



# Understanding experiences of employment and skills support in Surrey

A qualitative study exploring experiences of people who are unemployed and seeking work, or employed in insecure or low-paid roles and aiming for improved conditions

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Employment and skills support plays a vital role in reducing poverty, improving health, and strengthening economic resilience. This research explores how Surrey residents on low incomes, whether unemployed or in insecure, low paid work, experience local employment and skills services.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups with Surrey residents and employment advisors, the study provides insight into what is working well, what barriers persist, and how services could more effectively support residents into secure, sustainable and meaningful work.

Although Surrey is widely seen as an affluent county, many residents experience considerable financial hardship. Rising living costs, insecure and low -paid work, limited opportunities for progression, and gaps in accessible training create barriers to employment stability. National welfare reforms and the growing reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven recruitment tools are reshaping the job-seeking landscape and creating additional hurdles for residents.

Within this context, employment support has the potential to be transformative, provided it is trusted, easy to access, flexible, and meaningfully aligned with people's day-to-day realities.

### *Key findings*

- **Awareness of employment support is low.** Many participants first encountered services through voluntary and community organisations rather than being signposted by the Jobcentre Plus (JCP). Clarity about what each service offers, alongside stronger online visibility, would help residents identify and access support earlier and with greater confidence.
- **Experiences with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) were generally negative and impacting engagement with all employment advice.** Several participants described receiving limited or inconsistent guidance, and some felt that their health conditions or personal circumstances were not fully understood. A few felt pressured rather than supported. These experiences not only affected their trust and engagement with JCP services but also shaped how they approached other employment support initially, with some feeling cautious or sceptical until trust was established. As a result, many participants ultimately relied more on community-based employment services, which they felt better met their needs.
- **Most participants were receptive to employment support and valued the format and content of the advice.** Participants typically received in-person support, which helped build a relationship with someone, and valued support that was tailored to their career goals. Advice sessions were often held in public

spaces, like cafés, and some participants were concerned about the confidentiality of these locations. Some also thought that the sequencing of support could feel rigid (in that topics were covered in a set order, rather than which topic might be most useful for them at any one time).

- **Training access emerged as an area for development.** Participants expressed interest in courses such as English language courses, digital skills training, GCSE equivalents, or sector-specific qualifications. For some, these gaps directly prevented progression into work. Broader availability or funding for these opportunities would help people progress and participate more fully in the job market, particularly where digital skills are increasingly important.
- **Participants consistently emphasised the importance of tailored, person-centred support.** They valued employment advice that aligned with their skills, aspirations, and personal circumstances (including health conditions, caring responsibilities, digital skills, transport, and confidence levels). Feeling genuinely listened to was a critical factor in their engagement and trust. Some participants with experience of the JCP felt that the support offered by work coaches there was not tailored to their individual circumstances, and that coaches did not take the time to understand their needs. One area that was thought could be stronger was advisors providing information to people with long-term health conditions or disabilities about in-work adjustments.
- **Ongoing encouragement and continuity mattered for engagement.** Participants wanted to feel they were making progress and appreciated regular encouragement from advisors. Employment advisors emphasised that ongoing encouragement and consistent communication were crucial to maintaining engagement, yet service continuity could be disrupted when advisors changed roles, leaving some participants reluctant to “start again” with someone new.
- **Stronger links with local employers could lead to better outcomes for people seeking work.** Participants wanted employment advisors to build closer connections with local employers, so that they can more effectively match people to local opportunities and help secure useful feedback after unsuccessful applications.

### *Conclusions*

The findings demonstrate that Surrey’s employment and skills support offer is helpful for many residents, particularly where advisors provide personalised support. Where support worked well, its strengths lie in the quality of relationships built with clients through empathy, encouragement, and tailored guidance.

The research also identifies several areas where the offer could be strengthened, including increasing awareness of available support, expanding access to relevant

training, improving continuity when advisors change, and developing stronger partnerships with employers. These factors represent practical levers for enhancing how employment support is delivered and accessed across the county.

By addressing these areas, Surrey has the potential to improve employment pathways, better support residents' financial stability, and contribute to reducing the inequalities that influence health and wellbeing locally.

### *Acknowledgements*

Thank you to the Surrey residents who kindly shared their experiences by participating in this research; this study would not have been possible without their contributions.

Thanks also to the HDRC Surrey Public Involvement Panel (East Surrey), whose insight and expertise played a valuable role in shaping this research project.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Employment and skills support is a critical component in tackling poverty and promoting economic stability. This research explores experiences of employment and skills support of individuals on low incomes, specifically those who are unemployed and seeking work, or employed in insecure or low-paid roles and aiming for improved conditions. The study considers the accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness of current provision and explores opportunities to enhance uptake among those most likely to benefit. By drawing on qualitative insights from individuals with lived experience, the research seeks to inform local policy and practice, ensuring that employment support contributes to reducing socioeconomic and health inequalities.

### *1.1 About this research*

This research was jointly funded by [Research Ready Surrey](#) (funded by NHS England) and the [Health Determinants Research Collaboration](#) (HDRC) Surrey (funded by NIHR). This research was led by Good Company Surrey and HDRC Surrey.

[Good Company Surrey](#) is a Surrey-based charity committed to ending poverty across the county. Good Company works across Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, and large parts of Mole Valley and Reigate & Banstead. The organisation delivers a range of services including foodbanks, community food pantries, a refugee network and advice and support services. Good Company works in partnership with other local organisations to provide Advice Cafes which are drop-in sessions where residents can access expert advice on housing, benefits, debt, and employment.

Good Company Surrey are part of the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Surrey. This is a research collaboration hosted by Surrey County Council and partnered with the University of Surrey, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, and other local charities and organisations. HDRC Surrey focuses on generating evidence and insights to understand how wider factors, such as employment and housing, affect health outcomes. Its aim is to inform local policy and practice so that interventions can address these wider determinants of health and reduce health inequalities across Surrey. HDRC Surrey is funded by the [National Institute for Health and Care Research](#) (NIHR).

## 2. BACKGROUND

### *2.1 National context*

Poverty in the UK remains deeply entrenched and has been exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Rising prices for essentials such as housing, food, energy, and medicine have deepened existing hardship.

