

Exploring models of Supported Employment for people with disabilities

Final Report

EPIC Futures NI Policy Commissioning Fund

Horizons Research, Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment & PolicyScribe

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Acknowledgements	8
About the Authors	8
Abbreviations	9
1. Background and Context	10
2. Research Design and Methodology	13
3. Review of the Literature on SE	15
4. What does SE look like in Northern Ireland?	22
4.1 Supported Employment in NI: Disabled People's Perspectives	25
4.2. Supported Employment in NI: Employers' Perspectives	35
4.3. Supported Employment in NI: Disability Organisations' Perspectives	45
4.4. Supported Employment in NI: Policymakers' Perspectives	52
5. Lessons from Abroad	59
5.1 Republic of Ireland	59
5.2 Sweden	63
5.3 Austria	67
5.4 Policy Learning and Lesson Drawing for NI	71
6. Conclusions and Recommendations	78
6.1 Challenges for SE	78
6.2 Opportunities for embedding SE in NI	79
6.3 Concluding thoughts and recommendations	81
7. References	87

Executive Summary

Background and Aims

This project has been funded under phase 1 of the EPIC Futures NI Commissioning Fund, which seeks to contribute towards a prosperous and sustainable future for people in NI, through improvements in the labour market and employability landscape in NI.

According to the 2021 Census, there are 463,000 people with a long-term, limiting disability or health condition in Northern Ireland (NI), accounting for 24% of the population. NI has the lowest disability employment rate in the UK, and the largest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled persons. As a result of lower employment rates, 31% of disabled people live in poverty in NI. Despite this, a high proportion of disabled people in NI want to work.

This project explores how the Supported Employment (SE) model can help improve disabled people's participation in the labour market. SE is a person-centred method for supporting disabled people's right to work. It involves a five-stage process of engagement, vocational profiling, job matching, employer engagement, and ongoing job support, which together help disabled people access, maintain and progress in good-quality paid employment in the open competitive labour market. SE prioritises the ability and rights of disabled people to make self-determined choices, while combining this with tailored support for employers. The SE model has been recently adopted by the UK Government in its *Connect to Work* programme to support disabled people into work.

This study examines the experiences of disabled people, third-sector organisations, employers and policymakers in NI to develop an evidence base on how SE models are viewed and implemented. It also undertakes a comparative analysis of SE approaches in the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria to identify best practice and draw policy lessons for NI.

Methodology

The research consortium for this project is led by Horizons Research, working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE) and PolicyScribe. The guiding research questions are:

- How effective are Supported Employment approaches in helping people with disabilities and long-term health conditions find and keep paid work?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for embedding these approaches in NI?
- What can we learn from other countries in doing this?

We have adopted a qualitative approach to the project, examining how SE services are perceived and experienced by different people in NI. We have also developed a comparative approach, examining case studies in the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria. Key research methods comprised: a review of primary and secondary literature; 25 semi-structured research interviews with key stakeholders including disabled people, employers, disability organisations and policymakers in NI; online surveys with disabled people who are in work or seeking to access work (43 responses), and employers (25 responses); and an engagement event with stakeholders.

Key findings

This project examines the opportunities and challenges for embedding SE approaches in NI and develops policy recommendations drawing on international best practice.

NI context

Northern Irish organisations have been active in spearheading the international Supported Employment (SE) model and practices. NI disability organisations played a key role in establishing

the Association of Supported Employment Europe (ASEE), providing advice to EU member state governments on SE and building networks to support disabled people into work.

However, unlike other EU countries, SE services do not receive core funding as part of integrated government programmes in NI. Instead, there are two types of employability services offered in NI. The first comprise disability employment programmes offered by the NI Department for Communities, to help disabled people access work. These include:

- Workable NI, which provides in-work support for disabled people, incorporating elements of the SE model (such as job coaching and ongoing support, which can be time-limited). The Department for Communities contracts three disability groups to deliver this service: Disability Action, USEL, and Supported Employment Solutions (which is a consortium of 7 disability organisations comprising Action Mental Health, Adapt NI, Cedar Foundation, Mencap NI, NOW Group, Orchardville and Royal National Institute of Blind People NI).
- Access to Work, which provides practical (i.e., equipment) and financial support.
- The Condition Management Programme, run by healthcare professionals, which helps people manage their health so they can work.

In addition to these government programmes, there are currently 16 voluntary and community sector disability organisations delivering SE services in NI, covering a wide range of geographies and types of disability. Most of these organisations had previously relied on European Social Fund (ESF) funding to deliver services, and many are now in receipt of UKSPF funding. The loss of EU funding and transition to the UKSPF – which made significantly less funding available – had an impact on SE service provision in NI, leading to the loss of staff and reduction in services.

SE impacts on disabled people and employers

This project has found that SE approaches have been highly effective in supporting disabled people into work in NI. Disabled people using SE services in NI have reported positive outcomes such as finding and maintaining paid work, improved confidence, and better mental health. Employers have also reported positive outcomes, including an expanded talent pool, a more inclusive organisational culture, and increased knowledge around disability support.

Disabled People

In more detail, survey data suggested that the majority of disabled people respondents (91%) felt their relationship with their SE employment adviser was ‘very good’, 94% of respondents said their advisor understood and supported their needs and requirements, and 91% said they were involved in making their own employment plan. In addition, over three-quarters of respondents said that SE services helped them find paid work. When asked about the benefits of SE services, disabled people who responded to our survey or participated in research interviews stated that these included: receiving tailored support, skill-building, and mentoring to enter the workforce and keep jobs; a feeling of being understood, and their needs taken into account; help sustaining work and navigating challenges as they arose; and support advocating for accessibility requirements.

When asked about the challenges of SE services, most respondents said that “nothing” could be better in the support they received. However, one respondent said that it was difficult to access services when living rurally, and a small number expressed frustration around not getting a job yet. People were also concerned about funding cuts and reduced SE services, and the potential impacts this could have on their lives. Overall outcomes reported by disabled people who participated in this research included: gaining employment; building confidence and a sense of self-worth; improvements to relationships and financial stability; and gaining skills that continue to be beneficial beyond an initial job appointment.

Employers

We reached out to employers in NI that had recent experience of engaging with SE services to complete a survey and participate in interviews, which was facilitated by NIUSE. The majority of respondents had therefore already worked in partnership with employment specialists to offer SE to disabled people at their organisation. The majority of employer respondents to our survey (25 employers) had a positive experience of SE services, with 94% saying they were likely to engage with SE again in the future. Employer respondents also expressed a desire to share with other employers 'how easy it is' to hire disabled people through SE.

When asked about the benefits of SE services, employers who responded to our survey or participated in research interviews said these included: access to an expanded pool of talented (potential) employees; the support they received from SE services on onboarding, training and reasonable adjustments for disabled employees; which then led to broader insights on how to support every employee achieve success at their organisation, leading to an overall shift to a more inclusive culture and working environment. When asked about the challenges associated with SE services, most employer survey respondents and interviewees felt there were 'no' challenges with accessing SE services. However, some respondents highlighted the time and effort required to engage with the SE scheme, hire disabled employees and make reasonable adjustments; and that these challenges could be exacerbated when organisations faced headcount reductions or capacity pressures, thereby limiting their bandwidth to engage with SE services.

Overall outcomes reported by employers who participated in this research included: being able to expand into new talent pools in the labour market, which was considered especially valuable at a time of labour market and skills shortages; accessing employees who were well-matched in terms of their fit; and creating a more inclusive and caring workforce.

Learning from other countries

This study has engaged in comparative work to understand how SE is structured, funded and offered in other countries, and what we might learn from these cases for NI. The case rationale is based on a combination of most-similar and most-different systems designs. We chose to compare the Republic of Ireland as a similar case which will allow us to draw out lessons about policy design and delivery in a similar context to NI. And we chose to examine Austria and Sweden as two different cases which will offer insights into how SE approaches operate in different institutional contexts. Sweden has had a SE programme run by its public employment service for over 26 years, with comparatively high job retainment rates for disabled participants. Austria enshrined SE in its public employment service over 30 years ago and is moving from a sheltered work approach to more person-centred open labour-market approach to SE that includes quotas and wage subsidies. In addition to these cases, we also examine SE programmes in other parts of the UK, including the DWP's Connect to Work programme in England and Wales.

Republic of Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland, disabled people face amongst the lowest labour market participation rates in the EU. The disability employment rate is 43%, which is below the European average, and the disability employment gap in Ireland is 37% (the highest in the EU). In Ireland, employment outcomes vary significantly by severity of disability and there are links between disability, poverty, and limited educational attainment. In response, Irish policy has increasingly shifted toward inclusive, rights-based approaches that seek to simplify and strengthen employment supports available. Programmes like Work and Access have responded to previous gaps in service delivery, while initiatives such as the Ability Programme and EmployAbility Service have helped improve employer engagement and job readiness. However, there are persistent barriers to SE, including low uptake of supports, limited coverage of existing services, and unresolved disincentives to work. Thus, although progress has been made, there are still gaps between policy ambitions and outcomes for disabled people in the labour market.

Sweden

In Sweden, the disability employment rate is higher than the EU average (which was 65% in 2025) due to targeted initiatives, a strong legal framework, established practices in SE and a decentralised welfare system. However, there is still a significant employment gap compared to the general population, of 23.2 percentage points (in 2023). Sweden's key policy tools include anti-discrimination legislation, wage subsidies, disability employment targets in the public sector, and SE schemes to help disabled jobseekers access the labour market. SE is associated with positive employment outcomes including higher rates of job retention and increased disposable income. Furthermore, employers report that SE support has helped address concerns related to recruitment and workplace integration. However, access to SE varies across municipalities, implementation of nationally recommended methods remains uneven and in some cases employers' awareness of these provisions was limited. Thus, whilst Sweden has a coordinated and well-resourced policy landscape with a range of mechanisms to support disabled people into work, gaps persist in implementation, consistency of provision, and the translation of policy into practice.

Austria

In Austria, there is a lower disability employment gap than Ireland and Sweden (20.5 percentage points), while the disability employment rate is 54.6% - higher than NI and the Republic of Ireland, but lower than Sweden. The Austrian approach is shaped by a complex interplay of legal frameworks, financial supports, third-sector engagement, and institutionalised models such as sheltered employment. The Disability Employment Act and a mandated quota system contribute to the integration of some disabled individuals into the open labour market. The employment of persons with disabilities is also supported by targeted subsidies, reasonable accommodation laws, and regional vocational programmes. However, structural gaps persist. Disabled individuals face barriers related to discrimination, poverty, and limited pathways out of segregated work. And although there is evidence showing that quotas can increase disabled employment, many companies have avoided their obligations or paid the fine. Ongoing reform will depend on a shift away from segregated work and towards rights-based, person-centred SE models.

Policy Lessons for NI

The case studies from the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria provide a wealth of insights into enabling factors and constraints for supporting disabled people into work. We identified factors that have been key to the effectiveness of SE approaches in Europe, drawing lessons for NI.

1. Legislative Framework

The comparative case studies highlight the importance of the legislative framework in ensuring rights and protections for people with disabilities, including strong anti-discrimination and reasonable accommodation laws. NI may wish to strengthen its disability discrimination laws, potentially through adopting the Equality Act 2010 that applies in England, Scotland and Wales.

2. Cohesive, long-term funding

A key determinant of effective SE approaches in Europe is the provision of long-term, integrated funding for SE services. This is generally provided through core government funding streams for disability employment programmes, rather than through short-term contracts, project-based funding or external grants, as is currently the case in NI.

3. Cross-government working

The case studies provide a range of examples of how cross-governmental working can move the needle on disability employment, including whole-of-government strategies which underline the responsibilities of departments to supporting disability employment. NI may wish to strengthen its cross-governmental working and pooled budgets, to provide more cohesion across different policy areas touching on disability employment.

4. Inclusion in the open labour market

Across the case studies we looked at, but more broadly across Europe and liberal democracies, there has been a shift away from segregated sheltered workshops towards more human rights-based, inclusive employment in the open labour market, which has better employment and wellbeing outcomes for disabled people. NI is fully aligned with a person-centred, human rights-based approach to SE for disabled people.

5. Voice and co-design

The case studies demonstrate the importance of empowering people with lived experience of disability to be involved in the design and development of employment programmes, rather than making decisions *for* disabled people.

6. Quotas and targets

The case studies give a range of experiences of countries implementing quotas or targets for employers to hire disabled people, and the pros and cons of these. In order to avoid the challenges of implementing quotas, NI may wish to consider implementing disability employment targets, beginning with public sector hiring, as in the Republic of Ireland.

7. Messaging and communication

The case studies highlighted the importance of having a single point of advice and information for employers and (potential) employees on disability employment programmes, services, advice, information, toolkits, best practice and further resources.

8. Wage subsidies

Wage subsidies – that is, financial incentives for employers to employ disabled people – are a common tool across the EU. However, wage subsidies are sometimes associated with stigma and reduced expectations of disabled employees, and they may have limited impact if they are not combined with wraparound support. For those reasons, wage subsidies are not included in person-centred SE models. NI has been phasing out wage subsidies and the number of people receiving support through the Employment Support scheme are declining; but JobStart introduced new subsidies, which should be monitored for effectiveness, long-term outcomes and value for money.

9. Benefits System

International practice shows us that the social security benefits system can be either an obstacle to disabled people entering employment, or an enabler of this. At present, research participants felt that the UK benefits system was penalising their attempts to work. Changes to the system might include: changes to the benefits criteria so that individuals can retain key disability-related support in work; creating ‘trial work periods’ without losing benefit eligibility to derisk job transitions; and increasing the threshold amounts that disabled people can earn without losing benefits.

Challenges and Opportunities for SE in NI

Our findings, based on stakeholder views and our analysis of the NI context, suggest that there are a number of challenges and opportunities for further embedding SE in NI:

Challenges for further embedding SE approaches in NI include:

- An overall lack of funding for public and third-sector services in NI
- Post-Brexit UKSPF funding reductions, leading to reduced SE services
- Political instability leading to delays in developing disability and work policies
- A lack of cross-departmental cohesion on disability employment
- Low levels of employer awareness around disability employment
- Growing demographic demand for disability employment support

Opportunities for further embedding SE approaches in NI include:

- A stronger evidence base on SE outcomes for disabled people and employers
- Strong systems of collaboration across disability organisations
- Opportunities to input into new strategies and funding models
- The strong pedigree of SE services, standards and quality frameworks such as the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF)
- Recent expansion of SE services in other parts of the UK
- Positive employer views of SE in NI
- The potential to strengthen the new Partnership Agreement between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI, including Fair Funding Principles

Recommendations

Based on our interviews, surveys, engagement activities and policy learning, we have formulated a series of recommendations to improve policies, processes and impact. These recommendations are designed to ensure that people with disabilities and long-term health conditions receive the best support to find, keep and progress into high-quality, sustainable employment. These recommendations have been grouped into three areas, which are aimed at (a) SE service providers, (b) employers and (c) policymakers.

Theme A: For SE services, we recommend that:

1. SE services are focussed on quality of experiences and outcomes for jobseekers and employers rather than numbers.
2. Improved collaboration across SE service providers, to ensure greater cohesion.
3. Investing more in employer engagement, to overcome misconceptions.
4. Providing more transitional support for participants leaving structured services.
5. Maintaining flexibility in the SE model to accommodate different people's needs.
6. Exploring opportunities to expand SE services to other marginalised groups.

Theme B: For employers, we recommend:

7. Being open to being a disability-inclusive employer.
8. Increasing awareness, education and engagement around disabilities at work.
9. Creating disability-specific policies and procedures.
10. Creating more opportunities to employ disabled people, i.e. ring-fenced roles.
11. Developing a better understanding of health conditions & reasonable adjustments.
12. Sharing best practice and stories of hiring disabled people through SE.

Theme C: For policymakers, we recommend:

13. Allocating core funding for SE models through a model that replicates the strengths of the UK *Connect to Work* programme, and adopting the SEQF framework for this.
14. Co-designing SE programmes with disabled people and disability organisations, embedding greater collaboration with the community and voluntary sector.
15. Improving processes for cross-departmental working on disability employment.
16. Creating policy alignment with health and educational institutions.
17. Role-modelling best practice in the public sector, through targets/benchmarks.
18. Changing the benefits system to enable people to try different work options.
19. Improving marketing and communications, i.e. a one-stop-shop for information.
20. Improving data collection and evaluation and monitoring frameworks.
21. Legislative changes to strengthen disability rights (e.g. adopting Equality Act 2010).
22. Adopting a social model of disability across all public services.

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About the Authors

Dr Eve Hepburn

Eve is an Associate at Horizons, Managing Director of PolicyScribe, and Honorary Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Eve has held academic positions at universities across Europe and North America over the past 20 years and was formerly Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. She received her PhD in Social and Political Science from the European University Institute in Italy and has authored 11 books and over 60 refereed journal articles. She recently co-authored a report for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on 'Funding for Equality Groups in NI: The impact of the transition from EU Funding to the UKSPF'.

Lewis Bloss

Lewis is a Senior Researcher at Horizons. He has an MSc from Leiden University and an MA from the University of Edinburgh. He is highly experienced in the use of statistical and qualitative methods, and has led commissioned research for several organisations, including a comprehensive policy review for the Carnegie UK Trust, an analysis of the impact of Museums Galleries Scotland's funding streams, and a TSSA-commissioned study into the case for public ownership of the Scottish rail system. He recently co-authored, with Eve, a report for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on 'Funding for Equality Groups in NI: The impact of the transition from EU Funding to the UKSPF'.

Parisa Hashempour

Parisa is a Researcher at Horizons Research and she is currently completing a PhD in Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, where her research investigates migrant experiences in Scotland. She also holds an MA from Leiden University. Parisa's work has addressed health inequalities, economic and social exclusion and the lived experiences of people facing intersecting inequalities. She has experience evaluating place-based initiatives and engaging directly with service providers and vulnerable communities to assess social policy impacts. Parisa has an evidence-based approach to policy research and a background in multimedia journalism.

Abbreviations

ALMPs	Active Labour Market Policies
AMS	Public Employment Service (Austria)
ASEE	Association of Supported Employment Europe
BASE	British Association of Supported Employment
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities
CMP	Condition Management Programme
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act
DfC	Department for Communities (NI)
DfE	Department for the Economy (NI)
DPOs	Disabled Persons' Organisations
DPS	Department of Social Protection (Ireland)
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions (UK)
ECNI	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EI	Economic Inactivity
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
EUSE	European Union of Supported Employment (now known as ASEE)
GB	Great Britain
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
IPS	Individual Placement and Support
JBO	Jobs and Benefits Office
LMP	Labour Market Partnership
LGIU	Local Government Northern Ireland
NEBA	Occupational Assistance Network (Austria)
NI	Northern Ireland
NIHRC	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
NICVA	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
NIUSE	Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Personal Assistance
PES	Public Employment Service (Sweden)
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People
RNID	Royal National Institute for Deaf People
SE	Supported Employment
SEQF	Supported Employment Quality Framework
SMI	Severe Mental Illness
TEO	The Executive Office
UC	Universal Credit
USEL	Ulster Supported Employment Limited
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UK	United Kingdom
UKG	United Kingdom Government
UKSPF	United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund
VR	Vocational Rehabilitation
WISE	Work Integrated Social Enterprise

1. Background and Context

EPIC Futures NI established a commissioning fund in 2024 to reduce regional disparities in economic, social and environmental challenges faced by local communities in Northern Ireland (NI). This is part of a UK-wide programme of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council, and Innovate UK and the UK Research and Innovation. This project was funded under the first phase of EPIC Futures NI, which focussed on issues related to economic activity about the labour market.

Supported Employment (SE) is a model that supports disabled people to find, maintain and progress in employment. While this is an established approach in a number of countries, there is an evidence gap on how the effectiveness of such models and their applicability to a range of different groups (i.e. female, minority ethnic, older) and in different sectors (public, private, third), businesses (small, large, across different industries) and geographies (rural and urban locations). Working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE), the aim of this project is to explore the experiences and views of different stakeholders – from people with disabilities and long-term health conditions to employers, disability organisations and policymakers – to understand the opportunities and challenges for embedding SE approaches in NI. In addition, we engage in comparative analysis to understand how SE approaches work in other countries, including the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria – to draw lessons for NI. It is expected that the project findings will be of interest and relevant to a wide range of stakeholders, including policy officials in NI and across the UK, groups supporting disabled people, employers, and disabled people themselves.

Disability and employment statistics in NI

According to the results of the 2021 Census, there are 463,000 people with a long-term, limiting disability or health problem in NI, accounting for 24.3% of the population (NISRA, 2022). The employment rate amongst disabled individuals in Northern Ireland is 39%, compared to an overall employment rate of 71.7%; the disability employment rate in NI is considerably lower than in any other UK nation or region, with the overall UK average standing at 54% as of Q2 2023 (Pivotal, 2024). In total, 11.9% Northern Ireland's working age population is economically inactive due to sickness or disability, compared to 6.9% in the UK as whole. Of disabled people in work, a third work part-time. As a result of lower employment rates and inadequate welfare benefits, 31.5% of disabled people live in poverty in NI, compared to 18% of the general population (Joseph Rowntree, 2022). These challenges are also reflected in lived experiences data: surveys of disabled people in NI have found that 9 out of 10 find it difficult to find and keep a job, and 8 out of 10 do not have enough money to live a dignified life (Toman et al, 2022).

Disability policy in NI

There is not a current Disability Strategy in NI, with the development of a strategy postponed by the Department for Communities due to the absence of a functioning NI Executive between 2022-24; though a new Disability Strategy was announced on 9 December 2025 and is open for consultation until March 2026. A draft Disability and Work Strategy was announced in October 2025 and is under consultation until January 2026. The policy context in relation to employability support for disabled people has also been shaped in recent years by Brexit and the cessation of the European Social Fund (ESF) in NI in March 2023, through which much of this support was previously funded (Grant Thornton, 2020). Currently, a number of projects in NI aimed at providing employability support to people with disabilities are funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), the replacement for EU structural funding (UK Government, 2024a). The HM Treasury (2024) has announced that the UKSPF will be replaced by local growth funding in future.

What is Supported Employment?

SE is a person-centred method for supporting disabled people's right to work. According to the

Association of Supported Employment Europe¹, it involves a five-stage process engagement, vocational profiling, job finding/matching, employer engagement and ongoing job support, which together help disabled people access, maintain and progress good quality paid employment (EUSE, 2010). In this model, SE prioritises the rights of disabled people to make self-determined, informed choices throughout the five-stage process. SE began in the USA in the late 1970s as an alternative to ‘sheltered employment,’ initially targeting people with learning disabilities. SE has since been broadened to include all disabled people and has been implemented in a range of countries and contexts (see Modini et al 2016; Melling et al, 2011; EUSE, 2010).

The SE model is distinct from other employment approaches for three main reasons. First, it adopts a ‘place, train and maintain’ approach that assists disabled people rapidly into well-matched jobs, while providing intensive, one-to-one support to tackle any barriers arising at work. Second, the SE model provides parallel support to employer organisations, providing guidance and advice on how to hire and support disabled employees. Third, SE services operate to a fidelity scale. A fidelity scale describes the key features of the SE service and provides a benchmark for services to operate to and be measured against. Stronger adherence to fidelity is associated with stronger positive outcomes for employment (Baxter et al, 2024). In the UK, there are two fidelity scales: Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). Both models offer voluntary, person-centred and intensive support with specialist employment advisors operating to fidelity, with an emphasis on consent, wellbeing, co-production and the aim of achieving employment for clients in the open labour market. The SE model is aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Article 27, which recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others, including “the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.”²

According to the BASE (2025), the underpinning values of SE are that:

1. People with disabilities and/or disadvantages can make a positive contribution at work.
2. People with disabilities / disadvantage should have access to a real job. where wages are paid at the going rate; the employee enjoys the same terms and conditions as other employees; the job helps the person to meet their life goals; the role is valued by managers and colleagues; and the job has similar hours and times at work as other employees.
3. Practitioners uphold the ‘zero rejection’ philosophy of SE so that, with the right job and the right support, everyone who wants to work, can work.
4. SE does not adhere to a work readiness model; instead it has a ‘place, train and maintain’ approach.
5. Job search should happen at the earliest opportunity.
6. People are encouraged to exercise choice and control in achieving their career aspirations. Support is individualised and options assume successful employability.
7. There is genuine partnership between the person, their family carers, employers, community supports and the provider of SE.
8. People are supported to be full and active members of their workforces and wider communities, both socially and economically.
9. SE services recognise the importance of the employer as a customer of supported employment in their own right with requirements that need to be satisfied.
10. SE recognises that employment is a valued social role and becoming employed can reverse societal devaluation, with wider positive consequences for the person.
11. SE draws on the social model of disability recognising that disability is the product of the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers present within society.

¹ Formerly known as European Union of Supported Employment.

² The UNCRPD Article 27 was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006 and came into force in May 2008.

12. SE should encourage the career development of individuals by promoting training opportunities and seeking options for increased responsibility.

The strengths of the SE model therefore lie in its combination of ongoing one-to-one support for disabled jobseekers and employees, and support for employers, based on co-production, agency and personalised support. From a disability rights perspective, as highlighted above, SE can help institutionalise the 'social model' of disability, which also underpins the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which the UK adopted in 2009 (EHRC, 2010). This model recognises that disabled people are excluded by social barriers, such as inadequate healthcare, inaccessible workplaces and stigma.

Evidence base for Supported Employment

Systematic reviews of SE research have consistently found positive employment outcomes for participants, including higher employment rates, better job retention and higher wages. The largest body of research has been conducted in the US due to its emergence of SE models in that country, compared to the later introduction of SE in the UK (Modini et al 2016; Marshall et al 2014; Richter and Hoffman, 2019; Heffernan and Pilkington 2011; Melling et al 2011). Here, existing research has been largely focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the individual placement and support (IPS) method for people with mental illnesses. However, research in the UK on IPS beyond serious mental illness has been growing. A quantitative systematic review and meta-analysis of IPS for all disabilities found that IPS services are consistently more effective in supporting diverse population groups into sustained employment compared to business-as-usual employment services (Whitworth et al 2024). More broadly, there is a growing body of quantitative research around SE approaches beyond IPS in the UK and Europe, demonstrating the value of SE interventions for disabled people (Sundermann et al 2022; Bonfils et al 2017; Michon et al 2014). However, there is still very little research on SE in NI, and limited qualitative evidence on the experiences of disabled people in SE programmes, with some exceptions such as the work of Baxter et al (2024).

The role of the broader institutional context of SE services also remains relatively underexplored (Beyer and Robinson, 2009). Given that many SE programmes have been introduced alongside disability benefit cuts and wider welfare restructuring in the UK, it is important to examine the interaction effects of SE programmes with other employment and disability policies at national and sub-national level. While there is extensive research on the negative health, wellbeing, poverty and employment impacts of cuts to social security benefits levels and increased welfare conditionality for disabled people in the UK (Mehta et al 2021; Dwyer et al 2020), there are fewer studies analysing the broader institutional context in shaping SE outcomes, including changes to benefits systems and funding models for SE programmes, with some exceptions such as Baxter et al (2024). Finally, there is limited qualitative research on the different types of SE programmes and providers, and experiences of people accessing SE, in NI.

2. Research Design and Methodology

This research explores the effectiveness of Supported Employment (SE) approaches in helping people with disabilities find and keep paid work. It examines the experiences of disabled people, third-sector organisations, employers and policymakers in NI to develop an evidence base on how SE models are perceived, understood, and implemented in NI, and what enabling factors and barriers exist for developing this approach in NI; as well as to examine the broader policy context across the rest of the UK. It also undertakes a broader comparative examination of SE approaches in three other liberal democratic countries – Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria – identifying key enabling factors and barriers for the effective integration of the SE approach in labour markets, and drawing lessons from other countries to see whether they are applicable to the NI context.

Research Questions and Analytical Framework

The main research questions guiding the proposed project are as follows:

1. What are the labour market barriers facing people with disabilities?
2. How effective are SE approaches in helping people with disabilities and long-term health conditions find and keep paid work?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for embedding these approaches in NI?
4. What are other countries doing with regard to best practice in SE?
5. What is the experience of employers that have engaged in SE approaches?
6. How might supported employment models be advanced in NI?

1. Comparative analysis

The research project employs a qualitative, comparative approach to the question of the effectiveness of SE models in supporting people with disabilities in the workplace. Through comparative case studies, the aim will be to compare the ways in which the Republic of Ireland, Austria and Sweden have implemented the SE model, to determine best practice.

2. Policy learning

This project engages in 'lesson-drawing' in order to explore options for embedding the SE approach in NI (Rose, 1993), i.e. using knowledge about policy approaches to support disabled people in the workplace in other countries to explore appropriate models and best practice for NI. The aim of the policy learning framework is to construct lessons for NI based on the analysis of SE approaches adopted by other advanced liberal nations.

3. Equalities Approach

In this research, we will prioritise understanding the diverse experiences of disabled people in accessing and participating in supported employment models, with a focus on how intersecting disadvantages - such as gender, age, and ethnicity - shape these experiences and influence individuals' ability to engage with available support.

