



Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and Carers in Scotland

Research Report - Executive Summary

Funded and supported by



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One Parent Families Scotland

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Executive Summary

Working Together to Value and Invest in Unpaid Care in Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS), together with Oxfam Scotland, prioritise the promotion of decent work in tackling poverty. We also recognise the need to value unpaid care work as labour market participation is not an option for everyone. Both organisations have identified that unpaid care work, and those who provide it, is significantly undervalued in Scotland, resulting in poverty for too many people who look after someone.

A key area requiring significant progress is the ability of work to provide a reliable route out of poverty and critical to this is the removal of barriers for those with caring responsibilities to accessing decent work. An important consequence of the undervaluation of care is its effect on reducing the employment choices for those who undertake unpaid care work. This is compounded by a lack of sufficient and effective employability support for people juggling unpaid caring responsibilities with the need to secure paid work. These barriers disproportionately impact women, including single mothers, who provide the majority of unpaid care in Scotland.

To explore this issue further, OPFS - with Oxfam Scotland's support - has published a qualitative review of the effectiveness of interventions to support single parents and other people with caring responsibilities in Scotland into paid work. This summary describes the findings and recommendations of a literature review, targeted interviews with expert academics and direct engagement with single mothers and people with caring responsibilities - experts by lived experience. It is hoped this learning can help inform improved employability support in Scotland, capitalising on devolved powers, to enhance support for everyone choosing to seek paid work in Scotland, but particularly for those who undertake unpaid care work.

Key Points

- This report calls for a new approach to employability for single parents and people with caring responsibilities that puts access to good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations – an approach which would support single parents and carers not only into work, but to progress within it.
- Fair Start Scotland, the Scottish Government's flagship employability programme, has taken a number of welcome and important steps towards a more effective and fairer model. However, there is more to do to establish a distinct Scottish approach to employability. Furthermore, there is evidence that some positive elements are not being routinely implemented, and qualitative research has found a reluctance to invest in more intensive interventions owing to the programme's payment structures.
- The Scottish Government should continue to use its powers to significantly accelerate delivery of a distinctive Scottish approach to employability, drawing on the effective and innovative approaches considered within this report.
- There are numerous models for effective employability support. Our research has identified the following 10-point framework of key criteria that best meet the needs of single parents and carers.

A Framework of Best Practice

1. **Specialist third sector organisations should be part of broad partnerships, rooted in and expert in their local communities.** Partnerships are central to providing high-quality, comprehensive support. Specialist third sector organisations bring exceptional expertise, as well as trained and empathetic staff, strong reputations and credibility with service-users.
2. **Wrap-around personal development should be integral to the model.** Any programme for single parents and people with caring responsibilities needs to tackle low confidence, isolation, and mental health and wellbeing, while flexible training and skills-acquisition are central to achieving high-quality, sustainable employment outcomes.
3. **Flexible, user-centred service-delivery must be at the centre.** Voluntary participation coupled with flexibility around the pace, place, delivery, and end-goal enables parents and carers to balance effective participation with caring responsibilities.
4. **Personalised, holistic and joined-up services tailored for single parents and carers are essential.** Single parents and carers often face complex barriers, personal circumstances, and caring responsibilities. Many face multiple disadvantages that compound these barriers, not least gendered discrimination and pay differentials.
5. **Single Parents and carers should be actively involved in the design and delivery of employability services.** Single parents and carers know their own needs better than anybody else and should have opportunities to shape the content and delivery of programmes accordingly. True personalisation should surpass having a mere ‘menu’ of options to choose from and should instead offer real opportunities for co-production of services.
6. **‘Demand-led’ training and employer-facing activities should be rooted within the local labour market to maximise the additionality of programmes.** Tailoring training to local gaps and opportunities, and/or crafting suitable employment terms and patterns with employers makes employment outcomes more suitable and sustainable.
7. **Employment outcomes should be assessed qualitatively as well as quantitatively.** Jobs should be well-paid, sustainable, and should offer opportunities for progression. Employment should not be seen as an end in itself, but a means by which to derive an adequate income and a sustainable livelihood.
8. **Ongoing support – both regular and *ad hoc* – is vital for sustaining and progressing within employment.** Parents’ and carers’ complex barriers do not dissipate upon entering employment but may in fact become more pronounced.
9. **Transparency, accessibility and proactive engagement are essential.** Confusion persists among potential participants over eligibility and access to the services. A highly complex landscape with multiple, often competing, providers can prevent effective engagement with services.
10. **Achieving this at street-level requires complementary funding and governance models.** Funding models are crucial to collaborative partnership-working at ‘street-level’. Competitive tendering and payment by results are seen as largely incompatible with the collaborative partnership-working needed by those facing especial labour market disadvantages.