As of 2023/24, 21% of the UK population, about 14.2 million people, were living in relative low income, defined as below 60% of median income after housing costs. This includes 4.5 million children, meaning three in ten children are growing up in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026).<sup>1</sup> Whilst levels of relative poverty have remained stable over the last few years, within this, there are a higher proportion of people who have moved into very deep poverty (6.8 million people of the 14.2 million now in deep poverty). (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026).<sup>2</sup>

Employment is no longer a guaranteed route to financial security. Evidence shows that a significant proportion of people who accessed a food bank in the UK are in work. The Trussell Trust (2023) reports that around 20% of referrals to its food banks come from households where at least one person is employed. However, these individuals often face insecure working arrangements, low wages, and high stress, which contribute to persistent financial instability. Many are employed on zero-hours contracts or in agency work, leaving them vulnerable to fluctuating income and limited job security.<sup>3</sup> The impact of employment on benefit entitlement can also disincentivise work, with there being limited financial gains, especially when taking up low-paid work.

Employment quality is central to this challenge. A recent UK-based peer-reviewed study found that 65% of food bank users and 76% of working-age participants identified poor job quality - such as short-hours contracts, insufficient pay, erratic shifts, and inflexible working conditions - as primary drivers of food insecurity (Hayes & Maynard, 2024).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, welfare reforms requiring low-paid workers to increase their hours under threat of sanctions have compounded job insecurity rather than alleviating it, creating additional stress and barriers to stability.<sup>5</sup>

These findings highlight the complex interplay between poverty, employment, and food insecurity. They underscore the need for integrated policy responses that address not only income adequacy but also job quality and access to skills development, ensuring that work genuinely provides a pathway out of poverty.

### **National policy initiatives**

Recent national policy developments signal a shift towards more integrated and holistic support for individuals facing poverty. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP),

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *UK Poverty 2026* (2026) <<https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>> [accessed 29 January 2026].

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *UK Poverty 2026* (2026) <<https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>> [accessed 29 January 2026].

<sup>3</sup> Trussell Trust, *Hunger in the UK: A Comprehensive Study of Food Insecurity and Poverty* (2023) <<https://www.trusselltrust.org/hunger-in-the-uk>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>4</sup> Hayes, L. J. B., and N. Maynard, 'Workers Using Foodbanks: The Embedding of Food Insecurity at the Nexus of Welfare and Employment Laws', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 32.3 (2024), 318–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1332/17598273Y2024D000000026>>.

<sup>5</sup> Hayes, L. J. B., & Maynard, N. (2024).

through its *Get Britain Working* White Paper, has proposed a place-based approach that combines employment, health, and skills support across eight designated trailblazer areas. This initiative also includes a youth guarantee aimed at providing tailored opportunities for 18–21-year-olds, ensuring that young people have access to training and employment pathways (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, a new National Jobs and Careers, announced by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2025, is being introduced to streamline support across Jobcentres and the National Careers Service. This initiative will utilise digital tools to better connect individuals with training opportunities and employment, reducing fragmentation and improving accessibility (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).<sup>7</sup>

There are also commitments, set out in the Employment Rights Bill (October 2024), to enhance employer engagement and improve job quality. The proposed measures include banning exploitative zero-hours contracts, ensuring compensation for cancelled shifts, expanding day-one entitlement to statutory sick pay, and strengthening trade union access. These reforms aim to tackle structural issues that contribute to in-work poverty by creating fairer and more secure working conditions.<sup>8</sup>

### **Employment and skills support**

Effective access to employment and skills support is essential for individuals using food banks who wish to move out of poverty. However, the current system is fragmented and underfunded, limiting its ability to address the needs of those facing multiple barriers.

Research by the Learning and Work Institute, highlights the critical role of skills development in improving life chances. Gaining qualifications, undertaking training, and engaging in adult learning can significantly boost incomes, enhance social inclusion, and improve outcomes for children. Despite this, public investment in adult skills has declined over recent years, and both employer and individual contributions remain insufficient to meet demand (Learning and Work Institute, 2022).<sup>9</sup>

An Employment and Skills Policy Briefing further notes that while devolving employment and skills budgets to local authorities offers potential benefits, there is a risk that people experiencing poverty, particularly those with complex needs, will remain trapped in low-skill, low-pay employment without targeted interventions. Addressing structural

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, *Get Britain Working White Paper* (2023) <<https://www.gov.uk>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>7</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, 'Biggest Shake-Up of Jobcentres in Decades Gets Underway' (2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-shake-up-of-jobcentres-in-decades-gets-underway>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *What does the Employment Rights Bill mean for you?* (10 October 2024) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/what-does-the-employment-rights-bill-mean-for-you>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>9</sup> Learning and Work Institute, *Skills for Work and Life: The Role of Learning and Skills in Reducing Poverty* (2022) <<https://learningandwork.org.uk>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

barriers such as transport, housing, and childcare is essential to ensure equitable access to opportunities and to prevent the perpetuation of disadvantage (Sheffield Hallam University, 2023).<sup>10</sup>

These findings underscore the need for a coordinated, well-funded approach that integrates employment support with skills development and addresses wider socioeconomic barriers. Without such measures, individuals seeking to transition from food insecurity to sustainable employment will continue to face significant challenges.

## 2.2 Surrey context

Although Surrey is often perceived as an affluent county, significant pockets of deprivation persist. Rising living costs have placed increasing pressure on households, particularly those with low incomes and/or insecure employment.

### Employment in Surrey

Surrey's labour market appears strong, with an employment rate of 80% among those aged 16–64. However, economic inactivity stands at 18%, slightly above regional and national averages. While the county's median full-time wage (£45,831) exceeds national figures, one in ten full-time workers earns less than £24,615 annually, leaving them vulnerable to in-work poverty. Employment insecurity, such as short-hours contracts and erratic shifts, remains a concern for those on low incomes (Surrey-i, 2025).<sup>11</sup>

Employment is recognised within Surrey County Council's [Economy Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) (JSNA) as a key determinant of health and wellbeing. The JSNA highlights that the nature, quality, and accessibility of employment opportunities significantly influence financial security, mental health, and overall life outcomes. Secure and meaningful work not only provides income but also fosters social inclusion and resilience, whereas precarious employment (characterised by low pay, limited hours, and poor job security) can exacerbate stress and health inequalities. The JSNA looks at both the impact of the varied distribution of employment opportunities across Surrey and individual experiences of work, including job quality and progression opportunities. In addition, the JSNA identifies retired, unemployed and economically inactive residents as priority populations at increased risk of loneliness, highlighting how changes in employment status can reduce routine social contact and social participation.