Data collection methods

The data collection for this project will involve three, primarily qualitative, methods:

(i) Rapid review of the literature that makes up the existing evidence base, including research on supported employment, UK and international practice, and reviews of academic, third-sector, government, and think-tank research. We will identify this through electronic database searches (Web of Science, SSRN) supplemented by a manual search.

(ii) Surveys sent out to (1) 100 people using SE services in NI (eliciting 43 responses); and (2) 50 employers with disabled staff in NI (eliciting 25 responses). NIUSE supported the project team in identifying and accessing potential survey research participants, in line with a co-designed

sampling strategy that ensured that different equalities groups were included, and different types of businesses were included (across sectors, industries and geographies in NI, and of different sizes). Furthermore, the surveys include a question asking if the respondent would like to participate in a follow-up interview.

(iii) Semi-structured research interviews with people from three key groups, totalling 25 interviews. The aim was to solicit greater insight into the effectiveness of SE approaches for disabled people. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted using Microsoft Teams, with data being managed in accordance with GDPR. Interviews were held with: (a) people with disabilities in NI with experience of SE (6 interviews); (b) employers of people with disabilities in NI (6 interviews); (c) disability organisations (4 interviews) and (c) policy officials in NI (9 interviews). We used purposive sampling, with our partners at NIUSE facilitating access to disabled people and employers in NI, with the aim of ensuring inclusion of different people and types of employers.

iv) Engagement event: We held an Engagement Event in Belfast, where we shared our interim research findings with research participants, key stakeholders and the wider NI policymaking community (35 people). The aim was to solicit feedback on interim results and engage in a futures thinking workshop, in which we encouraged participants to identify challenges and opportunities for further embedding SE in NI. Findings from the event were integrated into our research report.

Ethical approach: This project adheres to the ESRC Research Ethics Policy, ensuring sensitive information is handled responsibly, with informed consent and transparency in research objectives. The project was approved by the ethics committee at the University of Strathclyde. Compliance with GDPR and the Data Protection Act has guided data collection, processing and storage. Informed consent for interviews and focus groups was obtained, and participants remain anonymous. Each participant received an information pack, including a project overview, consent form, and details on data storage and rights to withdraw. They confirmed understanding of the study's purpose, data handling, voluntary participation, and confidentiality through a consent form.

Partnership

Horizons Research worked in collaboration with NIUSE on this project. NIUSE is the umbrella organisation representing disability employment organisations in NI. With over 25 years working in the field of SE, it is recognised as the main lead on SE in NI. Its members represent national, regional and local disability employment organisations, covering all areas of disability (physical, learning and sensory disability, mental health and autism and neurodivergent conditions). NIUSE's main role in this project was to assist in gathering data, by disseminating surveys, helping to organise interviews, and identifying key stakeholders within the employment and disability field, including NI government departments, employers and employer organisations.

3. Review of the Literature on SE

Background and context

According to the results of the 2021 Census, there are 463,000 people with a long-term, limiting disability or health problem in Northern Ireland, accounting for almost a quarter of the population (NISRA, 2022). The disability employment rate in NI is 38.7%, compared with 54.4% in the UK, while the disability employment gap in NI is 47.6% (Webb, 2025). This means that amongst the regions of the UK, not only does NI have the lowest disability employment rate, it also has the largest disability employment gap. The impact of the Troubles, a period of conflict lasting three decades until the late 1990s, is one factor contributing to this higher rate of disability. In 2010, a Commission for Victims and Survivors Omnibus Survey found that 107,334 people reported suffering physical injuries as a result of the Troubles (Breen-Smyth, 2013). Additional surveys showed the true figures may more likely range from 286,224 to 644,004 people, with hearing loss and limb loss being the most commonly reported disabilities (ibid).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, economic inactivity across the UK has sharply risen with almost 3 million people now economically inactive due to long-term sickness, marking an increase of 800,000 since 2019 (Finn, 2025). The UK is one of the few advanced economies where the employment rate remains below pre-pandemic levels. The economic inactivity rate in NI is the highest in the UK: it is 27.5% compared to the overall UK rate of 21.4%. Of disabled people in work, a third are employed part-time. Just 3 in 10 working age people with autism are in employment compared with around 5 in 10 for all disabled people and 8 in 10 for non-disabled people (Webb, 2025). Researchers at the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2022) found that the disabled population is living with more limiting health conditions, educational qualifications are lower and employment structure and growth prospects differ compared to other disabled people across the UK.

Individuals who experience a disability alongside another intersecting inequality may be at greater risk of being out of work. An ECNI analysis of the 2021 census statistics on the economic activity of Section 75 groups shows that people from Irish Traveller (21%), Arab (34%) and Chinese (46%) ethnic backgrounds had the lowest rates of economic activity (ECNI, 2023). Another paper measuring the disability employment gap in NI found that the gap was higher for males (53.3 percentage points) than females (51.1). It also found that the disability employment gap increased with age. It was 46.9 percentage points for 30- to 34-year-olds, rising to 53.5 percentage points for 50- to 54-year-olds (Ijpelaar et al 2023).

As a result of lower employment rates and limited welfare benefits, 31.5% of disabled people live in poverty in NI, compared to 18% of the general population in NI (Joseph Rowntree, 2022). These challenges are also reflected in lived experiences data. Surveys of disabled people in NI have found that 9 out of 10 find it difficult to find and keep a job, and 8 out of 10 do not have enough money to live a dignified life (Toman et al, 2022). Research by Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2022) found that NI has the largest wellbeing gaps between disabled and non-disabled people in the UK; this gap has been linked to the work and education deficits faced by disabled people as well as the higher probability that they are experiencing poverty.

Structural factors contribute to NI's wider disability employment gap compared to other parts of the UK as well as to its overall lower disability employment rate, such as having a high proportion of disabled people with more severe or limiting conditions, alongside generally lower levels of formal qualifications. However, even when considering these factors, disabled individuals have a disadvantage when accessing employment NI's labour market. Research from Scope (2023) has found that disabled people must apply for 60% more jobs than non-disabled people before being successful. Despite this, seven out of ten out-of-work disabled people in NI have previously been employed, with the most common occupations including those in construction, retail, hospitality,

social care and logistics (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022). Barriers to employment include policy and funding limitations, a lack of access to high-quality employment opportunities and slow, poorly coordinated employment support systems and infrastructure (Scope, 2023).

Policy context

As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), member states such as the UK must aim to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and respect for their inherent dignity. This includes recognising the right of disabled persons to 'to work on an equal basis with others.'³ Since the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, UK government policy has sought to end discrimination towards disabled people by requiring employers to not treat disabled applicants/employees less favourably and to make reasonable adjustments so they are not at a substantial disadvantage.

Since the 1990s, UK welfare policy has encouraged benefit claimants to access work through job search requirements. This may include mandatory work-related activities that claimants must undertake to receive benefits, which can result in the cessation of benefits for failure to comply. The UK's welfare-to-work system is underpinned by the principles of 'work-first', where the primary goal is rapid job entry into paid, sustained employment and to reduce welfare dependency. Although the work-first strategy has had some success with the general unemployed population, it is considerably less effective for those facing complex barriers such as long-term health conditions (Finn, 2025). Furthermore, people with a disability or health condition in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) have largely been outside these job search requirements.

In recent years, both Conservative and Labour governments have introduced significant reforms to the welfare system to help disabled people into work, including expanding the Universal Support programme in GB (now called *Connect to Work*) to help people with disabilities and long-term health conditions find and keep work, establishing pilot 'Work Well' partnerships to develop an integrated work and health strategy, and by introducing reforms to the medical 'fit note' system in a bid to support effective conversations surrounding work and health (DWP, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). There has also been a growing focus on integrating employment support within health settings, for example, by leveraging employment advisers in NHS Talking Therapies (Hogarth et al, 2013).

In March 2023, the Department for Work and Pensions published a white paper on *Transforming Support*, outlining the government's approach to helping disabled people 'start, stay and succeed in work' (DWP, 2023). This support was framed as key to both growing the economy and increasing access to better-paid work. The white paper outlined how people could be deterred from seeking work because of a fear of losing benefits. To help address this, the government decided to remove the work capability assessment, which determines if someone is fit to work and as such, unable to receive certain benefits. More recently, UK government policy papers such as *Get Britain Working* (DWP, 2024b) and *Pathways to Work* (DWP, 2025a) indicated a shift towards more personalised employment supports, for example through: a new Jobs and Careers Service in Scotland, England and Wales; early intervention through support conversations; a guaranteed offer of employment support for disabled people; and reforms to Pathways to Work.

Get Britain Working acknowledged the need for localised and personalised support to help people with multiple barriers access employment (DWP, 2024b). The UK's £1bn *Connect to Work* programme, a voluntary SE initiative led by the DWP and owned by local areas as part of this *Get Britain Working* strategy highlights how SE is recognised as an evidence-based, fidelity-based, person-centred voluntary employment model tailored to the needs of jobseekers with disabilities, long-term health conditions and complex disadvantages in England and Wales (DWP, 2025b).

³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [Article 27](#).

However, whilst NI receives related funding through the Barnett Consequential, employment is a devolved matter and money is not ring-fenced, meaning it can be reallocated in NI to other areas.

The *Pathways to Work* paper also included a cut of £7 billion to disabled people and carers' incomes by 2029-30 (DWP, 2025a), which would have been the largest reduction in disability benefits since 2010 (Porter, 2025). This proposal was later shelved following public outcry (Disability Rights UK, 2025). It was estimated that the cuts could have significant impacts on disabled people, with a single person potentially losing up to 57% of their income and families with a carer potentially losing £1000 per month (Porter, 2025).

Meanwhile, in NI the development of a new Disability Strategy was postponed by the Department for Communities due to the absence of a functioning NI Executive between February 2022 and February 2024. However, in February 2024, Gordon Lyons MP, Minister for Communities, announced they would be taking forward Social Inclusion Strategies, including a Disability and Work Strategy, as part of the broader Disability Strategy. A draft Disability and Work Strategy was published by the Department for Communities in October 2025, which is currently under consultation until January 2026 (DfC, 2025a). When announcing the strategy, Minister Lyons said:

“Northern Ireland’s performance on disability employment has not been good enough... a new Disability and Work Strategy [...] will ensure more disabled people and those with health conditions access, and thrive in, quality employment in NI.” (DfC, 2025a).

The Disability and Work Strategy aims to add 50,000 disabled people to the NI workforce by March 2036 and increase the disability employment rate to 50%. Target groups include disabled people who in work or who are economically inactive, young disabled people in education, people in work at risk of becoming disabled, and employers. The strategic framework for the Strategy is based on personalised support, inclusive skills, educational transitions, and supporting and enabling employers. The Strategy states that support for disabled people must be personalised, making reference to the SE model (DfC, 2025a).

Furthermore, the Department for Communities recently published a draft Disability Action Plan 2025-2030, which laid out NI’s commitment to supporting disabled people to find and maintain employment in the public sector, including targeted support initiatives (NI Assembly, 2025). The plan included a target of supporting 11,000 people with disabilities and/or health conditions in progressing towards, securing and retaining employment in the public sector through programmes including Access to Work, Workable and the CMP. Meanwhile, a new Disability Strategy for NI was announced on 9 December 2025 and is open for consultation until March 2026 (DfC, 2025d).

In recent years, Brexit has also shaped the policy context relating to disability employability support, especially when the European Social Fund (ESF) ended in NI in March 2023 and a successor fund - UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) - was introduced (Hepburn et al, 2025). Currently, a number of UKSPF-funded projects in NI provide employability support to people with disabilities (UK Government 2024; Hepburn et al, 2025). In 2024, it was confirmed that the UKSPF would be maintained at a reduced level in 2025-26, ‘in advance of wider local growth funding reforms’ (HM Treasury, 2024). At the time of writing, no formal announcements have been made for funding post-March 2026. Beyond the UKSPF funding reductions, other financial constraints in NI have had a critical impact on public services, resulting in essential services being less available or sometimes closing, affecting health care, education, and social services (Grant Thornton, 2020).

Labour market barriers and role of employers

Almost one in four disabled people in the UK who are economically inactive would like a job (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022). Despite this, the charity Scope (2022) has found that disabled jobseekers face substantial barriers in seeking employment, including from employers

who may believe it is “too difficult, risky, or expensive” to hire someone with disabilities. Scope has suggested that organisations need to understand the challenges faced by disabled jobseekers, i.e.:

1. Jobs being posted on platforms that are incompatible with assistive technology
2. A lack of accessibility at interview venues, including no ramps at entrances
3. Interview tests and formats that are not accessible
4. Negative attitudes about the abilities, skills, and capabilities of disabled people.

Another report identified structural barriers to disabled people seeking employment as including: limited implementation of disability employment policy and strategy amongst employers, a lack of accountability, co-ordination and cross-departmental collaboration on disability employment, limited engagement with employers to support policy implementation, and undervaluing the voluntary and community sector strategic partners (Labour Force Survey, 2025). These barriers are important to address in light of labour shortages, demographic challenges, and projections indicating a rise in the proportion of the population likely to develop long-term health conditions in the coming years.

In the UK, policy initiatives have often focused on addressing ‘supply-side barriers’ encountered by disabled individuals. This includes health issues, skill deficiencies, motivation, and benefit structures. However, these approaches may also blur into structural issues like environmental access (e.g. building accessibility or workplace layout), which may be considered a ‘demand-side barrier’. Benefits are often seen as a supply-side barrier because they can influence a person’s decision or ability to look for work (for example, if working means losing financial support). But they can also be seen as a demand-side issue when employers make assumptions about benefit claimants or create rigid rules that discourage inclusive hiring (Froland et al, 2019).

Analysis by researchers at the Institute for Employment Studies suggests that ‘demand-side factors’ relating to employer practices and the labour market need to be addressed to effect meaningful change for disabled jobseekers (Meager & Hill, 2005). Research suggests that many UK employers are unaware of how Universal Credit (UC) functions as a wage supplement. Furthermore, they often lack understanding of the Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) that underpin UC. Employers are fundamental to ALMP outcomes as they provide job opportunities that job-seekers are trying to access. However, research suggests that UK employers are often unaware of the rules around UC and find ALMPs (which prioritise finding any job quickly) to be costly to manage and ineffective in supporting recruitment due to a high volume of inappropriate applications (Jones & Carson, 2023). UK employers also have expressed concerns about the potential negative impacts of in-work conditionality on staff wellbeing and retention (ibid).

Research suggests that employers who are unaware of issues surrounding disabilities may reject disabled job candidates, especially if there are suitable candidates available who have not disclosed any disability (Webb, 2025; Waterhouse, 2010). In NI and Ireland, researchers have identified a lack of accountability when it comes to recruiting people with disabilities as well as stigma in the workplace (Webb, 2025). Gaps around employer knowledge typically include mental health conditions, autism, learning disabilities and hidden disabilities as well as reasonable adjustments. This lack of disability awareness has led to issues with recruitment and rigid work environments. Disabled people are often steered towards cleaning, hospitality and retail positions, leading to limited diversity in job roles available. Application rates of disabled people seeking professional roles remains low, due a lack of access to skills development and training.

Disability employment in context

There are many types of programmes and interventions that are designed to help people with disabilities and long-term health conditions gain and sustain employment.

A common approach to disability employment includes the ‘train then place’ approach. This is a

model whereby disabled individuals are provided with pre-employment training for a period of time, often in a separate (training) environment, before being placed in a job. The aim is to prepare individuals with disabilities in particular skills prior to being placed in a work environment (Baxter et al, 2024). The pre-employment training environment is seen to help individuals overcome barriers to work (such as a lack of confidence) prior to employment attempts. However, research has shown that 'train then place' approaches are often ineffective in leading to sustainable employment, as individuals' newly acquired skills may not translate well into the workplaces they join, their confidence may be affected by delays to accessing real employment, employers rarely participate in the training, and there are low rates of transition into real paid employment (Nettles, 2013; Taylor et al, 2022; Baxter et al, 2024). Examples of 'train then place' approaches include work preparation schemes and vocational rehabilitation programmes.

Indeed, the traditional 'train then place' approach to disability employment in the past (which is still dominant in some systems) is segregated or sheltered work for disabled people. This approach involves disabled people spending time in separate, disability-specific work programmes that are often unpaid and take place away from mainstream community activities, education, or employment. The aim is to allow an individual who is considered unable to work in a competitive employment setting to develop their ability and skills to work in a segregated work setting (Kregel & Dean, 2022). Traditional sheltered work programmes include sheltered workshops (such as assembling or packing in factory settings), day centres and work activity centres. These forms of segregated work have been criticised as denying disabled people the same rights as other non-disabled workers and contributing to feelings of exclusion (Verdugo et al, 2006). In sheltered workshops, disabled people are employed to carry out tasks in a controlled environment where they might receive low or no pay and may not have the same rights as in mainstream employment (Heyer, 2024). Research has also shown that disabled people working in sheltered programmes find it difficult to move into paid positions in the open labour-market (Taylor et al, 2022).

The SE model

The Supported Employment (SE) model differs significantly from the 'train then place' disability employment approaches described above. Firstly, it is based on person-centred and human rights principles with the aim of finding paid employment in the open labour market. Secondly, it adopts a 'place, train and maintain' model that allows disabled jobseekers to move quickly into paid positions, while receiving personalised support to progress in employment. Thirdly, it operates to a fidelity scale that "describes the key features of the service and provides a benchmark for services to operate and be measured against" (Baxter et al, 2024). Through SE services, disabled people are provided with personalised support to access, maintain and progress high-quality paid jobs in the open labour market.

SE is defined by the British Association of Supported Employment (BASE, 2025a) as a personalised approach which supports people with disabilities and/or other disadvantages secure and retain paid employment. It is a values-based framework, based on a 'Place, Train and Maintain' model (BASE, 2025b). Instead of preparing individuals for work through sheltered experiences (as in the segregated approach) or pre-employment activities (as in the 'train then place' approach), SE places an individual directly into a paid work environment and delivers ongoing, tailored support within that setting (Homa & DeLambo, 2015). Built on strong partnerships, it aspires to give everyone who wants to work the right opportunity and support to do so. SE has a five-stage model (BASE 2025a):

- 1) Engagement: proactively engaging with individuals
- 2) Vocational profiling: building a rich profile of an individual's strengths
- 3) Employer engagement: proactively working to address workforce needs
- 4) Job matching: matching a person to the right role
- 5) In-work support and career progression: personalised support enables individuals to

flourish at work and supports employers in feeling disability confident.

It is through this strong values base and a mission to empower both individuals and employers through every stage of finding, working in and retaining a job, that SE is distinguished from other forms of employment support (Corbière et al, 2013). BASE (2025b) has suggested that SE works best as a partnership strategy between employers and employees, with job coaches playing a key role in providing holistic wrap-around support to the job-seeker, their family and the employer.

Key principles of SE identified by researchers are:

- participant empowerment, enabling people to take control of their own employment journey confidence, resources, and support to make informed decisions, advocate for their needs, and pursue meaningful work aligned with their goals and values;
- self-determined choice, ensuring people make their own decisions about their employment path, including the kinds of work they do and the hours they work; and
- collaboration, centring disabled jobseekers' voices whilst working with employment specialists, employers, and support networks (Khoronzhevych, 2022).

One of the most well-evidenced approaches within the SE model is Individual Placement and Support (IPS). IPS was first developed for people living with severe mental illness (SMI) and is increasingly being used to support a wider range of individuals, for example by supporting veterans, ex-offenders and those with physical health issues (Bond et al, 2012; Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019). IPS services are guided by a fidelity scale, which refers to how well an organisation is adhering to the SE approach. The IPS fidelity scale contains a 25-point checklist of items that can be scored out of five that relate to areas such as staffing, organisation and services.

A second fidelity scale is provided by the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF). SEQF services have traditionally supported individuals with learning disabilities and autism (Baxter et al, 2024). The SEQF fidelity scale is structured and scored around the five-stage model of any SE service (whether IPS or SEQF): client engagement, vocational profiling, employer engagement, job matching and securing work, and in-work support. Services can thus embed key performance indicators into assessments of how well they are engaging with all aspects of the five-stage model, as well as assessing outcomes (job entry, sustainment, pace, satisfaction).

The development of the IPS and SEQF fidelity scales have helped to drive improvements across the SE sector. While SEQF and IPS are two different scales, they have been described as 'two overarching specifications of the same SE approach' (Baxter et al, 2024). This is because they share more similarities than differences, for example, by both offering voluntary, person-centred and intensive support, using specialist employment advisors and holding shared values. Both establish a set of quality standards which SE service providers are expected to uphold.

SE outcomes

Systematic reviews of research studies have found that SE interventions have delivered positive impacts for disabled people transitioning to employment (Whitworth et al, 2024). Employment outcomes include higher employment rates, increased hours, better job retention and higher wages (Khoronzhevych et al, 2016; Modini et al 2016; Frøyland, 2016; Bridget et al 2018; Howlin et al 2005). Research has shown that engagement with SE services can also lead to changes in disabled people's attitudes towards work, with studies showing higher levels of motivation for seeking employment (Røddevand, 2017). UK-based research has also demonstrated improved wellbeing outcomes through SE participation as well as value for money (Whitworth 2024a). For instance, studies have found that keeping a disabled worker in full-time employment delivers £22,000pa in social benefits pa and £15,000 in government savings (Whitworth, 2024b).

Research on outcomes for employers using SE services in the UK is more limited. However, one

systematic review that analysed the benefits to employers of hiring people with learning disabilities across international settings found that there were numerous advantages in doing so. These included: improved reliability, with workers often staying in their roles longer than others and taking less sick leave than non-disabled counterparts; economic savings due to this reliability; enhanced reputation amongst customers; and a positive impact on workplace cohesion and productivity (Beyer & Beyer, 2017).

Academic research has focused mainly on IPS and outcomes for individuals with SMI. There have been over 20 randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews and meta-analyses across a wide range of countries - including Sweden, England, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, the UK, the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia – that have demonstrated the positive impact of IPS on competitive employment outcomes for individuals with SMI (Drake & Wallach, 2020; Modini et al, 2016 European Commission, 2025a). There is also a growing evidence base showing that SE can be an effective model to support people with disabilities other than SMI (Probyn et al, 2021). An international analysis of outcomes of IPS interventions for other populations beyond SMI found that 55% of IPS participants obtained competitive employment compared with 25% amongst individuals receiving other vocational services (Whitworth et al, 2024). When participants gained employment, they typically earned more and worked more hours (overall, per week, or over a longer period) than those in control groups. However, the analysis also highlighted that effectiveness varied across different populations.

Cost-benefit modelling has shown that IPS services for low-to-moderate mental health and musculoskeletal groups should be expected to deliver positive financial returns on investment for individuals, society and the UK Exchequer (Whitworth et al 2025). One group of researchers who analysed the wider economic case for IPS initiatives found that 24 of 41 studies reviewed demonstrated monetary benefits that more than outweighed the additional costs of IPS programmes for employers (Park et al, 2022). The authors concluded that there is a strong economic case for IPS programmes. However, they were also cautious, saying that evidence on long-term impacts of programmes remains limited. Whilst most IPS studies reported competitive employment rates exceeding 60%, there are isolated examples of rates below 30% (Lehman et al, 2002). Some of these outliers might be attributed to low fidelity (Drake et al, 2006).

In terms of challenges for SE, research suggests that they can be complex to implement and require careful multi-level stakeholder commitment and investment (Kilapsy et al, 2022). Anxiety, depression and low confidence amongst clients can all act as 'supply-side' obstacles to successful employment outcomes (Baxter et al, 2024). Other challenges in implementing SE have included difficulties for advisors in managing large, geographically dispersed caseloads and resource issues such as high staff turnover. The literature on IPS suggests there is no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting individuals in obtaining and maintaining employment. The evidence points to the need to tailor strategies based on individual needs and circumstances (Patmisari et al, 2024).

Research has also highlighted the need for policymakers and businesses to make efforts to transform employer attitudes around disabled workers. By doing this, 'employment aspirations, strengths and assets of disabled people can be more fully harnessed in the workforce.' (Baxter et al, 2024). Disability organisations and employers have recommended increased access to SE, with more training and resources required to implement an expansion of services (Webb, 2025).

Summary

Disabled people in NI face significant barriers to employment. NI has both the lowest disability employment rate and the largest disability employment gap in the UK. Contributing factors include the legacy of the Troubles and structural inequalities such as lower qualifications and limited access to quality jobs. Many disabled people in NI live in poverty and many disabled people report difficulty finding or keeping a job. The UK and NI governments have made commitments to

improving disabled people's access to work. For example, through legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act and the DWP's SE-based *Connect to Work* programme. But progress has been slow and uneven. Recent shifts towards more personalised employment support are promising, but these have been undermined by threatened cuts to disability benefits, ongoing workplace stigma, and continued employer reticence about hiring people with disabilities.

SE is a model underpinned by a clear set of values which help ensure individuals are supported into high-quality jobs. This, alongside its focus on strong partnerships which empower both individuals and employees at each stage of the employment lifecycle, makes it different from other employment support programmes like segregated work shelters, 'train then place' approaches and wage subsidies. SE is seen as an effective, evidence-based approach which can improve outcomes for individuals and employers. However, without more investment in certain countries, such as NI, the model is at risk of decline (Webb, 2025).

4. What does SE look like in Northern Ireland?

NI has been a key player in the global SE movement. In the 1970s, Irish organisations – from north and south of the border – were active in exporting the model from the USA to Europe. NI was a founding member of the European Union of Supported Employment (renamed Association of Supported Employment Europe—ASEE) in 1993, and half of its presidents over the past 30 years have been from NI. In 2017, the NIUSE and ASEE co-hosted the first World Conference on Supported Employment in Belfast. The current leadership of the NIUSE sit on the board of ASEE, building international networks to support disabled people into work (ASEE, 2023; Elston, 2014).

While there are currently no exact figures stating how many disabled people are being helped into work through SE services in NI, NIUSE estimates that its member organisations, which promote employment opportunities for disabled people in NI, collectively provide employment support to around 4,000 people with a disability or long-term health condition in NI (NIUSE, 2001). Furthermore, as of 2021, NIUSE member organisations employed over 330 staff across disability employment services in NI (NIUSE, 2021).

There are two types of employment support interventions in NI that target people with disabilities in NI – services commissioned as part of NI government programmes, and services independently provided by disability organisations in the voluntary and community sector in NI.

Northern Ireland government programmes

The Department for Communities offers three types of disability employment programmes. The first is the 'Workable NI' programme, which offers flexible support to disabled people who have the offer of a job (for longer than 6 months), or who are in work (for at least 10 hour per week), and who face barriers in keeping paid employment. This service incorporates elements of the SE model, namely, in-work support that is tailored to the individual's needs. Participants are supported by a dedicated employment officer who provides job coaching, mentoring and training to help them develop and improve their work skills and progress to unsupported employment. Support and training is also provided to the employer. The support is time-limited and is typically offered for up to 12 months (NOW Group, 2024). Thus, the Workable programme has elements of SE (in-work coaching, individualised supports, employer support, and a focus on paid roles in the open labour market). However, it is not a full-fidelity SE model, as it does not include pre-employment engagement with disabled jobseekers, vocational profiling, job matching and a structured multi-stage SE pathway with ongoing support. The NI government contracts three disability organisations to offer SE services through Workable: USEL, Disability Action, and Supported Employment Solutions (a consortium of seven disability organisations listed in Table 1).

The Department for Communities offers two further employability programmes for disabled people in NI. The first is ‘Access to Work’, which provides in-work practical support for individuals in a job, such as help getting to and from work. Access to Work can also cover practical costs such as special aids and equipment, adaptations to premises and equipment, additional costs in travelling to and from work, and the provision of disability awareness training (NI Government, 2025).

The third disability employment service is the Condition Management Programme (CMP). This is a work-focussed programme for disabled people facilitated by healthcare professionals. CMP enables disabled people to manage their health condition to allow them to progress towards, move into, and stay in work. Healthcare professionals, such as mental health nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, give advice on areas such as chronic fatigue, stress, depression, pain and musculoskeletal issues, to help people manage their condition and improve their prospects of returning to work or staying in work. An overview of NI government services is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: NI Department for Communities Disability Employability Programmes

NI Government Programme	Focus	Providers
Workable NI	In-work support programme	1. Disability Action 2. Supported Employment Solutions (Action Mental Health, RNIB NI, Cedar Foundation, Mencap, NOW Group, Orchardville Society, RNID) 3. USEL
Access to Work	Practical support for individuals and employers (i.e. equipment, travel)	Department for Communities
Condition Management Programme	Programme to help individuals with health conditions progress towards, move into, and stay in employment	Funded by DfC and delivered by health professionals in the six Health and Social Services Trusts across NI

While Workable NI, Access to Work and the CMP are active programmes funded by the Department for Communities, there is also an older programme that still supports some disabled people in NI. Employment Support (ES) was launched in 1981 and closed to new entrants in 2006 when it was replaced by Workable NI. However, a decision was made to retain existing clients who were receiving ES, if they were unable to move onto the Workable NI programme due to the severity of their disability. The ES programme offered subsidised work opportunities to disabled people, including wage subsidies to employers to retain severely disabled employees. The amount of financial support received by the employer was equivalent to the assessed percentage shortfall in the employee’s outputs. According to one interviewee, the programme currently has about 220 participants, and “they’re an ageing cohort, as there haven’t been new entrants in some time.”

