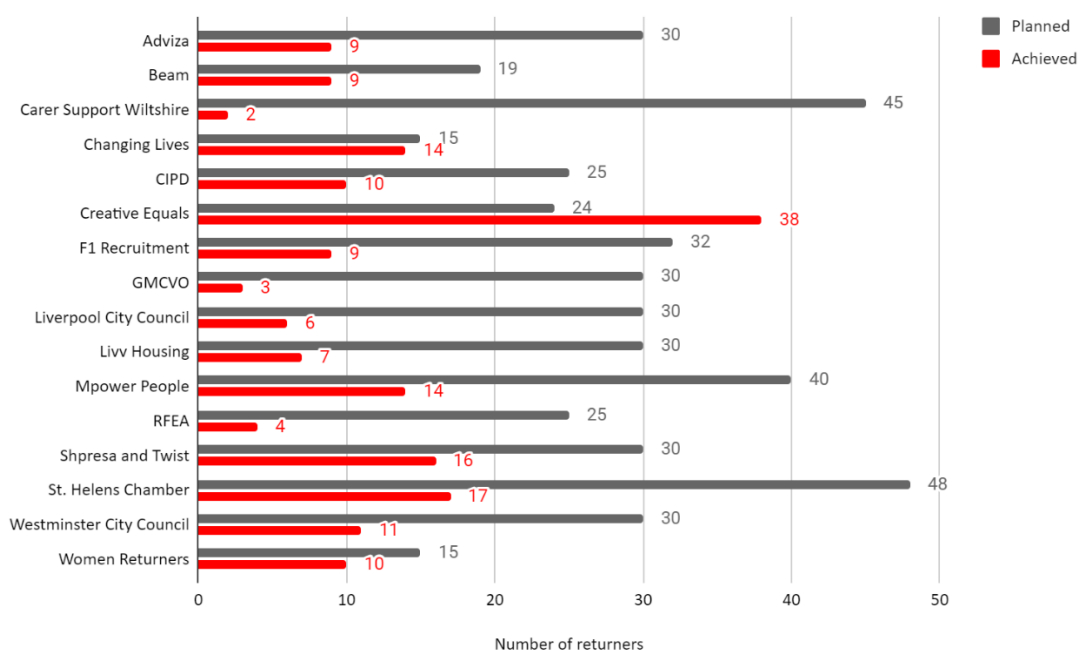
**Figure 4-1: Total planned and reported returner outcomes**

Source: final progress reports

N.B. 11 projects reported work experience targets (including returnships, placements, work experiences and volunteering)

- 4.16** Projects overall supported the number of returners they planned (837 supported against a target of 864, or 97%). This support ranged from receiving regular jobs bulletins and referral information to intensive and personalised support over several weeks or months.
- 4.17** All projects aimed to provide formal training and support to returners during the project period. These opportunities varied across projects. For example, the Beam and Mpower People projects enrolled their returners onto a range of different courses depending on their needs and ambitions. Several projects developed their own training programmes and commissioned external training providers to run them. Other projects ran their own training programmes involving project partners. The St Helens Chamber project offered a combination of both bootcamp training for some returners and referral to other courses (or both for some returners). In total, the 16 projects aimed to provide 845 returners with a form of training. At the end of the Fund, 569 returners were reported to have completed some form of training, 67% of the target.
- 4.18** 11 projects hoped to provide returners with a form of work experience. This included opportunities to work with an employer for a period of time, either paid or unpaid. Volunteering with a social enterprise was also included within work experience targets. These activities provided returners with an experience of being back in a workplace and a way to improve or update their skills. It also gave returners and their families an opportunity to experience new routines associated with work. Across the 11 projects that planned work experience within their delivery model, 156 returners completed work experience against a target of 354 (44%).

- 4.19** Most of the projects which relied on external employers to offer placements to returners had issues generating sufficient placements. Reasons for this included a lack of willingness or ability from employers to provide placements, having employer contacts that did not have authority to agree recruitment or placement decisions, and employer contacts moving roles. In addition, these types of workplace opportunities were dependent upon the needs and circumstances of each returner and it was at the discretion of the returner to accept the opportunity provided to them. 2 projects offered some of their returners unpaid work experience in their own organisation. One project (Shpresa and Twist) provided this for all the returners they were working with and hence exceeded their targets for returner placements.
- 4.20** A total of 179 returners were reported to have entered employment (either full or part-time, temporary or permanent) that extended beyond the lifetime of the project. This includes some who entered employment with an employer with whom they had completed work experience or who was connected to the project. Returners also found employment with employers in the open labour market. This 179 was against a target of 468, meaning that 38% of the target was met.
- 4.21** Figure 4-2 shows the breakdown of planned and reported employment outcomes for each project at the end of their funding period. Within the 16 projects, the number of targeted employment outcomes ranged from 15 to 48. By the end of the Fund, the actual employment outcomes ranged from 2 to 38. It should be noted that this does not reflect lack of effort on the part of projects but rather a combination of factors associated with difficult labour markets (made harder for those projects affected by COVID-19), ambitious targets and client groups who required longer periods of training and support to return to employment than the project timescales allowed. It should also be noted that these figures capture outcomes at the end of each project – as each project completion date is different (see Figure 2-1), this will not capture any additional employment outcomes beyond the funding period.
- 4.22** One project exceeded its employment outcome target (Creative Equals). This project was London based, working with professional and highly skilled women, and used a delivery model that was an extension of an earlier model. Other projects that also supported highly skilled returners (F1 Recruitment and Women Returners) found it harder to support their returners into employment despite significant efforts. This may have been because they were working outside the London labour market where professional roles may be less frequently available and employment opportunities more dispersed.

**Figure 4-2: Planned and reported employment outcomes by project**

Source: final progress reports

- 4.23** Most returner cohorts from each of the projects found employment in a diverse range of industries. Returners found work in the care sector, retail, hospitality, the third sector, the civil service, financial services, education, and administration. Where projects targeted sectors and brokered relationships between returners and employers (for example at speed-networking events), returners found employment in those sectors. Such projects secured good employment outcomes, which may have been helped by having a sector focus, but might also be due to the characteristics of returners (higher skilled), timing (when labour markets were relatively buoyant and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), and location (close to urban centres).
- 4.24** While there is limited evidence on salaries received by returners in their new roles, we know that all of those from the Changing Lives project who completed the post-project survey stated their salary in their current job was higher than their previous job. For the Creative Equals project, salary levels varied significantly, ranging from London Living Wage to £400 per day for placements and between £21,000 and £65,000 per year for permanent roles.
- 4.25** There is some evidence of returners securing flexible jobs. Many of the 10 returners who took part in the Women Returners project and subsequently found a job could blend home working, part-time working and flexible working patterns. For example, 1 returner worked from 9am to 3pm 4 days a week so they could pick up their children from school. Another returner was able to delay the start of their permanent contract so they could spend the summer holidays with their child. Within the F1 Recruitment project, several returners stated

that without the project, they would not have been successful at interviews or had the confidence to discuss flexible working options.

**4.26** However, some returners did not find employment that was sufficiently flexible to accommodate their childcare responsibilities. The project team from the Mpower People project observed that placements arranged for returners in September 2020, following the easing of lockdown measures, were not as flexible towards childcare issues as expected, and did not accommodate returners when their children were sent home from school due to suspected COVID-19 outbreaks. On another project, a small number of returners were unable to accept paid work because shifts were offered with short-notice and at locations that were not easy for them to get to.

## 5. Employer profile

### Returners Fund participants

#### Target numbers engaged

**5.1** The employer engagement target was exceeded, with projects engaging 422 employers (114% of the 370 planned target). 11 of the 16 projects also met or exceeded their target number of employers engaged (Table 5-1). The definition of employer engagement varied across the projects. This included employers who:

- Attended one-off promotional events
- Participated in training and upskilling returners, and training to improve their employment practices
- Offered workplace opportunities and jobs

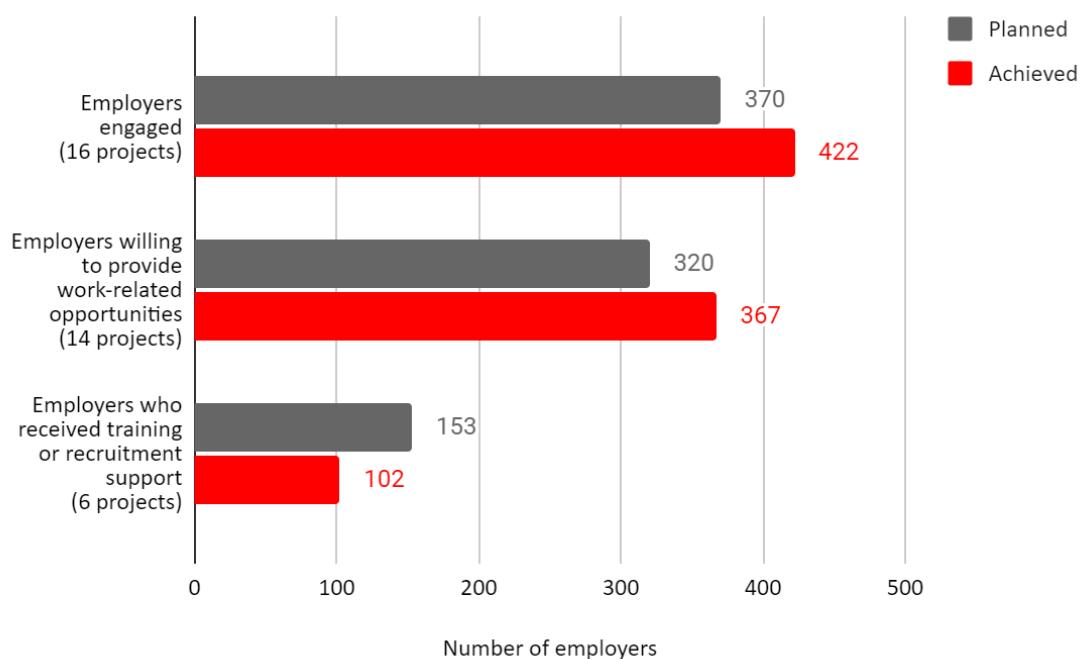
**Table 5-1: Employer engagement targets**

Project	Target number of employers	Actual number of employers
Adviza	10	10
Beam	15	27
Carer Support Wiltshire	80	20
Changing Lives	15	20
CIPD	25	24
Creative Equals	15	38
F1 Recruitment	30	23
GMCVO	30	56
Liverpool City Council	40	19
Livv Housing	30	14
Mpower People	18	26
RFEA	10	16
Shpresa and Twist	18	25
St Helens Chamber	12	62
Westminster City Council	10	12
Women Returners	12	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>422</b>

Source: final progress reports and grant agreement

- 5.2** While the number of employers engaged by the projects was reported to be higher than planned, the intensity of that engagement was, in some cases, lower than they had anticipated. This more limited engagement took a number of forms, for example offering a single work experience placement rather than multiple, attending recruitments fairs with no active job roles to recruit into, or attending a meeting with no further follow up.
- 5.3** Projects aimed to engage with employers in different ways beyond the scope of sourcing jobs for returners. Most projects (14) also wanted to work with employers who could provide work-related opportunities for returners – which included reviewing CVs and providing work placements. In addition, 6 projects wanted to provide training and support to employers, reviewing and adapting their recruitment practices to become more attuned to the needs of returners, where appropriate. Figure 5-1 demonstrates that projects exceeded targets for general employer engagement as well as sourcing work-related opportunities with employers. However, the 6 projects that aimed to offer training and recruitment support to employers did not get the anticipated take-up.