Purpose

This research report, published by One Parent Families Scotland, with funding and input from Oxfam Scotland, seeks to identify best practice within the field of employability for single parents and people with caring responsibilities. In so doing, it devises a framework of the key ingredients needed in any effective employability programme for single parent sand carers, and advances recommendations and conclusions specific to the Scottish context relative to these indicators.

It is hoped that this research and its findings will inform debate and planning on the replacement for Fair Start Scotland in 2023. This will be important for three main reasons: firstly, the devolved offer has been in place for a number of years now, and shows mixed signs of promise and progress, though with room for improvement; secondly, in the run-up to this year’s Scottish Parliament elections, we believe there is an opportunity to inject new energy and ideas into this debate; and thirdly, the arrival of the Covid-19

pandemic has catalysed the urgency of this report, amid significant and enduring upheaval to the labour market that has and will continue to hit single parents and carers disproportionately. While the research was conceived of and commissioned prior to the pandemic, it has taken on a profound importance as a result of it. As such, it is a highly timely and pressing report.

Background & Rationale

One in six Scottish adults provides care for someone with a mental or physical illness, old age, or a physical or learning disability. Unpaid carers experience a 10 percentage point employment gap compared to the national average and suffer a heightened risk of poverty.

Single parents head almost a quarter (22.6%) of all households with children in Scotland. Their employment rates have risen steadily over recent decades, from 43.8% in 1996 to almost 69% in late 2019. Nevertheless, they continue to lag behind the equivalent figures for cohabiting mothers and fathers: 77.6% and 93.8% respectively.

Even prior to the pandemic, over a third (37%) of those providing more than 20 hours of care per week were living in poverty, as were 43% of lone parent households. This situation has only deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic. There is therefore no route to poverty elimination that does not tackle the structural labour market barriers faced by these groups.

The barriers faced by single parents and carers are well-documented. Despite this, seven in 10 unpaid carers (69%) in the UK reported receiving no financial or professional support, including 40% of those providing over 35 hours care per week. Despite their numerical significance and heightened risks of poverty, single parents and carers have been described as largely “invisible” on employability programmes, with advisors and wider programme-design often unaware of their specific circumstances, needs and responsibilities. As a result, most mainstream interventions fail to provide the intensive and tailored support that these groups need to tackle to their multiple and/or complex barriers.

Policy context

Previous studies have typically placed employability interventions on a spectrum from ‘work first’ to ‘human capital’ approaches: the former relies on negative (financial) incentives and prioritises immediate (re-)entry into employment; the latter invests in training and skills-acquisition.

‘Work first’ approaches have dominated in the United Kingdom in recent decades, with recent intensifications in the scope and severity of job-search conditionality. These are seen as cost-effective approaches, but are also associated with financial destitution, heightened stress and anxiety, and poor-quality, often unsustainable, employment outcomes. Previous research has also found that they can exacerbate rather than alleviate tensions with caring responsibilities. In general terms, this approach is seen to poorly serve those facing multiple (or) complex barriers to employment.

‘Human capital’ approaches are associated with improved and more sustainable outcomes and greater progression prospects, especially in ‘loose’ labour markets with spare capacity. However, both approaches demonstrate an individualist, competitive, rational conception of the labour market that may overlook external and structural barriers to employment.

The Scottish Context

Owing to staggered devolution, the Scottish employability landscape is a complex patchwork of local, regional, and national initiatives, each with different target groups, funding streams and methods.