However, while wage subsidies for disability employment are in decline in NI, subsidies have been recently re-introduced in other employment programmes in NI. A new JobStart programme was introduced in October 2025, also funded by the Department for Communities, which allows employers to create new job opportunities for individuals who are unemployed or economically inactive and in receipt of working age benefits (DfC, 2025b). Employers receive 100% of the costs to hire new employees, including the National Living Wage for up to 25 hours per week, NI contributions and minimum automatic enrolment pension contributions for 6 months. Under JobStart, people with disabilities can work more flexibly, from 15 hours pw, for up to 9 months.

Finally, it is also helpful to consider the broader provisions around employment support in NI, in the form of the Labour Market Partnerships. The LMP model was created after the Department for Communities’ main employment programme to assist people into work, Steps 2 Success, ended in March 2021. The LMP model involved the establishment of 11 multi-agency partnerships in each local council in NI to help people find jobs and training programmes in their local area. Some of the LMP teams at local councils that we interviewed for this project highlighted how they valued the SE model, and were contracting third-sector organisations to deliver SE-based employability projects

at the council level, though these were time-limited and did not follow the full 5-stage model.

NI Voluntary and community sector programmes

In addition to the disability employment programmes provided by the DfC, and local council commissioning of time-limited SE-based projects (though not full fidelity SE services) as part of LMPs, a number of disability organisations across the voluntary and community sector in NI provide support to people with disabilities and long-term health conditions to find and keep jobs. There are currently 16 different providers of SE services across NI, with different target audiences (type of disability) and service areas across NI. Although SEQF is not widely known in NI, the NIUSE promotes the use of quality standards amongst third-sector providers of SE services in NI (including an SEQF pilot with three organisations), and voluntary and community sector organisations deliver services based on the SE 5-step model and SE principles and values. IPS is also not widely used in NI (with the exception of one project in Belfast, led by Belfast Trust and Action Mental Health). Instead, the SE model is used for all areas of disability in NI. Many of the third-sector providers were previous recipients of ESF funding and are now partners in UKSPF project consortia delivering services to help disabled people into work (Hepburn et al, 2025). Some of them also deliver Workable NI and LMP SE services. The providers are included in Table 2.

Table 2: Supported Employment Services Providers in SE (Disability Organisations)

Organisation/Provider	SE: Type of Disability	Service Area
Action Mental Health	Mental Health	All of NI
Adapt NI	Deaf, Hearing Impaired, Tinnitus	All of NI
AEL (Access Employment Ltd)	Learning Disability	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast & Glens, Mid & East Antrim
Appleby Trust	Learning Disability, Autism Spectrum	Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon, Mid Ulster and Newry, Mourne & Down
Can	Learning Disability	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast & Glens, Mid & East Antrim
Cedar Foundation	Physical Disability, Brain Injury, Autism	All of NI
Clanrye Group	All disabilities - Physical, Mental Health, Learning, Sensory, Hidden Disability	Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon and Newry, Mourne & Down
Disability Action	All disabilities	All of NI
Mencap NI	Learning Disability, Autism	All of NI
NOW Group	Learning Disability, Autism	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Ards & North Down, Belfast, Mid & East Antrim, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh & Omagh
Orchardville Society	Learning Disability, Autism	Ards & North Down, Belfast, Causeway Coast & Glens, Derry & Strabane, Newry, Lisburn & Castlereagh, Mourne & Down
Specialisterne NI	Autism	All of NI
Stepping Stone NI	Learning Disability, Autism	Ards & North Down, Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon, Lisburn & Castlereagh, Newry, Mourne & Down
Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) NI	Blind and Visually Impaired	All of NI
Triangle Progression to Employment	Learning Disability, Autism	Antrim & Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid & East Antrim, Mid Ulster
USEL	All disabilities	All of NI

While there are a large number of organisations delivering SE services across different areas of NI, the community and voluntary sector has been brought together to collaborate on delivering SE services in three ways: (1) through NIUSE, which is an umbrella organisation for non-governmental organisations delivering SE services in NI; (2) through the Supported Employment Solutions consortium of 7 disability organisations that delivers the Workable NI services; and (3) through the UKSPF funding model, which requires organisations to form consortia to deliver projects in NI.

Funding for SE in Northern Ireland

Funding for SE services run by disability organisations in NI is currently precarious. Support for disabled people – including pathways into employment – had been a key target under the European Social Fund (ESF) social inclusion strand of funding prior to Brexit. The ESF budget allocation to NI in the final year before it was terminated in the UK (Call 3 in 2022-23) was £177m, of which £60.7m was allocated to 22 disability projects. ESF funding came from ESF (55%), the NI Department for the Economy (10%), and a range of match funders (35%) which included government departments, Health and Social Care Trusts, local Councils, further education colleges, and private sources (NIUSE, 2020). During 2018-20, the NIUSE (2020) estimated that ESF funding led to the following outcomes for people with disabilities in NI:

- 6,635 disabled people benefited across 22 projects
- 17.5% of service users (1,162 participants) progressed into paid employment, thereby exceeding the 10% target set by ESF
- 54% of service users (642) remained in paid employment after six months
- 18% (1193) progressed into training or education on leaving the programme.

After Brexit, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) was introduced by the UK Government as a successor to the ESF. However, this was a smaller pot of funding, with shorter funding periods. As a result, disability organisations delivering SE programmes in NI – alongside other organisations supporting under-represented people into work – experienced reduced funding under UKSPF. Projects supporting disabled people in NI received £15.6m in the final year of ESF funding (Call 3, 2022-23), compared to £8.4m per year under the UKSPF (2023-25). This represents a 46% reduction in funding from the ESF to the UKSPF for disability organisations (Hepburn et al, 2025).

Organisations reported staff losses due to late confirmation of UKSPF funding in March 2023, and those who were awarded funding had reduced capacity to deliver services due to funding cuts. In particular, the stricter eligibility criteria focussing on economic inactivity led to the exclusion of those who were unemployed or in work. The shorter timeframe of the UKSPF (2 years, with 12-month extensions, compared to the 3-5 year funding periods under ESF) and the narrow focus on employment outcomes (rather than the broad social inclusion focus of ESF) limited the type of groups that could be supported. Unsuccessful applicants had to close programmes, including some SE services.

The precarious position of SE in NI contrasts with the rest of the UK. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) recently made SE a key aspect of its employability workstream. *Connect to Work* aims to support people facing barriers to employment, such as health conditions, disabilities, and complex needs to find and sustain meaningful work. It is a voluntary, high-fidelity SE programme, which is offered in England and Wales as part of the UK Government's *Get Britain Working* strategy. The UK Government is investing £1 billion in the programme, with the aim of supporting 300,000 people with disabilities and health conditions into work by 2030 (DWP, 2025c). However, NI is not required to replicate this programme as employment is a devolved matter.

4.1 Supported Employment in NI: Disabled People's Perspectives

In July-September 2025, a survey was sent out to users of SE services in NI with disabilities or long-term health conditions, to enquire about their experiences. The survey received 43 responses. With regard to the demographic composition of survey respondents, around half of respondents (a total of 22 people or 52% of respondents) were aged 18 to 35; while 21 people (48%) were aged 35-65. There were more male respondents than female; with 28 (68%) of respondents identifying as men, and 13 (32%) identifying as women. Only one respondent came from an ethnic minority background. Respondents reported having a variety of different disabilities and long-term health conditions: 24% of respondents had a learning disability; 20% were neurodivergent; 17% had a

mental health condition; 15% had a physical disability; 15% had a sensory impairment; and 10% had a long-term health condition or chronic illness. Table 3 provides a summary of survey responses amongst these individuals. In addition to the survey, six semi-structured interviews were carried out with disabled people in NI to explore their experiences of accessing SE services.

Table 3: Survey of people with disabilities, responses to demographic questions		
Age	No.	%
18 to 25	9	21
26 to 35	13	31
36 to 45	10	24
46 to 55	6	14
56 to 65	4	10
Total	43	100
How would you describe your gender?	No.	%
Woman	13	32
Man	28	68
Total	41	100
What is your ethnicity / ethnic background?	No.	%
White	41	98
Black African	1	2
Total	42	100
Do any of the following describe your background?	No.	%
I have a low income background	16	37
I have lived in care or been looked after by social services	0	0
I live in a rural or remote area	4	9
None of the above	14	33
Prefer not to say	7	16
Other	2	5
Total	43	100
Please describe your disability or long-term health condition	No.	%
Learning disability	10	24
Neurodivergence	8	20
Mental health condition	7	17
Physical disability	6	15
Sensory impairment	6	15
Long-term health condition / chronic illness	4	10
Total	41	101

4.1.1 Impact of disability on people's lives and employment

Survey responses highlighted the impact that health conditions and disabilities, and systemic barriers to work, have on disabled people's employment outcomes and their wider lives. Survey respondents explained that their health conditions and disabilities limited the kinds of work they had been able to pursue and sustain. For example, one respondent explained that they had trained as a social worker but that "the physical impact of the job, not to mention the cognitive fatigue caused by the condition, has meant that I could not pursue this career path." As shown in Table 4, 90% of survey respondents answered Yes when asked if they had every worked or applied for work; while 64% said that their disability or health condition had affected their work opportunities.

Table 4: Survey of people with disabilities, responses to disability and work questions		
Have you ever worked or applied for work?	No.	%
Yes	38	90
No	4	10
Total	42	100
Has your disability or health condition affected your work opportunities?	No.	%
Yes	27	64
No	4	26
I don't know	11	10
Total	42	100

People with disabilities described their difficulties in securing work, citing inaccessible and overwhelming application processes, a lack of confidence when it came to interviewing and encountering employers who were reluctant to hire individuals with limited work experience or due to stigma surrounding their disability. One respondent described feeling that they were simply “not being given a chance” in their search for work. Another explained that they were “openly declined for jobs because of my poor balance and coordination, and this was stated as the reason for not giving me the job. Even though it was a desk job and required no balance or coordination.”

In both surveys and interviews, structural barriers were commonly identified as a challenge to accessing work. This included inadequate local jobs and poor transport links, particularly for those living in NI’s rural areas. Interviewees spoke about “infrastructure issues” and “transport issues” impeding their access to physically attend job interviews. “People with disabilities can’t get to and from interviews, not everybody drives,” said one. Another said there were fewer jobs in rural areas.

Stigma both in the workplace and within broader society was described as acute in NI, with a feeling that a “just get on with it mentality” prevailed. Respondents also stressed that in the NI context, outdated legislation such as the DDA creates barriers for disabled people, comparing this to the stronger protections to improve equal access to the labour market under the Equality Act (2010) in GB. Other issues included difficulties accessing and using technology. One respondent replied that “lack of access to IT” was a barrier to finding work and that “getting suitable attire for an interview” operated as an additional barrier. For those who had entered the workforce, maintaining employment also often came with its own difficulties. Low energy, fatigue, anxiety, chronic pain, and cognitive difficulties presented challenges in performing certain tasks in the workplace, remaining in physically demanding roles, and working full time. One respondent wrote, “when in pain or extremely tired I find it difficult to fulfil my role” while another explained that having difficulties with walking or standing for any length of time presented a challenge in the workplace.

The survey data showed that disabled people in NI often faced a lack of understanding or support from employers. Table 5 provides an overall breakdown of survey responses from disabled people to questions around disability and work. As can be seen, while a plurality of respondents (50%) felt either very or somewhat comfortable telling an employer about their disability, only a minority of respondents felt this way about either asking for adjustments when applying for a job (36%) or asking for adjustments at work (34%).

Table 5: Survey of people with disabilities: How comfortable do you feel... ?		
Telling an employer about your disability	No.	%
Very comfortable	9	21
Somewhat comfortable	12	29
Neutral	7	17
Somewhat uncomfortable	9	21
Not comfortable at all	5	12
Total	42	100
Asking for adjustments when applying for a job	No.	%
Very comfortable	3	7
Somewhat comfortable	12	29
Neutral	8	19
Somewhat uncomfortable	9	21
Not comfortable at all	10	24
Total	42	100
Asking for adjustments at work	No.	%
Very comfortable	3	7
Somewhat comfortable	11	27
Neutral	10	24
Somewhat uncomfortable	8	20
Not comfortable at all	9	22
Total	41	100
Asking for employment support or advice	No.	%
Very comfortable	7	17
Somewhat comfortable	15	37
Neutral	11	27
Somewhat uncomfortable	5	12
Not comfortable at all	3	7
Total	41	100

Many respondents reported feeling hesitant or uncomfortable disclosing their disability at work, citing fears of discrimination, stigma, or being treated differently, with one explaining that “asking for reasonable adjustments is extremely difficult and can often lead to a passive aggressive treatment and a hostile environment.” However, others felt supported and able to disclose in the workplace, highlighting that trust and employer understanding could make disclosure more manageable. Where respondents felt their employers had failed to provide meaningful support this could lead to a worsening of physical and mental health, and resulted in one individual needing to end their working career early. Another said, “some employers have little to no awareness of disability, especially hidden disability. This affects my mental health as I feel I'm not good enough.” This quote highlights how the challenges disabled people face in accessing and sustaining employment can impact their overall wellbeing.

When coming up against recruitment barriers, and setbacks in maintaining work, respondents cited a loss of confidence and low self-esteem. For jobseekers, this adversely impacted their job search, becoming “avoidant and overwhelmed”, while for those in employment, it led to feelings of social exclusion. Several respondents spoke of struggling with social interactions and of being misunderstood by colleagues.

Breaking down responses by gender, income and age, as shown below in Tables 6a to 6c, some further noteworthy findings emerge. In particular, men and women were relatively balanced in their

comfort level in disclosing their disability to employers. As shown in Table 6a, 53% of women and 50% of men felt either 'very comfortable' or 'somewhat comfortable' telling an employer about a disability. However, there were more men who felt 'not comfortable at all' (14%) telling their employers compared to women (8%).

Table 6a: How comfortable do you feel telling an employer about your disability? (by gender)					
	Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat uncomfortable	Not comfortable at all
Women	2	5	4	1	1
% of women respondents	15	38	31	8	8
Men	7	7	3	7	4
% of men respondents	25	25	11	25	14

The survey also revealed that respondents from low-income backgrounds were less likely to feel very or somewhat comfortable telling an employer about their disability (37% of low-income respondents, compared to 50% across all respondents in Table 6b).

Table 6b: How comfortable do you feel telling an employer about your disability? (Low-income background respondents)					
	Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat uncomfortable	Not comfortable at all
Low-income background	1	5	2	6	2
% of low-income background respondents	6	31	13	38	13

As seen in Table 6c, younger respondents (those aged 35 or younger) were more likely to feel very or somewhat comfortable telling an employer about their disability (64% of respondents aged 35 or younger, compared to 35% amongst all other age groups).

Table 6c: How comfortable do you feel telling an employer about your disability? (by age)					
	Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat uncomfortable	Not comfortable at all
Aged 35 and below	5	9	3	2	3
% of <35-year-old respondents	23	41	14	9	14
Aged 36 and above	4	3	4	7	2
% of >36-year-old respondents	20	15	20	35	10

4.1.2 Disabled People's Experiences of SE services

People with disabilities who engaged in SE reported accessing a range of SE services and government programmes. Most survey respondents accessed services provided by disability organisations including Action Mental Health, Adapt NI, Appleby Trust, Can, Cedar Foundation, Clanrye Group, Disability Action, Mencap NI, NOW Group, Orchardville, Stepping Stones, Triangle Progression to Employment, Specialisterne NI and RNIB. Some respondents accessed SE through government-run programmes such as Workable NI, Access to Work and CMP. Table 8 below

provides an overall breakdown of the proportion of survey respondents who had used SE services.

Table 7: Survey of people with disabilities, responses to Supported Employment questions		
Have you ever used Supported Employment services?	No.	%
Yes	36	84
No	7	16
Total	43	100
Which Supported Employment service or government programme did you use?	No.	%
SE from a disability support organisation	33	70
A government programme	11	23
Other Supported Employment	2	4
Other	1	2
Total	47	100
Did you have an employment officer/worker or specialist helping you?	No.	%
Yes	32	91
No	2	6
Don't know	1	3
Total	35	100

Survey respondents reported first learning about SE through both formal referrals and informal recommendations. Disabled people also learned about SE through Jobs and Benefits offices and employment-related events whilst others learned about it through their school or educational programmes. Family, friends and personal networks were another important source of referrals, whilst some respondents reported accessing SE through an existing relationship with disability organisations. This combination of professional referrals, educational pathways and social networks demonstrates the multi-channel approach to outreach which underscores disabled people's access to SE services. Whilst disabled people shared that accessing services was easy once they knew about them, they also pointed out that information could be hard to find.

Disabled people reported overwhelmingly positive interactions with SE services, with many stating that without SE support, they wouldn't have been able to secure or sustain work. One survey respondent said: "I would not be in my current employment without their help, support, advice, reassurance and ongoing visits." For another interviewee, whose disability led him to leave the profession he had trained for, SE enabled him to first work as a volunteer and then progress to find work in the disability advocacy space. His response echoed many others as he said, "I wouldn't be where I am today had I never received the support from support employment." Other benefits noted by disabled SE service users included receiving tailored support, skill-building (including CV building, navigating job applications and help with interviews) and mentoring when it came to entering the workforce. Overall, respondents felt that SE services were personalised and proactive. The tailored aspect of support was consistently valued by disabled people who felt that it not only reduced workplace pressure, but it also helped an individual feel heard and respected. One interviewee explained:

"It's not like when I've been on Universal Credit and you get the work coach and it's kind of like they just want to push you out [into a job] and it doesn't matter what you're doing. This [SE service] was more about getting to know me and what I would like to go on to do and things like that... that was really helpful to me."

Survey respondents described positive relationships with advisors and appreciated the regular contact and responsiveness of advisors through WhatsApp, email and over calls. As shown in Table 8 below, all respondents who had accessed SE described their relationship with their advisor as either “Very good” (31 respondents) or “Good” (3).

Table 8: Survey of people with disabilities, responses to further SE questions		
How was your relationship with your employment advisor?	No.	%
Very good	31	89
Good	3	9
Not so good	0	0
Not good at all	0	0
Not applicable	1	3
Total	35	101
Did they understand and support your needs / particular requirements?	No.	%
Yes	33	94
No	0	0
Don't know	2	6
Total	35	100
Were you involved in making your own employment plan?	No.	%
Yes	32	91
No	2	6
Don't know	1	3
Total	35	100
Did they help you find paid work?	No.	%
Yes	27	77
No	5	14
Don't know	3	9
Total	35	100
Did the support continue after you got a job?	No.	%
Yes	27	79
No	1	3
Don't know	6	18
Total	34	100

Interviewees overwhelmingly described their advisors in positive terms such as “wonderful”, “open” and “honest”. One interviewee said, “she just listens and responds and if there’s any small things and she’s able to help, she does.” Many respondents also emphasised the role that their advisor’s personal qualities played. This included being empathetic and encouraging service users to engage with work at a pace which suited their individual circumstances. Respondents consistently described SE support as more personalised, understanding and caring compared with other job assistance like Work Coaches. For example, one person stated SE was “much better compared to job centre support because the Work Coach doesn’t have a relationship with the disabled person. You are just another work-related call in a day’s work to them.” The SE model was valued for its one-to-one support, flexibility, and what was seen as genuine concern for an individual’s needs.

People with disabilities who accessed SE overwhelmingly said that “nothing” could be better in the SE support they received in a survey. However, a small number highlighted challenges. In particular, concerns were raised about funding cuts: “As I was coming to the end of my time,

funding was reduced, which reduced the amount and types of different classes on offer. Another respondent reflected that: “The service has been cut more and more over the years. I felt I was being pigeon-holed into another box-ticking exercise. No disrespect to my [SE employment] advisor, I know she was being restricted due to funding.”

Some interviewees felt that working with an advisor helped them to build careers, rather than just find paid work. However, disabled people also said that they would appreciate more time with advisors, including additional coaching, more time in work placements and more long-term, sustainable employment options. Constraints on time available to spend with advisors presented a challenge for more than one respondent, with one individual saying: “Although I did have access to her support, the fact that it was time limited to an hour a month made me very uncomfortable, especially if my health worsened or dipped.” Some survey respondents also expressed experiencing difficulties when job outcomes were limited or when applications were unsuccessful, with one saying they found job rejections “frustrating” and another stating, “very helpful [service] but having received no reply [from employer]...I feel stressed and now alone”. This shows how, even when SE support is perceived as helpful for an individual, structural barriers within the wider labour market (like limited job availability and a lack of employer responsiveness) persists.

Where disabled people surveyed had not accessed SE services, they attributed this to having limited experience seeking work and not feeling the need to access services, with one participant explaining: “Never tried to find work that much before”. Others were unaware SE services existed. One retired participant reflected on the fact that these services were unavailable during their career and regretted not being able to access them as “they would’ve made such a difference to me.”

Overall, people with disabilities described SE services as providing accessible, tailored, and sustained support which helped them enter and navigate the labour market. Regular communication, personalised guidance, and the empathetic approach of advisors were repeatedly raised as key factors that enabled people to engage with work. Guidance on CVs, interviews, and employment planning was identified as especially useful. However, cuts to funding and systemic barriers continued to impact disabled people’s experiences.

4.1.3 Impact of SE on disabled people’s lives

Survey respondents consistently framed the impacts of SE as overwhelmingly positive. This extended beyond immediate job outcomes with many respondents commenting on the positive impacts SE services had on their wellbeing and long-term emotional health.

Finding and securing work

Disabled people described the employment outcomes which resulted from their engagement with SE as transformative, both in how it provided them with the opportunity to find and secure employment, and how having work has positively affected their lives. One respondent said that he wasn’t able to work “that would mean more stressors in the home, more financial stress. But also I feel work keeps my head well as well. It gives me purpose, it gets me out the house. So if I didn’t have that, it might affect my mental health.”

Financial security

Disabled people noted improvements to income, and ‘less financial stress’, resulting from engaging in paid work. This led to financial stability and comfort in daily life. As one survey respondent put it, “It has helped now I have a paid full time job that helps with my financial independence.” An interviewee expressed that without the paid work secured through SE, he would not be able to support his mother, with whom he lives.

Wellbeing

Respondents reported that accessing SE services helped improve their confidence and improved

feelings of self-worth. While one survey respondent said SE gave them back “independence, and improved my mental health”, another reflected that “my confidence level [went] up every time I tried something new.” SE was described as a key stepping stone for people re-entering the labour market after a period of unemployment due to ill-health. As one person stated, “we set small term goals and it was like, this is your first step. If you can do this, you can do this next thing. Progression for me really helped me to regain my confidence.” Another respondent described engaging with SE services as “one of the most important parts of my recovery” as it offered them a safe space to grow and push beyond their comfort zones. Whilst another person highlighted a sense of restored dignity and self-belief that SE provided, saying that it “gave me back my sense of self-worth, independence, and improved my mental health.”

Disabled people described gaining paid work as a source of happiness, security, and stability, emphasising the wide-ranging positive impacts this had their wellbeing. And for those accessing pre-employment SE services, individuals described themselves as feeling calmer and better prepared with one saying, “I found myself not losing any sleep as I wasn’t as stressed out.” In particular, supportive relationships built with advisors were frequently described as having a positive impact on wellbeing and self-confidence.

Relationships

Many disabled people who participated in this research saw improvements to relationships and feeling more connected to the people in their lives as a result of their engagement with SE services. Survey respondents emphasised the ways in which finding work through SE has enabled them to reconnect with friends, build new relationships at work, and feel “heard and accepted.” Along with getting back into a routine, one interviewee described a major benefit of accessing work through SE as: “just establishing a new team and being able to trust people again... when you're going through anxiety, you feel like the world is against you.”

In-work support

In-work support was described as similarly beneficial, helping people sustain jobs, manage challenges, and remain confident about their capabilities despite challenges. Interviewees explained that reduced pressure, more understanding from employers and adapting to accessibility needs had made their work life easier. “They give me a wee bit of space and understanding and support,” said one interviewee of his employer. Respondents noted the importance of ongoing emotional support from advisors, which helped rebuild motivation after periods of unemployment or illness. Survey respondents also reflected on gaining skills through in-work support which benefitted them well beyond their initial engagement with services.

Navigating difficulties finding work

Most interviewees framed their SE experiences in positive terms, yet others cited difficulties. These included wanting an advisor to be present during interviews for a job to help instil a sense of confidence, as well as anxieties around searching for work, and experiencing rejections. For one interviewee who was enjoying his work placement which had come to feel “like home”, the thought of trying to find another work placement which provided the same level of fulfilment was a cause of anxiety and stress. However, other interviewees pointed out that navigating finding work *without* an SE advisor was much more stressful than doing so alongside one.

Overall, key outcomes reported by disabled people accessing SE services included gaining employment, building confidence, and improving mental wellbeing, financial situations and social connections. Disabled people described the support as transformational: “It opened up opportunities for me that would not have been possible otherwise.”

4.1.4 Disabled people’s recommendations for the future

Survey respondents offered a wide range of recommendations for employers and policymakers,

commenting on the specificities around accessing SE in the NI context.

Employer recommendations

Respondents consistently stressed the need for more awareness around understanding and meeting the needs of disabled employees, including awareness of “different reasonable adjustments that can be put in place.” One disabled person outlined a list for employers: “Provide reasonable adjustments in a timely manner, create more equality of opportunity, open up career progression pathways, specifically for employees with disabilities, create stand-alone disability-specific policies and procedures in line with disability specific employment legislation.”

This reflects a wider view among disabled people, that employers needed to change their views on what kinds of jobs are suitable for disabled people. Research participants recommended that employers invest in disability awareness and training for staff, especially managers, so that employers have a clearer idea of appropriate support and adjustments for disabled employees, and create routes for disabled people to progress in their careers. Others emphasised the need to tackle stigma in the workplace, asking employers to “stop being reluctant to take a chance on someone with a disability.” Respondents wished that more employers would act as leaders in employing disabled people. “If more employers were disability aware and disability confident, they would have no problems recruiting for job vacancies,” said one respondent.

Interviewees expressed a desire to see more ‘more inclusive’ recruitment processes and easier routes into long-term sustainable employment rather than volunteer programmes. As one interviewee stated: “We need to move away from the days where little Joe is stacking shelves with a learning disability and never moves and never progresses.”

Policy recommendations

Respondents overwhelmingly stressed the need for increased funding for SE services, including sustained investment in specialist disability organisations. This included a request to “stop using job centres as the first port of call for job seekers with additional needs.” Disabled people suggested creating more ring-fenced roles and providing financial security for people in the process of exploring work. As one interviewee suggested: “a guaranteed safety net for up to a year within the benefit system to enable people to try employment options. Be flexible about how many hours people can work and remove disability related questions at interview.”

Many survey respondents also emphasised the need to include disabled people in decision-making processes and to reduce stigma towards disabled people in the labour market. Others pointed to wider structural issues, such as addressing negative rhetoric around people with disabilities, with one suggesting that “the Government needs to stop demonising people with disabilities as scroungers and a burden.” Challenges specific to the NI context also shaped the recommendations made by disabled people. Interviewees regularly cited transport issues as impacting disabled people’s access to work, as well as the need for the government to invest more in creating jobs in rural areas. Some people felt a stronger legislative framework was necessary to support disabled people into work and recommended that NI should adopt the UK Equality Act (2010), because the DDA was ‘dated’ and acted as a barrier to employing disabled people.

Overall, disabled people focussed on the need for employers to improve understanding of different disabilities, provide reasonable adjustments, tackle stigma, create clear pathways for career progression, and develop disability-specific policies and awareness training. For policymakers, they recommended an increase in sustained funding for SE services, co-design in decision-making processes, flexible financial support for jobseekers, and tackling NI-specific barriers like rural access, limited employer engagement and legislation.

4.1.5 Summary of Disabled People's Experiences of SE

In NI, disabled people reported facing significant barriers to employment. This included health limitations, stigma, outdated legislation, infrastructural inequalities and a lack of employer understanding or meaningful workplace adjustments. Interviewees and survey respondents consistently described their experiences with SE services in transformative terms, highlighting tailored guidance, skill-building, emotional support, and in-work assistance as especially helpful. SE was cited as helping to improve confidence, wellbeing, financial stability, and social inclusion for disabled people. However, some respondents noted some challenges that arose in their experiences with SE services, which they said result from limited funding, time-constrained support, and structural labour market barriers. Disabled people credited SE with helping them secure paid work, volunteer roles and enabling them to progress in their careers. Recommendations for employers and policymakers focused on increasing disability awareness, providing timely adjustments, tackling stigma, creating clearer career pathways and ensuring there is funding allocated to specialist disability organisations.

4.2. Supported Employment in NI: Employers' Perspectives

In July-September 2025, a survey was sent out to employers of disabled people with experience of using SE services in NI, to enquire about their experiences. The survey was disseminated through NIUSE's networks, with a focus on employers with experience of using SE services. The survey received 25 responses. With regard to the composition of survey respondents, 4% of respondents represented a small and medium enterprise (SME); 28% were from a large business; 40% were from a public sector organisation; 24% came from the voluntary and community sector (charities and social enterprises); and 4% came from other organisations. With regard to the geographical location of employers, 44% were located in an urban area; 4% were located in a rural area; and 48% of employers operated across both urban and rural areas. With regard to the size of organisations, 16% were micro-businesses with less than 10 employees; 20% had 11-100 employees; 24% had 101-1000 employees; 24% had 1001-10,000 employees; and 16% had over 10,000 employees. Table 9 provides a summary of survey responses from employers.