**Figure 5-1: Planned and reported employer outcomes<sup>4</sup>**



Source: final progress reports

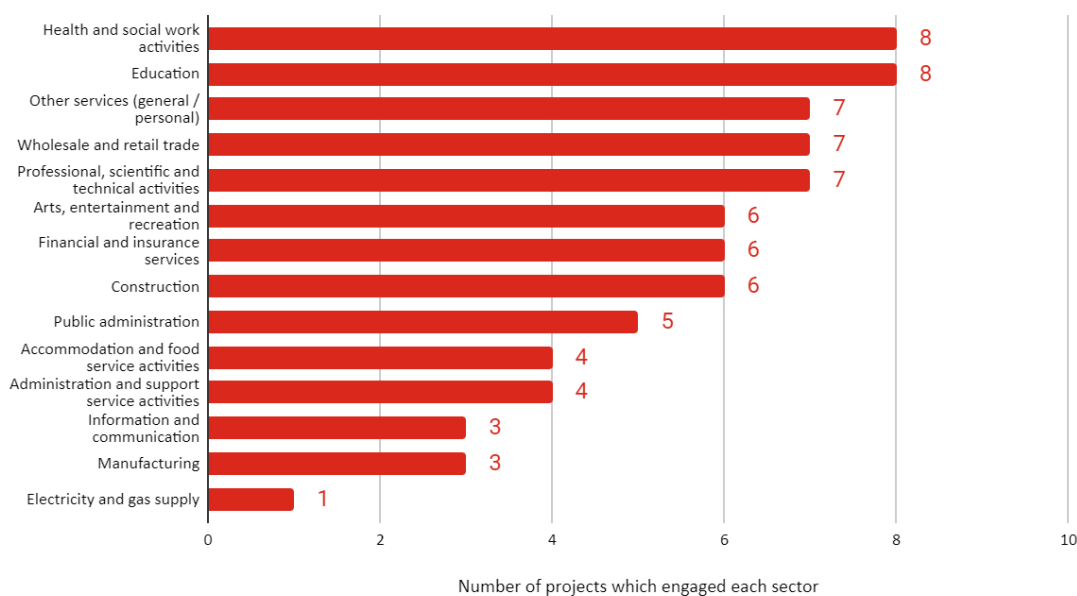
### Types of employer engaged

- 5.4** A range of different types of employer participated in the Fund:

<sup>4</sup> Project specific outcomes have been categorised by the evaluation team. Projects were not required or expected to report on outcomes in each category

- All 16 projects engaged both SME and large-scale employers<sup>5</sup>. Most projects reported that at least half of their employers were SMEs that might not have specialist HR skills in-house. 3 of the projects targeted larger employers. Of the 11 projects which reported on business size, the split between SMEs and larger business participation was almost even, with 127 SMEs and 122 large companies recorded
- Employers engaged in the projects were generally located within the same region as the project and were often local to the project area. Some of these were branches or offices of national companies. One project (RFEA) used their national profile and connected with some employers through their dedicated employer engagement team based across the UK. Working with several large employers who have roles across the UK supported the project's aim to create portable positions for returners
- A wide range of sectors were also represented across the 16 projects (Figure 5-2). At least half of all projects funded engaged with employers that represented education, and health and social work sectors

**Figure 5-2: Number of sectors engaged by each project<sup>6</sup>**



Source: SQW

**5.5** Projects often worked with employers from several different sectors and even those that planned to target a small number of sectors found they worked with employers from a wide range of sectors. The sectors they engaged with reflected 2 main factors. The first was the composition of the local labour market. For example, the St Helens Chamber project had a high representation of manufacturing employers because of the concentration of

<sup>5</sup> The UK definition of SME is a small or medium-sized enterprise with fewer than 250 employees. A large-scale employer or company is considered a business with more than 250 employees

<sup>6</sup> Represents all the sectors identified within the final progress reports for all 16 projects



manufacturing in and around St Helens. The second was the need to engage employers who represented sectors that returners were interested in. A few projects were deliberately focussed on single sectors. For example, the Creative Equals project only worked with employers from and returners who wanted to return to the creative and marketing sector. Other projects were led by what their returners wanted and actively sought to engage employers in those sectors. For example, the employment and skills team within the Liverpool City Council's project approached employers in their networks on behalf of returners.

### Employer participation

- 5.6** All 16 projects engaged employers to support their project, however some employers were more active than others. Employers participated in a variety of ways depending on their own capacity (of the main contact, local branch, and overall business) and the specific requests made from individual projects.
- 5.7** 3 projects reported that employers actively participated in governance or advisory groups. Employers in these advisory roles offered insight into their expectations of the required skills and competencies of returners, and employer ability to meet demands for flexible working or other support needs.
- 5.8** Projects were able to actively engage employers by:
- Publicising the project with other employers in their networks to encourage project participation and to promote the benefits of employing returners
  - Providing support for training activities including offering access to their training venues and providing training sessions
  - Holding mock interviews with returners and arranging for them to attend job fairs
  - Hosting work experience opportunities, placements and returnships
  - Contributing to resources on best practice when employing returners – informed by the previous experiences of those re-entering the workplace and employer's knowledge of recruitment processes, flexible work contracts and employee support options
- 5.9** Although projects reported that they engaged more employers than they expected, employers were reported as being passively involved, and the type of employer engagement may have been limited. For example, employer engagement could include attendance at a webinar or a project promotion meeting. Figure 5-1 also reports the number of employers who were willing to offer a work-related opportunity, although this may not have happened in practice. Consequently, the number of employers engaged overstates the degree of interaction they had with projects and with returners.
- 5.10** The limited, more passive engagement also affected the evaluation research. In total, 117 out of 422 employers reported to be engaged in the Fund actively consented to participate in the evaluation (28%). Levels of consent varied greatly across the 16 projects, from no consent

from any employers (2 projects) to all employers consenting to engage in evaluation (1 project). Employer engagement in research is often difficult to get particularly among SMEs. This would have been made worse if employers felt they had nothing to contribute (for example if their engagement had been limited), and further affected by the onset of the lockdown restrictions associated with COVID-19 in March 2020. The following sections are therefore informed by survey data which was reported for 4 projects and interview data which was gathered from 15 projects.

## Barriers to participation

**5.11** Not all projects engaged their targeted number of employers, or had the type of relationship with employers that they expected. The following sections suggest reasons why employer engagement was a challenge for some projects.

### Interest

**5.12** Employer interest in the projects was greatest where returners were work-ready (they were ready for interview or had completed the relevant training or accredited qualifications to begin work). Projects felt that it was a challenge to keep employers engaged when returners were not ready for work, and some employers were unwilling to offer supported progression into jobs.

**5.13** One project reported that prior negative experiences of similar employability programmes made employers hesitant to engage in the Fund. In particular, some employers felt that the time they would need to invest in setting up and supporting a placement would not be cost effective because it would take the returner some time before they were able to perform productively in the workplace. It was also reported by the project that the duration of placements also affected whether employers felt able to engage.

### Project aspiration and employer need

**5.14** Negative employer attitudes towards flexible working meant some projects struggled to engage employers. 3 projects reported challenges around generating flexible working opportunities with specific employers. Their project managers felt some sectors (examples noted by projects included construction, dentistry and media) appeared less inclined to offer flexibility to meet the needs of returners.

**5.15** 2 projects experienced initial engagement from employers at introductory sessions. However, these employers chose not to engage further because they thought the jobs they had available were not suited to the returners they met.

**5.16** One project found that they attracted employers from the care sector because their project was supporting people with experience of caring for others. However, while some wanting to return to paid work might have had skills and experience that made them attractive to care homes or other similar employers, the returners themselves often wanted to move away from

a caring role. There was therefore a mismatch between the type of employers interested in the project and the career aspirations of returners.

## Capacity

- 5.17** Employer capacity to engage in the Fund was an issue experienced by some of the projects. One project found employers were interested in participating but were unable to attend events or provide any additional support to returners, while those who did participate did not recruit as many returners as hoped due to a lack of appropriate vacancies.
- 5.18** One project felt that staff turnover made it difficult to develop or maintain a consistent relationship with the employer through which to implement project-related activities.

## Motivations to employ returners

- 5.19** Employers reported varying reasons for participating in the Fund. The most common motivations were:
- **Recognising the benefits of recruiting returners** – for 3 projects, employers were specific about the advantages they perceived returners would bring to their businesses. Returners were considered an “untapped” labour force and loyal employees who were likely to help address retention issues. They were considered to have a wide range of experience, skills and competencies which would benefit the workplace, including understanding, resilience and empathy. Returners were also considered to be more likely to make the most of opportunities presented to them and be willing to learn
  - **Difficulties in recruiting** – for 5 projects, employers reported that they thought the project could help them recruit for specific vacancies and specific skill sets (such as those with caring experience or those with security industry licenses). Employers from 2 projects also thought it would help them to address equality issues in their workforce and encourage female returners into their companies
  - **Company culture and corporate social responsibility** – for 6 projects, employers reported that their company culture and approach to corporate social responsibility aligned positively with the aims of the Fund
- 5.20** Project managers had additional thoughts about why employers were involved. In some cases, it was the specific interest and motivation of a key employee whose own experience or values made them sympathetic to the Fund. For example, an employer supporting the RFEA project was a military partner and had previously received employability support earlier in their own career. In other cases, they suspected that companies might be involved because they wanted to use it for public relations value rather than having a serious commitment to recruiting returners.