Multi-agency Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) (often comprising the local authority, local health services, third sector organisations, and others) are run in local authority areas, and Fair Start Scotland is the Scottish Government’s flagship national employability programme, for which single parents and those with certain other caring responsibilities are amongst the identified priority groups.

In 2017, employability became a fully devolved competency, meaning control moved to sit with the Scottish Parliament. This offers welcome potential to integrate and streamline local and national

programmes, and to dovetail their operations with wider Scottish Government frameworks, including the Fair Work Agenda to improve the quality of paid work and the Scottish Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

Barriers & Employability

An individual's employability can be seen as composed of 3 main elements, each with their own associated barriers:

- **Individual Factors:** skills, qualifications, health, literacy, confidence, and motivation.
- **Personal Circumstances:** caring roles, household circumstances, finance, debt, and social capital.
- **External Factors:** jobs market, transport, benefits, childcare, services, prejudice/stigma, etc.

Taking a similar logic, Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach goes beyond simple problem-oriented interventions to consider the holistic improvements that are within an individual or family's reach. It starts by looking at the day-to-day experiences of people's lives and draws on individuals' assets. External government policies often focus only upon a single aspect of someone's life, such as their income or earnings. Other factors that also impact, such as family and caring responsibilities, are often not considered. Policies which recognise the benefits of a "holistic" approach would be more effective in supporting people to make positive changes in their lives.

Methodologies

This research used a combination of desk-based and qualitative research. We conducted a series of focus groups with a diverse and representative sample of single parent carers, to hear about their experiences of employability programmes. These helped to identify the report's 'key principles' or evaluative criteria, against which we evaluated five previous employability interventions aimed at or largely serving single parents and/or carers. These were identified in consultation with an advisory group of experts in employability and parents and carers on the grounds of their effectiveness and/or innovation.

These five case studies each demonstrated innovative and effective elements of employability support for single parents and carers from which we might draw examples of good practice. Each case study drew on the relevant programme's evaluative outputs, complemented with qualitative research with expert academics with direct experience of these programmes. Effective practices common across these case studies were identified, highlighted, and used to outline a framework of the key ingredients for a successful employability programme for single parents and carers.

The interventions examined included:

- Working for Families (2004-06).
- Marks & Start (2004-18).
- Making It Work (2013-17).
- Carers in Employment (2015-17).
- Health 4 Work (2016-19).

Findings

Our findings relate to both best practice at 'street-level' (i.e. at the level of service-delivery) as well as offering recommendations for the overarching design and/or content of employability programmes. A number of different approaches can be taken to boosting the employability of single parents and carers. Aspects of common effective practice and/or particular innovation include locally rooted partnership-based approaches; offering personal development and flexible skills acquisition through 'asset-based' and 'demand-led' training; tailored and holistic support; and strong employer-facing activities within the local labour market. These are explored in more detail below.

Effective Partnerships

Partnerships including the public, private and third sectors are central to providing the high-quality, personalised, wraparound support that single parents and carers need. Common aims, coupled with consensus-building on methods, is a highly effective way of designing services. This breadth of perspectives is better able to map existing provision, identify gaps and deliver a range of services.

Specialist third sector organisations run expressly for single parents and carers bring particular expertise, as well as strong reputations and familiarity with local service-users.

Engagement & Outreach

Proactive engagement should widen access routes to services: co-location with partner agencies (e.g. health centres) and/or in community-level venues (e.g. nurseries and community hubs) allows for informal outreach to share information and raise awareness. Many parents and carers who have focused on their caring responsibilities will lack the confidence to immediately attend a formal meeting. An exclusive reliance on Jobcentre Plus for referrals will likely miss those facing the greatest disadvantage.

Personal Development & Flexible Training

Personal and work-focused development are both key ingredients: low confidence and low skills/qualifications are common barriers faced by single parents and carers. Programmes should offer emotional and personal support (through both keyworkers and peer support) to tackle low confidence and isolation, followed by real investment in skills-acquisition. This training should be designed and packaged in response to individuals' aspirations and local labour market opportunities and delivered flexibly (including part-time for those already in paid work). Work placements and voluntary work can be hugely effective, especially for those furthest from the labour market, with positive effects for not only skills and experience, but also confidence and mental health.

