

Exploring models of Supported Employment for people with disabilities: Lessons for Northern Ireland (NI)

Around 25% of people in NI live with a disability or long-term health condition

NI has the lowest disability employment rate in the UK (43%)

Due to lower employment rates, 31% of disabled people live in poverty

Department for Communities (2025)
'Consultation on Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland'

The Disability and Work Strategy for NI sets a 10 year aim to increase the employment rate for disabled people in NI to 50% by 2036. How can Supported Employment (SE) help?

A report published this month by Horizons Research examines three key questions:

1. How effective are SE approaches in helping people with disabilities and chronic health conditions find and keep work?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities for embedding these approaches in NI?
3. What can we learn from other countries in doing this?



Supported Employment helps people with disabilities and long-term health conditions secure and sustain paid work through personalised support, employer engagement and ongoing work-assistance through a five-stage process of:



Key asks for policy and practice in Northern Ireland:

- SE should be embedded in core policy and stable funding structures
- Improved governance and cross-departmental coordination on disability employment, and integration with education and health systems
- Enhanced employer engagement on disability inclusion, stronger equalities legislation, a more flexible benefits system & stronger SE quality frameworks
- Amplify the voice of those with lived experience and stronger collaboration with the third sector through co-design and co-development of programmes



“If social inclusion and economic inactivity were owned by a department or cross-departmental unit, I think it would be more beneficial” and “If you want to actually move the dial, then there has to be a properly resourced strategy to address this issue” - **Polymaker participants**

People with disabilities and health conditions using SE services are:

- **securing and maintaining employment**, with 77% of respondents reporting that SE services helped them find paid work
- **benefiting from improved confidence and self-worth**, with 94% of respondents stating that their advisor supported their needs and requirements
- **experiencing improvements** in relationships, mental health and finances, and
- **gaining skills** that continue beyond the remit of their initial role.



“I would not be in my current employment without their [Supported Employment services] help, advice, reassurance and ongoing visits.” - Service User participant

Recommendations for government departments, employers and service providers:

Theme 1: Stable Long-term Funding: Commit to stable, core multi-year funding for SE to enable long-term planning and continuity of support for disabled jobseekers and employers

Theme 2: Policy and Governance: Designate a lead department for disability employment or central coordinating role, align with health and education systems, role model public sector disability employment with targets, and address structural barriers to inclusion (e.g., accessible public transport)

Theme 3: Communication and Messaging: Single hub for disability employment information featuring up-to-date and accessible information on services, employer best practice and success stories

Theme 4: Legislation and the Benefits System: Strengthen disability equality legislation in NI and introduce flexibility within the UK benefits system to enable transition pathways into work

Theme 5: Employer Awareness, Engagement and Leadership: Support employers to understand the practicalities and benefits of hiring disabled people and implement disability-inclusive policies, processes and progression pathways to create more inclusive workplaces

Theme 6: Collaboration and Co-design: Build on partnerships with the Voluntary and Community sector and ensure those with lived experiences are involved in design, delivery and evaluation

Theme 7: Quality, Outcomes and Learning: Adopt a SE quality framework with shared evaluation approaches across services, and consider the expansion of SE to other disadvantaged groups.

A second phase of this research is underway to take a closer look at how and why SE models are working for disabled people in NI and investigate their application to other under-represented groups in NI such as young people, care leavers, ex-offenders, minority ethnic communities and women returning to work after caring responsibilities.

The consortium for this research was led by [Horizons Research](#), working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE) and [PolicyScribe](#). [Access the Executive Summary via the QR code or link.](#)



This project was funded by [EPIC Futures NI](#), a local policy innovation partnership that seeks to provide an evidence base for fair and inclusive employment in Northern Ireland.