## 6. Employer outcomes

### Employer recruitment of returners

- 6.1** 11 projects successfully engaged employers who provided work experience for the returners. This usually involved a period within their business, either paid or unpaid, as agreed with the project. Employers offered experiences for various reasons, including agreeing with the project's aims, having values and practice aligned to the project, working with the funded organisation already, or because they were testing different approaches to recruitment.
- 6.2** Many of the employers that participated in the Fund did not employ a returner and not all returners that entered paid employment did so with an employer engaged through the Fund. In fact, the only examples where returners were taken on by participating employers were the 3 projects whose delivery model was based on a high intensity intervention for highly skilled returners. In these cases, employers were looking for scarce skills in their labour markets and proved willing to invest time in the project to secure access to people with the required skills.
- 6.3** This section includes feedback from employers who participated in projects. Employers with no connection to a project but who did employ a returner were not interviewed because their feedback would have focussed on a returner rather than the project.

### Experience of recruiting returners

- 6.4** Events to meet and engage with returners prior to recruiting were valued by employers who participated in these opportunities. The benefits they reported included:
- **Improved returner understanding of roles and expectations** – employers appreciated the opportunity to provide returners with more detail about the roles they offered, and what was expected of employees in their companies, and one employer felt this might help returners make more informed decisions about which roles to apply for
  - **Practical outcomes** – employers had access to potential employees who they could contact about current vacancies and opportunities
  - **Early access to potential talent** – employers could engage with skilled returners before they started applying for job roles on the open market
  - **Developing new partnerships** – employers appreciated the opportunity to network with businesses they had not had contact with before
  - **Improved employer understanding of returner circumstances** – hearing first-hand about the barriers that returners had previously faced when attempting to return to work was valued, which helped some employers to reflect on how their current recruitment practices might inadvertently miss out on a set of skilled potential employees

- 6.5** There was evidence of employers engaging in repeat recruitment from projects. 2 projects reported that they had observed a pattern of employers who had successfully recruited a returner, returning to recruit again. This was confirmed by one employer who had hired several returners from a project, citing that they felt the quality of candidates was good.

### Satisfaction with project engagement

- 6.6** Most projects reported that at least some of the employers they worked with were already known to their organisation. Indeed, some projects had been supporting the recruitment or business development needs of these employers in the past. 6 projects reported that they supported 102 employers with their training or recruitment practices (Figure 5-1) which was fewer than anticipated. This may partly have been because they had already received support from the projects in the past.

### Satisfaction with project team engagement

- 6.7** The quality of engagement with project teams was viewed positively by employers who participated in the Fund. From 2 projects, employers identified the following reasons:
- **Good professional relationships with a named team member** – one employer appreciated having a relationship with an employment or project adviser and knowing that the adviser could identify returners with the right skills for their business
  - **Training materials and informal support** – employers received informal support through the Fund, such as receiving training materials, and they felt this was sufficient to address their needs
  - **Conflict resolution** – with one project, an employer faced challenges with a returner who was on a placement and could draw on the support and advice from the project team to help them make decisions about whether to end the placement and how to do so appropriately

### Satisfaction with the work readiness of returners

- 6.8** Employers who participated in the Fund said they were impressed by the calibre of the returners. Employers from 2 projects commented on the readiness of returners for the workplace, with one employer reporting that the calibre of returners was similar to that within the wider labour market. Another employer didn't recall interviewing any returners that they wouldn't have put forward for a vacancy (if one was available).

- 6.9** It is worth noting that projects were careful to only link a returner with one of their employer contacts if they thought the returner was employment ready. They did not wish to jeopardise the relationship and any future opportunities with that employer.

### Generating change in employment practice

- 6.10** Given the low level of employer engagement in the evaluation, there is limited evidence that employment practices for employers participating in the Fund changed. 6 projects evidenced some examples in varying levels of detail. It should be noted that most projects did not have targets associated with changing employment practice and focused on engaging employers to secure employment outcomes, rather than broader systemic change.

- 6.11** Most changes were associated with adaptations to recruitment practices. Employers reported to projects a range of changes they had made including proactively reaching out to returners and ensuring recruitment materials clearly stated that roles were flexible (to make them more attractive to returners). Another example was ensuring that policies and practices emphasised the skills and competencies required, with less focus on experience and time out of work.

- 6.12** Other changes to employment practice included a project which found employers were thinking more about supporting returners among their current workforce (for example with flexible working practices) and another project that reported an employer was considering running their own bespoke returnship programme.

- 6.13** The CIPD project offered intensive support to participating employers. Employers participated in training and networking programmes and created a community of HR practitioners focused on returner issues and flexible working across Yorkshire and the Humber. Employers who participated were very enthusiastic about their engagement as evidenced in the example case study.



**I am honoured to have been part of the project and to work with other organisations that were passionate about supporting parent returners. It has supported a direction the company was keen to explore and develop**



**Employer**

## Employer case study

**Jacobs (a large professional services company)** launched a UK returner programme with consultation from the CIPD project in 2019. Their programme, 'Bridge the Gap' offers a package of support for employees and their line managers that helps with the transition out of, and back into, their careers at Jacobs. The programme supports staff to:

- Explore different career paths and types of flexible working
- Decide which routes best match their career plans
- Boost their confidence, skills and experience ready for their return to work
- Reconnect with the business (and vice versa) during and after their break

A buddy system and parental forum were established, creating space for parents to share experiences. Returners are offered a 'Juggling Act' workshop on their return, and receive one-to-one coaching as well as group support. By July 2020, 40 of 180 eligible employees had participated. Jacobs said:

*"The creation of Bridge the Gap was a much-needed step for Jacobs and one which is already delivering positive outcomes for our employees and our business. Having the support of the CIPD at the development stage was instrumental in its success.*

*The project leads shared excellent insights, advice and research, and prompted us to explore critical issues, such as tackling the barriers that materialise when you challenge the status quo. The programme also offered a supportive forum for bouncing ideas and sharing advice and experiences with other HR leaders who were going through a similar process."*

Source: CIPD

**6.14** Some projects felt there were other factors which affected the ability of employers who participated in the Fund to enact change. These included the following:

- **Seniority and responsibilities of the employee engaged in the project** – projects had employer contacts with a range of different job roles. Projects were able to make more changes if their contact was someone responsible for recruitment as part of their job role than if they were working with a regional manager or someone indirectly responsible for recruitment for whom participating in the project was additional to their job role. The role of the employer contact therefore affected the pace at which they could make changes
- **The need for businesses to show leadership** – one employer commented that change within sectors is also determined by clients. If clients required gender diverse teams when pitching and delivering projects, the supply-chain would respond accordingly. However, it takes time to change perceptions through this mechanism



## 7. Assessing performance

### Returners Fund costs

#### Returners Fund awards

- 7.1** GEO initially approved around £1.46 million in grant funding for 16 projects. The 16 projects were awarded funding that ranged from £32,000 to £186,900 per project. 3 projects scaled back during their delivery and agreed grant variations with GEO. This reduced the total amount awarded to projects to around £1.39 million. At the end of the Fund, GEO had spent a total of £1.33 million in grant funding.

#### Total project costs

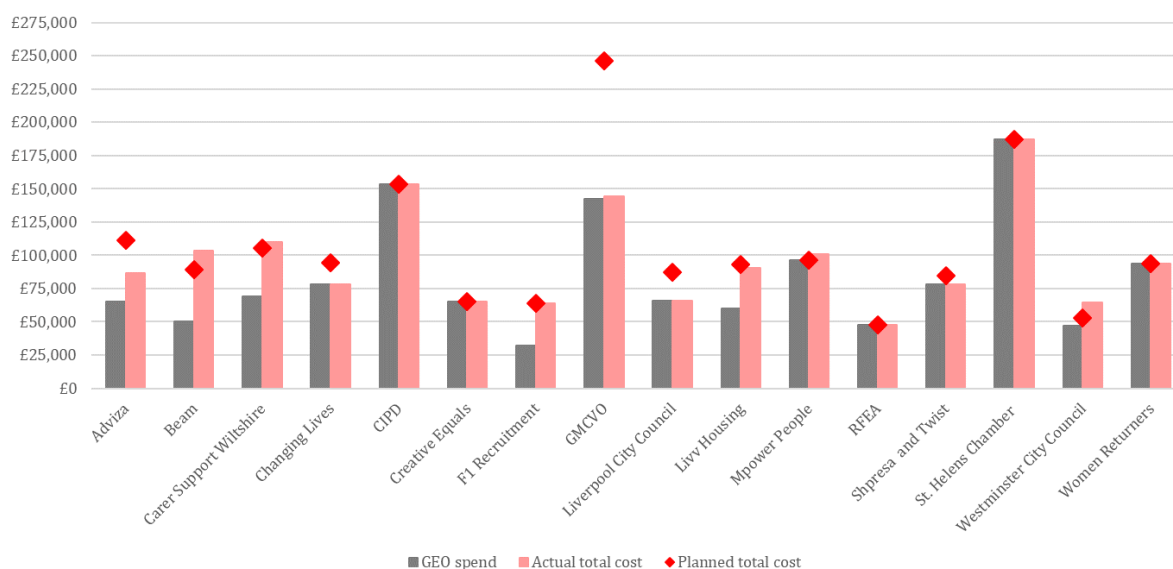
- 7.2** In addition to the GEO award, 9 projects also planned to provide match funding which increased the planned Fund costs to around £1.67 million. Total planned costs for projects ranged from £48,000 to £247,000, with half of all projects costing between £50,000 and £100,000.
- 7.3** Match funding was not a requirement of the Fund although projects were asked whether they would be using any at the application stage. Successful projects were also asked to report on any match funding when completing monitoring progress reports. During delivery, it was common for anticipated match funding to change – either it was not secured or the scale and source to that stated in applications was different.
- 7.4** The amounts and types of match funding used were not reported consistently by each project. 12 out of the 16 projects reported a form of match funding to deliver their projects. Of these, 9 projects reported specific match funding values (in cash or cash equivalent terms). The total match funding anticipated at the application stage was approximately £280,000 whereas the total amount reported was lower at approximately £200,000.
- 7.5** Match funding was reported in different ways. 8 of the projects reported that all or part of their match funding was provided by their own organisation in the form of staff time. Other sources of match funding were reported to be from external partners and employer partners, including discounts on commercial rates and the use of premises.