Table 9: Survey of employers, responses to organisational questions		
Do you consider your organisation to be:	No.	%
A small and medium enterprise (SME)	1	4
A large business	7	28
A public sector organisation	10	40
A third sector organisation (charities and social enterprises)	6	24
Other	1	4
Total	25	100
Do you consider your organisation to be based primarily in:	No.	%
An urban area	11	44
A rural area	1	4
Both	12	48
Other	1	4
Total	25	100
How many people does your organisation employ (approximately)?	No.	%
1 to 10 employees	4	16
11 to 100 employees	5	20
101 to 1,000 employees	6	24
1,001 to 10,000 employees	6	24
10,000+ employees	4	16
Total	25	100

The survey captured insights from a diverse range of organisations spanning the public, private, and third sectors across NI with experience of SE. Employers that had not participated in SE services (which constitutes the majority of employers in NI) were not part of the target group, as we were interested in learning about experiences of using SE. These views of survey respondents are thus not representative of *all* employers in NI, but rather employers with SE experience.

Survey respondents included senior managers and specialists across industries such as retail and hospitality, recruitment, manufacturing, insurance and digital innovation as well as construction and engineering. Significant representation came from the public sector, including education bodies, and public-facing organisations, such as broadcasters. In addition to the survey, six semi-structured interviews were carried out with employers in NI to explore their perspectives on supported employment and accommodating people with disabilities in the workplace.

4.2.1 Employers' approaches to accommodating disabilities

Employers responding to the survey said they had formal policies in place for supporting disabled staff. These policies were often framed within wider Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies. One employer said they had a Diversity and Equal Opportunity policy "in relation to the organisation as a whole being inclusive," while another said they had an Equal Opportunities policy that has "an appended section on employing people with disabilities." Several employers highlighted the role external recognition or partnerships played in their approach, for example by being a 'Disability Confident organisation', holding the "the AAA* Disability Positive Accreditation," or working "in partnership with the Business Disability Forum." Others emphasised more specific frameworks, such as a Disability Action Plan, where actions are measured on a yearly basis as part of the Section 75 Annual Progress Report."

When it comes to the processes in place to support disabled people, one recurring theme highlighted by employers was the provision of reasonable adjustments at different stages of

employment. One employer explained that their company was “committed to making reasonable adjustments, which ensures employees with disabilities are not disadvantaged, and taking steps to remove, reduce or prevent obstacles.” Another highlighted practical measures such as “offering adjustments, a choice for online or in person interview, [and] staff training on inclusion.” Specific recruitment processes included job applications in alternative formats, questions in advance, and providing reasonable adjustments.

During both recruitment and whilst onboarding, employers reported that applicants may be asked about their support needs, and if required, “an Occupational Health assessment is carried out...with any adjustments being included in a Reasonable Adjustment Passport.” Several organisations described using a *Work with Me Passport* or *Reasonable Adjustment Passport* to encourage confidential disclosure and to ensure agreed accommodations are documented and regularly reviewed. This “live document” is regularly updated, and managers can access further guidance from specialist disability support services. Another respondent explained that “candidates can request reasonable adjustments at any stage of the recruitment process...this may include alternative formats, extra time, accessible venues, or assistance.” Processes were also said to include “training for recruiters” (on topics such as “equality, unconscious bias, disability awareness, and inclusive recruitment”), as well as “confidential disclosure,” and “ongoing communication” which were all positioned as enabling employers to engage in inclusive hiring and to continue to support disabled employees beyond their initial job appointment.

Beyond recruitment, employers reported a commitment to building inclusive workplaces through measures such as mandatory EDI training for all hiring managers, robust support systems which they said “ensure inclusive hiring practices,” and ongoing staff training which relates to topics such as “equality, learning disability, human rights, diversity of individuals and equitable practice.” For some, inclusion was described as embedded in organisational strategy and culture. Employers also emphasised the “case by case” basis of support as well as some of the more practical supports that have been implemented:

“Depending on your disability, there are many ways we support our staff. If specialist equipment is required, employees will go through a desk assessment and will receive equipment such as ergonomic keyboards/mouse, specialist DSE chairs, specialist monitors, foot rests, back rests etc. There is a non-exhaustive list as to what the business will provide to those who need it. With regards to supporting employees outside of work, we offer flexible working shifts and accommodate these where we can as we do with reasonable adjustments etc.”

Ongoing support took place through mentoring or buddy systems, with one employer saying that a “work buddy [is] offered at commencement of employment,” and another explained that their company has an assigned lead “who supports the manager and candidate throughout the process and a check-in after 6 weeks and 3 months.” Employers also referenced wider organisational resources, including staff networks for disabled people and carers alongside “dedicated disability hubs with resources for all.” As one respondent stated: “We aim to continue to be as inclusive as possible, expanding what we do where an opportunity presents itself such as disability to employment schemes and supporting those with disabilities into the workplace.”

Table 10: Survey of employers, responses to disability and work questions		
Does your organisation employ people with disabilities and long-term health conditions?	No.	%
Yes	23	92
No	1	4
Not sure	1	4
Total	25	100
Roughly what percentage of your workforce do you estimate is made up of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions?	No.	%
None	1	4
1% to 5%	8	33
6% to 10%	10	42
11% to 25%	2	8
26% plus	2	8
Not sure	1	4
Total	24	99

4.2.2 Employers' Experiences of SE services

Employers described broadly positive experiences of working with SE services. Employers identified a range of specific SE services they had worked with, including disability support organisations such as NOW Group, Action Mental Health, Cedar Foundation, Disability Action, Stepping Stones, Triangle Progression to Employment and Mencap NI. Explaining their motivations for engaging with SE services, interviewees cited a desire on their part to hire more people with disabilities, and the role of SE in supporting them to do this. For one respondent, “the main motivation came from was how accessible and easy it actually was to bring people into the business with a disability, given their support groups and the support network they have behind them – it’s really seamless.”

Many employers who had engaged with SE services described their experiences as rewarding. Organisations valued the practical guidance from SE services, which included support and advice on reasonable adjustments, as well as access to training opportunities. Employers also highlighted the benefits of finding candidates “who are well matched to roles.” Employers cited SE partnerships as helping them adapt their practices to meet the needs of their disabled employees. One interviewee highlighted the value of ongoing support to employees, rather than a “handover done to the employer and you pick up and deal with any challenges.” Employers also described good relationships with SE advisors, who were seen as playing a key role in helping employers address any challenges arising, through communication and feedback loops. Challenges included the additional time required from managers to provide support, the need for ongoing adjustments as individuals progressed, and difficulties with short work placements or adapting workloads. However, challenges were often framed as manageable or necessary adjustments.

Table 11: Survey of employers, responses to Supported Employment questions		
Are you familiar with the Supported Employment model?	No.	%
Yes	24	96
No	1	4
Total	25	100
Have you ever worked in partnership with employment specialists to offer Supported Employment to disabled people at your organisation?	No.	%
Yes	19	76
No	6	24
Total	25	100
How likely are you to continue to engage with a Supported Employment service in the future?	No.	%
Very likely	15	83
Somewhat likely	2	11
Not very likely	1	6
Not at all likely	0	0
Total	25	100
Has your organisation worked with Government in-work support programmes for people with disabilities? (i.e. Workable NI, Access to Work and CMP)	No.	%
Yes	19	83
No	3	13
Not sure	1	4
Total	23	100

In considering their future approaches, employers expressed a willingness to continue working with SE services. As shown in Table 11, 15 survey respondents stated they were “very likely” to do so in the future with others, while two said they were “somewhat likely” and one “not very likely.” As one summarised, SE provided both practical support and meaningful opportunities, which were strongly welcomed by employers.

4.2.3 Impact of SE on employers

Employers described a range of benefits from engaging with SE services. Many described SE as mutually beneficial for both employers and employees because it provided structured support, broadened access to talent, and strengthened organisational culture.

Identifying talent and addressing skills gaps

Survey respondents and interviewees highlighted benefits they had experienced through SE services with regards to recruitment. Working with SE partners gave employers “a proactive way to engage with the community and branch out to talent in the market” as well as “identify talented individuals” with disabilities. One employer explained that a key benefit of engaging with SE services had been to “gain a bigger insight into the skills some people who struggle to get into employment actually have.” Similarly, one interviewee explained that “one of the core benefits is identifying talent that maybe you wouldn't necessarily have identified through your traditional recruitment exercise.”

Both skills and labour shortages were touched upon by one employer, who felt that economic inactivity amongst disabled people could be addressed through SE services: “Northern Ireland has the largest disability employment gap in the UK. Supported employment has helped provide long-term opportunities to those furthest removed from the labour market.” Employers also highlighted SE as a mechanism for developing employee skills and integrating employees into skilled roles, to address a longer-term skills gap. “The market at the moment, it's difficult to recruit externally, and there we have a group of people that that aren't being looked at with the skills to start any job.”

Strengthening the wider workforce

Other benefits of SE included workforce development opportunities. One respondent said that SE “has opened up the conversation around disability and inclusion,” and that SE “helped to create a better understanding of needs within the organisation.” This demonstrates how employers perceive their teams as being strengthened through inclusivity. Working with SE services was described by multiple employers as “empowering” for team members, who felt a greater sense of purpose in their organisation. In a more practical sense, respondents reported that teams benefitted from the support that disabled workers provided, including “support for projects, fresh perspectives, new thinking and better ideas.” This framing also arose in interviews, with multiple employers highlighting how the contributions of disabled employees had ‘enriched’ their teams. More generally, employers explained how their engagement with SE services had contributed to more positive and supportive working environments to the benefit of the whole workforce. One employer described the role of SE in “creating that safe environment where people feel that they can be themselves... I think that really is the main benefit that we see as an employer.”

Changes in employer attitudes towards disabled people

Relatedly, survey respondents described how engagement with SE contributed to greater awareness and understanding of disability in the workplace. One respondent described how “benefits for staff [were] an awareness of various disabilities and a sense of achievement that they had done meaningful, rewarding work through supporting and developing an individual into the workplace.” Another reflected that SE had supported their organisation’s “commitment to being an inclusive employer.” These comments suggest an openness amongst employers to learning, collaboration, and inclusion through SE.

An evolution of employer attitudes was also revealed in interviews with employers. One employer, for example, explained that prior to their experiences implementing SE, “I would have had that fear factor if I was recruiting someone with disabilities for all sorts of reasons, not just the practical ones in terms of the adjustments that are needed, but also... in terms of language I used and all those sorts of things.” The interviewee then described how working with SE organisations had been “like a godsend” in enabling them to ensure disabled individuals in the workplace had all the support they need. Another employer explained that “sometimes there can be a bit of fear around supporting those with a disability into employment that maybe it might not be suitable for them” and that SE advisors can help employers be more open-minded and supportive of individuals.

Reputational benefits to employers

Some respondents pointed to some of the reputational and staff morale-boosting benefits that engagement with SE services has for their organisations. One respondent shared that, “It has been great for our existing staff who have family and friends who have disabilities to take part in and fundraise for the NOW Group.” This indicates how visible community engagement (and as such, positive company branding) has come to be associated with SE and a stronger disability inclusion approach. Respondents also described how SE has enabled them to better engage with the broader disability sector, with one revealing that “people in the town are always saying to me that it’s great. Any customers that come in, they come into the counter and they’ll be saying, “oh, that young fella gave us really great service.” Another employer explained that “it’s getting our name out there locally to say the door is open, whether you’re disabled or not... I think locally it’s definitely been beneficial in terms of getting our name out.”

Benefits for disabled staff

As well as the benefits to organisations, employers highlighted a range of positive impacts of SE services for disabled employees. According to respondents, these benefits included “increased confidence,” “self-worth,” and “feeling useful, getting a routine, feeling like they are contributing.” There was a strong focus on employee wellbeing, with respondents sharing that SE advisors

helped employees “feel supported,” and gave them “increased confidence that they were being heard and the support they needed was available.” In interviews, employers provided more detailed examples of the impacts of SE on staff: “It would pull on the heartstrings, some of the feedback we have received from individuals, in terms of what it's done for their mental health and well-being, of the getting up and going to work and feeling supported... it has been so positive.”

One employer described their experience of employing a young adult who, “when he started with us [he] would have been very shy, whereas now there's no shyness at all, when customers come into the [workplace], he's straight over to them.” They also said, “for him, I think it's all about the confidence he's gained from working here, it'll take him on in life. And I know his mum is over the moon about him being here.”

More generally, survey respondents mentioned that SE provided “further training” and opportunities for “ease of learning and understanding.” Whilst skill building and development was cited as a benefit from an organisational perspective, it was also seen as beneficial to disabled employees. Employers highlighted opportunities for disabled employees such as “learning new skills in a work environment,” “training and experience,” and “progression and opportunities,” with opportunities to progress into new roles. One employer felt that the support provided to disabled staff translated into “a sense of belonging while also gaining the knowledge and skill of working in a team.”

4.2.4 Challenges of SE as perceived by employers

While several survey respondents reported no significant difficulties in engaging with SE services, others described a range of day-to-day challenges resulting from the time it takes to support the scheme, the need for continual adaptation in making reasonable adjustments, and reduced capacity to engage if there were headcount reductions.

Understanding the needs of disabled employees

Respondents described a learning curve in understanding and responding to the needs of disabled employees. One explained that “each participant comes with their own difficulties and challenges, which takes time to learn to be able to adapt and adjust to what they are suited to.” As some disabled people themselves pointed out in interviews, employers similarly highlighted the temporary nature of placements as a barrier. As one explained, “my participants have all been on 6-month placements, which isn't long enough, as they are only getting settled in and they are required to move on, which isn't good for stability.” This linked into concerns around the need for longer onboarding periods for disabled staff, and the difficulties this may pose to an organisation. As explained by one employer who was interviewed for this project:

“It's tough for companies to take somebody on and not have any output for maybe 1-2 months. But if you say “look, if you can stick in there, they will be really good for you and they'll probably stay with you longer and they'll turn up more. So in the long run they will be a better employee.”

Employers also cited challenges in relation to accessing support and information around how best to meet the needs of their disabled employees. Clear guidance and information were felt to be crucial in countering the “fear factor” of some employers in relation to hiring a disabled person. This was highlighted as a particular concern for smaller organisations which, due to limited capacity, “just feels like another challenge for them to take on.” When organisations know how to access the support available to them, by contrast, they were more likely to be confident that they “could be finding talent out there that will be an asset to their organisation” by engaging in SE services.

Continuity of support provided

A small number of survey respondents raised issues around the continuity of support, particularly during sickness absence. One employer explained, “when an employee is off due to sickness or illness, unfortunately, in our experience, many SE schemes will pause or cease the support they

provide to the employee. This causes further harm for the employee and employer.” This reflects concerns about being able to maintain consistent for the disabled individual across the whole of their employment journey. Relatedly, employers felt that when there is turnover in the staff supporting an individual, “it might be even more challenging for the individual: he builds a relationship with the person and then they need to start that process again.”

One survey respondent explained that while challenges were generally limited, complex cases could require coordination across multiple agencies. Here, an employer described a situation that “needed a number of professional bodies to be involved to work together to get a satisfactory outcome and adjustments put in place.” This indicates that, in certain situations, joint working between employers and external professionals is necessary to ensure appropriate adjustments and support are achieved to help a disabled employee.

Other concerns about hiring disabled people

Employers cited some additional concerns around employing disabled people which could present challenges to the implementation of the SE model in NI. One interviewee felt that there are “a lot of employers who are worried that if a [disabled] person doesn't do a good job, [they] have to keep them.” In reality, the interviewee explained, this is not the case: “if you're asking them to do a job... and they're not doing it for a certain reason, well, that's an HR issue.” The interviewee highlighted this as an area where training and development was needed to support the adoption of SE approaches. Another interviewee gave an example of an employee who had “very complex disabilities that needed to be carefully managed... they needed a lot of stuff put in place for them to be in the workplace to begin with, and it took a lot of organisations to come together to make that work.” This included modifications to ensure accessibility in the workplace building, and the provision of specialist equipment. In this instance, these efforts were successful, however the interviewee felt that a smaller organisation may have struggled more with arranging all the necessary steps in a case such as this. This comment reinforced the importance of employers having access to SE services, to provide guidance and support on these areas.

Impact of headcount reductions and capacity pressure

Finally, some employers cited internal pressures related to headcount reductions and decreased capacity as having the potential to pose challenges to the implementation of the SE model. One interviewee described how headcount reductions in their organisation had delayed their engagement with SE services, and had this not been the case, “we would have already kicked off recruiting externally through these groups that support people with disabilities.” It was also highlighted that organisations which have experienced headcount reductions are likely to have lower overall capacity to undertake new tasks and initiatives. This was seen as potentially exacerbating the concerns some employers may have around the time and effort felt to be required to bring on a new disabled employee.

4.2.5 Employers' recommendations for the future

Looking to the future, survey respondents identified a range of ways employers could improve the way they support disabled people in the workplace.

Meeting the accessibility needs of disabled staff

Many employers recognised the accessibility needs that shaped disabled employees' experiences of work. They emphasised the importance of “suitable adjustments” to meet individual needs, as well as ensuring “buildings [are] accessible”. One interviewee felt that workplaces could be adapted to better suit the needs of disabled employees, especially those with sensory sensitivities, by having a “room dedicated so that if people have breakdowns they can go in there, no judgement...rooms that have reduced noise...and the ability to adjust the lighting.” Several respondents called for manager and staff training on how to support colleagues with disabilities, and manager training around the supports available, as well as regular disability awareness and

learning sessions. Others pointed to the need for advocacy and leadership within organisations, suggesting that employers should “be open and transparent,” “continue learning and training on how to support people with disabilities,” and “be an advocate for employing disabled talent.”

Clearer and more visible guidance and resources for employers

Employers felt they needed clearer guidance and resources on hiring and employing disabled people, and that greater awareness of existing programmes, such as Workable NI and Access to Work, would be helpful. One respondent said that they recommend “better showcasing of what does exist for employers would help,” while another suggested appointing “an accessibility champion” to serve as a key contact for disabled staff and new employees. Increasing awareness of SE was also a key theme to emerge from interviews, with one describing a key recommendation as, “making it more well-known what options are available to organisations... to facilitate them adopting [SE approaches].” Respondents also urged the government to promote SE more visibly through awareness campaigns and practical support, recommending the government “deliver effective campaign activity to employers to highlight the business case,” “showcase real-life examples,” and “make it easier for employers to connect with disability employment organisations.”

Additional support for employers

Pointing to some of the resource issues that presented a challenge for employers, some respondents explained that additional time would be beneficial in helping to provide better assistance and the funding that might be required to make this happen. Many called for increased funding, “more money” for SE services, apprenticeships, and skills development programmes. As one simply put it: “the government could enhance access to funded and skills development programmes.” According to employers, this could all help expand work and training opportunities for disabled people in their organisations. Respondents also emphasised a greater need for inclusive recruitment measures, such as “ring-fencing roles,” “open and honest communication,” and “positive action measures.”

Strengthening the legislative framework

Some employers suggested policymakers should make participation in disability employment schemes mandatory for some organisations. One felt that quotas should be a requirement for businesses at a certain size, once people are employed this will help break down the barrier and stereotypes.” This was mirrored by another interviewee, who felt that organisations ‘of a certain size’ should be offering employment to ‘a certain amount of disabled people.’ Relatedly, employers highlighted the current legislative framework in NI around rights for people with disabilities as something they would like to see strengthened.

“Historically within Northern Ireland, and even within the disability legislation currently, they use very medicalised and negative language in the law, and the definition of those with a disability is most certainly a step away from the social model of disability, and I think that’s... maybe a big challenge for organisations to wrap their head around legally.”

As a result, the employer hoped in the future to see an “overhaul of that legislation to enable organisations to adopt a more supportive and inclusive.” Welfare and policy reform was another focus of employers, who commented on the importance of ensuring disabled people “do not lose access to benefits and are worse off for trying to work,” and calling for protections such as the ‘right to try’ within emerging legislation such as the Good Jobs Bill.

Cultural change and embedding inclusion

Employers overwhelmingly stated their desire to help create a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive employment landscape. They emphasised a hope for workplaces where disabled people are “seen as no different,” “treated as an equal,” and “included in every aspect of the organisation.” Respondents said that they would love to see a workplace where “barriers are gone

from start to finish and culture is supportive throughout". The importance of embedding inclusion into workplace culture and systems, rather than relying on reactive or ad hoc adjustments, was also cited as a wish. One respondent wrote that support should not be "something that's put in place because of X, Y, or Z, but rather embedded into the culture and infrastructure from the outset," while another said that "accessibility should be a fundamental principle in all aspects of the workplace and not an afterthought." Others imagined a future where there is "joined-up support across education, health, and employment services."

Improved collaboration and partnership

Finally, respondents wanted to see greater collaboration between employers, government, and the disability sector. This could be in the form mentorship, good communication, and one-to-one support, so that "disabled people have equality of opportunity and are empowered to thrive to reach their full potential, and where the government, employers, and community organisations work together seamlessly. There are ample resources, funding, and incentives to support inclusive employment practices. Collaboration between different sectors ensures that individuals with disabilities and long-term health conditions have equal opportunities to succeed." In an interview, another employer echoed the call for greater collaboration on disability employment across the government, and in collaboration with the disability sector, and employers in NI, arguing that "if you can pull all those partnerships together, that's when you see real success and change."

NI-specific enablers for SE

Employers highlighted some NI-specific factors as having the potential to strengthen the work of SE services or as providing a strong basis for them to succeed. Respondents pointed to the NI's existing infrastructure and collaborative networks, describing an "established supported employment infrastructure and government backing and policy support". Furthermore, one interviewee stated "the FE sector are already proactive in supporting learners and employees with disabilities and long-term health issues." Respondents also highlighted the "strong community and voluntary sector" and "fantastic network of charities doing amazing work," suggesting that the presence of dedicated organisations, colleges, councils, and local employers working together already provides a solid foundation for SE delivery. Employers also emphasised that the "large public sector employment should provide opportunities to create work schemes that provide SE approaches." Other enablers of SE suggested by employers were the "current low unemployment and size of organisation," and "brokering access between SE organisations and employment sectors." Employers felt that longer-term funding would "offer opportunity to more employers to consider hiring someone with a disability" and provide a basis for more engagement with SE in NI.

4.2.6 Summary of Employers' Experience of SE

Employers engaged with through this research project reported a variety of ways in which they sought to support disabled employees in the workplace. Amongst those who had worked with SE services, nearly all described positive experiences of doing so, alongside a range of positive impacts including: (i) the identification of new talent and the addressing of skills gaps; (ii) strengthening their wider workforce through the contributions of disabled employees; (iii) changes in attitudes towards employing disabled people as a result of implementing SE; (iv) reputational benefits they had experienced amongst customers or other people engaging with their organisation, and; (v) benefits for disabled staff including increased confidence and improved learning and development opportunities.

Challenges for the SE model in NI included the learning curve involved in understanding and responding to the needs of disabled employees, concerns in some cases around the continuity of support provided, and the impact of capacity pressures on the willingness and ability of employers to adopt SE approaches. Looking to the future, employers recommended the provision of clearer and more visible support, guidance and information to employers with regards to SE for disabled people, a strengthening of the legislative framework around disability and employment in NI, and

improved collaboration and partnership between employers, government and the disability sector to drive increased access to SE services for disabled people.

4.3. Supported Employment in NI: Disability Organisations' Perspectives

To gain the views of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), we interviewed four disability organisations who were either partners in the NI-wide disability employment projects funded by the UKSPF or contracted delivery agents for Workable NI. The disability organisations we spoke to had been providing SE services to disabled people in NI for many years and were able to reflect on the evolution of the sector.

4.3.1 Disability Organisations' views on benefits of SE

As the main advocates for the SE model in NI, disability organisations stressed a range of benefits of SE services compared to other employment support strategies.

Tailored support

One of the key advantages of the SE approach was tailored, one-to-one, bespoke support to individuals and employers. As one respondent said, the SE approach was distinctive in “engaging with the participant, and being conscious at the earliest stage of what the most person-centred approach would be that takes into consideration the person's disabilities and the barriers that they're confronted with.” Person-centred approaches are shaped by the type of disability or long-term health condition a person has, the severity of their condition, and other factors like past employment experience, personal background and mental health needs. Taking a holistic approach to a person's needs and wellbeing, employment officers would tailor how “you do your training, your development, how you work with employers, and what types of employers you work with.” This was seen to result in a better job match than more generalised advice and support.

Dedicated employment officer

The appointment of a dedicated SE employment officer, who was qualified and entrusted to provide support to disabled people and employers on an ongoing basis, was viewed as crucial to building trusting relationships and knowledge about client needs. As one interviewee stated, “it comes down to the relationship that's built between the employment officer and the participant on the programme, that seeks to look at the reasons for why barriers are present and what the interventions could look like for addressing those barriers.” Dedicated employment officers are the main point of contact for SE programme participants, providing regular (often weekly) support to participants, as well as liaison with employers and advice on recruitment, onboarding and reasonable adjustments. DPOs felt that the role of the employment officer was crucial in delivering effective SE services, in getting the right match between participants and employers, in negotiating with employers about reasonable adjustments in recruitment, initiating discussions around ring-fencing roles, and in providing employers with advice on inclusive employment practices.

Whole-employment journey support

Crucially, SE employment officers provided support to participants at all stages of the employment journey – from skills development to job-matching, recruitment, onboarding, and in-work support (for instance, in making reasonable adjustments or providing advice on workplace conflict, performance or capability issues). Many interviewees felt that the SE approach, in continuing to provide support in the early months of a participant's employment journey, was distinctive from other employment approaches that ended when a person was hired. They noted that the first few months in a job were often critical in shaping a person's long-term career in an organisation, and it was often during this early period that worries or concerns might arise. At the same time, disability organisations were clear that the end outcome of SE approaches is unsupported, or sustainable employment, where their services are no longer needed. They felt that the need for programmes reduces over time (even if setbacks do occasionally occur, requiring a temporary increase in support) and that the end point is when “the employment officer can actually walk away, and the

employee is in employment and unsupported.”

Two client groups: disabled people and employers

According to interviewees, a key strength of the SE model was that there were two client groups for the service: disabled people *and* employers. This was seen to distinguish SE from other employability programmes that either just focussed on the needs of employers, or on the needs of participants. By engaging with both groups, SE is the “perfect model, because the core value is that there’s two customers in this relationship.” This means that the SE model often involves more robust engagement with employers than other employability approaches, to ensure that employers have the support they need to hire and keep disabled people in work, and that their business needs are being met. One interviewee felt that once an employer agreed to participate in a SE scheme, “they’re more receptive to [hiring disabled people], and they’re more acceptable to keep them on as well. And we’ll help [the employer] when the person is in work.” Interviewees described how an employment officer would begin by making sure they were job matching with the right employer, they would explain to the employer what would happen, and they would provide a range of advice and resources, such as toolkits on different health conditions and reasonable adjustments, to help the organisation become an inclusive employer.

4.3.2 Disability Organisations' views on challenges to SE

The disability organisations we interviewed for this project raised concerns around a wide number of challenges to SE approaches in NI.

Loss of EU Funding and fluctuating funding models

The most significant of these was funding, and particularly the loss of ESF funding after Brexit and the transition to the UKSPF. Many disability organisations saw significant reductions in funding to deliver SE services, with some organisations having to close SE services altogether. Interviewees highlighted the negative impact of uncertainty on whether they could continue to employ staff and deliver SE services. Interviewees described the “stop, start” nature of the funding transition, the loss of keyworkers, and the impact this had on programme participants. “When you’re having to go to a client and say, look, your key worker is leaving, it’s so unsettling. It can be detrimental to their recovery because they’re like, *well, you don’t care enough*. And they feel let down.”

Interviewees highlighted how the fluctuating funding models and (ongoing) uncertainty around the UKSPF funding, and what might replace it, has created “instability in the planning of programmes and the support that they deliver.” Disability organisations also identified challenges resulting from the changed eligibility criteria for UKSPF funding, which focussed narrowly on supporting people who were economically inactive into employment (rather than being able to support people who were unemployed, or who were already in work but needed additional support). Interviewees described how they needed to ‘turn people away’ from services who didn’t fit the economic inactivity criteria. Furthermore, they described how the economically inactive cohort – which were not looking for jobs – were more challenging to identify and support. “With ESF, we were working with a broader group of people that identified as having a disability. That group, we could progress from unemployed to employed in a shorter period of time. It’s probably two or three times that length of time now [with people who are economically inactive].”

Short-termism

Interviewees highlighted the adverse impact of shorter funding timescales on their ability to deliver services to people who needed long-term support. One interviewee said, “with the ESF, there was more of an awareness that the people who access our service have more complex needs and therefore need a longer run into success. One of the problems is the short-term funding, but it’s [also] the uncertainty...and you don’t get long-term solutions or success with short-term funding.” The transition to UKSPF funding also had knock-on impacts on disability organisations’ relationships with other funders, such as NI departments, who were previously heavily involved in

the ESF funding, and health trusts, which had also been involved as match-funders of SE projects for many years under the ESF. When ESF funding came to an end, the successor UKSPF model did not include a match-funding element. This meant that “the buy-in wasn’t there any longer” and “they didn’t seem as interested as they once were” in employment outcomes for people with long-term health conditions. Disability organisations have described the deterioration of their long history of partnership working with trusts because of the end of ESF match-funding, with the situation seen as “going backwards.”