Personalisation

'Personalisation' is often cited in mainstream employability programmes, but rarely explained. Here we break down this generic term into its practical enablers:

Tailored support

Single parents and carers face complex circumstances that require a unique combination of services and supports, of which employability support may be just one. Keyworkers must have a comprehensive knowledge of both participants' circumstances and of local service-provision to tackle their specific barriers and to refer them to partners/services accordingly.

Empathetic & Expert Staffing

Empathetic staff must have the appropriate skills and experiences to understand and draw out participants' specific barriers, and to support vulnerable individuals. Time must be taken to get to know participants fully before devising a personalised plan. Staff drawn from the voluntary sector, childcare, social care, and counselling may be particularly suitable.

Flexibility

Participants should have control over the pace and end-goal of their participation. For those without recent work experience or with particularly complex circumstances, immediate entry into work may be neither feasible nor desirable. Single parents' and carers' employability journeys are rarely simple or linear; programmes should take account of this, and arbitrary timelines should be avoided.

Distance & End-Goals

Employability programmes should work for individuals at all distances from the labour market, with reasonable expectations of them at all stages. They should also respect and encourage all end-goals, including those of individuals who are not currently in a position to enter employment, but would like to move closer to the labour market. Programmes must not lose sight of the fact that full-time employment may not be optimal, feasible or desirable for all.

User-Centred Services & Co-Production

'User-centred' services – including practices such as co-location and warm handovers – tailor programme-delivery to parents' and carers' needs, commitments and schedules, and help to secure buy-in given the respect that they show participants.

Real opportunities for active co-production with participants makes for more effective, innovative, and tailored services. This in turn requires opportunities for voice, receptive keyworkers, and responsive flexible funding streams.

Holistic Support

Wraparound support should address all the constituent parts of parents' and carers' employability, surpassing purely individual factors (e.g. confidence, motivation, skills) to include personal circumstance factors such as the accessibility and affordability of childcare and the households' financial situation.

Broad partnerships allow for a range of services to be delivered at a high standard, each by a specialist in that field. This can include one to one support, group support, arranging and paying for childcare; financial and welfare rights advice; and support with transport and mobility. However, the exact range of services should be tailored to local and individual needs, and more specialist services should not be side-lined. In addition to being holistic, services must be joined-up to ensure effective and accurate referrals.

Childcare and transport are often 'gateway' supports that enable participants to engage more fully with services.

Longitudinal Perspective

Programmes should take a long-term view that sees the benefit in 'distance travelled' indicators. For those facing the greatest disadvantage, incremental steps towards employment are important, and evaluation should not focus solely on employment outcomes.

Employer Engagement

Employer-facing activities can help to maximise the impact of programmes. Brokerage, 'job-crafting' and job-shares can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to parents and carers' wider responsibilities and arrangements, to make outcomes more sustainable.

In parallel, longer-term engagement can spur changes in organisational attitudes and practices, raise awareness of single parents' and carers' needs, and challenge prejudices.

Programmes should also build a portfolio of local placement opportunities. This is often an afterthought, but early engagement is central to effective incorporation into programme-design and to building momentum and interest.

Employer-facing activities benefit from an employer-friendly language (e.g. reduced turnover, improved morale, and productivity) and staff with relevant business experience.

In-Work Support

Single parents' and carers' complex needs do not dissipate on entering employment; if anything, they may become more pronounced. This necessitates ongoing support to sustain employment and to progress within work. Furthermore, the proliferation of in-work poverty in recent decades has foregrounded the need for support with in-work progression. The rhetoric of work as a 'stepping stone' to better jobs is empirically dubious, especially in light of the recent proliferation of precarious work, often resulting in a 'low-pay, no pay' cycle. Concerted effort is needed to support in-work progression and secure a decent and stable income.