#### Actual delivery costs

- 7.6** In the final progress reports, 9 out of the 16 projects reported that their final project costs were less than they planned. This underspend ranged from £2,500 to £104,000. These projects stated 2 reasons for being **below budget**. These were:
- **Fewer returners participated than expected** – while core staffing costs were broadly unchanged, this had some cost effect as:



- **Fewer returners incurred expenses to be reimbursed** – fewer returners were ready to engage in work placements, which meant there was less demand for work related expenses including clothes, IT equipment for those working from home, travel costs and childcare
  - **Less formal training required** – some projects ran fewer formal training events and therefore did not spend what they might have expected on trainers, meeting facilities or catering. Other projects also moved their delivery mode from group training to personalised support provided by the core delivery team
  - **COVID-19 led to event cancellations** – one of the effects of COVID-19 was the cancellation of a variety of employer engagement events, and returner celebration events
- 7.7** 4 out of the 16 projects reported that their actual spend matched their planned budget.
- 7.8** 3 out of the 16 projects reported a small **overspend** when the actual total project cost was compared with the planned budget. Overspend ranged from £4,100 to £14,300, between 4% and 16% of the planned project costs. Reasons given for budget overspend were:
- **Higher management costs** – some projects overspent on management time, for COVID-19 contingency planning and to meet reporting requirements
  - **Increased overheads** – to account for the delays related to COVID-19, some projects agreed an extension period which required additional staff costs and, in some cases, additional costs for socially distanced room hire and IT facilities
  - **More intensive personal support** – some projects engaged returners who required higher levels of support than they had anticipated including more intensive one-to-one support
- 7.9** At the end of the Fund the total reported delivery cost was lower than planned. 9 of the 16 projects received all of their approved grant. Of the 7 projects that were paid less than their approved grant agreement, 5 had underspent and so were provided with funding which covered their total actual costs. GEO, in agreement with the remaining 2 projects, provided less funding than originally approved due to changes in project delivery.
- 7.10** Figure 7-1 shows the planned cost of each project, including the reported actual spend and funding paid out by GEO.

**Figure 7-1: Planned and actual total cost with GEO spend by project (£)**

Sources: project applications, grant variations and final progress reports

## Project costs

**7.11** Cost categories were not reported consistently across projects and therefore it was not possible to definitively break down overall project costs by different cost categories. However, most projects incurred similar types of direct and indirect project costs.

### Direct project costs

**7.12** The planned costs for all 16 projects on staffing amounted to approximately £840,000<sup>7</sup>, which was 48% of all estimated costs. In total, actual reported staff costs amounted to approximately £880,000, which was an overspend of £40,000 and amounted to 57% of the total reported spend.

**7.13** Projects used different types of staff to deliver their project. While the project manager role was consistently held by the grant recipient organisation, other roles were externally recruited. Examples of externally recruited staff include:

- Employer consultants, employer liaison or business advisers
- Career coaches or mentors
- Communications officers

**7.14** Staff costs accounted for a substantial proportion of projects costs. The Fund required intensive project management time to cover activities such as returner and employer direct engagement, recruitment of staff to the project, evaluation participation, and ongoing support

<sup>7</sup> This total represented 15 out of 16 projects, as 1 project did not identify staffing costs in sufficient detail to include in the calculation

for returners and employers. In addition, those projects granted extensions to their delivery period due to COVID-19 incurred additional staff costs.

### Indirect costs

**7.15** Common types of expenditure sub-contracted to third party providers were for:

- **Communications** – PR, advertising and marketing materials, as well as social media communications
- **Specialist trainers, training materials and course content** – for example, providers who could deliver grief and bereavement counselling or financial and benefits advice
- **Specific vocational training** – for qualifications and licenses, such as Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards, SIA licences, and Food and Hygiene Awards
- **Hosting events** – employer engagement and recruitment events either hosted or attended by the project, best practice sharing events and returner celebration events

### Project value

**7.16** The projects aimed to engage 1,517 returners and provide active support to 864 of them. Collectively the projects engaged fewer returners (1,140), but were close to meeting their support targets with 837 returners supported. Projects recognised in their plans that there would be attrition and not all returners supported would enter employment. Planned job outcomes totalled 468, whereas the actual job outcomes reported at project end was 179. 15 projects did not meet their planned number of job outcomes for returners during the lifetime of their project (the reasons for which were reported in the sections 'Returners profile' and 'Returner outcomes').

**7.17** One method to measure the value of employment support programmes is using a cost per job metric. Using the total cost to GEO as a base, the planned cost averaged £2,968 per job, whereas the actual cost per job was £7,436. The figure disguises differences between projects that ranged from actual cost per job of between £1,711 and £47,426 (Table 7-1). The actual cost per job metric was affected by:

- **The delivery model** – the total cost per job of all projects which used personalised models was around twice the cost per job of all projects which used cohort delivery. A personalised model had more one-to-one delivery time and was therefore likely to require more staff resource
- **Underachievement of job outcome targets** – 2 projects with high cost per job figures both relied on self-referral and digital engagement, and both over-estimated the number of returners that they would be able to engage through these methods alone. While their costs did not rise, the numbers of returners they supported into work was much lower than anticipated and thus drove up the cost per job metric

- **Overachievement of targets** – 2 projects reported a lower cost per job than planned. One project (Creative Equals) exceeded their targeted number of job outcomes and as such the actual cost per job was 63% of the planned costs
- **Lower costs** – while the Changing Lives project narrowly missed their targeted job outcomes (15 planned against 14 secured), their actual cost per job was less than planned due to a lower total cost of their project
- **Timing of outcome measurement** – the number of returners who entered employment was captured at project end. However, subsequent communication with projects revealed that several continued to support returners beyond the lifetime of the project, resulting in more positive employment outcomes. For the purposes of this report, these additional employment outcomes have not been included
- **COVID-19** – the pandemic affected 9 projects and the probability of returners securing job outcomes during the pandemic decreased

**Table 7-1: Planned and actual cost per outcome by project at project end<sup>8</sup>**

Project	Planned job outcomes	Actual job outcomes	Cost per job outcome	Returners supported	Cost per returner supported
Adviza	30	9	£7,221	36	£1,805
Beam	19	9	£5,556	24	£2,083
Carer Support Wiltshire	45	2	£34,700	27	£2,570
Changing Lives	15	14	£5,582	42	£1,861
CIPD	25	10	£15,335	87	£1,763
Creative Equals	24	38	£1,711	57	£1,140
F1 Recruitment	32	9	£3,556	32	£1,000
GMCVO	30	3	£47,426	85	£1,674
Liverpool City Council	30	6	£11,026	57	£1,161
Livv Housing	30	7	£8,571	52	£1,154
Mpower People	40	14	£6,893	45	£2,145
RFEA	25	4	£12,000	50	£960
Shpresa and Twist	30	16	£4,875	62	£1,258
St Helens Chamber	48	17	£10,994	114	£1,639
Westminster City Council	30	11	£4,265	52	£902
Women Returners	15	10	£9,348	15	£6,232
<b>Total</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>N/A</b>

*Source: final progress reports and grant agreements*

<sup>8</sup> Excludes match funding

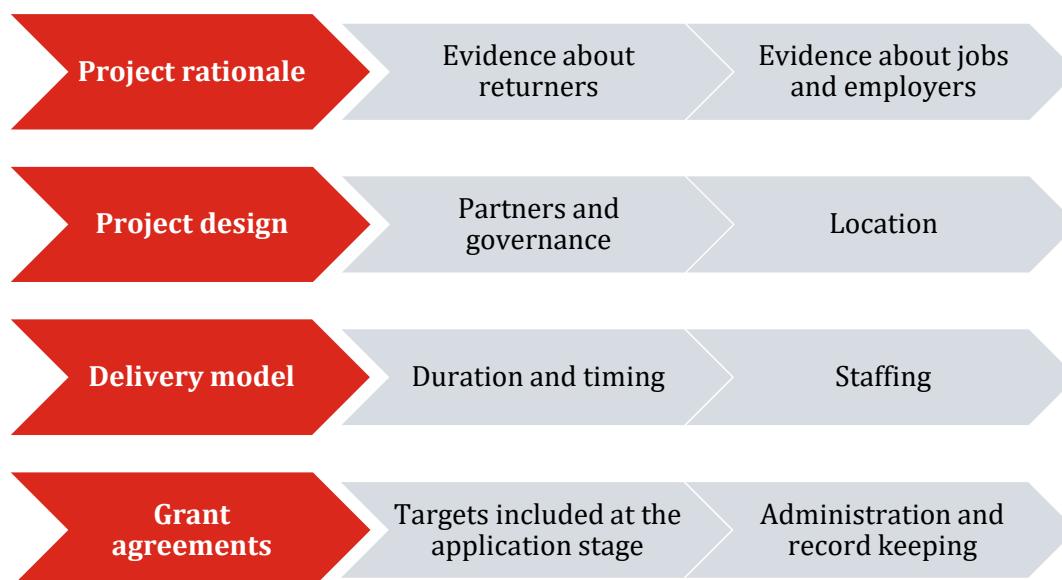
**7.18** It should be noted that the cost per job does not measure the throughput activity carried out by the projects in terms of businesses and returners supported, skills improved and families helped. Table 7-1 also includes information about the cost per returner supported which showed that activity costs per returner ranged from £902 per returner (for a project that provided mentoring and coaching support to returners) to £6,232 (for a project that provided intensive training and support, connections with employers and personalised recruitment support).

## 8. Designing interventions: lessons learned

### Introduction

- 8.1** The Fund was set up to create new opportunities and to increase understanding of the barriers and enablers for both returners and employers. Projects were funded to explore ways of overcoming challenges and the benefits of intervention. They were also designed to try out new ways of working, with different partners, in new localities or sectors.
- 8.2** This section summarises the lessons learned from the participating projects in terms of their approach to designing their projects, the groups they expected to work with and the scope and scale of their ambition. Generalisations are difficult as the projects were dealing with issues faced by groups of people with very different and often complex needs, as well as working across different sectors and labour markets. In addition, what started as an initiative in a relatively buoyant labour market ended at a time when COVID-19 was severely affecting the livelihoods of people and businesses.
- 8.3** This section is based upon the learning presented in each of the 16 project evaluation reports. It is structured to create generalised lessons about the project (its rationale), design, proposed delivery model, and grant agreement process (Figure 8-1).

**Figure 8-1: Lessons learned from the design of the funded projects**



Source: SQW

## Project rationale

### Evidence about returners

- 8.4** In their Fund applications, **projects used a range of evidence to underpin the rationale for their intervention** including:
- GEO reports that were publicised during the market engagement events
  - Office of National Statistics (ONS) data regarding population and deprivation which gave regional unemployment levels, claimant counts, qualifications, household income, skills shortages and health outcomes
  - Local or regional sector intelligence from sources such as local industrial strategy reports
  - Reports or studies into the barriers faced by particular returner groups (such as those associated with military families, or single parents)
- 8.5** **Projects drew on their own experience.** 12 projects were led by organisations that had been supporting people into the labour market as part of their core business, of which 3 had participated in projects that specifically targeted returners. Therefore, most projects based their project design on knowledge of previous labour market interventions with a different participant group or in a different locality. 6 projects applied other survey, monitoring or outcome data from previous projects to inform their application.
- 8.6** Such data provided useful context and enabled projects to articulate the nature of the problem that existed. However, the available data was incomplete. It was unable to show the scale of female or carer labour market participation and non-participation, by locality, household type or skill level. **There was a lack of quality data available to projects** to enable them to assess the number of carers or potential returners in their area, their characteristics or likely career ambitions.
- 8.7** Most projects therefore based their plans on imperfect data. **Some of the projects overestimated the number of returners who were ready to engage with the projects.** For example, one project had surveyed a group of returners about their readiness to return to work and used the results to set ambitious targets. However, in practice the numbers with serious intent to return to paid work in the short-term was far less than their market research had led them to expect. **The 3 projects that had worked with returners before were able to more accurately predict the numbers they could engage** and in fact collectively surpassed their target for returner engagement.