Other funding issues – tight budgets and short-term interventions

Disability organisations raised several other funding challenges that were affecting SE services. One noted the cap on funding for delivering the Workable NI services, and the impact this had on the number of people they could help: ““we have a fixed budget that can really dictate our capacity and the growth. It puts a bit of a ceiling on the growth opportunity of the programme. [There are concerns] it would become oversubscribed and therefore there wouldn’t be the budget for it. So, there is a capped budget.” Another interviewee highlighted the short-term nature of other (non-UKSPF) funding they received – for instance, from local councils, health trusts and foundations – and the negative impact this had on delivering SE services that required longer-term support.

Disability organisations felt that the short-term nature of funding influenced the type of employability programmes being supported, with the government and health trusts preferring shorter interventions with a clear ‘cut-off’ point. One interviewee referred to the JobStart programme as an example, which aims to help benefits claimants into work: “they’ll throw £10,000 or £15,000 per participant because it’s a six-month timeframe... And what happens is you’re getting the low hanging fruit. Unless you tackle those hardest-to-reach clients, you’re not going to move the dial on economic inactivity... [But] they will get the numbers, and they’ll be able to sell that as a very positive programme.”

In contrast, the SE approach seeks to help people with disabilities and long-term health conditions over a potentially longer timeframe with flexible and tailored support. This does not mean that there is no ‘end point’. Disability organisations stressed that the key goal of SE is to move people into sustainable or unsupported employment. However, the model also accommodates the possibility that people may have relapses or setbacks, and it ensures that support continues for as long as people need it. As one interviewee said, after a person is ready for unsupported employment, “there can be a series of setbacks in that journey... there can be life events at any time, that anybody can experience.” At the opposite end of the spectrum, interviewees felt that some funders – such as health trusts – wanted people to stay in supported employment, as funding was received per participant, rather than on the basis of outcomes. One interviewee shared that, “they’re looking for people in the door and they don’t mind whether they exit or not. In fact, they don’t particularly want them to exit a service because it diminishes the population of people they’re providing the service to... They would have lost funding against that participant.”

Related to this, disability organisations stressed the difficulties of adapting their programmes and services to meet the preferences of different funders. This created significant reporting requirements, having to tailor their paperwork to different criteria and targets, but it also posed challenges for delivering SE services in line with the 5-step framework and quality standards. One interviewee said, “we’re always trying to sell the core values of the SE model. But we recognise that different organisations are constrained by the nature of the funding that they’ve got available. So they try to make it fit the model.”

Lack of cross-departmental coordination

Disability organisations felt that there were challenges to embedding the SE model due to the structure of departmental decision-making in NI. Disability employment support is a cross-cutting government issue, aspects of which fall under the mandates of the departments for Communities,

Economy, Health, Education and Finance. Many of the interviewees we spoke to felt that there was a lack of effective coordination across departments, and that the lack of a clear lead within the NI government was hampering policy development and implementation around SE. One interviewee felt that, “they’re all saying, oh, this is somebody else’s responsibility. And even the way they’re constructed... when they reformed [the departmental structure], they should have put skills and employment together, you would have thought they were natural bedfellows, but no... so you’ve got another silo that is jostling for position to say, well, that’s not my responsibility.”

Lack of UK-NI coordination

Interviewees also felt that there was competition between the NI government and the UK government in the area of employability support. Some disability organisations felt that the Labour Market Partnerships (LMP), which were introduced by the Department for Communities in 2021 to replace the Steps 2 Success programme, overlapped with the UKSPF. Both the LMPs and UKSPF aim to improve employability in NI, with the UKSPF focussing especially on economic inactivity. However, as the schemes are administered by different governments (UK Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the NI Department for Communities, respectively) there is little data-sharing, target-setting or coordination across the two programmes. This has led to what some interviewees felt was a duplication of services around pre-employment support.

Lack of public-third sector collaboration

Interviewees also stressed their desire for better collaboration between the NI government and the NI voluntary and community sector to co-design and co-develop programmes. As one interviewee said, “There needs to be a bit more cohesion, a bit more communication between departments and the community and voluntary sector so that when programmes are being designed or targets or outputs are being decided on, there’s awareness of what is already happening.” Beyond the lack of communication, some disability organisations felt that there was a lack of respect for the voluntary and community sector in NI. Many interviewees talked about ‘a lack of respect for our expertise’ in the NI government, and a lack of acknowledgement of the services that they were delivering under tight budgets and uncertain funding models. As one interviewee stated, “we go through these hoops and we meet our targets and in a lot of cases exceed them. And yet there’s almost no recognition of that.” Another interviewee felt the NI government should give “us the trust that we can do the work that we have been doing for years.”

Lack of employer commitment to inclusivity

Another challenge identified by disability organisations was the extent to which employers were open to employing people with disabilities. Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the widespread challenge of overcoming employer fears and concerns around how to support disabled people, how much it would cost to make adjustments, whether they would be open to tribunal claims if they made a mistake, and so on. As one interviewee stated, “the knowledge of the support that’s available to the employer is not widely enough known. So, you’re kind of on the back foot when you approach an employer. They’re suspicious. But we have to make a case for engaging with our services and that the gains outweigh any of the downside.” Interviewees felt that more education, awareness-raising and training for employers around inclusive employment could help to address many of the concerns they might have. However, they also noted that the ‘suspicion’ around hiring disabled people was widespread despite many employers supporting EDI policies. One disability representative said, “nobody wants to be seen to not be an inclusive employer... but they don’t always put their money where their mouth is. If you look at their website, you look at their values, you look at their purpose; it’s all inclusivity... And then when you actually go to try and work with them, it’s like, ‘no, [we’re] not doing that.’”

Stigma around health conditions

Interviewees felt that there continued to be a high level of stigma around certain health conditions, which had influenced employer reluctance to hire people. Beyond a general concern amongst

employers that people were going to be off work due health conditions, disability organisations felt that there was a high degree of stigma around mental health. One interviewee said, “I think they [employers] see people with disabilities or mental health issues as, they’re going to be off. So, if I give that person a job, they could be off within 2-3 months. And if somebody has anxiety, depression, real mental health issues...I think there’s still that worry with employers that, ‘I just have to take their word for it.’”

Managing wage subsidy expectations

Despite the reluctance of employers to hire people with disabilities, the DPOs we spoke to were largely not in favour of offering a financial incentive to employers to do so. Many referred to the Employment Support Scheme, which incorporates a wage subsidy for employers to employ disabled people. While some interviewees felt this might be appropriate for people with severe disabilities who would not be able to work otherwise, most did not feel that wage subsidies were appropriate for most people with health conditions. This was because employers were reluctant to pay full employee costs after having received a wage subsidy for a disabled employee. DPOs also stated that they wanted to shift the employer mindset away from being ‘compensated’ for hiring a disabled people, to actually wanting to hire a disabled person and seeing the benefits of doing so.

Benefits system inflexibility

Finally, one of the most crucial challenges identified by interviewees for supporting disabled people into employment was the structure of the benefits system. Under the current system, people with disabilities and long-term health conditions who are in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) will see their benefit payments reduced or stopped if they work more than a certain number of hours per week. However, if that person is unable to continue working, they will need to re-apply for UC/ESA, which could take up to 6 weeks; and during this period they may be without any income. Claimants can apply for a loan but it has to be paid back once they receive benefits. As such, disability organisations fear that many disabled people are worried about entering employment as it is seen as too great a risk – if the job doesn’t work out, or they’re too sick to work, they may need to go without money for a time. As one interviewee said, “until the benefit system changes, a lot of people aren’t going to come out of their comfort zone and go, ‘I want to go into work’. I think that’s the biggest worry.”

4.3.3 Disability Organisations' recommendations for the future

The disability organisations we interviewed for this project suggested a variety of ways to better support people with disabilities into employment in NI. We have grouped these into recommendations for employers, policymakers, and service improvements.

Employer recommendations

Interviewees from disability organisations felt that there was much that employers could do to support inclusive and sustainable employment pathways for people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. A key recommendation was for employers to invest in education and training around disabilities, to address any fears, (incorrect) assumptions or stigma that they had about hiring disabled people. One respondent said, for a lot of employers, their first response to “finding out that a disabled person wants to apply for their job [is] ‘that’s going to cost me a lot of money.’” They automatically think about ramps or other physical equipment, and that if they make changes for this person, that’s going to cause trouble with employment law because somebody else has something different. I think there’s an education piece there that needs done for employers.”

Training and education were seen as particularly important for reducing stigma around disabled people asking for adjustments and additional supports within the workplace. Greater awareness around appropriate reasonable adjustments would support disabled people to work and create a more inclusive workplace culture rather than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ attitude whereby disabled people needed to meet the expectations of able-bodied staff. Knowledge of disabilities was seen to be

crucial when it came to employees who have learning disabilities or fluctuating health conditions, such as Long COVID. Respondents felt that it was important for employers to be informed as much as possible about these conditions to manage their expectations.

Several of the interviewees felt that great inroads had been made during the COVID-19 pandemic, when employers were required to be flexible and allow people to work from home, and there was a greater focus on staff wellbeing. This shift in employer attitudes was beneficial to people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, who may work more effectively from home, and the spotlight on mental health helped to challenge stigma. However, respondents felt that many of the 'work-life balance gains' achieved during the pandemic had since been lost, with employers often requiring staff to come back to the office full-time, and with less of a focus on staff wellbeing. Overall, disability organisations recommended that employers should be more open to having a conversation around hiring disabled people, and the multiple benefits that came with this – rather than being driven by fear, stigma, or a lack of information.

Policy recommendations

Disability organisation representatives also made a number of suggestions to improve the institutional, legal and policy context around disability employment support, to improve outcomes for SE service users. One of the most consistent suggestions across research participants was the need for better coordination around disability employment – amongst NI departments, between NI and UK governments, and between different employment services. Disability organisations highlighted how multiple NI departments were involved in different aspects of supporting people with disabilities into work and training – including the Department for Communities, Economy, Health, Education and Finance. However, there did not appear to be strong mechanisms of cross-departmental working, pooled budgets, shared strategies, and feedback loops with other organisations such as health trusts. This often meant that there were inconsistencies in the interpretation of policies, and a lack of collective leadership in the NI government on the issue.

At a macro level, interviewees felt that more cohesion was needed amongst government departments at the NI and UK levels around funding for SE, which was particularly acute during the development and roll-out of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which was managed by the UK Government without NI Executive involvement. More broadly, participants felt that there should be core funding for SE in NI – as there is in other parts of the UK (such as the DWP's new Connect to Work programme). One person said, "I suppose the biggest challenge with all this is that nobody is funding the delivery of supported employment. They're using money for different purposes."

At the micro level, disability organisations felt that there could be better coordination between employment services – such as Job and Benefits Offices (JBOs) – and SE service programmes. In particular, they felt that SE should be listed as a clear potential pathway for disabled people seeking employment support through JBOs. One respondent said, "we don't get enough referrals from the job centres, which we've fed back to the departments. There's so many people here that are economically inactive. How do we get to them?"

Building on the theme of collaboration, the disability organisations we spoke to also felt that NI departments could strengthen their relationships with the disability sector, and amplify the voice of disabled people, through the more effective implementation of co-design principles and practices. This should involve implementing the Partnership Agreement with the third sector in more robust and meaningful ways (NI Executive, 2025; NICVA, 2025b) and including people with lived experience of disability in policy design. As one interviewee stated, "when you read the Partnership Agreement, it talks about Fair Funding Principles, consultation, co-production, co-design. We don't see any of that happening on the ground."

Looking within the public sector in NI, disability organisations felt that a lot of the stigma around

disability employment – especially from employers – could be assuaged if the NI government role-modelled best practice for others, by implementing more inclusive employability principles and processes within the civil service. Interviewees also felt that policymakers could make small changes to disability employment support to make it more inclusive. These included embedding greater flexibility around the eligibility criteria for government programmes to include different types of disabled people doing different types of work, and more manageable funding requirements.

“An issue I see with Workable is that the eligibility criteria is a minimum of 10 hours of work per week and the job must last a minimum of six months. That will exclude a large number of people, like those in jobs with guaranteed hours, and those in temporary seasonal contracts. We can’t get in to support those people because of the criteria.”

Interviewees also felt that structural change was required in the UK benefits system to give disabled people more flexibility to try different employment options without being penalised by the DWP and losing their benefits for a long period. Finally, disability organisations felt that, overall, they would welcome more buy-in for SE approaches from policymakers in NI. There was a sense that the strong outcomes and value for money of SE models weren’t fully appreciated, despite a growing base around their effectiveness. As one interviewee said, “when we look across the water to some of the models that are there... the DWP Connect to Work programme, there’s a number of good studies and good practise. But it doesn’t seem to be happening here. We’re saying, look, this model works. Can you buy into it please? And we’ve never really had that buy in.”

Service recommendations

Representatives from disability organisations made recommendations about how to further improve SE services, to make them as inclusive and effective as possible. These included investing more into transitional support when participants left the time-limited Workable NI programme, in case they experienced setbacks after leaving the programme. Interviewees also recommended expanding the eligibility criteria and support provided by Workable NI, to enable more disabled people who did not have a minimum 6-month contract, or who worked less than 10 hours a week to access services. DPOs also recommended ensuring that SE approaches are flexible enough to accommodate people with different needs, especially those with mental health conditions. One interviewee said, “I think mental health is the outlier because there’s still so much stigma around having a mental health difficulty and, for a lot of our clients, they will happily accept the support that we provide them, but they don’t want their employer to know.” One interviewee felt that it would be helpful to more deeply embed quality frameworks such as SEQF in the delivery of SE. And another research participant felt that, within the broader SE model, they wanted to be able to spend more time on employer outreach to overcome misinformation and fears in the sector.

4.3.4 Summary of Disability Organisations’ Perspectives

Overall, disability organisations highlighted a range of benefits they associated with the SE model that were lacking in other employment approaches. These included the tailored, person-centred nature of the support provided to individuals with disabilities and employers; the appointment of a dedicated employment officer qualified and entrusted to provide ongoing support and build relationships with disabled people and employers; the fact that employment officers provide ‘whole-journey’ support to individuals, beginning with pre-recruitment and continuing to the in-work stages of the employment journey; and the role of SE in providing support to both disabled people and employers, rather than focussing on the needs of one group at the expense of the other.

Key challenges were felt to include the loss of funding for SE approaches associated with the transition from the ESF to the UKSPF after Brexit; issues with funding for SE approaches more generally, including the short-term nature of much funding for SE in NI; a lack of cross-departmental coordination between relevant government departments in NI, and between the NI and UK governments; a lack of commitment to inclusivity amongst some employers, in addition to

continuing stigma around disabilities; and a benefits system structured in such a way that disabled people entering employment could lose out financially if the job does not work out. Looking to the future, disability organisations make a series of recommendations to address these and other challenges, including for employers to be open to hiring disabled people; for policymakers to collaborate more with the third sector on funding and sustaining SE services; and for SE services to spend more time on employer engagement, training, and professional development to embed quality standards to benchmark organisations through SEQF.

4.4. Supported Employment in NI: Policymakers' Perspectives

We interviewed 9 policymakers at the NI and local council levels about their understanding and experiences of SE. These included representatives from the departments for Communities, Finance and Economy in the NI Government, as well as representatives from local councils in NI involved in delivering Labour Market Partnerships. The policymakers we spoke to offered a variety of perspectives on SE approaches.

4.4.1 Policymakers' views of benefits of SE in NI

The policymakers we interviewed at the NI and local levels had broadly positive views of the Supported Employment model, and the benefits to both individuals and employers. They felt that taking a personalised and holistic approach to supporting a person with a disability or long-term health condition into work was welcomed, and they appreciated the close and trusting relationships that were developed between employment officers, participants and employers during key stages in an individual's employment journey. One person said, "it's about helping that person secure the ability to move into employment and then while they're in employment supporting them through that, and maintaining that." Policymakers contrasted the person-centred, tailored approaches that typified SE models with the more general approaches taken by Jobs and Benefits officers.

"the disability organisations we work with for our delivery build up relationships with participants, and all the staff are really experienced in helping to support them. With [other employability services like] Jobs and Benefit officers, they're really good but they may not have the skills and experiences to support those individuals throughout that whole journey."

Policymakers appreciated the benefits that this individualised, whole-journey approach had for disabled individuals, especially those who may have been out of employment for a long time, or who may have never had any experience of work. In addition, interviewees stressed the advantages of SE not only for disabled people, but also for employers. One policymaker said, "I do think that the SE programmes are a lifeline to a lot of people... it's getting people to take the [first] step," while another felt that "there's benefits for organisations as well. I've heard a number of different employers talk about the impact within their business of being more open and inclusive."

More broadly, policymakers stressed that they were appreciated approaches that helped to support disabled people's right to work, recognising that this was a key issue in NI that deserved attention. One interviewee said that, "we're all very vested in this area. I have a great team below me who are absolutely, fully supportive of people with disabilities and health conditions in Northern Ireland," while another felt that "it would be beneficial for supported employment to be considered as part of the [local growth fund in NI]. You know, if there is proof that it allows for a more continuous employment for a person and it's beneficial, it should be considered going forward." At the same time, some interviewees felt that not all policymakers fully saw the value of SE.

4.4.2 Policymakers' views of challenges of SE in NI

The policymakers we interviewed for this project identified a variety of challenges to SE and disability employment support generally in NI. These included funding issues, short-termism, the lack of joined-up working across NI departments, employer reticence, and fractured SE provision underpinned by high levels of competition for funding.

Loss of EU funding and reduced resources for SE

One of the greatest challenges to supporting disabled people into work was the reduction in funding received by disability organisations as a result of Brexit. Policymakers in NI felt this had a number of adverse impacts, including reduced resources and SE services, and narrower criteria which meant large numbers of disabled people were excluded. One interviewee said, “I think the loss of European funding had a huge impact on SE, the loss of the ESF in particular. I don’t think the UKSPF completely replaced that.” Some policymakers felt the UKSPF funding was not cohesive with devolved policy and often resulted in duplication with NI programmes. This was seen to be poor value for money, at a time when pressures on public finances were high.

Interviewees pointed to other impacts of the loss of EU funding. For one, the overall loss in funding experienced by many organisations as a result of the loss of ESF was felt to have contributed to a reduction in the resources they felt able to put towards supporting employers to implement SE approaches. One participant said, “I know there are some incredible employers out there who want to [implement SE], but I think the loss of ESF meant that a lot of organisations who needed the time to develop their relationships with those employers - they’ve lost the capacity to do that.”

The shorter duration of UKSPF funding rounds in comparison with the ESF was also felt to have posed challenges for implementing SE in NI. As explained by one policymaker, “supported employment... can quite regularly require a longer journey for the individual” for the model to be fully implemented to the benefit of those being supported. Shorter-term funding rounds, in which there is greater uncertainty around the continuation (or not) of funding for SE approaches, creates situations in which “if funding is going to stop, the support stops”, which conflicts with the wraparound, continuing nature of the SE model. The loss of EU funding was seen as generally having contributed to a more constrained funding environment for SE organisations, in turn limiting the ability of organisations to deliver positive impacts for disabled people.

SE approaches affected by funding requirements

A related challenge with regards to SE in NI was the perception that SE services were often forced to align with different funding requirements, with potentially negative impacts for implementing the full SE model. One policymaker said they thought that “there are organisations that are contorting themselves slightly to be able to put bid for funding”, while another explained that “funding pots sometimes can railroad people into the streams of funding they have available to them.” This pressure to adapt approaches to fit with the constraints of particular funding pots (which may, for instance, only focus on pre-employment support such as the UKSPF) was seen to inhibit the implementation of the full five-step SE model, and pointed to the need for core funding.

Lack of resources creating competition

Policymakers described an SE landscape in NI consisting of a relatively high number of comparatively small organisations, each competing against each other for finite funding. Interviewees felt this contributed towards a competitive environment in the sector, in which an attitude could at times prevail of “don’t share best practise so that we’re the best at it”. Policymakers also reflected on the potential for different funding models to help facilitate a more integrated system of SE provision in NI. The consortium approach of the UKSPF was felt to have helped to drive a shift towards collaboration amongst SE organisations, with one policymaker describing this as “an approach we need to follow now going forward.”

Looking forward, policymakers generally expressed a wish for a more strategic, collaborative approach to the funding and delivery of SE approaches to be adopted. One interviewee, for instance, highlighted how they felt the collaboration involved with putting together UKSPF consortia had made some SE organisations “a bit more strategic and how they deliver what they do... I would

be delighted to see more of it”; while another expressed a preference for UKSPF funding to be “devolved entirely to Northern Ireland”, and for the devolved departments including the Department for Communities, the Department for the Economy, the Department of Health and the Department of Education to take a collaborative approach to commissioning SE provision.

Employer resistance to hiring disabled people

Another challenge cited by policymakers in relation to SE in NI was around employer attitudes towards employing disabled people. Overall, it was felt that progress had been made in recent years, and that there did exist in NI a number of employers demonstrating good practice in this space. However, policymakers also identified areas requiring improvement. Firstly, interviewees described a mixed picture with regards to the extent to which employers in NI have made relevant adaptations to their procedures and practices to support employment amongst disabled people. This was reflected by the fact policymakers working areas linked to SE often found the same group of employers engaging with them repeatedly, rather than attracting other employers drawn from across the full breadth of the NI economy.

Some policymakers were critical of the lack of interest shown by some employers towards the SE model and the employment of disabled people more generally. One interviewee, for example, felt that “employers don’t do enough in this space... they weigh in on our providers and on the government to be the funders, to be the answer, and they have very limited role or responsibility”. Another participant stated “(it’s) actually quite scary that so many [companies] had so little recognition of what you needed to do to take on somebody that was disabled and the support locally that was available.” Interviewees also felt there was a lack of clarity currently around where employers could turn for information, guidance and support in relation to disability in the workplace, an issue of relevance given the wide spectrum of health conditions experienced by people in NI.

“Employers don’t care what department they talk to, they just want to talk to somebody that they can say to ‘I have this issue, can you help me’ and the person on the other side of the phone says ‘yes, you need to talk to this person - I’m going to hand you over right now and that’s going to be you sorted.’ That’s all they want, and we’re not making it easy for employers.”

As a result, policymakers felt there should be more awareness-raising aimed at employers with regards to the support disabled people may need to fulfil different roles, as well as of the different kinds of support available to employers. One interviewee stated, “I think there needs to be awareness-raising and support for employers... to help them bring new people into their organisation from all backgrounds.”

Need to move to outcomes, not just enrolments

Policymakers felt there was a need for the provision of SE to adopt a greater focus on the achievement of positive outcomes amongst the individuals supported, rather than primarily on enrolling larger numbers of people onto programmes. One interviewee highlighted that some organisations are “more strategic than others” in understanding how to best scale up different activities to achieve outcomes. Another felt that funding pressures had contributed to a situation in which funders may look for SE services to ‘hold on’ to clients rather than help them to progress to a place where they no longer need intensive support. This was identified as an issue amongst health trusts, who received funding per head for participants, rather than funding based on outcomes.

Need for better cross-departmental working

Policymakers pointed to challenges around cross-departmental working in NI with regards to SE, with the result that SE has not to date received the level of priority amongst NI policymakers that it may otherwise have done. Firstly, policymakers felt that there was an absence of a clear lead within government taking ownership of disability employment. As one said, “we’re trying to drive issues that are much wider than us.... but at the moment there’s no other obvious party going

'Yeah, we'll own that and take the lead on that'... I think a key issue with all of it is nobody owns it as such within government." This was seen as important due to large number of NI departments with relevance to SE, including Departments for Communities, Economy, Education and Health. The dispersed responsibility for different issues relevant to SE was felt to have contributed to the lack of investment and priority given to SE in previous years, with some interviewees believing that the health and education departments in NI should be more involved in designing, developing and funding disability employment programmes. One interviewee described the large numbers of young people with disabilities coming through schools as a 'ticking time bomb' for the education department, while the health department should be more involved in health at work programmes.

Another interviewee felt that, "everybody seems to go *oh, that's coming our way - what are we going to do about it?* But then [they are] not doing anything about it." Looking forward, it was felt that driving forward efforts around disability employment would require a clear lead to coordinate cross-departmental working. As one policymaker said, "somewhere in government there needs to be a champion and an owner and a driver of this."

Communication and understanding of SE models

Policymakers also emphasised the importance of effective communication with regards to SE and disability employment in NI. Overall, it was felt that there were mixed levels of understanding across different parts of NI government, economy and society. "I think across some of the departments, it's very well understood - across some of the departments, maybe not so much. And then when you move into the more general public [the understanding] tends to sort of degrade a little bit. Some employers are very aware of what it is and what's needed, some are not."

One interviewee reflected that "smaller sort of family run businesses don't seem to have as much [understanding], but that could be because of communication and outreach and those sorts of things." Another policymaker recognised that "we do face some criticism that we don't advertise enough from employers." There was recognition of the need for clearer communication from the government in relation to SE, with one policymaker explaining that "communication is key in all of this - actually having the people that need [SE] understand that it's there is a big barrier."

NI specific challenges to SE approaches

Policymakers highlighted several challenges for implementing the SE model in NI. A key challenge was the unstable funding environment for SE in NI, and the legacy of past short-term funding cycles in disrupting provision. As described by one policymaker: "Inevitably the precarious nature of our funding cycles means that when programmes [such as] ESF have ended, we have had a cadre of people who got disbanded, they got casted out all over the place." Each new funding cycle requires organisations to build up capacity and expertise again which they may have lost at the end of earlier cycles, undermining consistency and the potential for long-term progress. In this context, it is left to "those in the community sector... who are the constants in this space and actually provide the stability that the civil service should be but isn't providing."

The historical and social legacy of the Troubles was also highlighted as posing a challenge with regard to the scale of support required. One policymaker highlighted that the "legacy of the Troubles... doesn't go away, in terms of wages, in terms of employment levels, in terms of mental health, in terms of suicide, access to health services", while another interviewee pointed to "the legacy of division and non-integrated education" as relevant factors. However, the nature of SE services was perceived as an effective approach to meeting the complex needs of individuals. For instance, one policymaker described "very deprived areas where there is generational trauma... the way to reach those people is through organisations that you wouldn't normally have to deal with, and they are the smaller organisations that are out there that are taking those risks in order to go in and interact with the communities." Overall, then, the legacy of the Troubles was seen as both creating increased levels of need for approaches such as SE and posing additional difficulties with

regards to the provision of this kind of support in comparison to other contexts.

Intergenerational unemployment and economic inactivity were also pointed to as factors with particular relevance to NI. One policymaker, for instance, identified “a big issue in Northern Ireland around intergenerational unemployment, where kids are looking at parents who haven’t worked and grandparents that haven’t worked... there’s no role model as such who has a job,” while another described the numbers of people who are economically inactive as “massive, and some of it is hereditary... it goes from generation to generation.” This was seen potentially creating challenges with regards to the motivation of some individuals to take part in SE approaches in NI.

4.4.3 Policymakers’ recommendations for the future

The policymakers we interviewed for this project felt that support for SE approaches could be improved by implementing a number of changes. We divided these recommendations into: policy and governance, service improvement, and employer engagement.

Policy and governance

Interviewees suggested that the most impactful recommendation around improving disability employment policy was to create clearer processes and lines of responsibility for cross-departmental working. At present, there were several NI departments working on relevant areas, but they were insufficiently joined-up. Some interviewees felt that having a clear departmental lead or a cross-departmental unit to coordinate disability employment strategies across NI departments would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration and budgets. One interviewee recommended the adoption of “single ownership... to have the visibility across the whole thing, to ask the difficult questions of different departments... I think somewhere we’re missing that tier of collaboration” while another said, “if social inclusion and economic inactivity were owned by a department or owned by... a cross-departmental unit, I think it would be more beneficial than six different strategies across six different departments to tackle the same thing.”

One respondent suggested that some legislative mechanisms already exist to enable cross-departmental working and shared budgets. “The Children’s Services Co-operation Act... has a power in it that allows departments to share budgets and to pool resources... but it doesn’t get used in part because nobody quite knows how to.” Another interviewee suggested that senior responsible owners (SROs) could be appointed at the Permanent Secretary or Deputy Secretary level to drive cross-departmental outcomes, or the TEO could take ‘a greater coordinating role’.

Beyond the need to improve coordination between government departments, interviewees also felt that stronger coordination was needed with health trusts and further and higher education providers around disability employment. One interviewee recommended “making sure the health trusts are looped in, making sure further education colleges are looped in, making sure all of those public bodies are aware; a more educated system.” Policymakers also discussed the funding around disability employment and SE approaches, recognising the adverse impact of the reductions in funding for SE services as a result of the transition from the European Social Fund to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. One interviewee felt that SE should be part of core funding by the NI government, with (post-)UKSPF funding being additional. Another interviewee felt that NI needed to develop a properly resourced, whole-system strategy with aligned priorities. They said, “if you want to actually move the dial, then there has to be a properly resourced strategy to address this issue and all the moving parts need to be in tandem.”