Skills development is identified as a critical enabler for improving employment outcomes. The JSNA stresses the importance of accessible training and upskilling

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<sup>10</sup> Sheffield Hallam University, *Employment and Skills Policy Briefing: Devolution and Inclusive Growth* (2023) <<https://www.shu.ac.uk>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>11</sup> Surrey-i, "Employment in Surrey: Statistics about Jobs and Employees," Surrey County Council, March 2025. Available at: <<https://www.surreyi.gov.uk/dataset/exzxm/employment-in-surrey-statistics-about-jobs-and-employees>> [Accessed: 9 January 2026].

initiatives to support career progression and reduce inequalities. It also notes that employment interventions should be integrated with health and social support to address the complex needs of those facing disadvantage.<sup>12</sup>

### **In-work poverty**

Previous ethnographic research conducted with Surrey residents who are employed yet remain in poverty, identified key drivers for this.<sup>13</sup> Drivers included low wages, high living costs, health challenges, relationship breakdowns, and limited career progression. While short-term support - such as food banks, childcare schemes, and debt advice - offers temporary relief, these measures fail to address underlying causes. The report highlights the need for a tailored approach that combines immediate assistance with long-term strategies, including personalised career coaching, accessible training, and reframing support services to increase relevance and uptake. By investing in skills development and promoting financial resilience, Surrey County Council can help individuals transition from precarious living to sustainable economic stability.

### **Local skills and employment support**

Surrey County Council coordinates programmes such as [Work Wise](#), [WorkWell](#), and [STEP Surrey](#), which provide integrated employment, benefits, and training support for residents facing multiple barriers. These efforts seek to ensure that work offers a genuine route out of poverty. Local strategies also emphasise the importance of skills development and inclusive employment pathways. The [Surrey Skills Plan](#) (2022) aims to address skills gaps and support economically inactive groups through employer-led initiatives.

## **2.3 Summary**

Nationally, rising living costs and structural challenges in the labour market have undermined the assumption that employment guarantees financial security. Insecure work, low wages, and limited progression opportunities have left many households reliant on short-term support, such as food banks, while welfare reforms have often compounded instability rather than alleviating it. Policy responses, including the Employment Rights Bill and initiatives under the Department for Work and Pensions, signal a commitment to improving job quality and integrating employment, health, and skills support. However, gaps remain in addressing systemic barriers such as childcare, transport, and housing.

Locally, Surrey reflects national trends despite its overall affluence. Significant pockets of deprivation persist, driven by high living costs and uneven access to secure, well-paid

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<sup>12</sup> Surrey County Council, *Economy* (Joint Strategic Needs Assessment), published January 2025, Surrey-i, available at <<https://www.surreyi.gov.uk/jsna/economy/>> [accessed 9 January 2026].

<sup>13</sup> *Experiences of In-Work Poverty* report, commissioned by Surrey County Council and conducted by Revealing Reality

employment. While the county's labour market shows strong headline indicators, economic inactivity and low pay among a segment of workers highlight the risk of in-work poverty. A tailored approach is required, combining immediate support with long-term strategies focused on skills development, career progression, and integrated health and employment services. Local programmes represent important steps toward this goal, but sustained investment and coordination are essential to ensure that work provides a genuine route out of poverty.

### 3. RESEARCH AIMS

This research sought to understand how well local services are meeting the needs of people on low incomes who are unemployed or seeking improved employment conditions. The three research aims were:

**Aim 1:** *How do Surrey residents on low incomes who are looking for work or better working conditions hear about and engage with employment and skills services, and what are their first impressions of these services?*

**Aim 2:** *How are employment and skills services experienced by residents on low incomes (including the content and format of support)?*

**Aim 3:** *What recommendations do residents have for improving local employment and skills support services?*

#### 3.1 Research context

This research was conducted across two of the key main areas where Good Company Surrey operate: Epsom and Leatherhead. In these areas there are a range of organisations that provide employment support, including local council services, social housing providers (some of which offer support to non-residents), and other community-based organisations. Research participants were also asked about any employment or skills-related assistance they had received through their local Jobcentre Plus (JCP). The main providers mentioned by participants were:

- **Epsom and Ewell Employment Opportunities and Training Hub** offers free employment support for anyone seeking work or looking to change roles. Based in Epsom town centre, it also provides outreach support and is part of the Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership. Website: <https://www.epsomandewellhub.com/>
- **Mole Valley Employment and Skills Hub** provides similar services to the Epsom and Ewell Hub, supporting job seekers and those wanting new roles. It is located in Leatherhead town centre and is also part of the Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership. Website: <https://www.molevalley.gov.uk/community/mole-valley-employment-skills-hub/>

- **WorkWell** supports Surrey residents with health conditions or disabilities that affect their ability to work. It helps individuals stay in employment, return to work, and access wellbeing support for mental and physical health challenges. Website: <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/jobs/employability-and-skills/workwell>
- **Work Wise** offers one-to-one employment support for people with health conditions, disabilities, or neurodivergence. It focuses on helping individuals find and sustain meaningful, long-term paid employment or remain in work. Website: <https://www.getsetuk.co.uk/work-wise/>
- **Clarion Futures – Jobs, skills and training support** provides job search support, training, business start-up advice, and grants for courses. Services are available to Clarion residents and non-residents, including weekly sessions at Leatherhead Community Hub. Website: <https://www.myclarionhousing.com/help-and-guidance/clarion-futures-support>
- **Raven Housing Trust’s Employment Support Programme (Work Smart Surrey and Sussex)** helps unemployed individuals into work and supports some in-work Universal Credit claimants seeking new roles. It is delivered in partnership with housing providers, colleges, councils, and Good Company Surrey. Website: <https://www.ravenht.org.uk/getting-help-and-support/support-with-skills-for-work/>
- **Stoneleigh Job Club** offers free CV development, job search planning, interview preparation, and motivational coaching. It is funded through community grants, including the National Lottery Community Fund. Website: <https://www.stoneleighjobclub.co.uk/>

#### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research set out to examine how effectively local employment and skills services support people on low incomes. It focused on individuals who have accessed Good Company services who are either unemployed and seeking work or employed but looking for better pay, permanent roles, or increased hours. The study assessed whether current provision is accessible, relevant, and responsive to user needs, and explored ways to improve uptake among those who could benefit most. People unable to work due to long-term health conditions or disabilities were outside the scope of this research.

This research had a qualitative design with a two-stage approach which included both desk research and primary research. As the project handled sensitive topics with vulnerable populations, a research ethics review was conducted using the HDRC Surrey Research Ethics Review process before any data was collected. Key study documents were reviewed by the HDRC Surrey Ethics Review Panel to ensure the study in conducted in line with sound research ethics and local data governance principles.

#### *4.1 Public involvement*

HDRC Surrey runs two Public Involvement Panels, made up of residents with lived experience of health inequalities, who contribute directly to shaping the programme's research activities.

Two engagement sessions were held with the East Surrey Public Involvement Panel to shape this study (August 2025 and October 2025). These sessions aimed to gather panel members' perspectives on the research approach and experiences of barriers to accessing employment support.

