

Title of Report:	Officer Presenting: Head of Business
Post COVID-19 Recovery – Update on Labour Market Interventions	Author: Skills Manager

1 Purpose of Report/Recommendations

- 1.1 To update members on the labour market interventions progressed with stakeholders to help mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market.

2 Background

- 2.1 In July and September, members were presented with a report detailing the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market, including identifying those most vulnerable in the labour market and highlighting broad areas of labour market intervention where we could work with stakeholders to add value. These included Careers Information & Guidance, Health & Wellbeing, Apprenticeships, Skills Academies, Employer Incentives and Supporting Inclusion in Education. Others areas identified by Councillors for interventions included green tourism, recycling, circular economy, advancement to L3 & L4 training opportunities, and skills/employer academies.
- 2.2 As previously outlined by UUEPC, the economic consequences of COVID-19 on the Northern Ireland economy mean it is likely to take 4 to 5 years to reach pre-COVID levels of economic activity, and possibly more than 10 years before unemployment falls to previous lows. Members will be aware of some of the headline figures in relation to unemployment, economic inactivity, youth unemployment, self-employment, those furloughed and the impact on vulnerable sectors.
- 2.3 Given the changes in the broader economic climate and in the labour market, officers have been liaising with key stakeholders to ascertain our current situation, to review how activity is being delivered and to provide input into the re-focusing of planned activity to provide employability and skills support.

3 Key Issues

3.1 As outlined in the July and September committee papers, officers have been liaising with DfE, DfC, INI, ESF, NWRC & community sector to discuss the challenges we face and the pressing need to rethink our supply and demand side interventions to reflect our shifting priorities in the labour market, whilst continuing to deliver on our Strategic Growth plan. Details of ongoing work and emerging areas of engagement are set out below.

3.2 Careers Information and Guidance

3.3 The most important lesson from previous downturns has been the need to provide rapid and high quality support for those who find themselves unemployed, so that they can maintain contact with the labour market and return to work as quickly as possible. Every year, Council and DfC host an annual Jobs Fair – last year it was a North West Jobs Fair held in the City Hotel. Unfortunately, this year the plan to deliver two events in the Guildhall Square, by mobilising all those in the space of delivering careers & employment services in the Council area, has had to be postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Other options are being explored to ensure that those out of work get the help they need to reconnect with the labour market.

3.4 Locally, our Fintech sector has managed to sustain itself, or to even create jobs, during the pandemic. Under the auspices of our Digital, Creative and Financial Technologies sub group, a number of initiatives are being progressed for this sector including an interactive digital map and a scoping study. In addition, we have appointed Makematic to produce a series of 10 short career videos (each approx. 1.5 minutes in length) designed to encourage and educate post primary young people about career pathways into the Digital, Creative & Financial Technologies sectors. The videos are to inspire them, challenge stereotypes and broaden their horizons but to also give them a realistic picture of what it is like to perform a range of jobs in the sector. We plan to couple the films with information about the future labour market and to link with our sub group members on the ongoing promotion of careers in this sector.

- 3.5 During the complex and rapidly changing situation of COVID-19, work experience placements, local employer visits and careers workshops have been postponed, but good quality careers education is still as important as ever for pupils. There are many challenges facing schools and we want to ensure that they are provided with relevant interesting online career resources. As students have had to embrace technology for remote learning across all of the curriculum, we need to find new ways to inspire them online. To this end officers are working with School Employer Connections, who are funded by DE, to enhance links between the world of work and the world of post primary education through development and delivery of appropriate best practice models and rollout of effective programmes. Historically, SEC have focused their energies on in-company work experience, class study visits and careers events. COVID-19 has seriously impacted the way SEC performs its day to day work and the organisation has been forced to carry out a complete review of its delivery approaches.
- 3.6 The work of SEC aligns closely with DCSDC's SGP Employability and Skills actions to increase industry engagement in careers advice and guidance, and to promote the importance of educational pathways. To address the changing nature of the education environment within the COVID-19 pandemic and to continue to deliver on the good work they have accomplished, the skills team have identified key work streams where we can work together to create and maintain a wide range of new high quality online resources and ways of working to link young people to career pathways so they can make informed, flexible choices.