Finally, interviewees felt that policies should be designed to support and incentivise employers to develop more inclusive workplaces that accommodated people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. As one person said, “maybe a more strategic approach from government level on the employer side [is needed] - supporting employers to be more inclusive and promoting the visibility of people with disabilities working across all sectors.”

Service improvement

Interviewees working in the policy community felt that SE service delivery could be improved to become more effective. One of the key 'asks' of policymakers was for services to adopt stronger outcomes-based approaches – with more focus on measurement of impact rather than enrolments. Furthermore, policymakers suggested there should be stronger collaboration, data sharing and cohesion across SE services provided by voluntary and community sector organisations.

Some interviewees felt that service cohesion could also be better modelled within the NI government, by promoting a whole-journey approach for disabled people across departments, that supports individuals from pre-employment through sustained work. According to one policymaker, "the [disability and work] strategy really targets sustainable pre-employment support for those with disabilities and health conditions moving all the way through to in-work support in one single continuous journey... We need to look at that one single continuous model and stop everybody doing things in isolation." Another policymaker felt this could be helped by changes to the UK benefits system, to create pathways for disabled people to trial paid employment without risking benefits. They said, "I would see disabled people being on a programme... being paid, respected, [and] given the chance to do a few weeks or months of paid employment with no threat to their benefit, to see if it suits them. If they had no threat to their benefit, I think that would be ideal."

Finally, policymakers recommended that SE services keep building on the strengths of existing approaches to achieve greater impact. "There's lots of good practice in programmes that have been delivered... the ability to make those longer, make them more bespoke as well."

Employer engagement

The policymakers interviewed for this project felt that there were a number of ways in which employers could be encouraged and supported to employ disabled people and engage with SE services. A first suggestion is for the NI government to improve its offerings to employers on training and engagement around hiring and maintaining disabled employees. In particular, it was felt that a single hub for advice and resources for employers would be helpful: As one interviewee said, "we do not have a single structured awareness programme for employers where there's regular monthly workshops or awareness sessions that employers can dial in to for a subject they're particularly interested in - that's something that we're lacking. We don't have a Disability Confident scheme like the rest of GB. I think that's a major lack."

Another policymaker felt that the voluntary and community sector could have a greater role in providing advice and training to employers around disability employment support, recommending that "voluntary and community sector groups [go] out with employers, training them around what sort of interventions this person maybe needs and how it works." The development of joint training between SE providers, employers and employees, was seen as a potentially effective way to support improved communication. As one person said, "we need more triangulation between the provider, the employee and the employer in being able to increase the ability of the employee to be able to use their employer, who is there daily, to help with managing the health condition."

Finally, one interviewee felt that benchmarks or voluntary targets for employers to hire a certain number (or workforce percentage) of disabled people could help to encourage disability inclusive recruitment and representation in NI. They also recommended that any benchmarks or targets should be accompanied by extensive support, advice and resources for employers on hiring and retaining disabled people, to address any concerns or misinformation.

4.4.4 Summary of Policymakers' Perspectives on SE

Policymakers provided a range of insights in relation to their understanding and experiences of SE. With regards to benefits, policymakers welcomed the personalised and holistic approach they

associated with the SE model, highlighted the person-centred and tailored nature of SE services, and pointed to the benefits of this model both for disabled people (who may lack experience of the workplace) and for employers (who may lack experience or knowledge of hiring disabled people). Policymakers also identified a challenges facing the SE model in NI, including the loss of EU funding and reduction in resources for SE approaches, which led to greater competition amongst providers; the forced alignment of SE services with different funding requirements; continuing reluctance amongst some employers to hire disabled people; and a need for better cross-departmental working in NI between the various departments relevant to SE.

Looking to the future, policymakers made a number of recommendations with regards to the improving SE services. This included creating clearer processes and lines of responsibility for cross-departmental working, using legislative mechanisms to facilitate cross-departmental working and shared budgets, and providing longer-term, multi-year funding to enable meaningful impact and continuity. For service improvement, policymakers advocated a stronger outcomes-based approach with clearer cohesion across SE services, and improved data sharing and tracking to support employment journeys. Finally, in relation to employer engagement, policymakers recommended improving engagement and training around disability, encouraging employers to promote inclusion and share best practice, and creating voluntary targets to hire disabled people.

5. Lessons from Abroad

To uncover what might be useful for the NI context, the next sections look at how SE and other disability employment models are used in the Republic of Ireland, Austria, and Sweden. Ireland works as a useful comparison because it has a similar social, economic and policy context to NI. In this way, it can help us learn about how policies are designed and put into practice in a familiar setting. The way SE and other disability employment models operate in Austria and Sweden is quite different from NI, providing insights into how SE approaches operate in different institutional contexts. Comparing how SE models operate in these three contexts will offer new insights for NI.

5.1 Republic of Ireland

5.1.1 Background and demographic context

In the Republic of Ireland, 19.7% of the working population (aged 15 to 64) have a disability (Webb, 2025). Although the right to work is enshrined in Article 27 of the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, which was ratified by Ireland in 2018, the disability employment rate in Ireland is 43%, which is below the European average. The disability employment gap in Ireland (between disabled and non-disabled people) is 37%, which is the largest disability employment gap in the EU-27 (ibid). Employment levels vary depending on the extent of disability reported. The employment rate of people with a disability 'to some extent' (60%) was more than double that of people with a disability 'to a great extent' (27%). Meanwhile, women with a disability are less likely to be employed than males, though their unemployment levels were lower than those of men (National Disability Authority, 2024). Census data shows that 26% of Travellers reported experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent compared with 22% of the total population (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Considering principal economic status in 2022, 61% of Irish Travellers were unemployed, compared to 16 per cent of Roma and 7% of the White Irish population (O'Toole et al, 2024). Overall, the number of people in receipt of disability-related welfare payments increased between 2015 and 2024 (DPS, 2023).

There is a strong link between employment and social inclusion. Ireland ranked near the bottom of all 27 EU Member States on a number of social inclusion indicators for people with disabilities, including severe material deprivation (Sprong & Maitre, 2023). Amongst people who were unable to work due to long-term disability, one in five disabled people in Ireland lives in consistent poverty (Disability Federation of Ireland, 2024). There are also additional costs of living with a disability. A 2021 report published by the Department of Social Protection, estimated these costs to amount to between €8,700 to €12,300 a year (Indecon, 2021). Accounting for recent inflation, the Disability Federation of Ireland (2024) estimates these costs range between €10,379 to €14,673.

Similar to NI, the share of disabled people with low levels of education in Ireland remains high relative to people without a disability, when compared to other OECD countries in Europe (OECD, 2021). The number of students in higher education registered with disability support services in Ireland increased by 273% from 2008 to 2023 (Healy & Ryder, 2023). However, 14.4% of people over the age of 15 who had finished their education only completed primary level education compared to 7.4% of the general population (Disability Federation of Ireland, 2024).

Research on the experiences of disabled people in Ireland has found that individuals often want to work but that there are persistent barriers to moving into long-term employment. This has included limited transition planning (e.g., being able to identify career options and finding a pathway to reach goals); insufficient opportunities to be challenged in work placements; negative self-perceptions of work readiness; and negative experiences around disability disclosure (Scanlon et al, 2019). Studies suggest that employers may underestimate the capabilities of people with disabilities or that discrimination or a reluctance to make workplace modifications may play a role in limiting

disabled people's opportunities to access work (Watson et al, 2017).

5.1.2 Policy context in Ireland

Ireland's employment policy for disabled people is aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and grounded in a rights-based and inclusive approach. A set of Employment Equality Acts (1998 to 2015) have prohibited discrimination on the grounds of disability, whereby employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for disabled workers (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2025). The Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015 was fully enacted in 2023, which paved the way for the operationalisation of a Decision Support Service, and a cultural shift from decisions made 'for' disabled people, to being supported to make their own decisions based on individual will and preference (Donnelly & Gleeson, 2021). The Disability Act 2005 mandated that public bodies must employ a minimum percentage of people with disabilities. The Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act 2022 saw a statutory employment target (though not a quota) for disabled people in the public sector increase from 3% to 4.5% by 2024 and 6% in 2025 (ISB, 2022).

Taking a cross-governmental approach has been central to the Government of Ireland (2025) approach to disability employment support. This was enabled by a Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES), running from 2015 to 2024, which addressed barriers facing disabled people seeking employment. Reforms under the CES made it easier for disabled people to move into work by allowing a smoother return to benefits if needed, providing free travel for five years after leaving benefits, and offering grants for workplace adaptations and needs assessments. The National Disability Authority (2025) worked to support the implementation and monitoring of this strategy. It found that there was low uptake of employment support under (non-SE) schemes such as the Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) – a fund to support employers and employees make 'reasonable accommodations' to overcome disability-related barriers to work. Recent reforms have aimed to increase uptake of these schemes, and to make supports more accessible and effective (ibid). A broader whole-of-government plan, the National Disability Strategy (2025 to 2030), is also being finalised at time of writing, which aims to embed disability inclusion across all sectors.

For the past 10 years, Ireland has been phasing out its previous sheltered employment approach in a shift towards a more inclusive, open-labour market model (OECD, 2021; Fleming et al, 2016). In 2024, the Department of Social Protection (DPS) launched a new disability employment support scheme, called Work and Access. This scheme replaced earlier initiatives from the Department of Social Protection, including the RAF and the Disability Awareness Support Scheme (which offered up to €20,000 annually to private sector employers for disability awareness training) (DPS, 2019a, 2019b). A review by the DPS (2023) found that these schemes were disjointed and underutilised.

Work and Access aimed to respond to employers and employees need for simplified access to funding and clearer guidance, by providing a single point of access for all workplace disability supports, including training. It is an in-work support scheme that contains some elements of SE (such as in-work coaching, individualised supports, and a focus on paid roles in the open labour market). However, it is not a full-fidelity SE model, as it does not include pre-employment engagement with disabled jobseekers, vocational profiling, job matching, employer engagement and a structured multi-stage SE pathway. Ireland also offers employers financial incentives to encourage the hiring of disabled people, which is not part of SE. This Wage Subsidy Scheme includes criteria on how many hours an individual must work (i.e. at least 15 hours pw, under a 6-month minimum contract) and top-ups for companies employing multiple disabled employees.

When it comes to the full-fidelity SE model in Ireland, SE services are delivered through the national EmployAbility service network, funded by the DPS. SE has been the core of the Irish government's disability employment programmes for many years. The previous 'Supported

Employment Service' was the main Irish government employment service for people with disabilities, while its current successor programmes, EmployAbility and WorkAbility, are both SE models. These programmes provide a job-matching service to help ensure successful recruitment and in-employment support for both the employer and the employee. For example, WorkAbility provides inclusive pathways to employment through tailored training and development, personalised supports, employer collaboration, work experience and placements, and services which focus on soft skills as well as skills gaps (IRD Dulhallow, 2025). Other employment support through Willing, Able, Mentoring (WAM) programmes have provided graduate work placements for people with disabilities and built employer capacity to support them. GetAhead has helped students with disabilities in their transitions from higher education to full-time work (Ahead, 2025).

The Irish context around disability employment is also informed by broader EU policy, with ESF funds used to deliver SE services. For example, a St Michael's House WorkAbility programme is being co-funded by the Government of Ireland, through the DPS and the EU. Running from 2024 to 2028, the project will support individuals over the age of 16 to 'Prepare, Train and Gain' meaningful employment in the community (St Michael's House, 2022).

5.1.3 Third-sector approaches in Ireland

Civic organisations, trade unions and disability organisations play a key role in supporting disabled people into employment in Ireland. These efforts span advocacy, service provision, policy influence and direct employment support. Disabled People's Organisations such as Inclusion Ireland, Disability Federation Ireland (DFI) and Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI), advocate for inclusive employment policies, accessible workplaces and the enforcement of anti-discrimination approaches. ILMI is Ireland's national DPO, led by and for disabled people.

The SE-based EmployAbility Service (which used to be the Supported Employment Service) in Ireland operates through local, community-based sponsor organisations to provide job coaching, employer engagement, and workplace adaptation support (Citizens Information, 2022). For instance, EmployAbility Dublin South is a social enterprise and community-level provider of the EmployAbility service on behalf of the Department of Social Protection. It offers coaching, job matching, engagement with employers and in-work support to people with disabilities.

Civic society organisations are often contracted to deliver other disability-focussed government-funded programmes in Ireland. The Ability Programme funded 27 voluntary and community sector organisations across Ireland to support young people with disabilities aged 15 to 29 during 2018-2021. This was a 'pre-activation' programme, meaning it is aimed at people who are not yet 'work ready'. The programme was co-financed by the DPS and the ESF. Its aim was to help participants build personal and work skills, with the goal of progressing into education, training, employment, or meaningful social roles. The programme enrolled 1,946 individuals by early 2021, and an evaluation found that 88% of participating employers were more likely to hire people with disabilities in the future (Quality Matters, 2021). Employment support, like the pathway to employment through the Ability to Work Fund (a €1.5 million fund created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with State Street and the Government of Ireland) have also helped open up pathways to work for disabled people in Ireland. This is done by investing in organisations which provide training, upskilling and education (Rethink Ireland, 2023).

Finally, workers' unions such as SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions support disabled workers by advocating for workplace rights and protections under the Employment Equality Acts. They have negotiated for inclusive policies and raised awareness around disability (Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 2025; SITPU 2021).

5.1.4 Outcomes of SE and similar models in Ireland

SE models, delivered through EmployAbility and WorkAbility, reflect a mix of positive outcomes as

well as ongoing challenges for disabled people and employers in Ireland.

With regards to Ireland's core SE offering, a 2016 evaluation of the EmployAbility service found high levels of client satisfaction amongst most of the clients who this evaluation had surveyed. These individuals reported feeling that the programme gave them opportunities to gain work experience and/or employment, improved their levels of motivation and increased feelings of self-confidence, as well as contributing to their sense of health and well-being (80% or above agreed) (OECD, 2021). More recently, one WorkAbility programme via Business In the Community Ireland resulted in 11 out of 60 individuals securing employment alongside their schooling in its first year of running. Feedback from participants in the programme found that 94% of people believe they are more confident in their day to day life after engaging with the programme, 99% believe they are communicating better, whilst 94% believe they are better able to speak up for themselves and learn to make their own decisions (European Commission, 2025d).

Meanwhile, another project which piloted IPS by integrating an Employability Employment Specialist into health teams found that strong connections to mental health services led to better job retention as well as improved independence and reduced anxiety amongst participants. Over the two-year programme, 18 out of 95 (19%) participants also engaged in further training following their involvement with this programme (Mental Health Reform, 2017).

More broadly, a 2020 study of older Irish adults with intellectual disabilities found that being involved in work was linked to better mental health (McCausland et al, 2020). People with strong social support were also more likely to take part in a range of activities. The researchers suggested that focusing on what these activities personally mean to each individual could help support their ongoing involvement and wellbeing. Despite this, problems making it harder for disabled people to work, highlighted in the *Make Work Pay* report (DPS, 2017), had still not been fixed by 2024 (Disability Federation of Ireland, 2024). These included issues like limited access to personal assistant support, lower earning potential, and the extra costs of living with a disability which can mean people are not financially better off when they work (National Disability Authority, 2025).

Studies show that Ireland's CES has made progress in its wider employment support policies for disabled people. As mentioned above, people can return to disability payments within a year if a job doesn't work out, and those who leave benefits for work can keep free travel for five years (National Disability Authority, 2025). Although there are still big gaps in personalised career guidance for disabled students, access to education has improved. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) gives better support to preschool children with disabilities. According to a 2024 evaluation of AIM, more than 27,000 children had benefitted across 4400 settings. Meanwhile, data shows that the number of disabled students accessing supports in higher and further education has substantially increased in Ireland (Healy & Ryder, 2024).

5.1.5 Summary

Although Ireland has a strong legal framework, disabled people continue to face amongst the lowest labour market participation rates in the EU, and there are links between disability, poverty, and limited educational attainment. Policy in Ireland has increasingly shifted toward inclusive, rights-based approaches with recent reforms seeking to simplify and strengthen employment supports available with cross-governmental working, through a National Disability Strategy and whole-of-government CES for People with Disabilities. A non-binding statutory target for hiring disabled people in the public sector is in place in Ireland, to help increase representation of disabled employees. This target has been backed by government awareness-raising campaigns.

SE services in Ireland are funded through core government channels (DPS) with programmes like WorkAbility co-financed through the EU. SE programmes have moved Ireland towards a more inclusive human-rights based model and away from its previous focus on segregating training and

work programmes for disabled people. Meanwhile, employment support programmes like Work and Access have responded to previous gaps in service delivery and changes to the benefit system has helped support disabled people in Ireland with more flexibility in trialling work.

The SE model in Ireland places a particular emphasis on employer engagement, awareness, and capacity building. Recent reforms have sought to improve coordination and accessibility of disability employment supports. Following a DPS evaluation of existing disability employment support schemes, Work and Access was launched to provide a single, cross-government access point for information, grants, workplace adaptation, job matching, and employer advice. Nonetheless, evaluations of the Irish context highlight persistent barriers, including low uptake of supports, limited coverage of existing services, and unresolved disincentives to work.

5.2 Sweden

5.2.1 Background and demographic context

In Sweden, approximately 778,000 people aged 16 to 65 have a disability, which represents around 12% of the total population. The number of young people (under the age of 35) with disabilities is rising in Sweden (EASPD, 2022). In data from 2020, the poverty risk rate for working-age people with disabilities was found to be 26.7% compared to 14.3% for their similarly aged non-disabled counterparts, with an estimated disability poverty gap of approximately 12 percentage points (European Commission, 2023). Disabled people in Sweden are also more likely to work part-time (62%) compared to the rest of the population (83%) (Statistics Sweden, 2025a).

In Sweden, 8% of the country's population has a disability that reduces an individuals' ability to work. Recent data shows that the employment rate for disabled people was 65% in 2025, one of the highest in the EU. However, it is much lower than the employment rate of the general population (88%) (Statistics Sweden, 2025a). Furthermore, Sweden has a disability employment gap of 23.2% in 2023, which is aligned with the EU average (Buchanan & Hammersley, 2023). In a government-funded survey in 2023, it was found that six out of ten disabled employees had a disability that reduced their ability to work, 80% needed support and adaptations to be able to work, and 17% did not receive the adaptations they needed (Statistics Sweden, 2023). This survey also found that 66% of non-employed people with a disability believed they *would* be able to work if they received at least one support and adaptation measure.

The most recent Swedish government-funded research found that 33% of disabled people have been subject to discrimination or offensive treatment in their working lives (Statistics Sweden, 2025a). Those with reduced ability to work said they experienced discrimination twice as often as people without reduced ability to work. The most common form of discrimination was being rejected from a job for which a person was adequately qualified. Other forms of discrimination included being given notice, dismissed, and being subject to bullying or harassment.

Swedish studies have found that disabled people value work and are as likely as non-disabled people to want to find a job (Dag & Kullberg, 2010). However, those with disabilities have experienced difficulties finding work. This is due to employer perceptions that hiring a disabled person would mean receiving lower work capacity and higher labour costs. e.g. due to special adaptations (Angelov & Eliason, 2018). While a number of indicators relating to physical ill-health increased the risk of a person leaving employment in Sweden, physical ill-health was more likely to be related to employment exit than psychological ill health (except in some occupations where conditions like burnout are more common) (Højbjørre et al, 2023).

5.2.2 Policy context in Sweden

Sweden has introduced some of the strongest legislation in the EU surrounding disabled people's rights to work. In 1993, the Swedish Parliament passed the Act Concerning Support and Service to

Persons with Certain Functional Disabilities (the LSS Act). This legislation was implemented to provide people with disabilities the opportunity to live more independent lives with equal living conditions and full participation in community life (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021). This includes the right to personal assistance (PA), a central idea within the Swedish approach. The amount of support an individual receives is determined by the extent of that person's disability. As stated in Article 19 of the UNCRPD, PA is a supportive measure that aims to increase disabled people's participation in society. In the LSS Act, this right was enshrined into policy (Riksdag Lag, 1993).

To strengthen Sweden's disability policy, a 2009 Discrimination Act was later brought in and further developed the legal protection of individuals. Equality Ombudsman monitoring compliance was used to help people facing discrimination obtain compensation. From January 2015, discrimination in the form of inadequate accessibility became prohibited in Sweden (Swedish Agency for Participation, 2023). This law focused on preventing and countering discrimination. Sweden has also passed laws on reasonable accommodation to create more accessible work environments (European Disability Forum, 2024). According to the Work Environment Act 2015, Swedish employers must make allowances for employees' specific needs at work through modifying working conditions or other appropriate measures which facilitate work for people with disabilities (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015).

More generally, Sweden has based its disability policy on the UN's Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Disability policies are centred on the UN Convention (UNCRPD), ratified by the country in 2008. In line with this, the Swedish government has aimed to 'achieve equitable living conditions and full participation in a diverse society for people with disabilities' (Swedish Institute, 2024). Since the early 2000s, Sweden has employed a 'work first' approach to unemployment-related policies, where work and economic activation are seen as key ways to tackle societal challenges like poverty, ill-health and segregation. Participation in employment programs offered by the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES, known in Swedish as Arbetsförmedlingen) have been enforced as mandatory for many benefits recipients. Eligibility criteria for welfare support has been tightened alongside benefit cuts instead of social and economic redistribution through the public insurance system (Lindberg et al, 2022). However, this approach is seen as transferring responsibilities for inclusion from society to the individual.

Sweden has a history of providing sheltered work opportunities to disabled people. Samhall is a state-owned company which provides sheltered employment to people with high support needs in Sweden. However, not all disabled jobseekers are directed to the organisation. The Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) has moved to prioritising competitive, mainstream employment for persons with disabilities and Sweden's employment support programmes place an emphasis on inclusion in the open labour market. Sweden's SE model embeds ongoing employer support as a core function of the PES (Gustafsson et al, 2018). It is facilitated through SIUS (Special introduction and follow-up support) (PES, 2025). Support is individual and provided by an adviser with training in SIUS for up to six months. Up to one year of follow-up support is provided after an individual finds employment and, whilst not a part of the SE model, a wage subsidy may also be offered to employers as an additional employment support measure during the job seeking stage. Wage subsidies are widely used in tandem with SE, notably in cases of individuals having limited work capacity due to functional impairments (Gustafsson et al, 2014).

When it comes to the benefits system, the Swedish government has sought to ensure flexibility, providing personal assistance (PA) financial support to disabled people when they have found employment. Employers hiring disabled employees with extensive support needs can access support via technical aids, grants and certain allowances to support a personal assistant (Försäkringskassen, 2025). Some disabled employees may be eligible for a specific allowance to cover hiring a PA to provide support with private as well as work-related tasks (EBU, 2025).

A pre-Covid OECD review reported that Sweden has experienced substantial decreases in both the disability payment people have received (disability reciprocity) and sickness absences recorded (Hemmings & Prinz, 2020). It found that disability reciprocity had fallen from over 11% of the working-age population to around 6%. Government spending on disability payments had also decreased. Although it was around 5% of GDP in 1990, it made up 2% of GDP in 2020 (with reports stating that this was driven by sickness benefit cuts in the 1990s). The review described how Sweden has public-funded sick-leave compensation, which switches from being funded by the employer to being funded by the state from the 14th day of sick leave, a relatively short period compared to other Nordic and European settings. Although there was previously no maximum duration for sick leave, a mid-2000s reform introduced a 2.5 year ceiling. For long-term disability, Sweden's 'Sickness or Activity Compensation' offered around 64% of a reference income, with a ceiling equivalent of around 55% of the average wage. This marked a strong contrast with Norway's ceiling of 110% of the average wage (Hemmings & Prinz, 2020).

Whilst Austria and Ireland have employer quota and target systems in place, respectively, Sweden does not operate such systems when it comes to disability employment, instead choosing to promote inclusion through anti-discrimination legislation and SE programmes delivered by PES. via the PES. Similar to the other case studies, SE is mainstreamed into government employability programmes in Sweden. Sweden's national employment service (PES) has delivered an SE programme for over 26 years with a focus on person-centred, rights-based integration into the open labour market. SE is a widely understood and used concept in Sweden with SE consultants embedded both into the PES and within independent organisations, helping persons with disabilities find employment. SE consultants assist employers with the matching of candidates and preparing individuals for recruitment and onboarding, including setting up reasonable accommodations (European Disability Forum 2024).

Sweden's national disability policy framework has emphasised a shared responsibility between national, regional, and municipal levels. Government agencies have a national responsibility for specific sectors, including within education, healthcare and employment. However, Sweden has strong local autonomy and its regional councils are responsible for healthcare while the country's 290 municipalities control their own education and social services (Swedish Institute, 2024). This has resulted in a varied approach to social service and methods of SE delivery through PES. The Social Services Act (2021) was designed as a framework law to bolster this approach. The Act provides flexibility for how service provision is interpreted which has resulted in local politicians choosing whether to implement evidence-based methods irrespective of whether they are prioritised within official governmental guidelines (Hillörn, 2023).

Beyond the SE model, the majority of Sweden's municipalities provide some form of vocational support or rehabilitation for persons with mental health conditions, mostly in the form of the traditional 'train-then-place' models (Hillörn, 2023). The National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) has published guidelines recommending appropriate methods for municipalities and healthcare providers. Since 2011, IPS has also been given high priority in Swedish national guidelines, particularly for people living with schizophrenia and related conditions. However, by 2023 only about a third of Swedish municipalities had implemented this method.

Whilst Sweden's SE model involves multiple levels of governance, it can best be described as decentralised rather than cross-governmental. This has led to uneven implementation of SE services. For example, municipalities are not required to develop Shared Action Plans, in which jobseekers set out their goals and planned activities, which could improve cooperation of services (OECD, 2023). Responsibilities are shared between national, regional, and municipal authorities with strong local autonomy resulting in varied approaches to service delivery. This contrasts with Ireland's centrally coordinated, whole-of-government strategy.

5.2.3 Third-sector approaches in Sweden

In Sweden, third sector organisations make up only a small proportion of the contracted providers of public welfare services (Lindberg et al, 2022), and the nationwide PES delivers SE services.

Disability organisations receive municipal-level funding for the running of local support programmes including day centres (Commonwealth Fund, 2020). Within the sheltered work section, the PES refers individuals to Samhall, which then trains and job-matches the individual seeking employment. Samhall is also a member of the international cooperation organisation Workability International, which has worked towards enabling 'people with disabilities to be better put to use a valuable resource on the labour market' (Samhall, 2025). Samhall aims for up to 1500 employees to annually leave the company's training to begin working for other employers, after they are matched to the right jobs, in areas such as cleaning, care, logistics and manufacturing (ibid). However, it is worth emphasising here that DPOs in Sweden continue to advocate for a move away from sheltered work environments that frame disabled people as 'incapable of contributing to the open labour market' (Heyer, 2024). Organisations such as Swedish Disability Rights Federation and Disabled Refugees Welcome advocate for the employment rights of disabled people. Meanwhile, Work Integrated Social Enterprises (WISEs) receive public funding to collaborate with municipalities to provide employment pathways for disabled individuals (Andrén & Kremel, 2025).

5.2.4 Outcomes of SE and similar models in Sweden

Sweden's central SE programme has been run by its public employment service (PES) for over two decades and is embedded in a wider system of employment support (European Commission, 2024). Research on the use of the SE model in Sweden found that disclosing disabilities in the workplace can help to create fairness. Researchers also found that the SE method has helped to contribute to feelings of social inclusion amongst disabled people through job-matching and by encouraging natural support (Gustafsson et al, 2018). Their findings also showed that disability disclosure can help ease working relationships. However, for one in ten people registered with the PES, waiting times to have a disability recognised, and thus formally disclosed in a workplace, can take more than three years (Swedish National Audit Office, 2025).

One study found that SE services in Sweden effectively addressed key concerns faced by employers when considering hiring individuals with disabilities (Gustafsson et al, 2013). Although only employers who have had a positive experience with SE agreed to participate, researchers found that the SE support structure addressed employers' needs for security and efficiency and influenced their willingness to work with SE and hire disabled people. Another study examined the effectiveness of SE compared to other employment approaches in supporting people into work. The cohort included over 1000 young people who were divided into three different action programmes. This study found SE to be the most successful approach, with 26% of people finding work (compared to 20% and 18% for other approaches), making the SE the most effective and cost-saving solution, even when the need for more staff was taken into account (Lindahl, 2018). SE has also been found to result in individuals being hired more quickly and earning a higher disposable income, while receiving lower levels of benefits (Germundsson et al, 2012).

The provision of reasonable accommodations for disabled people is enshrined into Swedish law, however, an employer survey by the European Disability Forum (2024) found that only 2% of respondents were aware of the public legal framework and/or public programmes supporting the provision of reasonable accommodation in the workplace. Labour market structures appear to have had some bearing on employers' perceptions of disabled individuals' work capacity. One study found that a programme with wage subsidies resulted in benefit recipients finding subsidised but not regular employment (Angelov & Eliason, 2018). Other studies have found that wage-subsidised employment may negatively influence disabled persons' feelings of social inclusion and can be perceived as problematic because investigations of this system have identified problems with the circumstances in which individuals with subsidised wages work (Gustafsson et al, 2018).