In August 2025, the research design was presented to the Panel. Members identified several barriers they felt should be explored, including feelings of embarrassment or shame, lack of formal qualifications, and limited trust in services, particularly those perceived to be linked to the Department for Work and Pensions or associated with potential benefit sanctions. Members also highlighted the importance of including employment advisors in the research, which led to revisions in the focus group design to ensure these perspectives were included.

In October 2025, emerging findings were shared with the Panel using an anonymised composite case study. Members offered further reflections on the barriers people may face at different stages of their journey in seeking employment support. These insights informed refinements to the structure and sequencing of the focus groups.

#### *4.2 Desk research*

The desk research involved a light-touch synthesis of national and local research and evidence related to employment. This included reviewing research on employment quality and in-work poverty to better understand the local context, as well as mapping existing support offers and initiatives related to employment and skills development.

#### *4.3 Primary research*

The primary research was qualitative and conducted in two stages: in-depth interviews followed by focus groups. The interviews explored participants' individual experiences, while the focus groups were designed to generate ideas on how employment and skills support could be improved. Fieldwork was conducted between September - December 2025.

### **In-depth interviews**

#### Research design

The first stage involved eleven in-depth interviews with individuals who had used Good Company services, such as food banks or pantries, and for whom employment advice would be useful, either to find work or improve their current job situation.

## Research ethics

All participants gave informed consent prior to interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring data was stored securely. Participants were reminded they could skip any questions and were provided with an information sheet after the interview which listed support services, including Citizens Advice and welfare and health resources. To thank participants for their time, £40 vouchers were provided, plus travel costs. All interviews were held in local venues known to participants for familiarity and comfort.

## Participants, sampling and recruitment

Participants included those out of work and seeking employment, as well as people in work looking for better pay, permanent roles, or more hours. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit individuals with lived experience of financial hardship and an interest in employment support. The sampling approach aimed to capture diversity in experiences and backgrounds, including individuals with limited or substantial employment support, those on zero-hours contracts seeking stability, and people returning to work after caring responsibilities or health-related breaks.

Recruitment was facilitated through Good Company services and recent events held by Good Company (such as Research Cafe events). Participants had varied ages, gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, and health conditions. The sample included people who had received little or substantial employment advice, those out of work, and those seeking better pay or more stable hours.

## Data collection

Data was collected through eleven in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Interviews explored participants' employment histories, current circumstances, and experiences with support services. Discussions also covered barriers to work, aspirations, and perceptions of available employment and skills support. Interviews were audio-recorded and stored securely in a protected folder.

## Analytical approach – thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes across the interview data. Themes were refined through iterative review and sense-checking with the research team to reduce bias and ensure accuracy.

## **Focus groups**

### Research design

The second stage involved two in-person focus groups. Each group included five participants with lived experience of financial hardship and an interest in employment support, alongside at least one employment advisor. The groups brought together a mix

of some individuals who had taken part in a first-stage interview and other who were new participants in the study.

During the focus group discussions, anonymised case studies, developed from interview findings, were used to illustrate the range of barriers people may face when accessing or engaging with employment and skills support. Participants then took part in a journey mapping exercise in smaller groups to explore the emotions and thoughts that an individual might experience at different stages of the employment support journey. This activity also explored what might make someone engage and what might make them disengage at each point in the journey, to help generate suggestions for improvement. This activity facilitated reflection on lived experiences without forcing personal disclosure.

### Research ethics

All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the focus groups. Participants were advised that they did not need to share any personal information and, if others did so, to treat it confidentially. Confidentiality was safeguarded by ensuring that all findings were reported in a way that prevented individuals from being identified. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw at any time without consequence; one participant chose to do so and left the session.

To recognise participants' time and support any travel costs, each was given a £45 voucher. Safeguarding procedures were in place throughout, and participants were signposted to support services where appropriate. The discussions were designed to minimise distress, and participants could take breaks or skip questions at any point. Focus groups were held in familiar community venues such as food banks and advice centres to ensure comfort.

### Participants, sampling and recruitment

The focus groups primarily included individuals with lived experience of financial hardship and an interest in employment support, alongside one or two employment advisors in each group. Most participants with lived experience of financial hardship and an interest in employment support had already taken part in a research interview earlier in the study, as their familiarity with the topic was expected to support richer discussions on how services could be improved. A smaller number of new participants were also recruited to broaden the diversity of perspectives and due to practical considerations, as not all interviewees were available to join a focus group.

### Data collection

Data were collected through two in-person focus groups, each with five participants and one or two employment advisors. The sessions followed a structured format that began with sharing anonymised early findings from the interview phase. Participants

were then invited to reflect on these insights and explore ideas for designing an effective employment support process.

#### Analytical approach – thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes across the two focus groups. Themes were refined through an iterative process involving review, discussion, and sense checking within the research team to reduce bias and ensure accuracy.

#### *4.4. Validity and reliability*

This research project was designed and conducted to ensure both validity and reliability. Validity was ensured through purposive sampling of individuals with relevant lived experience and the use of in-depth interviews and focus groups that allowed for nuanced, authentic responses. Reliability was strengthened by consistent facilitation across interviews, ethical safeguards, and triangulation with wider literature.

#### *4.5. Study limitations*

To support transparency and appropriate interpretation of the findings, it is important to acknowledge the key limitations of the study. These limitations do not detract from the richness of the data but help frame the extent to which the insights can be applied more widely.

Limitations relate of this study primarily to the scope of the sample, recruitment approach, and the inherent characteristics of qualitative research:

- **Small sample size:** The qualitative research methodology facilitated collection of data that is deep, nuanced and reflective of a range of complex experiences. However, as with most qualitative research projects, this required keeping the sample small and purposively recruited. Therefore, the findings are based on a limited number of interviews and focus groups, which means we are unable to make generalisations to the wider Surrey population.
- **Selection bias:** Participants were recruited through Good Company services and partner organisations, meaning they were already engaged with some support networks and may not represent those who do not access such services.
- **Sensitive topic:** Whilst efforts were made to create a safe environment for participants to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences, there is always the risk that some participants may have withheld details due to the personal nature of employment challenges.

**Risk of bias:** While rich in detail, qualitative findings are interpretive and dependent on researcher judgement. We took steps to reduce any bias through our work engaging with HDRC Surrey Public Involvement Panel so that their

experience and external perspectives could help to reduce bias, and through thematic analysis and sense-checking with members of the research team.

## 5. RESEACH RESULTS

### *5.1. Awareness of employment and skills support*

**Participants typically became aware of employment and skills support services through local voluntary and community organisations that they were in contact with, rather than through formal employment pathways.** Most participants had learnt about employment and skills support via community-based services such as social prescribing teams, food support initiatives (e.g., Epsom Pantry), Leatherhead Community Hub, or similar local organisations. These organisations effectively acted as informal gateways, signposting residents to employment advice when needs were identified.

