

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Visit to Airdrie

Note of discussion

Monday 28 November 2022

Committee member attendees

Siobhian Brown MSP (Convener)

Murdo Fraser MSP (Deputy Convener)

Jim Fairlie MSP

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The Committee visited Airdrie to try and understand the reasons behind the high levels of people not working due to a long-term illness in North Lanarkshire.

They met with two employability organisations, Routes to Work Ltd and Remploy who provide a range of services aimed at helping people re-enter the job market and also heard from local employer partners and local council officials. The Committee also spoke to service users about their experiences which led them into unemployment and the support offered to them to help them back into work.

Following discussions, the Committee then visited the Routes to Work Airdrie Central Community Engagement Project launched in February 2022 and funded by the UK Community Renewal Fund. The UK Community Renewal Fund is a UK Government programme for 2021/22. This aims to support people and communities most in need across the UK to pilot programmes and new approaches to prepare for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It invests in skills, community and place, local business, and supporting people into employment.

The programme is pre-employability focused with an intense community engagement approach to support those unemployed, economically inactive or in unsecure or unstable work in the Airdrie Central area.

The programme aims to reach those most in need in the heart of the community through concentrated, intense engagement offering pre-employability and personal development activities and innovative practise to support people into employment.

The following summary is intended to provide an overview of the main themes that emerged from the visit.

Employability organisations

Routes to Work Ltd is a registered charity who has transformed, developed, and grown into an organisation whose mission is to *'tailor our support to each individual, helping them recognise and develop their unique capabilities'*. Over their 20 years delivering employability and skills services they have been funded to deliver through a variety of European, National Government (UK & Scottish), Local Government and Big Lottery funding streams, targeting many different unemployed, underemployed & disadvantaged customer groups including (but not limited to), Lone Parents, Workless Households, the Long-term unemployed, Young People, ESA & other health-related benefit customers, older workers (50 plus), customers with addictions and people with convictions. To date they have been supported over 21,000 North Lanarkshire residents into work.

Remploy, part of Maximus, provides specialist employment and skills support for disabled people and those with health conditions and those at risk of long term unemployment across England, Wales and Scotland.

They help employers to create a workplace environment where all employees can thrive and to recognise the benefit to their business of employing disabled people. The Remploy brand is only used in Scotland to deliver the Fair Start Scotland contract in Tayside and Lanarkshire, which is funded by the Scottish Government. To date Remploy have helped 8, 000 people back into work through Fair Start Scotland. They offer 18 months support to help people get into work and a further 12 months in work support.

Barriers to getting back into employment

The Committee heard of the barriers that people with long-term illness faced going back into work which included—

- Mental health issues, which, in many cases, have been exacerbated by the pandemic
- Individuals anxious of face-to-face contact following the pandemic and a fear of catching covid
- The need to retrain as a number of manufacturing companies shut down as a result of the pandemic
- Long term unemployed people lacking confidence feeling their skills are redundant
- Concern that people will become financially worse off if they go back to work as they will lose their benefits
- Fear their entry into the job market could be short lived if health issues made it impossible to continue to work and that they would return to Universal Credit as opposed to Personal Independent Payment or adult disability benefits which they currently receive
- Concern that the cost-of-living additional payments are inadvertently acting as a disincentive to people seeking employment
- Ongoing health issues and days of fluctuating wellness
- Ongoing caring and/or childcare commitments

- A mis match between workforce and job markets where the health and hospitality sectors are not able to offer flexible working conditions.

Services offered

The organisations highlighted some of the key aspects of their services as follows—

- Employability support services adopt a person-centred approach with services tailored to the needs of the individual and are voluntary
- The need to build trust with client
- Strong partnership working with local government, employers, health and advice services and the third sector
- Wellness support, such as signposting other services or offering counselling often precedes employability support with all staff trained on mental health issues
- Employability support included help with harnessing transferable skills; compiling CVs; confidence building and interview skills
- The need to retrain people for different roles in light of their health condition
- The need for employers to understand childcare and caring commitments and offer hybrid models of working and flexibility around office hours
- Engaging with employers to identify appropriate recruitment processes for individuals
- Those who were made redundant during the pandemic trying to re-enter the job market often feel overqualified for posts
- The average cost of helping someone back into work ranges from £4K- £14K per job

- As a staged approach to obtaining full time work, people can do shorter periods of permitted work while still receiving social security benefits
- Post COVID there is a shortage of workers in the health and hospitality and construction sectors
- A number of people with health problems have seen these worsen following the pandemic as appointments and scheduled procedures had been postponed
- During covid, services included support with mental health and help with accessing support such as activity packs and food banks