Interviews at major companies in Sweden revealed that neither anti-discrimination legislation nor financial incentives had much impact on employer practices when it came to the inclusion of disabled workers. Findings instead suggested that targeted corporate policies, advisory support, and management agency were of greater importance (Kuznetsova & Yalcin, 2017).

5.2.5 Summary

Sweden's approach to disability and employment is shaped by a strong legal framework, established practices in SE, a sheltered-work sector and a decentralised welfare system. Key policy tools include anti-discrimination legislation, wage subsidies, and personalised assistance schemes, which are designed to help facilitate disabled jobseekers access the labour market. SE in Sweden is institutionalised within PES, rather than being delivered through third-parties or short-term contracts or grants. The strong SE model means that disabled jobseekers are more likely to move into jobs in the open labour market with smaller provision for sheltered jobs. In Sweden, disability organisations have a formal consultative role in the design and implementation of disability and employment policy. Sweden's governmental strategy involves multiple levels of governance and is largely decentralised. Municipalities exercise control over their own approach to SE which can result in mixed approaches to service delivery. Thus, unlike Ireland's centrally coordinated strategy, Sweden's SE framework relies on flexible local interpretation.

Unlike Austria and Ireland, Sweden does not have quotas or targets for hiring a certain percentage of disabled people. Instead, employers are incentivised to support disabled employees through wage subsidies that are paired with other aspects of the SE model (i.e. vocational profiling, job matching, coaching) to place disabled people in the open labour market. In some circumstances, an individual may also be supported through the country's PA system, which likewise, seeks to provide financial stability. SE in Sweden is associated with positive employment outcomes, including increased disposable income and reduced reliance on allowances. Employers engaging with SE reported that structured support has helped address concerns related to recruitment and workplace integration. However, access to SE and other forms of employment support varied across municipalities and implementation of nationally recommended SE models such as IPS remained uneven. Despite legal protections and financial incentives being in place, Swedish employers' awareness of these provisions also appeared limited. Overall, Sweden has demonstrated a comprehensive policy framework with a range of mechanisms intended to support disabled people into work. Yet gaps remain in implementation, consistency of provision, a transition away from sheltered work, and the translation of policy into practice at local levels.

5.3 Austria

5.3.1 Background and demographic context

In the latest data from 2022, 759,311 people were recorded as having a registered disability in Austria, making up 8% of the total population. In Austria, 61% of people with a registered disability receive a long-term care allowance and 15% are registered under the Disability Employment Act (known as BEinstG), which means an individual has been officially recognised as a 'beneficiary disabled person.' This status provides specific legal protections and access to employment-related support through a 'Behindertenpass,' which operates as proof of being classified as a disabled person and is provided for people whose 'reduction of work output' is 50% or more (Naue, 2006).

At 54.6%, Austria's employment rate for persons with disabilities is lower than Sweden, although higher than Ireland (EDF, 2023). Austria has a disability employment gap of 20.5 percentage points, which is lower than both Ireland and Sweden. Alongside Luxembourg and France, Austria has the highest mean equivalised net income for women with disabilities in the EU at 23%, while for men, it is 38% (ibid). However, structural bias and discrimination persist in Austria, whereby 47% of Austrians report that having a disability puts them at a disadvantage in recruitment when they have the same qualifications as non-disabled applicants (European Disability Forum, 2024)

Austria has also witnessed an increase in poverty and social exclusion amongst individuals with disabilities, with 21% of disabled people being at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Hammersley, 2024, European Human Rights Report, 2020). Evidence suggests that financial and in-kind support is important to those with disabilities and that due to particularly high levels of inflation, many people with disabilities are facing financial difficulties (Manoudi et al, 2025). This has resulted in the Austrian Disability Council demanding a thirteenth annual payment of social assistance or minimum security for persons with disabilities (in Austria, it is common in some contexts, such as with pensions or salaries, to receive 13 monthly payments per year).

5.3.2 Policy context in Austria

Like both the Republic of Ireland and Sweden, the Austrian approach to disability employment is supported by a legislative framework that seeks to protect the rights of disabled people in accessing equal opportunities to work. In 2008, Austria became one of the first EU member states to ratify the UNCRPD. To implement this, the country launched a National Action Plan on Disability 2012-2020, which includes long term disability objectives and measures (Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020). Since 1997, a ban on discrimination and a commitment to the equal treatment of disabled and non-disabled people was included in the Austrian Constitution. In 2006, an equality package came into force that integrated anti-discrimination law with the EU Framework Directive on Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation. Alongside the Federal Disability Act and the Federal Disability Equality Act, the Disability Employment Act provides the substantive legal basis for disability law in Austria (Manoudi et al, 2025).

Reasonable accommodation is also legally mandated under the Disability Employment Act. Under this law, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for newly hired staff and to actively support their promotion and career development. Employers are also required to grant reasonable accommodations to staff who acquire an impairment during the course of their employment (Naue & Flieger, 2023). Since 2010, an amendment to this Act increased protections against termination for disabled persons receiving special support (Manoudi et al, 2025).

Disability policy in Austria has sought to prioritise gainful employment in the open labour market. The Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection has measures for the occupational integration of people with disabilities, financed through the ESF, national funding and out of the compensatory tax fund (Österreichischer Behindertenrat, 2024). Austria's central government is responsible for vocational education, employment, social insurance and long-term care allowances. However, as a federal system, all other social welfare and social service provisions (such as those relating to income poverty, care, housing or sheltered work such as assistance, support or occupational training and their funding) come under the remit of the Bundesländer. Austria's regions have each enacted legislation relating to disability and relevant provisions with 'notable discrepancies between individual state law' (Wegscheider & Forstner, 2025). This division of responsibilities means Austria's approach to disability employment involves coordination between federal ministries, national agencies, and regional governments. Disability councils and advisory boards at the federal and regional levels also seek to involve disabled people in service design and delivery. However, implementation remains uneven across regions.

Differing from the other case studies, a key characteristic of the Austrian approach has been its well-developed segregated work sector (Wegscheider & Forstner, 2025). More than 25,000 people work in these kinds of arrangements in Austria. Sheltered work often involves an absence of employment contracts, minimum wage and social insurance, which potentially violates a person's human rights (Wegscheider & Forstner, 2025). In 2023, the UNCRPD reported concern over sheltered workshops and segregated work, a hallmark of the Austrian approach, for denying disabled people the status of employed or self-employed, and giving people 'pocket money' as opposed to appropriate wages (Wegscheider & Forstner, 2025).

Despite maintaining a substantial sheltered workshop sector, recent reforms in Austria have sought to strengthen inclusion in the open labour market. Austria's Netzwerk Berufliche Assistenz (NEBA) lies at the heart of Austria's SE model and is run through its government employability programmes. Austria's Public Employment Service (AMS) runs the NEBA programme for employers and employees with disabilities, which operates through its federal welfare-to-work system, rather than through grants or contracts. Inclusive workplaces are promoted through NEBA which, through its SE model, assists both employers and employees who have disabilities. The AMS also provides specific supports which seek to integrate workers with disabilities, including needs-based training and career advice as well as individually tailored skills training, support measures and unemployment benefits (Manoudi et al, 2025). Beyond these supports, various social provisions are in place for disabled persons in Austria including tax relief and social support.

Austria has a mandatory quota system for employers. Under the Disability Employment Act, companies with more than 25 employees must hire one person with a disability or pay a compensation tax. So unlike Sweden, which has no quota system for the employment of persons with disabilities, and Ireland, which has a target system, Austria's quota system is binding. Any compensatory tax is earmarked for measures and programmes which support the 'vocational integration of persons with disabilities in Austria' (Naue & Flieger, 2023). According to the most recent data from 2020, over half of employers in public administration have fulfilled their quota obligation. However, in the accommodation and catering, agriculture and forestry, education, real estate and construction sectors, less than 20% of employers have fulfilled this obligation (Naue & Flieger, 2023). The share of employers who fulfil the obligation is relatively high among medium-sized companies with 25 to 250 employees (at 24%) compared with 18% for companies with 250 or more employees and only 12% for small companies with fewer than 25 employees.

As part of a broader package of employment supports aimed to help disabled people into work, Austria also offers wage subsidies. Businesses are eligible to receive support when seeking suitable employees as well as advice and services 'from a single source' for any queries or issues which relate to the employment of persons with disabilities.

5.3.3 Third-sector approaches in Austria

Disability rights groups have played a key role in shaping Austria's disabilities legislation, most notably the Disability Equality Act, which sought to outlaw discrimination. Although disability rights activists criticised the final law for failing to deliver meaningful equality or enforceability, the Act had significant symbolic value and triggered discussions about disability rights, societal perceptions, and the political participation of marginalised groups in Austria (Naue, 2006).

Disability-focused NGOs and organisations like Lebenshilfe (promoting disabled workers rights), Jugend am Werk (using a 'place-then-train' model of SE), and Caritas (offering employment pathways) provide a range of supports which include job coaching, SE and vocational training. This includes acting as intermediaries between employers and disabled jobseekers, and facilitating workshops and transition programmes for people with disabilities. NGOs such as Klagsverband have also provided legal support to individuals facing discrimination in the workplace.

Austria supports integrative enterprises (social businesses that employ a high proportion of disabled workers) that are often run by NGOs and receive subsidies for wages and infrastructure (European Commission, 2022). These integrative enterprises are not a part of the SE model. They operate across Austria with over 3,400 employees and 400 apprentices and include tailored skills training. They are funded by a mix of their own revenue and subsidies. Many third sector organisations also belong to networks like the Austrian Disability Council (Österreichischer Behindertenrat), which represents disabled people in consultations with the Austrian government. Trade unions such as GPA and Vida negotiate collective agreements for improving care and

working conditions in sectors employing many disabled people. They have been actively supporting disabled workers through workplace disability representatives (BVPs), legal advice and advocacy as well as by spearheading campaigns for inclusive hiring and quota enforcement.

5.3.4 Outcomes of SE and similar models in Austria

Austria has a relatively conservative welfare state, and researchers have found that 'hegemonic hierarchical structures' have obstructed how much people with disabilities can participate in the development and enactment of policy, with decisions often made *for* disabled people (Naue, 2006). This has led to the development of a strong segregated work sector, which has been criticised for lacking a person-centred human rights approach. However, the Austrian Social Ministry Service has also focussed increasingly on integrating people with disabilities in the open labour market through SE-services provided through NEBA (European Commission, 2025c). This indicates a shift towards seeking long-term, stable employment for individuals with disabilities in Austria. Employers have also reported that SE services led to them hiring additional disabled employees and improved broader company operational processes (Social Ministry Service 2025a, 2025b).

With regards to Austria's quota system, evidence has suggested that quotas do increase the employment of disabled workers, although some firms deliberately keep their number of employees below 25 to avoid either paying the tax or hiring a disabled employee (Lalive et al, 2013). Companies at the threshold employ about 0.04 more disabled workers than they would without the tax, with the impact being larger among low-wage firms. Firms required to hire two or more disabled workers also increased disabled employment further and higher penalties for noncompliance boosted disabled employment. However, financial bonuses which are provided to companies for overcompliance slightly reduced the overall effectiveness of the quota policy.

5.3.5 Summary

Legal frameworks, financial supports, an institutionalised SE model through NEBA, as well as a large sheltered employment sector, make up the Austrian approach to disability employment. The public employment service (AMS) delivers SE programmes through NEBA for employers and employees with disabilities as part of its federal welfare-to-work system, embedding them within core government provision and often underpinned by subsidy-based supports. Through AMS, Austria combines mainstream labour market services with targeted disability employment supports to integrate disability policy across regional and federal levels of governance. Councils and advisory boards aim to involve disabled people in service design and delivery in some regions. Yet coordination challenges between national and regional authorities result in some inconsistencies in SE implementation as well as in the delivery of broader employment support.

Recent reforms have sought to improve disabled workers' inclusion in the open labour market. The National Action Plan on Disability (2022–2030) aims to expand SE and promote transitions from segregated settings into competitive employment. Yet significant structural gaps persist in the Austrian context. Disabled individuals continue to face barriers related to discrimination, poverty, and limited pathways out of segregated work environments. When it comes to sheltered workshops, criticised for their lack of proper labour rights and fair compensation, Austria lags behind other countries. This highlights some of the tensions between inclusion and institutional inaction that are still present in the Austrian context. Ongoing reform will depend on the success of the continuing shift away from segregated structures and towards rights-based, person-centred employment models that recognise disabled individuals as equal participants in the labour market.

On the employer front, Austria offers wage subsidies as part of a package to support disabled people into work. Austria's quota system is legally binding with financial penalties for non-compliance. Despite evidence showing that quota systems can increase disabled employment (especially when supported by a compensatory tax) many companies have avoided their obligations and financial incentives for overcompliance may inadvertently dilute the impact of this

policy approach. In some cases, it may result in ‘tokenistic’ hiring, whereby low-paid jobs are offered to disabled people, without real inclusion and career progression.

5.4 Policy Learning and Lesson Drawing for NI

The case studies from the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria provide a wealth of insights into enabling factors and constraints for supporting disabled people into work. In this section, we explore best practice, identifying factors that have shaped the effectiveness of SE models in Europe. We then explore each factor in turn, reflecting on how we might draw lessons for NI.

5.4.1 Legislative Framework

The comparative case studies highlight the importance of the legislative framework in ensuring rights and protections for people with disabilities. All the countries analysed take the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as the starting point for their domestic disability laws and strategies. Sweden has perhaps introduced the strongest legislation in this area, introducing anti-discrimination and reasonable accommodation laws that prevent and counter discrimination at work as well as ensure that employers make allowances for disabled people’s needs at work. Austria has combined anti-discrimination laws with an official legal status of ‘beneficiary disabled person’ that provides specific legal protections and access to employment support. Meanwhile, the Republic of Ireland’s Employment Equality Acts require employers to make reasonable accommodations to disabled people, while its Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act led to a move away from decisions being made ‘for’ disabled people to decisions being made by them. Notably, the shift towards inclusive, human rights-based approaches has strengthened disability employment support and outcomes.

How could the legislative framework be strengthened in NI?

Several research participants were critical of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), which was seen to use ‘negative’ and ‘medicalised’ language when referring to people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, which ‘turned off’ employers. In Great Britain, the DDA was succeeded by the Equality Act in 2010, which brought together several disparate pieces of anti-discrimination and equalities legislation. In NI, equal opportunities and discrimination are transferred matters under the Northern Ireland Act (1998). Yet in NI, there is no single Equality Act, but rather a number of pieces of legislation that provide differing levels of protection across different equality grounds, notably the DDA and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The lack of a clear, harmonised framework for equality and anti-discrimination legislation in NI has been criticised by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) for creating gaps and shortfalls compared to international standards.²⁶⁶ Notably, the ECNI has reported that in NI,

“Protections are inconsistent and confusing, and unlike in GB, there is no protection against indirect disability discrimination, and discrimination arising from disability in Northern Ireland. In GB many inconsistencies and shortfalls were addressed through the Equality Act 2010.”

Several of the research participants in this project called for NI to adopt the Equality Act 2010 to simplify and modernise laws in NI, keep up to date with international human rights standards, and to strengthen legislation around anti-discrimination.

5.4.2 Core funding

A key determinant of effective SE approaches in Europe is the provision of long-term, sustainable, core funding for SE services. In the cases that we looked at, this has been provided through core government funding streams for disability employment programmes, rather than through short-term contracts, project-based funding or external grants. For instance, Sweden funds SE provision through its core Public Employment Service (PES) as a mainstream function. Austria’s Public Employment Service (AMS) runs the Occupational Assistance Network (NEBA) SE programme for employers and employees with disabilities through its federal welfare-to-work system, rather than

through grants. Ireland similarly centres cohesive and sustainable funding for SE through core government channels with provision coordinated by the Department of Social Protection and delivered via the nationwide EmployAbility service network, rather than through short-term or project-based funding. The UK's *Connect to Work* programme, a voluntary SE initiative run by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as part of the *Get Britain Working* strategy, highlights how SE is recognised as an employment intervention in the UK. However, whilst NI receives related funding through the Barnett Consequential, employment is a devolved matter and money is not ring-fenced, meaning it can be reallocated to other areas such as health or education.

In addition to core government funding, we see that EU funding continues to be a significant secondary source of funding in EU countries, to fund projects that support disabled people into employment. For instance, the Republic of Ireland's *WorkAbility: Inclusive Pathways to Employment* programme is co-financed by EU funds. Long-term, cohesive funding also strengthens workforce stability and quality of SE service delivery. In Sweden, SE consultants employed through the PES are part of the core system, enabling ongoing training and continuity of support for both jobseekers and employers. Similarly, Ireland's *EmployAbility* staff are funded through permanent government programmes rather than short-term grants, allowing them to build trusted, long-term relationships with participants and employers.

How can funding for SE be made more cohesive and long-term in NI?

At present, SE services in NI are project-based, grant-funded or contracted on a temporary basis rather than funded through long-term, core government provision. This has created competition, and sometimes duplication, in SE services. Short-term funding and fluctuating funding models have also created capacity issues, of high staff turnover (often due to job losses at the end of grants/contracts), leading to reduced services. The current funding model thus undermines workforce stability, long-term planning, and quality of support.

These challenges may be overcome by developing core NI government funding for SE services that is ring-fenced, rather than reliant on project/grant-based funding. This could be done by including SE in core departmental budgets (i.e. as part of employability and economic inclusion funding in the Department for Communities, as part of support for people with health conditions in the Department for Health, and as part of transition support for young people with health conditions going from school/college to work). Furthermore, SE pathways could be provided as part of mainstream Jobs & Benefits office provision and funded through the Department for the Economy. Beyond core funding, NI departments that seek to contract out SE services to disability organisations may consider moving from an annualised basis to 3-5 year funding cycles. This would enable providers to more easily recruit and retain staff, invest in staff training, build partnerships with employers, and ensure that SE support to programme participants is not disrupted. Beyond this, any external funding, such as UKSPF funding (and whatever replaces it) should be considered as additional funding, and be focussed on supporting innovation to pilot new programmes rather than delivering core services to disabled people.

5.4.3 Cross-government working

The case studies examined earlier provide a range of examples of how cross-governmental working can move the needle on disability employment. The Republic of Ireland, for instance, developed a Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) for People with Disabilities, a cross-government approach to addressing barriers facing disabled people who are seeking employment. The CES furthermore had a strong implementation, monitoring and evaluation element, to assess effectiveness. Ireland also developed a whole-of-government National Disability Strategy, which underlines the responsibilities of all departments to supporting disability employment. Austria's approach to disability employment is cross-governmental and decentralised, spanning multiple ministries and regional levels. However, unlike Ireland's centrally coordinated model, it operates through shared responsibilities that lead to varied implementation across its regions.

How can cross-government working be strengthened in NI?

At present, disability and work programmes largely fall within the remit of the Department for Communities, which runs Workable NI, Access to Work and the CMP programmes, and which has recently developed a draft Disability and Work Strategy. However, disability employment also straddles other policy areas – including skills and training, health and education. Research participants in this project were strongly in favour of deeper cross-governmental working, especially between the Departments for Communities, Health, Economy and Education, to ensure a holistic and whole-journey approach for individuals.

There are a few options on how to achieve this. A first option is to task a lead department – such as The Executive Office (TEO) – to drive and coordinate efforts across all relevant NI government departments around disability employment. This may involve creating a cross-departmental Disability Employment strategy that sets out goals, targets and indicators, with clarity around departmental responsibilities and pooling of budgets. A second option is to enhance the Department for Communities' role as the 'lead' on disability employment, by giving it a coordinating role across all other relevant departments (Economy, Health, Education, Finance) in implementing its Disability and Work Strategy, with pooled budgets and clear responsibilities across departments. A third option may be to consider restructuring NI departments so that employment and skills are brought together (as previously, in the Department for Employment and Skills).

To enable cross-governmental working and pooled budgets in any of these scenarios, one interviewee suggested that a legislative mechanism already exists in NI to enable this: the Children's Services Cooperation Act, which was introduced in 2015. This legislative mechanism provides legal scope for government departments and agencies in NI to cooperate and *pool resources* for services to improve young people's well-being, which could include some kinds of disability employment support for young people. However, this mechanism would only apply to young people (i.e. under 18), and interviewees felt that it had been underutilised as few people knew how to use it. Other processes for cross-departmental working may need to be found, such as the example provided by TEO's role in coordinating NI departments to work together on key issues such as tackling paramilitarism and tackling violence against women and girls.

5.4.4 Inclusion in the open labour market

Across the case studies we looked at, but more broadly across Europe and liberal democracies, there has been a shift away from segregated sheltered workshops towards more human rights-based, inclusive employment in the open labour market. This shift is underpinned by the UNCRPD, especially Article 27 on the right to work and employment, and it is further grounded in domestic legislation on anti-discrimination and equal opportunity. This shift has been underpinned by a growing evidence base showing that inclusive employment in the open labour market leads to better economic and wellbeing outcomes for disabled people.

Sweden currently focuses much of its efforts on the SE approaches offered through the Public Employment Service (PES). Through PES, SE participants are more likely to move into jobs in the open labour market with smaller provision for sheltered jobs for people with high support needs (through Samhall, the state-owned company providing sheltered work). The Republic of Ireland has also moved to an inclusive human-rights based model through its EmployAbility and WorkAbility programmes, and away from its previous focus on segregating training and work programmes for disabled people. Austria, which has a long tradition of sheltered workshops for disabled people, is perhaps the furthest behind. More than 25,000 people still work in sheltered work – which is known for its absence of employment contracts and minimum wage – and which therefore limit disabled people's human rights. However, Austria has been moving to more inclusive pathways and training through its NEBA programme, and its most recent National Action Plan 2022-30 sets targets to move away from sheltered models.

How can disabled people be supported into the open labour market in NI?

The disability employment model in NI is strongly focussed on jobs in the open labour market, the organisations moved away from segregated and sheltered work many years ago. Currently, there are some 'place then train' employment services for disabled people in NI offered through social enterprises. Here, individuals would be offered fixed-term paid work in social enterprises such as cafes and factories. During this time, they would be offered training, support and paid work for up to 12 months. However, they would then be encouraged and supported to find employment in the open labour market. Otherwise the main approach in NI is based on the integration of disabled people into the open labour market, through Workable NI, LMPs and UKSPF-funded SE projects. The case studies show that NI is in line with international standards around inclusive employment, and a greater shift to well-resourced SE approaches to supporting disabled people into work would further entrench NI's rights-based model.

5.4.5 Voice and Co-Design

The case studies show how important it is to empower people with lived experience of disability to be involved in the design and development of employment programmes, rather than making decisions *for* disabled people. For instance, the Irish WorkAbility programme has explicit criteria for service user involvement in design and feedback, and programmes to support individuals with intellectual disabilities transition from school to employment (such as WALK PEER and Ability) have embedded user consultation and peer-led support models. In Austria, disabled people's voices are represented through formal advisory structures and civil society organisations such as the Austrian Disability Council, which consults with the government on disability policy. In Sweden, disability organisations have a formal consultative role in employment and disability policy.

How can disabled people be empowered to co-design programmes?

Northern Ireland can learn from international best practice to ensure that people with lived experience of disability are actively involved in shaping SE programmes, not just as recipients but as co-designers, advisors, peer supporters, and decision-makers. This could involve strengthening the Partnership Agreement between the NI government and the voluntary and community sector, to create practical implementation strategies and models for co-design and co-production. It could even involve creating co-design frameworks for existing disability employment programmes (such as Workable NI) or the creation of an Advisory Group for Disability Employment comprised of people with lived experience, which can review policies and programmes, advise on pilots and test new ideas. Beyond this, Austria's disability councils provide an example of funding disability organisations to participate in the governance of SE programmes and to advise and co-create service improvements, while representing the voice and needs of disabled people.

5.4.6 Quotas and targets

The case studies give a range of experiences of countries implementing quotas or targets for employers to hire disabled people, and the pros and cons of these. Austria has a mandated quota system, whereby employers are required to hire a minimum of 4% of disabled workers if they employ 25 or more staff. This is a legally binding requirement, and there are financial penalties for non-compliance. Evidence shows that mandatory quotas have led to higher levels of workforce participation. At the same time, research shows that employers have sought to avoid penalties by keeping staff numbers down (to less than 25 employees) where possible, that some employers prefer to pay a penalty rather than hire disabled staff, and in some cases, employers are seen to engage in 'tokenistic' hiring – offering low-paid jobs to disabled people, without real inclusion.

In contrast, the Republic of Ireland has a non-binding statutory target of seeking to hire a minimum of 6% of disabled workers within the public sector (a target recently increased from 3%), to help increase representation of disabled employees. This target has been backed by government awareness-raising campaigns. Meanwhile, Sweden does not have quotas or targets for hiring a

certain percentage of disabled people; instead, it has sought to lead by example by encouraging inclusive employment in the public sector.

How might employer targets for disabled people work in NI?

At present, there are no quotas or targets for employers in NI to hire a certain percentage of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. If this were to be considered a policy option, certain measures would likely have to be put in place to help employers reach the target/quota (and even without quotas/targets, should be put in place to encourage employers to hire disabled people). These include extended SE support, including disability awareness training, job coaching, job-matching, and extensive advice on reasonable adjustments, workplace adaptations, and supporting employees with different health conditions; in addition to monitoring and reporting on disability disclosures, employment rates and barriers; and clear signposting to further resources (i.e. Access to Work, Condition Management Programme), to support employers and employees.

While quotas have increased levels of disability employment in Austria, they are not without their challenges. If they are poorly implemented, they may lead to disabled people feeling they are given a job to fill a quota rather than on the basis of merit; mandatory hiring may be contentious amongst employers if they are not given the necessary support to reach quotas; and as we saw in Austria, some companies have preferred to pay the fine rather than hire disabled people, which reinforces stigma. NI may therefore prefer to consider targets, as exemplified by the Republic of Ireland, beginning with public sector hiring (i.e. civil service, local councils, health trusts, education sector), and potentially rolling this out to the private and third sector over the longer-term. For instance, NI could include disability targets in procurement practices, requiring employers bidding for public contracts to disclose disability employment rates. The NI Department of Finance already has a requirement that public procurement works and services should allocate a minimum of 10% of the total award criteria to 'social value' for contracts above £500,000. While this social value requirement is not disability-specific, the wording could be amended to include a target for disability, for example a target number of people with disabilities employed on the tender. Targets are a softer mechanism, but combined with strong messaging and leadership from politicians, can help to engender a culture shift in societal views on the benefits of disabled people. It would also enable the NI government to lead by example in inclusive employment.

5.4.7 Messaging and communication

The case studies highlighted the importance of having a single point of advice and information for employers and (potential) employees on disability employment programmes, services, advice, information, toolkits, best practice and further resources. This is valuable in providing employers and disabled people with a 360-degree view of what opportunities and support are available to them; and research has also shown that clear, well-resourced hubs can increase uptake of programmes. In Ireland, a review of existing disability employment schemes in 2023 found that information was fragmented and schemes were underutilised. This led to the creation of a single point of access for all information and supports under the Work and Access programme.⁴ This one-stop-shop provides cross-cutting and cross-departmental information about employability, grants, workplace adaptation, job matching, health supports and employer advice. Clear, consistent messaging also plays a key role in shaping employer attitudes and awareness. In Austria, the Service for Businesses initiative was created to provide advice and guidance to employers on hiring and retaining disabled workers. Sweden's SIUS model embeds ongoing employer support through trained consultants within the PES and Ireland's Work and Access hub aims to make information on grants, adaptations and inclusive practices clear and straightforward.

How might inclusive employment tools, advice and practices be better communicated?

At present, information on disability employment in NI is available across multiple organisations

⁴ See <https://www.ahead.ie/wideframework>

and platforms. For instance, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland provides advice and information on disability duties, discrimination, reasonable adjustments and guidance on recruiting people with disabilities. The NI Department for Communities – through the NI Direct website – offers information for jobseekers, including those with a disability, with information on Workable NI, Access to Work and the Condition Management Programme. Third sector organisations such as Disability Action provide advice and resources for employers through their own and external platforms such as the NI Business Info website. In short, there are several information points that cover different parts of the employment journey for disabled people and employers.

NI may wish to follow in the footsteps of the Republic of Ireland in developing a single, unified digital hub on disability employment that acts as a ‘one-stop shop’ for employers and disabled people. This resource could: map all the supports (such as rights, subsidies, programmes and contacts) for both employers and disabled jobseekers/employees; provide up-to-date and clear information on reasonable adjustments, existing funding supports, eligibility and best practice from employers; raise awareness around projects and programmes (NI government, LMP, UKSPF, other third sector) that provide employment support to disabled people; and create feedback mechanisms so that users can have a say in whether the advice is helpful, accessible and timely.

5.4.8 Wage subsidies

Wage subsidies – that is, financial incentives for employers to hire and maintain disabled employees in their workforce – are a common tool across the EU to support disability employment. Though not part of SE, they were used in all of the cases above. In Sweden, wage subsidies are widely used in tandem with the SE approach (in particular, vocational profiling and job matching and coaching) to place disabled people in the open labour market. Notably, wage subsidies are used in cases of individuals having limited work capacity due to functional impairments. Austria also offers wage subsidies as part of a package of supports to help disabled people into work. Here, again, financial incentives to employers tend to be focussed on individuals who may need more support at work (i.e. those with learning disabilities and chronic illness), whereby wage subsidies are tailored depending on assessed work capacity of individuals. The Republic of Ireland also offers a Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) that provides subsidies to employers to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities. It has specific criteria around how many hours an individual must be employed for (i.e. at least 15 hours pw, under a 6-month minimum contract) and top-ups for companies employing multiple disabled employees are offered.