**In contrast, signposting to employment and skills support from Jobcentre Plus (JCP) appeared very limited.** Although most participants were in regular contact with JCP regarding Universal Credit (UC) claims (either while unemployed or employed on low-income or zero-hours contracts), none reported being proactively directed to local employment and skills support services. Two participants became aware of the local employment and skills hub only because a UC related meeting happened to be held there, but even then they received little information about the broader support offer available.

**For many participants, awareness of employment services occurred by chance, often while seeking help for unrelated issues.** Several participants expressed that they could have benefited from support much earlier had they known it existed. For example, one participant initially visited Leatherhead Community Hub for food bank access, was then supported by a Good Company support worker with a disability benefit claim and was subsequently signposted to employment advice provided by Clarion Futures. Others had not heard of any local employment support, while some were aware of it but felt services were inaccessible due to opening hours that conflicted with part-time or irregular work schedules.

**When discussing how they would prefer to hear about employment and skills support, participants emphasised the need for greater visibility both in local spaces and online.** They noted that some hubs, such as the Epsom and Ewell Employment Hub, lacked clear signage or promotional materials in high footfall areas, such as the adjacent shopping centre, reducing public awareness. Participants suggested that information should be displayed in widely used community locations such as GP surgeries, pharmacies, libraries, and community food projects (e.g.,

community fridges and pantries). Online visibility was also highlighted as essential. Participants recommended targeted promotion via local community Facebook groups, LinkedIn posts, and other digital channels used by residents. They also emphasised the value of sharing information through established community networks so these organisations could cascade messages to their members. Suggested networks included local advice cafes, Surrey Coalition of Disabled People, Catalyst Support, and Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum.

## *5.2. Initial perceptions of employment and skills support*

**Most participants were open and receptive to employment and skills support when they first became aware of it.** Although they were not always sure what the support would involve, many felt motivated to return to work or improve their employment situation and therefore welcomed any guidance available.

Some expressed the emotional strain associated with job searching, noting that the process could feel overwhelming, isolating, or demoralising. As a result, several emphasised that they valued not only practical assistance but also the opportunity to speak with someone who could offer encouragement and emotional support. For many, the prospect of having a supportive, understanding advisor was as important as the employment advice itself.

*“It was at the right point for me.. I’d been trying to get something for ages... but it was more advice, who to contact.. she got me at the right time...”*

(Man, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

**Clear information about the service offer was particularly important to participants.** Many were initially unsure what to expect from employment and skills support, and they strongly valued receiving a clear and straightforward explanation of what the service could provide.

*“I didn’t know really what... she said she’ll help me look for a job and she explained...but I didn’t know how that would work...”*

(Woman, looking for work, interview)

**A number of participants expressed concern about whether the employment and skills support was connected to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or Jobcentre Plus (JCP).** Previous negative experiences with JCP shaped these worries, particularly as JCP activities can be mandatory and non-compliance can lead to benefit sanctions. As a result, some participants feared that engaging with any employment support might lead to information being shared with JCP or result in adverse consequences for their benefits.

**Participants also described negative experiences of employment support directly provided by JCP, including being encouraged to apply for jobs they felt were unsuitable.** This contributed to a perception that support linked to DWP/JCP might prioritise meeting compliance requirements over providing personalised or meaningful help. In some cases, individuals had been instructed by the JCP to attend meetings at a local employment hub, which reinforced the belief that the hubs were directly connected to JCP and not independent services.

**Employment advisors echoed these concerns, noting that clients often arrived with a pre-existing sense of distrust due to their interactions with JCP.** Employment advisors felt that this could limit open communication, particularly around barriers to work such as health issues or caring responsibilities - topics that clients feared might negatively affect their benefits if disclosed. Advisors stressed that developing an honest and trusting relationship was essential to providing effective support, but that this trust could take time to build when clients were anxious about possible links to JCP. Advisors also said that some clients missed appointments or disengaged entirely due to fear of sanctions, despite the fact that their services operate independently from JCP and do not impose penalties. Advisors had also seen clients who were worried that missing a single appointment would result in being “kicked out” of the service, even though this would not be the case.

### *5.3. The first meeting with an employment and skills advisor*

**Participants described the first one-to-one meeting with an employment advisor as a pivotal stage in the support process.** Many felt that starting the process was a big step and that someone may still have a lot of anxieties at this point. Because it could be a difficult barrier, clients did feel that this was an accomplishment and should be valued as such. Most participants found it reassuring when their first meeting was delivered in a relaxed and informal manner, in contrast to the more formal tone and time constraints they associated with JCP appointments. A less pressured environment helped reduce anxiety and made participants feel they did not need to “perform” or present themselves in a particular way. This, in turn, enabled them to be more open about the challenges they were facing, including issues that might affect their ability to find or sustain work.

*“Make it more like a chat as opposed to like a proper meeting because you don't want to be pressurised into thinking ‘Oh this is a formal meeting, I have to perform’ ”*

(Woman, looking for work, focus group)

**A negative first impression could be enough to deter someone from engaging with the service altogether.** Participants described the first advisor they met as setting the tone for how they perceived the entire service. If the initial interaction felt rude,

dismissive, or disinterested, participants said that they were unlikely to return and, in some cases, refused to access the service again.

*“She was pretty rude...No eye contact, and I felt like I wasn’t there... she was just typing away.. I’m kind of giving you my life here on the situation I’m in, and she wasn’t engaging at all... I won’t go back”.*

(Man, looking for work, interview)

Participants emphasised that employment advice services should model the qualities associated with good customer care. They wanted advisors to demonstrate genuine interest and respect, showing this through behaviours such as maintaining eye contact, facing the client, actively listening, and creating a supportive atmosphere.

#### *5.4. Format of employment and skills support*

**Support was typically offered in a face-to-face format, particularly for more in-depth sessions.** For sessions such as developing an employment support plan, reviewing CVs and job applications, and practising interview questions, these tended to be in in-person sessions. Following more intensive sessions, some clients received follow-up check-in calls or messages from employment advisors. Participants felt this mixed approach worked well, as remote contact at this stage allowed them to ask questions as they arose and feel supported between appointments. Some participants highlighted the importance of advisors being able to offer support in a range of formats to suit individual needs and preferences. While many valued in-person guidance, others felt that face-to-face meetings could be intimidating, particularly at the early stages of engagement or when discussing sensitive personal barriers.