3.7 Health and Wellbeing

- 3.8 As previously outlined to Committee, officers have embarked on putting together an online wellbeing hub providing free and confidential information. This project is now being taken forward as part of a Learning City & District National Lottery application. As COVID-19 has placed restrictions on all sorts of activities and events it is important that all citizens, especially those furthest away from both the employment and educational markets, are provided with a single point of contact to enable them to easily access and engage with a range of behaviour changing interventions / opportunities in a free, confidential online platform including:

- Education, training, learning and digital inclusion
- Housing, legal benefits, debt support, care advocacy
- Counselling, befriending and other support groups
- Employment and volunteering
- Health lifestyles and health promotion

- Social and peer support activities
- Art, crafts and therapeutic activities

Building upon our membership of UNESCO'S Global Network of Lifelong Learning, this one stop shop online portal will be modelled on a social prescribing approach to wellbeing.

3.9 Council continues to engage with DfC through its representation on the Employability NI Board. The Employability NI Programme is a cross-governmental approach to co-designing and co-commissioning a sustainable future strategic employment offer beyond 2020. The programme has been designed in order to deliver a reduction in economic inactivity and long-term unemployment, provide increased support for those with health conditions (esp. mental health) and disabilities, and to create a mechanism for government to collaborate with Councils and other Departments to offer local solutions. In relation to health conditions, the aforementioned wellbeing hub will be invaluable in providing a one stop shop of services and support available to underpin the rollout of the new employment offer post 2020.

3.10 In terms of the plans to progress Labour Market Partnerships (LMP) as part of the suite of new programmes being developed under Employability NI, it is proposed to utilise community planning structures in each council area. The purpose of the LMPs is to:

- Provide leadership and lead on the integration of services
- Develop local area plans including setting targets for performance
- Manage devolved funding and its delivery through a dynamic purchasing framework
- Manage arrangements for the evaluation of local interventions

3.11 Officers are currently working with DfC with a view to exploring how the Community Planning structures can offer a mechanism for mobilising the proposed LMP in our council area. This will be central to our ability to focus government interventions on areas of most need. An update report will be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

3.12 **Apprenticeships**

3.13 For the last 2 years, Council has invested heavily in promoting the growth of apprenticeships as a key vocational route for young people leaving school through its '**Get Paid, Get Qualified, Get Ahead**' campaign. The current pandemic has had a

significant effect on apprenticeships. The momentum we have created around apprenticeships is at risk, therefore we have been advocating for additional support for apprenticeships as an essential component of any long term economic recovery and sustainability plan. As members will be aware, DfE launched a £17m Apprenticeship Recovery Package on 11th September 2020. The Apprenticeship Recovery Package includes short term interventions which are targeted to reduce significant longer term economic impacts, including a wage subsidy which was strongly advocated for by Council. These interventions aim to reduce unemployment and ensure that employers continue to have access to people with the skills and qualifications needed to maintain productivity, to grow their businesses and to assist in closing the skills gap, ensuring that more people have a pathway to better paying jobs.

- 3.14 Council has utilised its networks to share this information as widely as possible and Officers have been in contact with all of the local apprenticeship providers to maximise take up of the interventions. In addition, the recovery package includes an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund to promote greater collaboration between employers and suppliers, whilst maintaining the employers' role at the centre of the apprenticeship system and creating room for the Department for the Economy (DfE) to take a more creative and innovative approach to solving problems. The Challenge Fund has a budget of up to £0.5m. Successful applicants could receive one-off awards of up to £50,000. DCSDC has encouraged our local apprenticeship providers to avail of the funding and DCSDC has submitted an application in partnership with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce.
- 3.15 Partnering with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce provides access to a database of 400 local businesses. Working through the Chamber we propose to employ a Facilitator on a 3-month contract. The Facilitator will undertake initial research work by reconnecting with these 400 employers and assessing the impact COVID-19 has had in this changing environment on apprenticeships. The research shall assess what barriers to taking on apprentices these companies envisage they may have going forward, what assistance they may require, what apprenticeship opportunities they project they may have and how we can work together as a council area across all stakeholders to skill up beyond COVID-19.
- 3.16 Additionally, the Facilitator will ascertain who currently employs apprentices, those who have taken on apprentices in the past but no longer do so and why, those who run an in-house apprenticeship scheme and those who have never taken on apprentices. This builds a picture of what type of apprenticeship each company can provide and what levels of apprentices they employ and across which sectors.