In-work support should couple regular sessions to plan ahead with *ad hoc* support in case of emergency. In-work support should, like pre-employment support, be conceived of as a package covering personal finance, access to education, provision and affordability of childcare and more, recognising that these all contribute to a sustainable livelihood. This support should be delivered flexibly, including outside of standard work-hours, and through a variety of channels (e.g. via social media, phone, or text).

Funding & Governance

These practices on the ground also require complementary funding and governance models, and they should be clearly incorporated into programmes' evaluative frameworks. Competitive and efficiency-oriented funding models exhibit a bias towards 'work first' approaches and can constrain efforts to establish more intensive interventions. The marketisation of employability has demonstrably led to increasingly homogenous services, while competitive tendering processes can set a tone and establish structures that might fundamentally compromise efforts to build tailored, wraparound services. Payment by results transfers financial risk to providers, limiting up-front investment in intensive interventions, and excluding small specialist partners.

In contrast, co-managed and co-governed partnerships, based on shared aims, consensus-building and mutual respect benefit from pooled expertise and resources and generate better collaboration. Co-

produced and responsive services require flexible funding streams and are stymied by rigid legal-contractual arrangements. Furthermore, long-term funding guarantees offer providers – especially those in the third sector – the security to invest in effective interventions.

Demand-Side Action

In the absence of good jobs, the effectiveness of any employability programme is fundamentally compromised. While the specific details are beyond the parameters of this report, it would be remiss to not note the need for complementary demand-side interventions, especially amid current and predicted turbulence.

Key Recommendations for Scotland

The devolution of employability powers has seen a more dignified and personalised approach emerge in Scotland, with the welcome eradication of conditionality and improved flexibilities, among others. However, on the basis of our findings on best practice and our framework of key ‘ingredients’, we have identified certain gaps and areas for improvement in the Scottish offer. The Scottish Government should:

1. Embed our key principles within Scottish employability:

The five key principles and priorities for employability programmes, developed from our research and with the direct input of service-users, should be used to guide Scottish Government employability programmes. These are:

- **Dignity, Inclusion and Outreach:** No parent or carer should be forced to choose between destitution and the wellbeing of their child or cared-for person. Programmes should use proactive and positive incentives rather than damaging disciplinarian approaches.
- **Empowerment:** Asset-based approaches should work with the individual’s skills and aspirations through intensive investment in personal and professional support and development to ensure that parents and carers can thrive, not just survive.
- **Personalisation:** Employability programmes should tailor their content and services to the unique combination of barriers unique to each individual. Furthermore, nobody can recognise, report, or resolve these barriers better than service-users themselves.
- **Holistic Support:** Programmes should address every facet of an individual’s employability, including structural and external barriers. An individual’s employability is only as strong as its weakest link.
- **Good jobs, not any job;** A job should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to a flourishing and sustainable livelihood. Any employment outcome should promise dignity, progression, and an adequate wage.

2. Enrich and improve measures of success:

- **Single parents’ and carers’ outcomes must be transparent and fully disaggregated.** Outcomes and results must be transparently disaggregated for programmes, practitioners, and stakeholders to assess the programme’s adequacy for single parents, carers, and women beyond a headline level, and to ensure that programmes embody the principle of continuous improvement. Single parents and carers are not homogenous and should not be treated as such in evaluative outputs.
- **Employment outcomes should be assessed on their quality, pay and progression prospects.** Employability programmes should put good-quality, sustainable and rewarding employment at the heart of its design and operations as part of efforts to ensure people secure a sustainable livelihood. Employability interventions must be scrutinised not only on whether they achieve employment, but also on the quality and sustainability of these employment outcomes.
- **Fair Start Scotland should adopt a more longitudinal perspective and embrace ‘distance travelled’ indicators.**

Rewarded outcomes and evaluative outputs remain myopically focused on employment outcomes. It remains unclear what incentives there are for providers to support those furthest from the labour market to move closer to employment.

3. Simplify and integrate the Scottish employability landscape:

- **Fair Start Scotland should be better integrated with local provision.**

The staggered devolution of employability powers has left a complex patchwork of local and national initiatives that are off-putting and difficult to navigate, align poorly with one another or, at times, explicitly compete against each other. Nested partnerships and integrated funding streams would make sure that programmes work in the interests of their participants rather than those delivering them.