Meetings took place in a variety of mutually convenient locations, including employment support offices and local cafés. While most participants felt these arrangements were generally workable, several raised concerns about **confidentiality** when sessions were held in public spaces. Discussing personal challenges in busy cafés made some participants uncomfortable.

Others thought that the employment advice offices themselves did not always feel private. For example, due to being visible through windows or because conversations could be overheard by others nearby. These factors affected how comfortable participants felt sharing personal information and influenced their willingness to fully engage with the support.

**Participants also highlighted challenges with the sequencing of the content covered in employment support sessions.** Participants noted that support tended to be offered on a linear basis e.g. starting with CV development, followed by applications, and then interview preparation. For some, this meant that real-life interviews occurred before they had received any interview training, leaving them unprepared. A more

flexible, needs-led approach, was seen as preferable, with support tailored to what was most urgent or relevant at a given moment within their job search.

### 5.5. Experiences of employment and skills support

**The content of employment support sessions was generally found by participants to be relevant and useful.** The support they received typically included assistance with creating or updating CVs, identifying suitable roles, completing job applications, and practising interview techniques. The level of support varied depending on individual needs. For example, one participant who spoke English as an Additional Language received more intensive help, with the employment advisor typing her application while she explained what she wanted to include. This tailored approach was highly valued and demonstrated the importance of flexible, personalised support.

*“Every week we applied for jobs...when we meet together...he asking which job do you prefer...sometimes we have four or five jobs...we do together on the computer...he writing [and I would say]”*

(Woman, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

While participants generally found the content of employment support sessions useful, they identified several areas where improvements could enhance the relevance and impact of the support provided.

**Access to relevant training opportunities was a significant challenge, particularly for those wanting to retrain or pursue new career paths.** While some participants were happy to undertake any available free training to strengthen their CVs, and appreciated advisors signposting them to these options, others struggled to find training that matched their needs or aspirations. For example, one participant felt that they were being held back by their English language skills but there were either no relevant courses that they could attend or no funding available for this. Another person felt that not having all of their GCSE qualifications in key subjects was leading to rejections at application or interview stage. Another participant wanted to re-train in an area of interest, and before they were able to complete the course, the funding was withdrawn. These examples highlighted that advisors were sometimes limited in their ability to support access to tailored or specialist training, even when this was critical for clients' progression into work.

**There was also limited awareness and uptake of JCP-provided training courses among participants.** Only a small number had been offered or attended these courses, and of those who had, most felt the training was not well delivered and the content was not particularly useful to their employment goals.

*“They invited me to the jobcentre, it was voluntary...for people 50+...it was called digital skills, (I need this)... It's two days, I've gone along...about an hour and half into faffing about we're supposed to start it... because the woman didn't know what she was doing... it was supposed to be over two days, it turned into one day and we were out of there two hours earlier than we were meant to...it was a complete waste of time”*

(Woman, working part-time, looking for better paid work/more hours, interview)

**Participants identified digital skills training as a key area where they required additional support.** This was particularly important for participants who had been out of work for long periods (e.g. 10 – 15 years) and felt they needed to significantly upskill to re-enter the job market with confidence. Digital tools, online applications, and technology-based recruitment processes were described as major barriers for this group. Participants also frequently raised concerns about the increasing use of AI-driven systems to screen job applications. Many felt disadvantaged by automated filtering tools, expressing the belief that their applications were being rejected before a person had the opportunity to review them. This contributed to feelings of frustration and discouragement and reinforced the need for tailored digital support to help them navigate modern recruitment practices.

*“I wonder how many applications are put through an AI thing first...to sort them and say no that doesn't meet the requirements...”*

(Woman, working part-time, looking for better paid work/more hours, focus group)

Participants also noted that they lacked confidence in using AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to support them in writing job applications. This was seen as a significant gap, and training in how to use AI effectively could improve their ability to apply for roles and compete in an increasingly digital job market.

**A key suggestion was the need for stronger collaboration between employment advisors and local employers, particularly larger employers with regular vacancies and local opportunities.** Participants felt that closer relationships would help advisors promote local opportunities more effectively and better support clients into suitable roles. They also believed that trusted relationships between advisors and employers could encourage employers to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants; feedback that participants felt would be invaluable for improving future applications and interview performance.

## 5.6. Important elements of employment and skills support

**Participants consistently emphasised the importance of tailored, person-centred support.** They valued employment advice that aligned with their skills, aspirations, and personal circumstances, and felt that this approach was essential for meaningful progress. Feeling genuinely listened to was a critical factor in their engagement and trust. In particular, clients felt listened to when the employment advisors understood their childcare responsibilities, and that they needed a role which fit around this. Similarly, individuals with long-term health conditions valued support that prioritised roles compatible with their needs, such as opportunities for flexible or home-based work. When advisors recognised and respected these circumstances, clients felt better supported and more motivated in their job search.

*“She wasn’t pushing me towards things I don’t want to do... she knows what I want and that’s what she’s helping me look for...”*

(Man, looking for work, interview)

*“He asking which I prefer...when we check the distance, he asking if I’m interested.. sometimes he decided it’s too long, so leave it...”*

(Woman, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

Some participants with experience of the JCP felt that the support offered by work coaches there was not tailored to their individual circumstances, and that coaches did not take the time to understand their needs. One participant, who was highly motivated to return to work but living with multiple severe physical health conditions following a workplace accident, described receiving job suggestions that were entirely unsuitable, such as dog-walking roles that they were physically unable to perform. They found this experience upsetting and unhelpful, and felt it illustrated a lack of personalised support.

*“The jobcentre.. they sent me things like dog walking... the jobcentre are useless at things like tailored.. It’s almost offensive at times...I’m using crutches and getting sent dog walking jobs...”*

(Man, long-term health condition, looking for work, interview)

**Tailored support was particularly important to participants with specific needs, such as those living with long-term health conditions or disabilities.** Many of these participants had positive experiences when advisors took the time to understand their circumstances and adapt the support accordingly. They appreciated when advisors listened carefully, recognised their capabilities and limitations, and helped them focus on roles that were both appropriate and achievable. For these individuals, personalised

guidance made the process feel more supportive, respectful, and aligned with their goals.

*“[she’s so] wonderful...she was asking, trying to see my kind of limitations in what I can do in terms of the physical side of things, and she said she’s gonna put some feelers about in terms of voluntary work”*

(Man, long-term health condition, looking for work, interview)

**Participants with long-term health conditions also felt there were knowledge gaps around in-work support and reasonable adjustments**, particularly regarding what they could request from employers to help them stay in work. Many participants had not received any information from their employment advisor on this. They believed this was an area where employment advisors could offer more guidance, especially in helping them understand their rights and how to navigate conversations with employers about workplace adaptations.