What role should wage subsidies have in disability employment in NI?

At present, wage subsidies for employers to employ disabled people is a model that is being phased out in Northern Ireland, and/or restricted to people with severe disabilities who would not otherwise be able to work. Wage subsidies continue to be provided through the old Employment Support Scheme programme (which was closed to new clients several years ago). This scheme focused on supporting disabled people in the workplace who had severe impairments and faced significant barriers to working or progressing in employment. In addition, the JobStart scheme offers financial incentives to employers to take on disabled employees. The main strand involves 25 hours of paid work for at least 6 months; while the second strand focusses on individuals with disabilities and ‘recognised barriers to work’ and involves 15 hours of paid work per week for 9 months. In October 2025, the NI government announced that the eligibility criteria for the scheme would be expanded from young people aged 16-24 to anyone of working age.

NI’s previous approach, of using wage subsidies to incentivise employers to hire people with more severe disabilities through the Employment Support Scheme, was more in line with EU practice. However, evidence from the cases, including NI, suggest that wage subsidies are sometimes associated with stigma and reduced expectations of disabled employees and their merits. They may have limited impact if they are not combined with the wraparound support that is provided by SE approaches. Furthermore, they can be expensive for governments to fund. It is perhaps too

soon to evaluate the shift away from wage subsidies to focus on paid short-term placements for people with disabilities/barriers to work, however the effectiveness of this approach in supporting people into long-term, sustainable employment should be monitored, as well as value for money.

5.4.9 Benefits System

International practice shows us that the social security benefits system can be either an obstacle to disabled people entering employment, or an enabler of this. The key question for policymakers here is: how can the benefits system be structured so that disabled people are not penalised for trying to work? In the Republic of Ireland, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) led to changes in the benefits system, whereby disabled people were more easily able to return to benefits should a job not work out, and disabled people were given free travel for 5 years after they left benefits. Ireland also provides workplace needs assessment grants and adaptation grants for disabled people who start work, so that they are supported with practical costs. Meanwhile, the Swedish system has sought to ensure flexibility around benefits, providing personal assistance (PA) financial support to disabled people when they are employed.

How can the benefits system be reformed to support disabled people into work?

The UK social security system is not devolved to NI, thereby limiting the NI government's ability to change the benefits system. At present, disabled people in NI may be eligible for Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), which have differing rules on eligibility while working. PIP can be claimed if someone is working, as long as their additional needs are stable, and the ESA has 'permitted work' rules, allowing limited work while still accessing the benefit. However, given the complexity of the system (and different rules, thresholds and assessments), research participants in this project said that people were fearful of starting work because of the risk (real or perceived) of losing their benefits and being without income with several weeks/months should a job not work out and they have to reapply for benefits. In short, the benefits system was seen to punish disabled people's attempts to work.

Some of the options to address these risks might include: changing the benefits criteria so that individuals can retain key disability-related support in work, potentially for a time-bound period, or for as long as the extra costs of disability persist; creating 'trial work periods' without losing benefit eligibility; increasing the threshold number of hours that disabled people can work without losing benefits; and creating transitional protections, so that if someone moves off a benefit into work, and cannot continue working, there is a window to return to benefits without fully reapplying.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This project has explored how Supported Employment approaches are advancing disabled people's rights to work. It has examined the current context in Northern Ireland, including the experiences of people with disabilities and employers who have accessed SE services, and the views of disability organisations and policymakers on SE in NI. This project has furthermore considered NI in comparative context, drawing policy and legislative lessons from the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Austria for how SE models may be advanced in NI.

The project has found that SE in NI has been associated with a range of challenges and opportunities. These relate to broader funding issues; policy development, leadership and governance structures around SE in NI; demographic trends and demand for disability employment services; networks of collaboration in the third sector; and employer awareness around disability employment supports. This chapter summarises those key findings, including the views of stakeholders who participated in this research on challenges and opportunities for embedding SE in NI. The final section of the chapter sets out a number of recommendations to improve SE services in NI, which are aimed at policymakers, employers, and service providers. Further details on the recommendations of each of the key stakeholder groups interviewed for this project – disabled people, employers, disability organisations and policymakers – can be found in Chapter 4.

6.1 Challenges for SE

We begin by summarising the challenges for further embedding SE approaches in NI, based on the perspectives of stakeholders and our analysis of the NI context.

(a) Overall lack of funding for public and third-sector services in NI

Research participants from across our key stakeholder groups – disabled people, employers, disability organisations and policymakers – concurred that overall funding pressures in NI created significant challenges for SE. It was felt that the SE model – which provides tailored support to disabled people and employers over longer periods of time – might be overlooked in favour of shorter-term, less intensive interventions when there was a squeeze on public budgets. This was despite the growing evidence base around the effectiveness of SE approaches and value for money, given its success in achieving positive outcomes including paid employment and improved mental health for service users. Furthermore, due to the nature of the support being provided under SE (to those who are often furthest from the labour market with multiple needs), the short-term (i.e. yearly) nature of funding was generally insufficient to provide ongoing support.

(b) Post-Brexit UKSPF funding reductions, leading to reduced SE services

Notably, research participants highlighted the tremendous impact of the loss of EU funding and introduction of the UKSPF funding model on SE services. Previous ESF funding had broader eligibility criteria for service users (not just economic inactivity, but unemployment, training and social inclusion), which allowed SE services to help more people. Furthermore, the multi-year funding periods under ESF enabled consistent service delivery and long-term support for disabled people. The loss of EU funding and transition to the UKSPF led to a significant reduction in funds supporting disabled people into work, leading to reduced SE services. Moreover, the uncertainty and inconsistency around UKSPF funding (which has now been extended twice at short notice, and reduced amounts) has led to anxiety and job losses within the disability sector. This has resulted in a reduced number of staff delivering SE services, while demand grows.

(c) Political instability leading to delays in developing policies

Another challenge identified by research participants was the impact of political instability on the development of disability employment policies in NI. There is no current Disability Strategy in NI,

because of delays caused by the absence of a functioning NI Executive between 2022 and 2024. Furthermore, the absence of an NI Executive meant that NI ministers were unable to feed into the design and development of the post-EU UKSPF funding models in NI during 2022-25, which reduced funding for disabled groups in NI. However, research participants have noted a new sense of momentum since the NI Executive returned in February 2024, and the development of new strategies such as the draft Disability and Work Strategy, which is currently under consultation. At the same time, research participants noted concerns around broader political shifts at the UK level, and the potential for cuts to disability benefits due to pressures from Reform UK.

(d) Lack of cross-departmental cohesion on disability employment

Research participants from disability organisations, employers and policy backgrounds felt that the lack of cohesion and shared leadership on disability employment within the NI government was a source of challenge for SE services. The policy area of disability employment traverses multiple government departments – including the Departments for Communities, Economy, Health, Education and Finance. While interviewees described the efforts being made by senior civil servants to join-up working across NI departments behind the scenes, there are inadequate formal processes of cross-departmental collaboration and pooled resources. In addition to this, NI departments often have a lack of clarity on the funding they will be receiving for the coming year, making commitments to longer-term services such as SE more challenging.

(e) Low levels of employer awareness around disability employment

While this project engaged with employers who had participated in SE services, it did not sample the broader population of employer organisations with no experience of SE. However, all the stakeholder groups we engaged with, in addition to other research on employers and disability, suggests that there are low levels of employer awareness around disability employment, which have contributed to the low disability employment rate in NI. This includes a lack of employer knowledge on how to hire, train, support and maintain disabled people at work; what advice and services are available to support disabled employees, including SE services; what resources are available (i.e. Access to Work NI); misinformation about costs and risks associated with hiring disabled people; and low levels of disability training, policies and processes. Stakeholders noted that this lack of knowledge can be particularly acute amongst smaller companies.

(f) Growing demographic demand for disability employment support

Finally, research participants pointed to broader demographic issues in NI that are likely to create growing challenges for SE services in terms of demand. Notably, the number of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions is likely to increase in NI in the coming years due to an ageing population (combined with higher state pension ages, which means older people with potentially poorer health will be working for longer), in addition to a significant increase in the number of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The combination of two large demographic cohorts – young people and older people – requiring disability employment support over the coming years will likely put additional pressure on existing services. It will also likely lead to a greater need for SE services, and for SE services to focus more on staff who develop a disability or health condition while in work.

6.2 Opportunities for embedding SE in NI

Despite the challenges listed above, there are several opportunities for further embedding SE approaches in NI and supporting more disabled people into work.

(a) Stronger evidence base on the SE outcomes for disabled people and employers

Research participants, especially disability organisations, noted that there was now a much stronger evidence base on the effectiveness of SE approaches for supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions into work. There are now numerous case studies from other countries (including those analysed in this report) demonstrating how SE approaches

delivery positive impacts on the likelihood of job starts, increased job sustainment and increased earnings, while also having positive impacts on disabled people's wellbeing, self-confidence and career trajectories. This project seeks to add to this evidence base, by focusing on the range of outcomes of SE for disabled people and employers in NI. It is hoped that this evidence base will enable policymakers to make decisions around the role of SE in disability employment support.

(b) Strong systems of collaboration across disability organisations

Another striking opportunity to advance SE approaches in NI is the strength of the voluntary and community sector in NI, and the close relationships amongst organisations. The UKSPF consortium model has further encouraged collaboration and the sharing of expertise and resources amongst third sector organisations; this bodes well for the potential to utilise SE approaches to support other groups facing labour market barriers.

(c) Opportunities to input into new strategies and funding models

There are other current opportunities to advance SE services in NI, through the development of new strategies, legislation and funding models. Stakeholders pointed to the draft NI Disability and Work Strategy launched by the Department for Communities, which is currently open to consultation from October 2025 to January 2026. The strategy seeks to get 50,000 more disabled people into work by 2036 and thereby increase the disability employment rate to 50%. Key themes of the strategy include personalised employment support and enhanced support for employers, in addition to working more closely with local community organisations, which align with the goals of the SE model. Employer stakeholders also highlighted the Good Jobs and Employment Rights Bill, which will go to the NI Assembly in January 2026, where there is scope to include more on disability employment and overcoming barriers to hiring disabled people for SMEs. Finally, research participants across the board pointed to Local Growth Fund in NI, which will replace the UKSPF, and the potential to enhance disability employment provision through SE models in the design, development and implementation of this funding.

(d) Strong pedigree of SE services, standards and quality frameworks

The Department for Communities has a strong track record in supporting disabled people into employment through the SE-based Workable NI programme. Furthermore, the voluntary and community sector has significant experience in delivering SE services, especially through years of being funded by the ESF to deliver the five-step model of SE to support disabled people find, keep and progress in jobs. While the IPS and SEQF fidelity scales are not as embedded in NI as the rest of the UK, where there is not requirement by the NI government for any SE provider to use SEQF or IPS fidelity tools, NIUSE has been active in supporting delivery organisations to develop and maintain clear standards and frameworks around the delivery of services. There is scope for quality frameworks to be more embedded in NI, along with an expansion of SE services.

(e) Recent expansion of SE services in other parts of the UK

The adoption of the SE model by the UK Government as part of its core employment services demonstrates the consensus emerging in policymaking across European countries that Supported Employment is effective, impactful, and delivers savings to the public purse. The DWP's *Connect to Work* programme, launched in September 2025, is a new, voluntary Supported Employment programme using the 'place, train and maintain' model, that aims to help people with disabilities, long-term health conditions and other complex barriers in England and Wales find and stay in work. The evidence base for the *Connect to Work* programme is rooted in the effectiveness of the international Supported Employment model, which has been shown to be impactful across numerous countries and cohorts in delivering sustained employment, increased wellbeing for service users, delivering well-matched talent for employers, and savings for governments.

(f) Positive employer views of SE

This project has revealed that employers in NI that have engaged with SE services to hire and

maintain employees with disabilities have had an overwhelmingly positive experience of doing so. Employer representatives who participated in this project spoke about the numerous benefits of accessing SE services – helping them to find well-matched and talented individuals to fill roles, enhancing their knowledge of how to best support employees, providing an ongoing source of advice and support, and helping them create more inclusive and compassionate workplaces for all employees. Indeed, employer representatives felt that more should be done to share with other employers how easy it is to hire disabled people through SE services, and the benefits it brings to organisations. While only a small percentage of employers in NI engage in SE services, it is possible that – owing to labour shortages in NI – employers are likely to become more proactive in seeking to hire disabled employees if they're given the tools and support to do so.

(g) Potential to strengthen the new Partnership Agreement

Another opportunity to advance SE services, that was mentioned by stakeholders involved in this project, is the potential to build on, and strengthen the Partnership Agreement between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI, which was endorsed by the NI Executive on 5 June 2025. By working more closely with disability organisations to expand SE services to meet the needs of the population in NI and reduce the disability employment gap, this will serve to strengthen good working relationships between the public and third sector in NI. This could be further enhanced if Fair Funding Principles e.g. multi-year funding, which were included in the Partnership Agreement, were to be used to form the basis of funding for SE services.

6.3 Concluding thoughts and recommendations

Over the past two decades, a growing body of evidence has shown that SE approaches are effective in helping disabled people find and keep high-quality jobs and help employers find and keep well-matched talented employees. Furthermore, cost-benefit analysis typically show that SE interventions deliver savings to the public purse. This study has sought to add to this evidence base and to fill a gap on studies of SE in NI, by revealing that SE services in NI have likewise been effective in supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions to find or stay in employment, with a range of positive outcomes for service users (higher levels of confidence, improved mental health, and earned income through jobs); while additionally delivering a range of positive outcomes for employers (identifying new talent, creating a more inclusive culture).

This study has found that all of the key stakeholder groups would like to see more SE services offered in NI. This sentiment follows a general trend across Europe, where SE is increasingly viewed as one of the most effective approaches to help people with disabilities and health conditions into employment. This research has shown how Sweden, Ireland and Austria have utilised SE approaches to reduce the disability employment gap, and how England and Wales have recently made SE a key plank in their employment programme through *Connect to Work*. Northern Irish organisations have spearheaded the adoption of SE practices worldwide. They have been instrumental in establishing the European association, benchmarks and practices of SE. They also, within NI, have a strong track record of delivering SE services. However, due to funding cuts (notably since the loss of EU funding), uncertainty around future funding opportunities, and the lack of core SE provision in employment programmes, NI SE services – and the people with disabilities and long-term health conditions that they serve – currently face an uncertain future.

Based on our interviews, surveys, engagement activities and policy learning, we have formulated a series of policy recommendations. These recommendations are designed to ensure that people with disabilities and long-term health conditions receive the best support to find, keep and progress into high-quality, sustainable employment. These recommendations have been grouped into three areas aimed at (a) SE service providers, (b) employers and (c) policymakers.

Theme A: For SE service providers - service improvements

Recommendation 1: Stronger outcome-based approach

To ensure that SE services are focussed on outcomes rather than numbers. Research participants shared that funding requirements often focussed on quantitative measurements, such as the number of enrolments on SE programmes. Indeed, this study revealed that some health trusts do not want participant numbers to drop off (i.e. people moving off programmes when they no longer need support), as the trusts would lose funding. However, there was agreement that SE should be outcomes-focussed, with the core aim being to move individuals off SE programmes into sustainable employment. An outcomes-based approach could be strengthened through clearer SE quality frameworks, such as SEQF, to be adopted by service providers and funders of services.

Recommendation 2: Greater collaboration across SE service provision

To continue improving collaboration across SE service providers, to ensure greater cohesion of SE provision. Some research participants noted that there were some gaps in SE provision (especially rural and remote areas), while there was possible duplication between UKSPF funded projects and LMP programmes in local council areas that offered pre-employability SE support. An enabling factor is that networks, partnerships and relations are already in place in NI. More alignment of SE services and joined-up programmes, could help address areas facing growing demand, such as skills and development for young people, pre-employment support, and in-work support.

Recommendation 3: Invest more into employer engagement

To invest more into employer engagement, with a view to overcoming barriers and misconceptions amongst employers around the risks of hiring disabled people. While the SE model is unique amongst employability programmes in having employers *and* disabled people as service users receiving support, research participants felt that the lack of employer awareness around disability employment was such that SE services should be funded to spend more time on engaging with and training employers, combined with additional resources and advice for employers (see below).

Recommendation 4: More transitional support for participants

To provide more support for those participants leaving structured SE services (like the time-limited Workable NI programme), as they move onto the path of sustainable employment. Research participants noted that, as many disabilities and health conditions were fluctuating, people could experience setbacks after leaving a structured SE programme – especially in cases where they experience high-stress events such as bereavement and divorce – which could lead to participants leaving the workplace. SE service users should therefore be informed, encouraged – and funded – to return to SE services should they experience a setback in the workplace, which may constitute a more light-touch programme of support that is specifically tailored for returners.

Recommendation 5: Maintain flexibility in SE model

To ensure that SE services are accessible to those that need them. This may involve, for instance, expanding the criteria for individuals to access Workable NI (to enable people working for less than 10 hours per week, and on temporary or zero-hours contracts, to support). Equally, to ensure that, while there are clear quality standards for SE, the model is also flexible enough to accommodate the different needs of individuals. For instance, people with mental health conditions may not wish to inform their employer of their condition (due to ongoing mental health stigma) but may wish to engage in the other steps in the SE model, such as vocational profiling and in-work support.

Recommendation 6: Consider expanding SE to other groups

To explore opportunities for SE services to be expanded to other marginalised groups experiencing labour market barriers who would benefit from tailored support. In the course of our research, we found that a number of EU countries were using SE approaches to support other economically inactive groups into work – including ex-offenders, care-experienced young people, and people

with substance misuse. Furthermore, several research participants suggested that SE approaches be used to support broader client groups in NI who were economically inactive. As the international SE model has shifted away from purely a focus on people with learning disabilities to supporting a wider range of disadvantaged people into work, SE could form the basis of a community of practice for voluntary and community organisations supporting different equality groups in NI.

Theme B: For employers – disability engagement

Recommendation 7: Openness to being a disability-inclusive employer

To consider the many benefits of being a disability-inclusive employer. There is often reticence amongst employers around hiring disabled people, due to fears that those employees will be less productive, require more training and onboarding, take more sick leave, and potentially put employers at risk of disability discrimination legal claims if individuals are insufficiently supported at work. However, employers who have engaged with SE services have highlighted the numerous benefits of hiring disabled people with support and advice from SE employment officers, including access to new talent pools, more loyal employees, and improvements in organisational culture.

Recommendation 8: Engagement and awareness

To increase awareness, education and engagement around disabilities at work. Given ageing populations, increasing numbers of SEND pupils, and the impact of the COVID pandemic on people's health and wellbeing, it is likely that more employees will have disabilities and long-term health conditions going forward. Employers would do well to arm themselves with information, knowledge and advice on how to best support employees and applicants with health challenges. However, many employers still lack knowledge and awareness in this area, especially smaller organisations that may not have a HR department and may lack relevant disability and wellbeing-related policies and procedures. Employers may wish to consult with the advice and information provided by organisations in NI on what they can do to support disabled staff, as well as what resources are available to help them – including information provided by disability organisations, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and the NI Department for Communities.

Recommendation 9: Create disability-specific policies and procedures

To develop disability policies, as part of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies, to provide clear guidance for employees and managers. Disability policies may include areas such as legal protections for disabled employees and reasonable adjustments like flexible work and equipment, as well as processes for supporting disabled employees. Such policies would help provide clarity around disability support, foster a more inclusive and respectful work culture, and could help increase employee retention and performance. Employers may wish to engage with the resources and information available on disability inclusion from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Citizens Advice, ACAS and employer organisations such as the NI Chamber of Commerce, to develop the processes, procedures and policies that enable them to best support their staff.

Recommendation 10: More opportunities to employ disabled people

To create more opportunities to hire, maintain and advance the careers of disabled people in the workplace. This could include: engaging with any of the SE service providers in NI to explore opportunities for hiring new well-matched talent; seeking advice from the ECNI to ring-fence part-time jobs, full-time jobs, and work experience placements specifically for people with disabilities, which is lawful in NI and considered a form of positive action under the Disability Discrimination Act; and creating career progression pathways for people with disabilities (which may look different to pathways for able-bodied employees, i.e. with a greater focus on flexibility and potentially part-time work). Career progression pathways for people with disabilities is especially important, to enable talented individuals to take on senior management and leadership positions, which could help improve decision-making and create role models for other disabled employees within the organisations. By hiring, supporting and advancing disabled employees within the organisation,

this will help engender a culture shift within organisations, with positive reputational benefits.

Recommendation 11: Better understanding of health conditions

To develop a better understanding of different health conditions and disabilities, and reasonable adjustments for each of these, to better support disabled staff at work. Different health conditions and disabilities – ranging from learning difficulties to physical impairments, chronic medical conditions and mental ill-health – will have different impacts on employees, necessitating different forms of support (such as workplace adaptations, flexible hours, modifying job duties and accessible equipment). Employer organisations would do well to develop their knowledge bank of different health conditions, and relevant accommodations, so they can quickly and easily support staff. Employers could advance staff understanding of different types of health conditions and disabilities by providing regular training to staff (especially line managers), making use of occupational health services, conducting workplace assessments, encouraging staff networks and peer support systems for staff, and developing disability policies and procedures.

Recommendation 12: Share stories of hiring disabled people

To share best practice and success stories of hiring disabled people through SE. Employers with positive experiences of hiring people with disabilities and long-term health conditions could be influential in the business community by sharing the benefits of their experiences. Employers could do so by publishing case studies and success stories on company websites, recruitment pages and social media; by participating in national disability awareness campaigns; by sharing peer-to-peer learning about what worked at business conferences and networks; and becoming Disability Confident Leaders and ambassadors for inclusive employment. These actions could help challenge misconceptions in the business community around hiring disabled people, provide stories and models of best practice which could encourage others to hire disabled people, and could showcase their commitment to diversity and inclusion, which could boost staff morale, strengthen their employer brand, and make them more attractive to job-seekers.

Theme C: For policymakers – policy, governance and funding

Recommendation 13: Core funding for SE models

To allocate core funding for SE services, ideally through multi-year funding settlements, to provide much-needed certainty to SE providers. This may take a similar form to the UK DWP's *Connect to Work* programme, which aims to support 300,000 disabled people into work through SE services, or to at least replicate its strengths. There should be cohesion across funding schemes relevant to SE, and pooled departmental budgets to enable increased partnership working to achieve outcomes. This kind of approach should build upon on the Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland (endorsed by the NI Executive on 5 June 2025), which sets out Fair Funding Principles and Ways of Working, including a recognition of the importance of promoting longer funding arrangements where possible, and of collaborating to identify and achieve mutually agreed outcomes to ensure impact (DfC, 2025c). Quality frameworks – in particular, the SEQF – should be embedded in funding frameworks and outcomes. In the short-term, there is an urgent need for clarity on the future of local growth funding post-UKSPF; decisions and plans must be put in place as soon as possible, with co-design of the successor fund, otherwise there is a risk of key SE services disappearing. Looking further forward, core funding for SE services, underpinned by quality frameworks, would reduce the risk of future 'cliff-edge' scenarios as experienced by SE providers under the UKSPF.

Recommendation 14: Collaboration and co-design of DSE programmes

To co-design SE programmes with disabled people and disability organisations. This would recognise the crucial role played by the voluntary and community sector in NI in the delivery of SE support to disabled people, and consequently the vast expertise of those in the sector with regards to the most effective ways of providing this support. Previously, the NI government worked closely

with third-sector SE providers in the delivery of ESF programmes; however, this relationship was ruptured during Brexit and the transition to the UK government-managed UKSPF. However, there is an opportunity to strengthen relationships, by building upon and more strongly embedding the 2025 Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI, which identifies Collaboration as a key shared value and highlights “improved inter-sector engagement in planning and co-design of programmes and public services” as a way of working to deliver this value. Greater collaboration between the NI government and third sector would create stronger, trusting relationships and more effective services. More co-design of employability programs would likely also help SE providers increase their impact with regards to key outcomes.

Recommendation 15: Improve coordination across NI departments

To improve processes for cross-departmental working on disability employment. Disability employment is cross-cutting issue with relevance to the mandates of several NI Departments, including the Department for Communities, the Department of Health, and the Department for the Economy, and many research participants felt that at present there is a lack of effective coordination across departments with regards to SE and disability employment, hampering policy development and implementation. It was highlighted that there are various mechanisms with the potential to enable better cross-departmental working in this area, including the pooling of budgets across departments and the identification of a clear departmental lead to drive progress and coordinate strategies related to disability employment.

Recommendation 16: Role of educational and health institutions

To create policy alignment with health and educational institutions. Demographic changes currently underway in the NI population are set to have a range of impacts relevant to the issue of disability employment. These include the ageing nature of NI's population, which is likely to increase the number of older individuals in work in NI, in turn making the retention of individuals who develop a health condition while in employment an issue of increasing prevalence and importance for employers and SE services; and the increasing prevalence of some disabilities and health conditions amongst young people in NI. These kinds of trends necessitate a stronger role for educational and health institutions in NI in the provision of SE services, including universities and public health agencies and departments; ultimately, the aim should be for an all-ages, all-abilities approach to SE to be in put in place in NI, encompassing the transition of young people out of schools and recognising the preventative role SE can play with regards to public health.

Recommendation 17: Role model best practice - targets and benchmarks

To role-model best practice in the public sector, through the adoption of disability employment targets and/or benchmarks within the civil service. More broadly, the public sector should take a lead in role modelling other aspects of inclusive employment: this could take inspiration from aspects of the approach described in the Ireland case study, which includes (recently-increased) non-binding statutory targets for public sector employers with regards to the hiring of disabled workers, in addition to government awareness-raising campaigns and a whole-of-government approach to policy development around disability employment. In the future, targets and benchmarks adopted in the public sector could be expanded to encompass (aspects of) the private sector; potential options for consideration could include a quota or target for larger businesses to ensure their workforce is representative of disabled people.

Recommendation 18: Change benefits system

To change the benefits system to enable people to try different employment options. Research participants highlighted that, at present, many disabled people see entering employment as a risk, due to the benefits system being structured in such a way as to create the possibility that individuals must go without income for a period of time if they take on a job which doesn't work out (as a result of the length of time required to re-apply for UC or ESA). Through coordination with the DWP, the benefits system should be adjusted to better enable disabled people to try different

employment options without the fear that they may be penalised financially for trying to work.

Recommendation 19: Improved marketing and communications

To improve marketing and communications around disability employment resources, advice and information – for both employers and disabled people. This may include the creation of a one-stop-shop or single-point ‘resource hub’ for information. Research participants highlighted that, at present, some employers find accessing support and information around SE difficult, with some feeling there is a lack of clarity around the kind of support that is available in relation to disability employment and how it can be accessed. A one-stop-shop or unified digital hub could fulfil a range of functions relating to communications and awareness around SE. This could include mapping the various supports available to employers and disabled employees/jobseekers, making employers aware of the benefits of employing disabled people, and providing clear and up-to-date information with regards to reasonable adjustments, examples of best practice, and existing projects and programmes that provide funding for SE approaches.

Recommendation 20: Evaluation and data

To improve data collection and evaluation and monitoring frameworks around disability employment. Research participants felt that, overall, there is a need for more data to be collected with regards to what is working well and what is not working well in the provision of SE in NI, so as to ensure that future policy development in this area is based on the strongest evidence base possible. At present, providers are incentivised to adopt somewhat transactional approaches to monitoring and reporting based on the particular requirements of specific funding streams; with SE organisations providing services through a number of different consortia and projects, it was felt that this limits the level of data sharing and cohesion in the sector. Looking forward, the sector should agree on a shared evaluation approach with the aim of providing richer evidence as to the impacts of SE, with a strong focus on progress towards agreed outcomes.

Recommendation 21: Legislative changes

To initiate legislative changes to strengthen disability rights, such as adopting the Equality Act 2010. Several research participants were critical of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), feeling that DDA uses medicalised and negative language which discourages employers from hiring disabled people. As a result, several favoured NI adopting the Equality Act (which succeeded the DDA in GB in 2010), with the caveat that the DDA provision of employers being able to ring-fence jobs or work placements for people with disabilities should be retained.

Recommendation 22: Social model of disability

To adopt a social model of disability across all public services. Overall, there was a strong sense amongst many research participants that there was further scope for NI society to move from a medical model to a social model of disability, with employers adopting this. This should include recognition of the societal barriers to employment faced by disabled people and action to address them, for example by making improvements to transport and digital accessibility across NI to increase the accessibility of employment opportunities. Action should also be taken to remove the barriers limiting the numbers of disabled people in positions of leadership, for instance around inflexible working hours or discriminatory assumptions. SE should be fully integrated into public sector recruitment approaches, with recruitment processes adapted to enable the participation of disabled people at all stages. Finally, the importance of addressing the challenges and opportunities linked to AI within policy development emerged throughout the research, so as to ensure that the implementation of new AI-based systems and ways of working in the workplace does not reinforce inequalities or lead to exclusionary impacts.

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