4. Strengthen partnership-working within Fair Start Scotland:

- **Fair Start Scotland should strengthen and widen its practices around partnership-formation and partnership-working.**

Partnerships of experts – in their fields and in their communities – are central to delivering the holistic, specialist, intensive support needed by single parents and carers. Consortia of relevant partners can better deliver high-quality wraparound support than a supply-chain model. Dedicated single parent and carer specialist organisations bring indispensable expertise, credibility, and trust to programmes, but are often excluded by large-scale tendering processes.

- **To this end, tendering processes should prioritise and incentivise partnership-working and high-quality services, rather than efficiencies.**

Competitive tendering can foster adversarial rather than collaborative relationships between providers, with participants suffering as a result. Instead, we would like to see a funding and governance model that incentivises collaboration and constructive deliberation in lieu of a 'supply chain' mentality. Clearly articulated aims, expectations, and end-goals from funders, with discretion and deliberation from partners on design and implementation appears a winning combination.

5. Boost awareness and engagement of employability programmes:

- **Fair Start Scotland should work proactively at community-level to build awareness, trust and participation.**

Awareness of mainstream employability programmes remains low among eligible individuals. FSS should surpass statutory bodies and mechanisms for recruitment and accept that specialist third sector organisations and community-level venues have a vital role to play in this, as trusted and reputable sources of information, but require active inclusion and real incentives to do so.

6. Invest in participants' assets and skills through intensive interventions and concerted upskilling:

- **Funding models should be reformed to ensure adequate investment in participants. Payment by results should be avoided.**

Previous scholarship has found efficiency-oriented tendering and payment by results to be associated with increasingly homogenous services and under-investment in those facing significant or multiple barriers. Flexible, generous and up-front funding streams, co-managed by partners, and deliberative programme-design are central to providing the tailored, responsive and intensive interventions necessary.

- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue a fully-fledged 'human capital' approach to employability.**

The UK's historic under-investment in skills-provision is a direct cause of the current preponderance of low-skilled, low-paid work, and the 'low pay, no pay' cycle that characterises many individuals' employment trajectories. Human capital approaches that invest in upskilling

and training demonstrate higher success, especially for those facing multiple barriers to employment and during economic downturns. They are also associated with more sustainable outcomes, higher employment conditions and better progression-prospects. The use of training, work experience and voluntary work should be expanded, and opportunities to pursue higher and further education should be backed up with effective financial support.

7. Co-produce and tailor employability support with participants:

- **Fair Start Scotland should offer real opportunities for co-production.**
FSS has demonstrated a sincere commitment to the principles of co-production, though opportunities for effective voice are limited. Single parents and carers know better than anyone else their own barriers and needs. By granting participants ownership over their journey, FSS can secure not only greater commitment but also more effective outcomes. Co-production should be core to the design and delivery of employability programmes, with participants actively involved in shaping the support they receive, not merely offered a 'menu' of options. In addition to an appropriate organisational culture, the practical realisation of co-production rests on organisational factors, including partnership-working and the availability of flexible funding needed to provide such responsiveness.
- **Fair Start Scotland should build on the flexibilities granted to participants.**
Exercising control over the pace, timing and end-goal of their participation is essential for single parents and carers to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. Arbitrary timelines are incompatible with this, especially amid ongoing uncertainty and turbulence of home-schooling, lockdown and labour market disruption.