A small number of participants felt that advisors sometimes made assumptions based on their identity, which affected how supported they felt. For example, one participant who was older (near pension age) still wanted and needed to work but sensed an assumption that people of their age group were less likely to seek employment. They felt this resulted in fewer opportunities and less tailored support, highlighting the importance of avoiding stereotypes and ensuring all clients receive equitable, personalised guidance.

### *5.7. Important characteristics of employment and skills advisors*

In addition to receiving useful and personalised advice, **participants emphasised that the attitude and approach of the employment advisor played a crucial role in shaping their overall experience**. Many participants who had positive experiences spoke highly of their advisor as an individual, describing them as supportive, friendly, and a source of encouragement during what was often a difficult period. Many said that it can be a difficult and demotivating time when you are frequently rejected for roles, and their advisor was able to support them and encourage them to continue.

*“She was just comforting, like a friend...always fiercely looking for stuff ...giving me options to go out and do stuff.”*

(Man, long-term health condition, looking for work, interview)

*“The main thing I thought she would do for me is kind of give me a pep talk on where I was going wrong..”*

(Man, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

**A key factor influencing trust was the reliability of the advisor.** When advisors followed through on agreed actions, were available at the times they promised, and communicated consistently, participants felt reassured and able to build confidence in the relationship. Conversely, if advisors did not deliver on commitments or were not accessible when expected, this quickly eroded trust. In one case, a participant chose to stop working with a service entirely and sought support elsewhere after their advisor repeatedly failed to meet agreed expectations.

**Participants also reflected on the vulnerability involved in receiving employment support.** Opening up about their skills gaps, qualifications, and personal barriers could feel exposing, and some described past experiences, particularly with JCP advisors, where they felt judged or “made to feel small.” As a result, honest, respectful, and non-judgemental communication from employment advisors was highly valued.

*“Some people, i.e. at the Jobcentre, talk to you like you're this big, and it doesn't help with your confidence either”*

(Woman, working part-time, looking for better paid work/more hours, focus group)

**Continued encouragement from employment advisors was particularly important to participants,** because during the process of applying for jobs, participants said that they could feel demotivated if they continued to be unsuccessful in their applications. How the employment advisors guided someone through unsuccessful applications seemed crucial, as it became a point where someone may become disillusioned and start to blame themselves for not being successful. Participants could feel deeply discouraged and this would make them feel like it was their own fault that they could not find work, and so their lack of success became internalised to a failing on their own part. Participants who had little feedback from their interviews and felt that they were not able to improve struggled with motivation at this point. However, there were examples of great practice where employment advisors were able to keep encouraging participants to apply for more jobs, including ones which the individual may have ruled out because of a barrier such as qualification criteria.

*“He advised me to still go for roles. I wouldn't have applied because it said GCSE maths, but he said to still go for it. They might overlook it...”*

(Woman, looking for work, interview)

### **5.8. Outcomes for employment and skills support clients and exiting support**

**Employment support came to an end for some because they had achieved a successful outcome.** At least two of the eleven interview participants secured new jobs during the period in which they were receiving support. Even among those who had not yet moved into new or different roles, many still felt that they had made meaningful

progress as a result of engaging with employment support. Participants experienced a range of positive outcomes, including:

- increased understanding of what roles to focus on
- increased confidence in themselves and what they had to offer
- increased confidence in going for different/ more challenging roles
- increased knowledge and skills through completing training courses.

These achievements were seen as valuable steps toward longer-term employment goals, even if immediate job outcomes had not yet been reached.

Participants noted that they were motivated to continue engaging with employment advisors when they felt they were still progressing, whether through gaining new skills, receiving useful guidance, or taking active steps towards work. Many also expressed the importance of knowing there was a clear plan for ongoing development, including further training opportunities or practical steps they could work on between sessions.

*“You would continue, as I am, because the help and support you’re getting is encouraging and it’s working...I’m doing courses...I’ve got a few under my belt now, so it’s really good...1.... it’s given me something to do and 2. I’m learning along the way...whilst I’m looking for a job.”*

(Woman, looking for work, focus group)

*“You would want clarity [from an employment advisor] on how to move forward, rather than it just be.... because sometimes you go to these things and you don't know what the next stage is - is there a next stage? Or will we have the same conversation we had three weeks ago?”*

(Man, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, focus group)

Conversely, participants explained that they were less likely to continue engaging with employment support if they felt they were no longer making progress, either in their sessions with the advisor or in their wider job search. Many described how demoralising it was to apply for numerous roles without receiving job offers or even constructive feedback to help them improve. When progress stalled and rejection accumulated, participants felt discouraged and questioned the value of continuing with the support, particularly if they felt the advisor was no longer able to help them move forward.

**Participants emphasised the importance of employment advisors being positive and persistent.** Even when clients were no longer having in-person support, they valued ongoing contact from the employment advisors and regular contact from them. It reminded them that the person was still there for them and able to support them.

*"I speak to [Employment Advisor]...she's always ringing me up.. rings me every Tuesday...asking me how I'm doing, how I'm going, and ask if there's anything I might need...any additional support...she's always there.. she's so bubbly, you feel comfortable"*

(Woman, working part-time, looking for better paid work/more hours, focus group)

Employment advisors also described making efforts to maintain engagement over time, including staying in touch even after a client had secured a job, to ensure they continued to feel supported.

**While strong relationships between clients and employment advisors were seen as a major benefit of the service, they could also lead to challenges when an advisor left their role.** Several participants described situations where their advisor moved on, and support effectively came to an end. Although clients were offered a new advisor, they chose not to re-engage. They felt uncomfortable about starting over with someone unfamiliar and felt that this would mean having to repeat their personal story and circumstances. For individuals who had built trust slowly or shared sensitive information, the prospect of forming a new relationship felt overwhelming.

*"He changed jobs and I stopped...He offered to me if I can continue with another person...but I said I'm not comfortable...someone else I might not understand"*

(Woman, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

*"[Did a] little bit on interviews.. and she left... I could've carried on with the next person... I suppose her job was done the fact that I'd got a job... I made the decision that maybe I just sign off. Instead of going and having to meet someone else and going through all the same things, and maybe I didn't like the next person"*

(Man, working on a zero-hours contract, looking for permanent work, interview)

**Participants generated several ideas for how to prevent situations where support ends abruptly when an employment advisor moves on.** They felt this was likely a common enough occurrence that services should anticipate it and put plans in place. A key suggestion was that clients should be informed as early as possible when an advisor is due to leave, helping to manage expectations and reduce anxiety. Participants also recommended planned handover meetings, where the departing advisor, the new advisor, and the client meet together. They felt this would help reassure clients that their

new advisor understands their circumstances and is prepared to continue the work seamlessly.