## Summary: evidence about returners

Market research and local surveys provided helpful data but it was often incomplete and needed to be treated cautiously as an indicator of the scale of need in an area.

Projects with experience of working with returners were better placed to accurately assess their needs and the scale of interventions required.

Projects needed to use several sources of information and intelligence to design their project.

## Evidence about jobs and employers

- 8.8 Insight into job availability came from analysis of job bulletins and through talking with employers** (given that not all jobs are advertised). As part of the application process, projects were asked to provide names of employers that they could work with to deliver their project to demonstrate to GEO that these links were in place.<sup>9</sup> The application process did not require projects to evidence employer support, or evidence any formal or informal research with employers. The insights from employers were useful but they **could not always anticipate future needs or how they might be involved with the project months in advance**.

## Summary: evidence about jobs and employers

Discussions with local employers informed project design.

Employers were not always able to accurately predict, months in advance, what roles would be available in the future.

## Project design

### Partners and governance

- 8.9 Projects performed several different roles to connect employers with returners** including:

<sup>9</sup> In the second and third rounds of funding applicants were asked: "If you have already secured employer support, please provide further information on up to 5 employers who have committed their support"



- Referral agent – bringing people into their project and referring them to other services, or developing relationships between employers and returners
- Trainer – training returners to refresh or extend their employability skills
- Mentor or careers coach – advising, guiding, mentoring, and coaching returners to support their career decision, health and wellbeing
- Business adviser – advising employers on their recruitment practice and the construction of job roles to make them more flexible and attractive to returners

**8.10** These diverse roles were not usually available within one organisation. **Almost all projects developed partnerships with organisations that provided the roles and expertise that complemented their own.** In most cases these were contractual relationships with payment for services. In other cases, partnerships were based on mutual reciprocity. For example, an organisation might refer a client to the project knowing that they would receive employment support before being referred back to them for other support services, or an employer might offer to contribute a trainer or mentor with the hope of making connections with skilled potential recruits.

**8.11** Partnerships were essential to the design and delivery of projects. Projects were designed to work across areas and sectors and bring together a diverse set of skills and experiences. The ability to connect and work with a range of other organisations was very important and projects proved adept at building these, bringing in new partners where helpful, commissioning partners to deliver services, and harnessing the professional networks of their staff.

**8.12** **3 projects, familiar with working with public or third sector partners, constructed formal governance arrangements to provide additional support when working with private sector employers.** One project connected with their parent organisation’s board, while 2 others constructed groups of partners that met up to 3 times during the course of the project to share emerging learning, plan contingencies, and provide specialist expertise to support the project’s delivery.

### Summary: partners and governance

Some projects developed a range of partnership relationships to cover the diverse roles and networks that were needed to connect employers with returners.

The projects that had formal partnership governance structures found them helpful.

### Location

**8.13** **3 projects applied to the Fund to take a delivery model that had worked in London and apply it in different cities or places beyond the capital’s commuter belt. All 3 projects**

**encountered challenges.** One project was unable to make the necessary partner connections before being affected by COVID-19, another found take up of their offer by both returners and employers in the new location to be lower than they expected, while the third did meet employment outcomes albeit with fewer employers and returners participating than they would have found in London. The challenges were therefore in part associated with a lack of knowledge about how different the London labour market is compared to other parts of the country. Evidence from the ONS shows that in September 2019, London had record high employment levels, jobs were being created in London faster than anywhere else, and it had the highest proportion of workforce jobs in the services sector compared to other UK regions. Challenges were also attributed to the more limited networks London-based project managers had beyond the capital.

**8.14** These projects used a number of approaches to overcome these issues. One project found that they needed to include a much wider catchment area than they initially anticipated (across counties rather than focused in an urban centre). The 3 projects also connected with local partners or agents to help them make connections. **Local partners helped to create more returner opportunities, but could not replicate the more vibrant job market that existed in London pre-March 2020 and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**8.15** The concentration of 3 projects running in Liverpool concurrently created some early difficulties as the projects found they were wanting to connect with the same partners, particularly for referrals. This was eventually overcome but could have been avoided with higher quality bids from underrepresented regions and different funding decisions.

### Summary: location

Delivery models that worked in London did not transfer easily to other locations.

The concentration of some projects in Liverpool created early difficulties for sourcing partners.

## Delivery model

### Duration and timing

**8.16** Project funding was available for a maximum of 12 months. The start date for some projects was later than planned due to the timescales associated with approving the grant funding and preparing formal grant agreements. Both of these factors led projects to reflect on their duration and the timing of important milestones.

**8.17** With a 12-month delivery period, projects had a limited number of recruitment and training cycles for different cohorts that could be accommodated. Some projects planned a single cycle with one cohort being supported, while 2 projects planned for 5 cycles of

recruitment and delivery. Where multiple cycles were planned there was limited time available for contingency measures to be implemented between cohorts.

- 8.18** Projects in the first round of funding planned to use the 2018 summer period to get set up to start in September 2018. This was thought to be a good time for returners with childcare responsibilities to start on projects, as it follows the school summer holidays. However, start dates were delayed which affected their recruitment and delivery efforts. **For returners, the time of year was an important factor when making plans to seek work.** For example, those with childcare responsibilities were not looking for work just before the summer holidays. Some projects also reported that the new year was also a good time to recruit returners onto their project.
- 8.19 One project experienced delays with IT developments.** Their online portal was essential as it enabled returners and employers to access resources, job opportunities and ongoing support from the project team. The development of the portal took 3 weeks longer than planned.
- 8.20 Other delays were largely associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore not anticipated.** This included administration delays in other organisations that meant that returners had to wait longer for their qualifications and certifications to be processed. The projects themselves needed time to manage their own operations, furlough staff and put delivery contingencies in place. Such considerations meant that communication became slower between projects, their partners, and GEO. The effect of these delays was particularly felt by some projects who extended their delivery period and needed staff to work on the project for longer than anticipated.

### Summary: duration and timing

Some projects needed to plan recruitment at key times of the year and avoid delivery during school holidays.

Some projects experienced delays and needed time for contingency planning.

### Staffing

- 8.21 The skills and experience of staff deployed to run the project needed careful consideration.** Projects found that both employers and returners responded well to having a named person to talk to. **Returners commented that they liked having staff members who were also role models, and who shared some of their experiences or backgrounds.** One project

“ (The project manager) made me see that I’m still really capable  
 Returner

actively chose to recruit a member of staff who shared the same experiences as the returners they were supporting and provided them with the training they needed to be able to run the project.

- 8.22** 2 projects reported challenges with recruiting or retaining the right staff. In one case this was due to the short-term nature of the contract they could offer, and the other was due to a lack of skilled business relationship managers available.

### Summary: staffing

Staff with both technical and communication skills were essential to the success of some projects.

Some projects reported that staff who shared characteristics with the returners connected well with them.

## Grant agreements

### Targets included at the application stage

- 8.23** Projects that had delivered similar work before could draw on their experiences to plan the resources they would need and the numbers of returners they might be able to engage. However, **most projects overestimated the number of returners that they would recruit**. Projects responded with active and creative ways to recruit and support returners, including linking with different referral partners, doing work with press and social media, and attending events or groups where returners were likely to be present. Most found their engagement targets challenging.
- 8.24** Nevertheless, **most projects either met or came close to meeting their stated targets in terms of recruitment and active participation of returners**. 3 projects had run returners projects before and were extending a model that they had previously used. The others were all social or third sector organisations and had a good understanding of the characteristics of their target group and the barriers they faced when seeking employment. These projects were able to make more realistic assessments of the demand for a returners service.
- 8.25** In their applications, projects stated their intentions regarding the number and type of employers they would work with and what their recruitment needs were. 2 projects predicted this accurately based on their existing engagement with employers, but most projects had to adapt their employer engagement plans as the projects progressed.
- 6 projects initially planned to work with a set number of employers who would each want to recruit more than one returner. They found that this rarely happened outside of

London and employers who were involved in the projects either did not have employment opportunities available or only had just one to offer at the time

- Timing was also a factor. **Job vacancies anticipated at the project application stage were not always available when projects were active**, either because employer recruitment plans had changed or they had filled vacancies by the time the projects started

### Summary: targets included at the application stage

Most project target outcomes for returners and employers were ambitious and challenging.

Most projects overestimated the numbers of returners ready to work with them and recruitment of returners was a challenge for most projects.

Projects engaged employers at the application stage but most found their job insights to be out of date or inaccurate by the time project delivery started.

### Administration and record keeping

**8.26** Each project signed a grant agreement that set out the terms of funding, including reporting requirements, delivery targets and timescales based on their successful application. The monthly reporting process, including use of monitoring systems and requirements to capture evidence, was familiar to several projects. For example, those that had participated in previous government funding schemes or European Structural Funds had systems in place to capture data and report it in the format required by the Fund. **Other projects had not planned sufficient administration resource to meet monitoring and reporting requirements**, particularly those new to government funding and often from the private or charitable sector.

**8.27** The project grant agreements included outcome measures tailored to each project rather than standardised for all projects. For example, the definition of engaged was reported to mean registered interest or enrolled on a training programme by different projects. The match funding contributed by a project was also reported in different ways, with some projects not reporting it at all, some reporting it in text without a financial value, and others allocating a value but not saying how it was used. This may have been because match funding was not a requirement of project funding, although reporting it was. Where payments are based on delivery of activities and outcomes, written agreement about the nature and definition of key terms is essential.

### **Summary: administration and record keeping**

Some projects had not planned sufficient administrative resource to meet monitoring and reporting requirements of grant funding.

The Fund would have benefitted from standardised definitions of key terms, available at application stage, for monitoring and reporting purposes.