8. Provide holistic support to help a deliver a sustainable livelihood:

- **Fair Start Scotland should employ a sustainable livelihoods approach to ensure that all facets of an individual's employability are being resolved**
Following the success of Oxfam's 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' with DWP staff in Wales, we believe that Fair Start Scotland should institutionalise this holistic approach to personalised support. This model relies on relationship-building and a comprehensive understanding of participants' circumstances to ensure tailored, wraparound support.
- **Scottish employability should support financial resilience through both educational and practical routes.**
Better-off calculations as well as budgeting and welfare rights advice are highly effective interventions that help to smooth entry into employment and ensure sustainable outcomes. In addition to these established educational measures, practical financial (or, at least, 'in-kind') support should help to tackle the costs associated with entering employment. The implicit assumption that parents and carers have savings or a secondary wage to fall back on defies the reality. The Scottish Government should therefore create new payments or extend eligibility to the Job Start Payment.
- **To provide truly holistic services, childcare and transport will require much greater attention**
These policy fields in their own right are inextricably linked to employability. In the absence of accessible, affordable care and/or transport, sustained entry into employment remains unlikely. The (paused) roll-out of funded early learning and childcare should be a stepping-stone towards greater provision, not an end-goal in itself, and the Scottish Government should build on its promising out of school care consultation.

9. Embed employability interventions and practices within local labour markets:

- **Employer-facing activities should occupy a central role within Fair Start Scotland.**
Job-crafting and brokerage, with ongoing revision, can help to tailor employment terms and patterns to suit caring responsibilities. Effective employer-facing activities require a specific suite of skills, tools and arguments that we herein delineate.

- **Fair Start Scotland should pursue ‘Demand-led’ training in consultation with participants and local employers to maximise additionality.**

Training opportunities should be offered in response to individuals’ aspirations and local labour market gaps and opportunities. This requires early and ongoing partnerships with local employers. At present, such opportunities appear to often be an afterthought or under-utilised.

- **The Scottish employability landscape would benefit from a ‘middle ground’ that better maps onto local labour markets.**

Scholarship has previously noted that arbitrary administrative boundaries map poorly onto local labour markets. At the other end of the scale, FSS’ regions appear unwieldy, especially for those who lack mobility or transport. A nested system that integrates national, regional and local initiatives would enjoy greater additionality.

10. Continue to instil the principles of fairness in the Scottish labour market:

- **Fair Start Scotland should maintain and expand its selective approach to job-search activities.** ‘Work first’ approaches to employability may have fed the proliferation of low-paid work. Under the Scottish offer, service-users used should be encouraged to apply selectively to vacancies that satisfy their financial, personal and familial requirements. This will likely be compromised as long as payment by results remains in place.
- **A revitalised approach to employability should be complemented with activities and incentives that encourage employers to improve their own standards.**

Long-term ideational activities through the Fair Work Agenda, as well as more immediate financial mechanisms of procurement, conditional business support and financial incentives, are promising tools in the Scottish Government’s arsenal by which to instil fair employment practices in workplaces across Scotland. Female-dominated sectors such as hospitality and retail, and publicly funded sectors like childcare and social care are prime candidates for such efforts.

11. Remember that employability is just one side of the coin:

- **Effective and high-quality employability programmes are an essential complement to, not a substitute for, bold and ambitious demand-side interventions.**

As supply-side interventions, the success of employability programmes inevitably hinges on the availability of real, good-quality employment opportunities, in the absence of such jobs, supply-side interventions risk undermining wages and employment conditions. The Scottish Government should use its procurement processes and conditional business support to drive up employment standards, in addition to more direct job-creation and industrial strategies. These must not neglect women-dominated sectors.

Conclusion

Employability has clear links and interactions with several Scottish Government agendas, priorities, and policies – including efforts to tackle child poverty. However, it is evident that there is no route to eliminating child poverty, or to address gender inequalities, that does not include tackling single parents’ and carers’ employment-related barriers. It is equally clear that, to succeed, the Scottish Government’s Fair Work agenda should be fully and effectively aligned to an enhanced employability programme, including concerted and rigorous employer-facing activities.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of investing in participants’ assets, interests, and aspirations. This will facilitate good-quality, sustainable employment outcomes, and offer sustained, effective in-work support, and ongoing educational opportunities. Concerted local employer-facing activities would help to shape employment outcomes and terms to ensure high standards and sustainable transitions. **Single parents and carers do not want to merely survive but should be supported to thrive.**

About the Research

The full report, '[Improving Employability Support for Single Parents and People with Caring Responsibilities in Scotland](#)' was published in April 2021 with funding and support from Oxfam Scotland. It is available as a free PDF at www.opfs.org.uk.

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