3.17 An employers' apprenticeship database will be drawn up which will create a starting point for the Facilitator to target and contact relevant businesses with full information on Apprenticeships NI, the benefits of taking on an apprentice - endorsed by local business people - and access to both the website and a suite of videos which Council commissioned featuring both businesses and apprentices. It is anticipated that these actions will, at least, promote and highlight the Apprenticeship NI programme to employers and, as an optimum outcome, increase uptake by employers. The data collated in terms of the employer and apprenticeship sectors identified will enhance the existing careers advice and guidance detailed on our bespoke website. This data will be inputted into the website and the information will be freely accessible and transparent to young people

3.18 **Skills Academies**

3.19 Council continues to work closely with NWRC to promote re-skilling and re-training opportunities. The NWRC has recently secured further funding from DfE to offer over 50 level 2-5 training to those affected by COVID-19 in areas such as Digital Marketing/Media, ICT, Electrical Vehicle, Welding, Counselling and Leadership & Management. Council officers have assisted the NWRC by consulting with those ESF providers who work with unemployed individuals to identify who could avail of the training and to also ascertain the type of courses in demand and at what level.

3.20 Council and NWRC have been successful in securing funding from DfE to fund 2 Software Fundamental Skills Academy at level 4 for up to 30 participants. The course will be delivered over a 14 week period with a four week placement and a guaranteed job interview. One academy will be in Derry and the other is Strabane. Recruitment will commence at the beginning of November, with delivery in January 2021.

3.21 Given our past success in delivering employment/skills academies for the unemployed, we are currently exploring new emerging areas of work which will provide opportunities to re-skill and re-train in new sectors and new growth areas, as well as those sectors that are more likely to emerge first from the current situation. We are having ongoing discussions with our ESF projects and the community/voluntary sector to offer assistance in delivering academies and to broker with prospective employers for entry-level positions. Following on from successful academies delivered by these organisations in care, cleaning and

construction, conversations are ongoing around the most buoyant areas to skill and reskill using a timely approach. Each organisation, with the assistance of the Skills Team, is reassessing the labour market situation, reviewing the needs of their clients given the changing economic climate, individually and collectively, and compiling a realistic and attainable list of courses and academies which will benefit the people of the Council area.

3.22 **Recycling/Circular Economy**

3.23 The Skills team have been working with Council's Strabane Community Development Co-ordinator and Council's waste and recycling officers to develop a pilot demonstrator collaborative recycling project using wood. The project has been named the Wood Shack Project and is designed to encourage re-use of wood resources from the Strabane area which have been presented at the recycling centre for disposal. The objective of the project is to reduce the cost to council for wood processing and encourage alternative uses for wood. On receipt of the wood it will be:

- sorted and graded
- re-used in the construction of planters, outdoor furniture, bird boxes and any other projects
- resold to the local community for minor repairs for example fence boards etc.
- in the case of Inferior/poor quality wood, it will be used for wood chippings and kindling

3.24 It is anticipated that there will be set up costs for capital for a wood chipping machine, PPE and hand tools. Further work is ongoing in getting the project off the ground and in relation to identifying employment & training opportunities.

3.25 Council is the first Local Authority in NI to develop a Circular Economy/Zero waste Strategy. Such a strategy, and its core values, have been strongly embedded within the Derry City and Strabane's Inclusive Strategic Growth Plan. In relation to the circular economy, a small working group has been established in Council to explore existing activity and potential activity taking place in relation to skills across the following strategic areas - behavioural change and education, preparing for re-use, resource collection, green procurement, circular economy and national influence. Any emerging skills projects will be brought to Council.

4 Financial, Equality, Legal, HR, Improvement, Rural Needs and other Implications

4.1 None.

5 Recommendation

5.1 Members note contents of the report.

Background Papers

BC95/20 & BC120/20