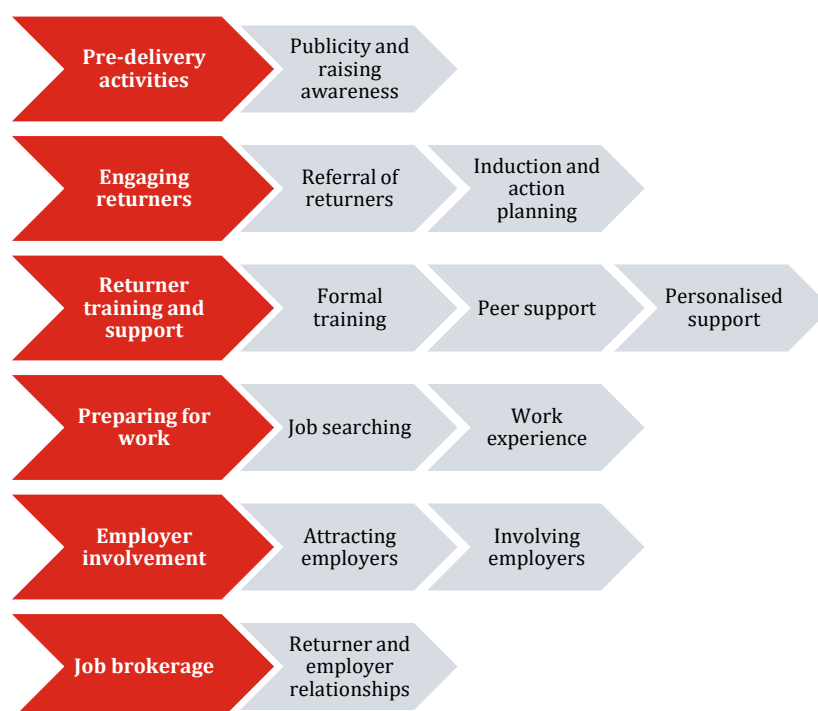
## 9. Delivering interventions: lessons learned

### Introduction

- 9.1** The projects were diverse in their structure, approaches and experiences. However, all projects included core components, such as pre-delivery activities, engagement and referral of returners, returner training and support, preparations for work, employer involvement, and job brokerage (Figure 9-1).
- 9.2** Each project assembled their delivery models with some or most of these core components to suit their returner and employer needs. In some cases, the delivery model was adapted as the project progressed. Delivery models included:
- Using cohort training models which took a group of returners through a training programme or personalised approaches that created bespoke training or support programmes for each returner
  - Involving employers as partners engaged in project delivery and returner support, or as providers of an employment opportunity at the end of the project

9 projects offered both cohort and personalised delivery models, 4 chose personalised models, and 3 delivered cohort models. 9 projects also actively engaged several employers in their delivery, and all sought employer opportunities for returners that were work-ready. Given the multiple combinations of delivery models and the relatively small size of each project, there was limited opportunity to undertake a comparison of the effectiveness of different models.

**Figure 9-1: Lessons learned from the delivery of funded projects**



Source: SQW

- 9.3** This section of the report describes some of the different approaches taken to present important lessons derived from the experiences of the 16 projects. Note that in some cases learning has been combined from different projects to highlight important points, rather than including every example.

## Pre-delivery activities

### Publicity and raising awareness

- 9.4** Projects needed to raise awareness of their offer rapidly with both returners and employers in their target communities and sectors. All used digital media. **Multiple online channels, including social media and parent-focused websites, were used to publicise projects with returners and employers.** Some projects found the use of a specialist public relations professional to be useful. Others developed digital communication strategies, involving different platforms and timing that reflected national campaigns.
- 9.5** **Some projects worked with their named partners to extend their reach into different communities.** For example, some partnered with local Chambers of Commerce to help reach local businesses by sending information or requests by email to their membership.



## Summary: publicity and raising awareness

Multiple online channels, including social media and parent-focused websites, were used to publicise projects with returners and employers.

Some projects found the use of partners' networks was also an effective way to reach different communities.

## Engaging returners

### Referral of returners

- 9.6** In addition to social media, **all projects used their existing community networks and partnerships to encourage referrals.** 11 projects also created links with new organisations that they had not worked with before to broaden their referral base. One project actively incentivised their client group to refer friends or family members through offering Amazon vouchers.<sup>10</sup>
- 9.7** 6 projects used self-referral. One project relied wholly on self-referrals in response to social media campaigns, although it was more usual for self-referral to be used alongside other entry routes. **Self-referral was a useful supplement to recruitment, but projects needed to have effective screening or eligibility checks in place to ensure that participation was right for the returner.**
- 9.8** **Successful referrals from partner organisations required regular and in-person contact** with partners and messages often needed repeating before the project was fully understood and supported. This worked very well in several projects where project teams were able to use established professional relationships to build contacts in other organisations. Where a project was challenging stereotypes or established practices, time was required early on to persuade partners of the need for intervention and encourage them to take part.
- 9.9** **Referral partners needed careful selection.** Referral organisations needed to have sufficiently close relationships with clients to be able to identify and refer suitable people. This was often the case when the referral organisation (which could be another part of the funded organisation or a project partner) was connected with a specific group or community (such as carers, migrants or law professionals).
- 9.10** 6 projects developed referral relationships with Jobcentre Plus and a further 3 projects stated they wanted to, but it did not happen in practice. Projects working with staff teams within the local Jobcentre offices had to carefully brief them about the type of referral they were looking

<sup>10</sup> 5 of the 31 engaged returners were referred on to it by a friend or family members who then received a £30 Amazon voucher

for and maintain regular contact. One project invested time in this relationship and found it best to focus effort on those offices that recognised and valued how the project would support their clients and would then keep in regular contact with the project. Another project found that the people who were referred by Jobcentre Plus had different characteristics and aspirations to those referred by alternative routes and needed a different model of support.

### Summary: referral of returners

All projects used their existing community networks and partnerships to encourage referrals.

Self-referral was a useful supplement to recruitment, but effective screening or eligibility checks were needed to ensure that participation was right for the returner.

Several projects also gained successful referrals from partner organisations through regular and in-person contact. However, referral partners needed to be carefully selected to ensure they could meet project expectations.

## Induction and action planning

- 9.11 Projects had a range of ways to share their plans with returners and to introduce them to project teams.** Some projects held a formal meeting at their premises or went out to meet returners to explain their project prior to recruitment. Others requested returners apply for a limited number of places. One project held a selection day and interviewed candidates in person, which allowed returners and the project team to assess whether they were right for the project.
- 9.12** Projects often experienced some attrition at this point. Some returners who expressed initial interest were unwilling or unable to commit to a formal programme. Returners may have withdrawn if their circumstances changed, if they lacked confidence to attend a group meeting, or if they thought their employment prospects were poor. **Over-referral may be necessary as not all registrations converted into actively engaged returners.**
- 9.13** Project onboarding processes needed to identify returners who were eligible and able to fully participate. Reviewing participation barriers helped to ensure that projects were appropriate for returners. In addition, an initial face-to-face and one-to-one introduction conversation with interested returners helped to ensure that those who expressed initial interest were ready to participate. Such an approach helped returners feel comfortable to engage and commit to joining the project. Several projects chose at this point to undertake a personal action planning approach with the returner, led by a project team member or a trained careers adviser. In addition, 2 projects were linked to the National Careers Service delivery teams and supported some returners to develop a long-term career plan and understand different routes for their employment goals.

**9.14** Projects that planned their induction process to be by an online portal or email found this was less successful and most switched to phone communication to make a personal connection with the returner.

**9.15** Returners were motivated by the prospect of gaining skills and work experience, and for those whose first language was not English, they were also motivated to improve their English language skills. Returners also appreciated being among others with similar circumstances to them, such as caring responsibilities.

### Summary: induction and action planning

Projects used a range of ways to share their plans with returners and to introduce them to project teams. However, over-referral may be necessary as not all registrations to projects converted into actively engaged returners.

Some returners were motivated by the prospect of gaining skills and work experience and being among others with similar circumstances to them, such as caring responsibilities.

## Returner training and support

**9.16** Returners accessed a range of support from the 16 projects. Some project delivery models were based around a cohort of returners who participated in a scheduled, formal training programme. Other delivery models used a more personalised approach with support offered on a one-to-one basis by the project team, or through other training courses or specialist support teams. Lessons about the different types of training are captured in the following sections.

### Formal training

**9.17** 13 of the 16 projects offered a formal training programme. 10 projects ran their own training programme for cohorts of returners as part or all of their offer:

- Some were of limited duration (1 or 2-day courses) and some ran over longer periods (for example, 10 weeks)
- Course timing had to consider potential take-up. Projects avoided school holidays and some were run within school hours or with childcare provided by the project
- Course intensity also needed careful consideration. Some projects ran short intensive training bootcamps with participants who were used to training or working in a group

**9.18** 5 projects referred returners to other training courses that they could complete within the duration of the project. These were courses that would improve their vocational and

employability skills, for example courses based on food and hygiene (for access to catering and hospitality roles), or IT courses (to support access to administrative or retail roles). Training was helpful to returners as it raised their confidence as well as their skills. Some of the training also provided them with up-to-date certification necessary for certain job roles (such as food safety and hygiene).

**9.19 Projects stressed the importance of choosing the right training partner and conducting due diligence.** One project stated the importance of using trainers with experience of working with their client group (for example, a training provider with experience of supporting those affected by domestic abuse). They needed to work with clear and agreed procedures to deal with any safeguarding issues that might arise.

**9.20 Some projects adapted training according to the needs of the group.** Several projects reported that digital skills development was found to be a useful way to build both confidence and employability. Intense training experiences, such as bootcamps also provided access to a broad range of activities including insights from real employers about their expectations of applicants.

### Summary: formal training

The form and content of training needed to recognise returner needs (at a personal and group level).

Training providers needed to be carefully selected to ensure they were right for the returners and some projects needed to adapt course content to respond to emerging returner needs.

Barriers to participation such as location, travel costs and childcare, needed to be removed for several projects to encourage participation.

### Peer support

**9.21 Role models and peer support were important to returners.** They valued support and guidance from project team members or trainers that had been in their situation, who provided both empathy and role modelling.

**9.22** Returners also liked the opportunity to talk with other returners on the project regularly to share challenges, boost confidence, and support and learn from one another. One project noted that their returners led quite isolated lives, and that this element of the project was really important as it helped them build friendships and mutual support networks.

## Summary: peer support

Peer support was an important part of the return to work journey that offered emotional support and role modelling.