**A particular barrier to re-engagement was the reluctance to retell their story to someone new.** Participants stressed the importance of demonstrating clearly that their notes, plans, and progress had been fully transferred to the new advisor so they would not have to “start from scratch.”

## 6. DISCUSSION

***Aim 1: How do Surrey residents on low incomes who are looking for work or better working conditions hear about and engage with employment and skills services, and what are their first impressions of these services?***

Findings suggest that current pathways to information about employment and skills services are not sufficiently proactive or visible. Awareness of employment support services tended to happen through other services or by chance (such as social prescribing teams, food support initiatives, advice cafes), rather than through formal employment channels. Even those participants who had heard of support said that they could’ve done with it earlier. They thought that there should be greater promotion of employment and skills support services in places like libraries, community hubs, GP practices and through online networks.

Participants expected JCP to be one of the main routes through which they would learn about local employment support. However, none of the participants in this study had been referred to employment advice or informed about it during their JCP interactions. This highlights the importance of maintaining strong referral pathways through community-based services, while also strengthening signposting and warm referral processes from the JCP to local employment and skills providers to improve awareness and uptake.

Participants who were looking for work or hoping to improve their working conditions were generally very open to receiving support. They reported feeling more comfortable and motivated when it was clear what the service offered and when advisors clearly explained the type of help available.

A key factor influencing whether participants felt comfortable taking up employment support was concern about potential links to the DWP or JCP. Many had experienced negative interactions with JCP, such as sanctions for missed appointments or pressure to apply for unsuitable jobs, which shaped a strong sense of distrust. For these individuals, the possibility that their actions or disclosures might be reported back to JCP had a negative impact on their willingness to engage with employment advisors. Because of this, if JCP is to play a greater role in signposting residents to local employment and skills support, it will be crucial to communicate clearly and

consistently that these advice services are independent, confidential, and not connected to DWP/JCP reporting or compliance requirements.

***Aim 2: How are employment and skills services experienced by residents on low incomes (including the content and format of support)?***

Participants described the content of the support offered through employment and skills advisors, including help with CVs, job applications, identifying suitable roles, and interview preparation, as relevant and useful.

There were many positive experiences of support due to the advisors' approach which are important to preserve. A notable strength was the extent to which support was tailored to individual circumstances, particularly for those with long-term health conditions, disabilities, or caring responsibilities. This personalised approach helped participants identify roles that aligned with their needs and enhanced their confidence in applying for work. Key strengths to also preserve include advisors' positivity and persistence, honest communication, and helping clients see their progress.

However, accessing relevant training opportunities was more challenging. Participants seeking specific skills, such as English language development, digital literacy, or sector-specific qualifications, often encountered limited availability of free or funded courses. Digital skills were a particular area of concern. Some participants had been out of the workforce for many years and required significant upskilling to re-enter the job market. Others were unsure how to navigate AI-driven recruitment processes or use AI tools (such as ChatGPT) to support job applications, indicating a significant gap in training provision.

These findings suggest that while core employment support is functioning well, residents would benefit from greater access to targeted, flexible training, especially in digital skills and English language development, and clearer advice about how to secure in-work adjustments and support.

***Aim 3: What recommendations do residents have for improving local employment and skills support services?***

Many aspects of the Surrey employment and skills offer are working well. Participants placed high value on support that is tailored, positive, persistent, and grounded in honest communication. Feeling listened to and supported, seeing progress in their job search, and maintaining regular contact with advisors were key factors that helped sustain motivation.

However, participants also identified several priority areas for improvement. They emphasised the need for greater promotion and visibility of employment and skills services across community settings and online platforms, alongside expanded access to relevant training opportunities, including ESOL, digital skills, GCSE-equivalent qualifications, and sector-specific courses. Participants also wanted clearer guidance

on in-work support for people with long-term health conditions or disabilities, particularly around how to request workplace adjustments.

Strengthening collaboration with employers, especially larger local employers, was seen as important for increasing access to suitable roles and securing constructive feedback for applicants. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of improved continuity of support, with clear processes for advisor transitions and structured handovers to ensure clients do not feel they must “start again.”

Overall, the findings show that Surrey’s employment and skills support offer is valued and making a positive difference; however, enhancing visibility, training pathways, employer partnerships, and service continuity would further increase its reach and impact, particularly for residents facing complex barriers to work.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the key findings from this research, the six recommendations below highlight opportunities to strengthen local employment and skills support and address the barriers identified by participants.

- 1. Raise awareness of employment support services through increased and more diverse advertising formats and mediums.** One of the clear findings from this research was that the advertising of what employment and skills support is available locally could be improved. Many participants felt that both physical adverts in relevant places in town centres (such as at libraries, community hubs, GP practices), more sharing of information to local community groups, and more online advertising on local social media groups would be helpful.
- 2. Strengthen the employment support provided by the Jobcentre Plus (JCP).** Participants felt JCP could play a more active role in supporting jobseekers, both by promoting independent local employment advice services and by improving their own support through personalised role suggestions, constructive CV feedback, and referrals to relevant training.
- 3. Improve the format of employment support by delivery in a range of ways to reflect client preferences.** Different options can include in-person sessions, telephone appointments, and online video calls, allowing clients to engage in ways that feel accessible and comfortable. It is important to ensure that confidential spaces are available for support sessions to help clients feel safe and able to speak openly.
- 4. Improve the content of employment support by expanding access to training opportunities, (including digital skills) and information about employer adjustments in the workplace.**

- **Participants emphasised the need for more training opportunities aligned with their goals.** They noted gaps in available or funded provision for English language courses (ESOL), GCSE-equivalent qualifications, and sector-specific courses.
  - **Strengthen digital skills training, including support to use AI tools.** Further support is needed to help clients understand online recruitment processes, navigate AI-driven screening systems, and use AI tools to draft applications or prepare for interviews.
  - **Offer information for people with long-term health conditions or disabilities on securing in-work support.**
- 5. Improve advisor handover processes to maintain continuity of support.** When advisors leave their roles, support can be disrupted or even stopped. Participants recommended planned handover meetings involving the outgoing advisor, incoming advisor, and client, along with clear evidence that notes and plans have been fully transferred. This would help maintain trust and prevent clients from feeling they must repeat their story, or disengaging from the service altogether.
- 6. Enhance collaboration between employment services and local employers.** Closer relationships with employers, especially large local employers, could increase opportunities for clients, improve matching to roles, and encourage employers to share meaningful feedback with applicants. Strengthening these partnerships would support smoother pathways into work for residents.