### Personalised support

- 9.23** Some returners were not ready for group work and needed smaller, less formal initial sessions to build their confidence. These returners, whose circumstances had led to them spending a lot of time in their own home were said to find large group and more formal venues off-putting. They valued having access to a caseworker or mentor who helped them with the support they needed at the time they needed it. This ad hoc support worked well alongside a structured set of planned check-ins. Projects sometimes included access to sessions on things like mindfulness or self-care to help boost returner confidence for participating in group work or starting to look for employment.
- 9.24** A blended model was used by many projects to provide personalised or coaching support alongside structured training, although this could be labour intensive. **While returners valued this bespoke, flexible support at times, they also required more structure and definition around activities and goals.**
- 9.25** One project used a formal mentoring process where a mentor and mentee were paired and set mutually agreed objectives – this project used a mentoring model where employers (in this case HR professionals) volunteered their time to support returners to find work and support them through their first few weeks of employment. This project found that returners received between 3 and 8 mentoring sessions and reported very positive feedback. Another project was setting up a similar mentoring model after their funded project had completed.
- 9.26 Specialist support and advice was also valued.** Specialist support, such as financial advice, was often included in the project offer, with signposting to additional specialist services where needed. For example, access to a financial adviser allowed returners to understand the financial implications of taking paid work with regard to any reduction in their benefits and the effect on their household income. They felt better informed, more in control of their finances and more motivated to find paid work.

## Summary: personalised support

Returners valued a structured training approach, including personalised and specialist support where appropriate.

## Preparing for work

### Job searching

**9.27** All projects provided job search support for those returners who were ready for work or became work-ready during the course of the project. Sometimes they secured input from a HR professional or an employer. These sessions addressed gaps in knowledge about the world of work (which was particularly valuable to those who were unemployed for a number of years) and about recruitment processes, including:

- What employers look for in applications and CVs
- How to present their career breaks on their CV and at interview
- How to ask about flexible working in interview

In 3 cases, employers also ran mock interviews. Returners who participated in the evaluation commented that they appreciated this type of support as it gave them new skills but also made them feel more positive about their existing skills and employability.

**9.28** **Projects helped returners to apply for roles and opportunities that harnessed their existing skills and were appropriate to their personal circumstances.** In many cases returners were looking for full-time flexible roles and were advised by projects to consider more inherently flexible roles such as roles in schools or care environments and shift-based roles.

### Summary: job searching

Returners who were ready to start looking for jobs benefitted from job search and application support provided by all projects for roles that harnessed their existing skills and were appropriate to their personal circumstances.

### Work experience

**9.29** Some projects provided returners with work experience opportunities. Projects labelled and defined their work experience in different ways. Some projects called this a “returnship” which was a paid placement, recruited for and designed by the employers. More frequently, projects used different forms of work encounters, such as workplace visits, short unpaid work experiences, or volunteering in third sector organisations. **Projects ensured that the nature, duration and location of these experiences matched both the needs and capacity of returners and employers.** Bespoke work placements worked well for returners who were considered by the project team to be work-ready, or who wanted to use a placement to improve their language skills.

- 9.30** Projects would not propose a returner for a work encounter if they did not think the returner was ready. **Some projects used volunteering in the social sector as a stepping stone experience for some returners.** This included work shadowing and pilot workshop opportunities. In some cases, offering unpaid placements within the project organisations themselves enabled returners to gain work experience in a familiar environment.

### Summary: work experience

Some projects provided returners with work experience opportunities that matched both the needs and capacity of their returners, and what the participating employers could offer.

Bespoke work placements worked well for returners who were considered to be work-ready, or who wanted to use a placement to improve their language skills.

Some projects considered voluntary work to be a useful stepping stone for returners prior to private sector employment.

## Employer involvement

- 9.31** Employers were involved in all projects. Their role was to support the delivery of training or personalised support for returners, provide work experience, placement, or job opportunities, and support project governance. Some projects also sought to provide advice and recruitment support to encourage employers to provide flexible job roles and consider employing returners. Most projects worked with employers with whom they already had constructive relationships, or reached employers through project partners.

### Attracting employers

- 9.32** **Employers did not necessarily recognise ‘returners’ as a distinct cohort and therefore projects used a range of messages to engage them.** Employers appeared to respond to messages about diversity, access to talent, and networking with other like-minded employers. One project found that providing employers with examples of returner stories, particularly where returners have been employed successfully, was a powerful way to change employer perceptions and increase their willingness to engage with returners.
- 9.33** Projects either partnered with organisations with extensive employer contacts or used their own networks. An approach that worked well for one project was to review their contact list, identify those who might be most receptive, and engage using a personalised approach. Another project found that employers became interested if contacts within their professional sector-specific business networks were also interested. **Any initial expression of interest needed quick follow-up as employer priorities changed from month to month.**

- 9.34 Employers valued opportunities to network and some said they appreciated hearing the authentic experience of recruitment and employment from returners themselves.** Other employers valued face-to-face workshops and opportunities to meet other like-minded employers, as well as the dedicated time that some projects provided to consider how to make organisational practices better for returners.

### Summary: attracting employers

Employers did not necessarily understand the term 'returner' but some projects found that employers responded to messages about increased diversity and access to talent.

Initial expressions of interest from employers required quick follow-up.

Employers valued networking opportunities with other like-minded employers and hearing the authentic experience of recruitment and employment from returners directly.

### Involving employers

- 9.35** More employers were interested in the project than actively involved. **Many employers who expressed interest did not become involved because the timing was not right.** Employers needed to be ready and able to participate in the project at the same time when returners were ready to engage with them.
- 9.36 Employers needed to be aware from the outset of the expected time they needed to commit to be involved in the project, and benefited from being offered a wide range of involvement opportunities.** For example, one project found it easier to ask employers for specific inputs as part of relationship building, such as hosting a lunchtime "coffee and chat" with a returner or conducting a workplace tour. Overall, employers that were more involved in project delivery were better placed to recruit the talent they needed.
- 9.37** Each project had very different experiences with employers and each employer had their own set of needs and circumstances. For example, it took some projects several weeks to turn a receptive employer into one who could offer work experience, a placement, or interview to a returner. Others engaged quickly, especially if they saw the potential of returners to address their recruitment needs.



## Summary: involving employers

Securing employer involvement was a challenge. Many employers who expressed initial interest did not become actively involved due to timing issues.

Employers needed to be aware from the outset of the expected time they needed to commit to be involved in the project and benefitted from a wide range of opportunities once involved.

## Job brokerage

### Returner and employer relationships

- 9.38** Projects used different models to connect returners with employers. Some projects developed relationships with groups of employers and returners to broker matches between them. 3 projects used training bootcamps for this and employers who participated in these projects provided employment opportunities (either short duration paid returnships or paid employment). Participating in careers fairs also provided opportunities for returners to meet employers and secure interviews.
- 9.39 Other projects took a personalised approach to job brokerage and made connections with employers on behalf of returners where possible and appropriate.** This required active participation or worked for projects with regular contact with employers. Given the time required in taking a personalised approach, this was not extensively used across projects. Nevertheless, it worked very well for one project where an employer got involved in the returner training and was therefore able to talk with returners informally before moving to a more formal recruitment process. **Other projects introduced employers to returners who they thought would be a good fit.**
- 9.40** Where projects were brokering these relationships, they needed to manage returner expectations carefully and ensure that both parties had sufficient time for one-to-one conversations.
- 9.41 It is worth noting that job brokerage was not used in all projects as returners found employment through usual recruitment channels.** However, job brokerage was used by projects to connect employers with returners where they thought there was a good fit.

## Summary: returner and employer relationships

Some returners found job opportunities through connections made by projects and employer-related involvement as well as through usual recruitment channels.

## 10. Legacy and conclusions

### Next steps for projects

**10.1 All projects planned to continue delivering returner support beyond GEO funding.** 6 projects had either secured or were applying for funding to continue supporting returners into work. This included:

- Employer-funded programmes, for example:
  - Creative Equals secured funding from participating employers and subsequently launched 2 further Creative Comeback projects, and were planning a third, targeting 100 women across London, New York and Mumbai
  - Women Returners were working with 4 employers to run their own returnship programmes – one of whom has since developed their own returner programme and won ‘The Most Innovative HR’ award at the 2021 People in Law Awards
- 3 projects who were applying to local authorities, Trusts or charitable funds
- 2 projects who were planning to run their smaller scale bootcamp intervention as part of their mainstream National Careers Service contract

**10.2** 3 projects were launching new training offers based on their experiences of delivering the funded projects. These included training that targeted unemployed people, people who were unemployed due to COVID-19, and career changers. **Projects were adapting their delivery model to reach a wider potential client group, in addition to returners.**

**10.3** 2 of the projects were adapting their core services to include aspects of practice learned through the Fund. For example, one project hosted cafes to bring returners together informally on a regular basis. They planned to create themed cafe events for all of their clients who were looking to get back into work, including returners. Another project introduced one-to-one guidance sessions for all their clients as part of their mainstream work.

**10.4** 2 projects were using learning about going digital and applying this to their core service delivery to enable them to offer support in a less resource-intensive format to all their clients.

**10.5** 3 projects said that their **relationships with employers** had improved and that they would like to include them in other parts of their service provision (for example helping with financial advice, or advocating for their work).

### Main lessons

**10.6** 4 projects stressed the usefulness of the lessons learned from the Fund and outlined how this would influence their staff more generally. For example, one project said it had raised

awareness of the needs of a different client group that was relevant to all their staff. Another was sharing their experiences with similar organisations in their sector.

**10.7 8 of the 16 projects produced materials to be used beyond the project lifetime.** 6 of them produced materials for employers, 3 produced materials for employment service providers and 2 for returners:

- Toolkits and guidance materials were made available to participating employers to give them the tools and knowledge to recruit and retain returners. Private sector projects did not publish these guides but the 2 produced by the social sector partners were made available online. One project was maintaining and managing its portal, which was being used as a resource to support both returners and employers
- 2 projects provided materials for returners following project delivery. One launched a Support Agency Directory for returners. This contained information on welfare, housing, financial and mental health support, plus other employment service organisations across their city. The other planned to maintain the returner resources developed online and continue the project's LinkedIn group
- Projects developed training resources for their own organisations during or following the Fund. One national organisation developed a training session about recruiting parents and offering flexible working, and planned to share it with colleagues across other regions
- 9 projects produced a range of returner, mentor and employer case studies that described their circumstances and feedback on the project



Source: Creative Equal's Best Practice Guide for Employers

**A Guide to Flexible Working**

GMCVO

Caring, Working, Living

**What are the types of flexible working?**

As both interest in and the benefits of flexible working become more widely known, the number of reports and fact sheets about flexible working is increasing. The Caring, Working, Living Panel, made up of both employers and employment support organisations, reviewed a number of examples to consider how best to present this wealth of information to employers.

The following information is intended to provide more detailed context to our visual guide, for employers less familiar with how to offer flexible working solutions. It can be found [here](#).

**The Legal Position**

All employees have the legal right to request flexible working once they have worked for the same employer for 26 weeks.

**Part-time working**

**Potential benefits**

» Customer demands can be met and machinery can be used more efficiently if parttime workers cover lunch breaks/evening shifts and weekends

Source: GMCVO's Guide to Flexible Working webpage

## Conclusions

### Delivery of expected outcomes

**10.8** The logic model, developed at the inception of the Fund and discussed in the ‘main research questions’ section, set out a range of expectations. These included that:

- 10 to 18 projects would be funded
  - In practice **16 projects were supported and successfully completed**
- These projects would recruit a number of returners and employers
  - In total, the 16 projects **recruited at least 70% of their target number of returners**, with 10 projects meeting or exceeding their target
  - Performance was better on employer engagement and the projects engaged **114% of their target number of employers**
- Returners would receive a range of support to make them more employable and more able to apply for jobs
  - **A wide range of support was offered across the projects and participating returners provided positive feedback about their experiences**
- Returners would be able to access a range of work experience opportunities, including volunteering and placements, and in time re-enter employment
  - Both of these happened but at a lower level than expected. **156 returners completed work experience and 179 returners were reported as entering employment** (the latter being 38% of the anticipated target number entering employment).
- Employers would be engaged to provide insight to returners about how best to present themselves to potential employers
  - This was met with mixed success with some very good examples in some projects but others struggling to secure practical input from employers
- Employers would be offered business advice about their recruitment practices which would lead to employers altering their recruitment practices to make jobs more accessible to returners
  - This generally was not completed by projects, as employers that were engaged already had flexible working practices in place

**10.9** The projects were either complete or coming to an end when the lockdown restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were put in place in March 2020. **Delivery for 9 projects was affected by COVID-19 and 5 agreed a time extension with GEO to enable them to complete their support for returners.** Returner recruitment was mostly unaffected by the pandemic and by March 2020, projects had already engaged employers that were actively supporting their projects (for example, through mentoring or training) and consequently this

activity was also largely unaffected. **However, 3 projects had to pause or scale back returner recruitment and targets associated with completion of training, work experience, and entry to employment were also harder following the first lockdown period in 2020.**

### Research questions

**10.10 An important objective of the Fund was to identify and develop an understanding of the barriers and enablers for both returners and employers.** The Fund aimed to test approaches to supporting returners back into work. The lessons learned about project delivery and outcomes, together with wider evidence gathered, provided an opportunity to revisit the main questions regarding the design and delivery of interventions, and to consider the successes of the Fund.

### Returner benefits

**10.11** Projects were designed to provide personalised support that would give returners the skills, opportunities, and motivation to re-enter the labour market and find meaningful employment. The evidence from the evaluation about returner benefit is mixed:

- **The returners who participated in the evaluation were enthusiastic about their experiences.** They appreciated the efforts and attentions of the project teams, they valued the support they received, they enjoyed meeting others like them and making new friendships, and they wanted to express thanks and gratitude for the opportunities that had been made available to them. There was clearly demand from returners for projects to help them to return to paid employment
- **There was consistent evidence across the projects that returners needed skills support.** This was most commonly around updating knowledge of the world of work and how to find and apply for jobs in the current day (recognising recruitment practices have changed significantly in the last few years)
- **Some returners also needed to update their transferable skills** (for example, improving general digital skills or English language skills), others needed to develop their vocational skills and knowledge and obtain up-to-date qualifications, new skills, and identify new career opportunities
- **Some returners' circumstances changed within the lifetime of the project** due to factors beyond their control, such as personal circumstances (for example, mental health) or family circumstances (for example, breakdown of childcare arrangements)

**10.12 Future projects should recognise that returners need support for different durations.** Returners with higher skills and who were focussed on a return to work, benefited from a short intervention. However, longer interventions could be beneficial for those who have been out of work for some time, have qualifications below that of the Level 2 equivalent

threshold<sup>11</sup>, have no formal qualifications, or have not practiced in an employment context. The projects that were most successful in terms of helping returners to move towards and enter employment were those who supported returners with higher skill levels, who could afford childcare and who lived close to employment opportunities. For other returners, longer and more substantive interventions that work at the pace and capabilities of the returner are recommended.

**10.13** The type of support returners need is also a factor, with returners benefitting most from vocational and employability skills support, as well as job search and application support. **The importance of addressing issues such as mental wellbeing and financial capability either alongside, or before, employability support was emphasised by several projects.**

**10.14** While returners shared characteristics within the project cohort (for example, high or low skill), all projects said that individual assessment was desirable. Several projects that supported highly skilled returners found that they also faced barriers that included domestic abuse and poor mental health. Other projects reported cases of people who proved exceptionally resilient and employable despite their personal circumstances. Therefore, while projects can target particular groups, a personalised approach is still necessary to ensure that support is appropriate.

**10.15** Finally, the nature of returners' circumstances means that they were seeking jobs which would make the return to work worthwhile. Returners needed sufficient earnings to ensure additional costs such as childcare were covered (and earnings that compensate for a loss of benefits). Therefore, in identifying potential job roles, salary levels and working conditions are important, alongside knowledgeable support on the practical implications of taking on paid work for household budgets.

### Employer benefits

**10.16** Projects were designed to connect with employers and explore creative and cost-effective ways to address their skills needs. Employer engagement was more challenging to address through evaluation because although employers were engaged and promised support, their actual involvement were more limited (for many projects), as was their participation in evaluation.

**10.17** Consequently, across the projects there was limited evidence of employers changing their practices. In some cases, this was because they had taken previous action, while in others there was little appetite for change. The latter seemed to reflect the range of routine business pressures that employers faced, which intensified due to COVID-19. Employers who did express interest responded positively if they had prompt communication from a project, knew another employer who was involved, were asked to take specific action, and were able to align their involvement with their company's approach to corporate social responsibility.

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<sup>11</sup> GCSE grades less than 5 A\* to C or 9 to 4 would be considered below that of the Level 2 equivalent threshold

**10.18** One project focussed specifically on engaging and supporting employers to create a group of “returner champions”. They found that with regular and specialist support from a group of HR recruiters, they were able to make many positive changes to how jobs were designed, advertised and recruited. This project recognised the challenges facing employers and the need for transparency about the time employers need to invest if they are serious about change. They also acknowledged the importance of senior leader involvement, tailoring interventions so that they suit complex organisations with differing needs within different departments, and linking to wider ambitions of culture change over time.

**10.19 Employers were able to offer fewer job opportunities than projects had anticipated.**

There was little evidence of changed recruitment practices to create new roles, such as workforce profile reviews or the creation of flexible or part-time roles. Reasons for this include:

- Employers’ recruitment needs were time-specific and often out of alignment with project delivery
- Many employers recruited in small numbers either because they were small businesses, or because they were recruiting only to replace staff leaving, rather than expanding or restructuring their workforce
- Employers were unwilling to offer roles without first understanding the nature of the candidates that might be interested, to ensure they were in control of any recruitment process
- Only occasionally would larger employers have multiple vacancies and even then, this might be seasonal and time-dependent

**10.20 There may be benefits to sector or occupation focused returner programmes, which are carefully targeted.** The limited evidence generated would suggest that they would work best where:

- There is a genuine skills shortage due to a lack of candidates in the labour market (rather than a skills shortage arising from a lack of candidates, unattractive wages, or poor job conditions)
- There is strong buy-in from an influential large employer or employers at the start of the programme

**Added value of intermediary**

**10.21** The Fund was promoted by the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), which secured interest from organisations across a range of different sectors including commercial recruitment agencies, local authorities, and the social and voluntary sectors. A wide range of organisations were funded, suggesting that there is an infrastructure with capacity to undertake this work.



**10.22 There is a clear rationale for intervention.** The evaluation findings suggest that returners need support to find work and overcome barriers. However, 3 things were not clear from the Fund:

- Whether projects should be designed to support both returners and to encourage employers to adapt their practices – there is no evidence from this evaluation that both these issues should be addressed by the same project at the same time
- How far the intermediaries need to be specialists in working with returners. It could be that a more generalist programme run by a larger welfare to work provider<sup>12</sup> could be effective, but this was not tested
- How far the intermediaries needed to be specialists in working with employers – most projects connected with a small number of employers directly, or with a larger number through an employer-facing partner. Projects which are specialists in business support and run by employers for employers might have improved outcomes but this was also not tested

**10.23** Funded projects and their partners need to identify the added value they bring. Returners who participated in the projects welcomed and valued the support they received and were very happy with the project teams that they engaged with. They also said that the personalised and intensive support they received was not available to them anywhere else. However, **it is not clear if the support required for returners is sufficiently different to that offered through more general employability programmes for other groups wishing to find employment** (such as those who have been made redundant, or people leaving the armed forces).

**10.24 It was clear that the interventions were resource intensive (by design).** While they moved returners closer to the labour market and created opportunities that brought employers into contact with returners, some of the projects were expensive when assessed by the cost per job metric. It is not clear whether job outcomes would have been significantly different if projects had run for longer and had not finished in the middle of a national lockdown. **Some projects did report that more returners entered employment beyond the lifetime of the Fund and therefore there would have been more returners reported as in employment had projects been given longer delivery timescales.** At the same time, the projects not affected by COVID-19 did not generally perform better in terms of employment outcomes than those which were.

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<sup>12</sup> This approach may have offered efficiencies in terms of economies of scale but might also have created concerns about additionality



## Next steps for supporting returners

- 10.25** The COVID-19 pandemic has affected how and where employees work, how employers manage and support their teams, and what employers need to do to sustain their business<sup>13</sup>. When delivery of the Fund completed in September 2020, 1 in 6 people in the UK workforce were either furloughed or working fewer hours<sup>14</sup>. Certain groups, including women and carers, have been disproportionately disadvantaged for a range of reasons. For example, women from ethnic minority groups were more likely to lose their jobs in shrinking sectors and occupations and less likely to gain jobs in growing ones<sup>15</sup>. Structural disadvantages have been compounded by the effects of school closures and the need for home-based childcare and schooling. Recent research also points to evidence that the crisis has resulted in a dramatic increase of women's unpaid care work burden<sup>16</sup>. The immediate future for employers and returners, in a post-COVID-19 labour market, will therefore be challenging. It is important that any recovery efforts do not inadvertently disadvantage returners.
- 10.26** The Fund has generated important learning about returner support. It has shown that returners need and benefit from additional support to participate in the labour market. It has also shown how the needs and benefits vary among different groups of returners and at a personal level. Future labour market policy to support returners should consider the findings of this Fund evaluation, with future interventions designed to build on the learning in this report.

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<sup>13</sup> CIPD (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on working lives

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/goodwork/covid-impact>

<sup>14</sup> Institute for Employment Studies (2020) The impacts of the coronavirus crisis on the labour market <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/impacts-coronavirus-crisis-labour-market>

<sup>15</sup> Institute for Employment Studies (2020) (n 11)

<sup>16</sup> Power, K., (2020) The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15487733.2020.1776561>



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