Manchester Community Central
Policy & Influence Team

Supporting Pathways to Good Work:

The Role of Manchester's VCSE Sector

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> **Being in good work is usually protective of health, while poor-quality work, stressful jobs, and unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, contribute significantly to poor health and low wellbeing and increase the risk of mortality - Build Back Fairer**

Introduction

The importance of good employment

Good employment is a significant factor in the wellbeing of both individuals and communities. At the individual level, being in good employment does not only mean financial security, but also a sense of wellbeing and purpose. In contrast, poor-quality work and unemployment (particularly long-term unemployment) contribute to poverty and poor health and wellbeing. For communities, low employment rates can correlate with higher rates of social issues such as crime and anti-social behaviour, as well as slowed economic growth.

Economic inequality and employment in Manchester

Manchester has seen significant growth over the past few years - from 2002-2019, the size of Greater Manchester's economy grew by 2.0 per cent per year, well ahead of other large cities such as Liverpool (0.8 per cent) and Birmingham (1.1 per cent). Despite this economic growth, Manchester has also seen growing inequalities between areas and groups within the city, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many groups and communities being underserved and left behind.

Employment inequalities are present in Manchester in the form of a low employment rate (65%), a high percentage of people who are economically inactive (28%), and many people who are 'under-employed' (where an individual is employed, but this employment may be unstable, low-paid, present few opportunities or lead to the employee feeling undervalued). People from marginalised communities disproportionately struggle to gain and stay in secure and appropriate employment. For example, the employment rate among the Pakistani and Bangladeshi working age population in Greater Manchester was around 50% in 2021, compared to 75% for the white ethnic group in the same year (see Figure 1). Within Manchester, there are wide discrepancies between different areas; for example, Moss Side had the highest unemployment rate of any ward in 2024 at 10.78%, compared to Deansgate which had an unemployment rate of only 1.13% (see Figure 2).

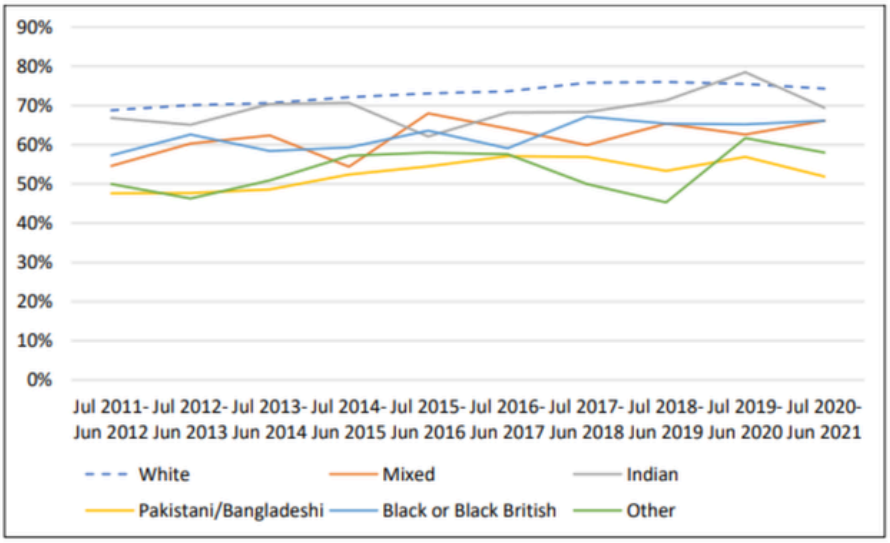
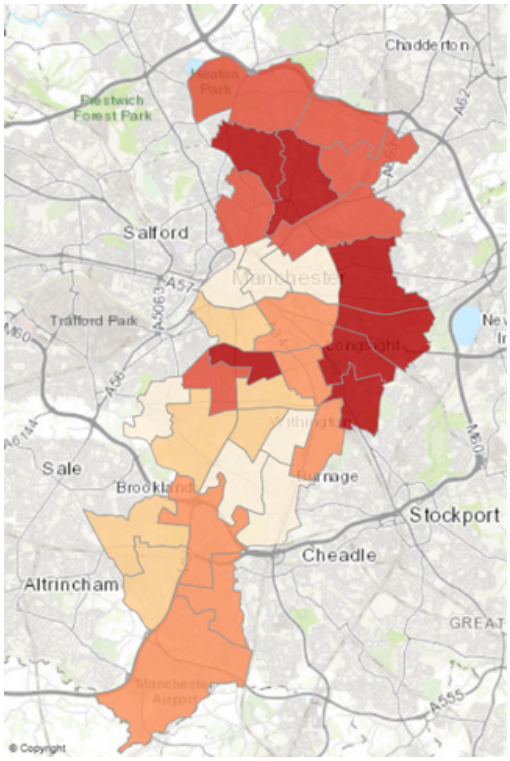


Figure 1: Line graph showing employment rate of working age population in Greater Manchester, by ethnic grouping. Source: Ethnicity Evidence Baseline, GMCA

Figure 2: A map of Manchester showing unemployment rates by ward.



The role of the VCSE sector in supporting people into employment

Despite this challenging picture, there is a lot of work being done by statutory, business and voluntary sector stakeholders in Manchester to improve employment outcomes for all. The Manchester Work and Skills strategy sets out the vision for an inclusive employment landscape where 'more of our residents are connected to our city's success'.

'Employment support' can encompass all the services provided to help people to find and apply for jobs, such as CV and application writing, interview preparation and help with job searching. There is a range of support provided by statutory services to support people into employment, from adult skills courses to partnerships with anchor organisations to help people into work.

However, this more direct form of employment support is just one part of a much bigger picture. Often, there are wider barriers preventing people from finding and securing sustainable and suitable employment, and failing to address these can lead to a 'revolving door' of people who are in and out of work. Employment support can therefore also mean supporting the whole person, for example with their health (physical and mental), housing, confidence and a range of other factors that impact their lives. This is where the VCSE sector (voluntary, community and social enterprise sector) plays an essential role, supporting people in their local communities who may be unemployed and looking for work with a holistic, whole-person approach.

The purpose of this report is to understand what types of employment support VCSE organisations in Manchester provide, what challenges they face in providing employment support and where additional support is needed, and what the gaps are in provision to specific communities (for example communities of specific ethnic minorities or communities in a specific area of Manchester).

Research findings

Methodology

A survey consisting of twelve questions, targeted at Manchester-based voluntary sector organisations that provide employment support, was distributed via the Macc bulletin, social media, and other communications channels. Additionally, desk research was done to identify organisations that fit the above criteria, and publicly available data on beneficiaries, activities and employment support of the organisations were included in the research. 19 organisations responded to the survey and a further 35 organisations were included from desk research.

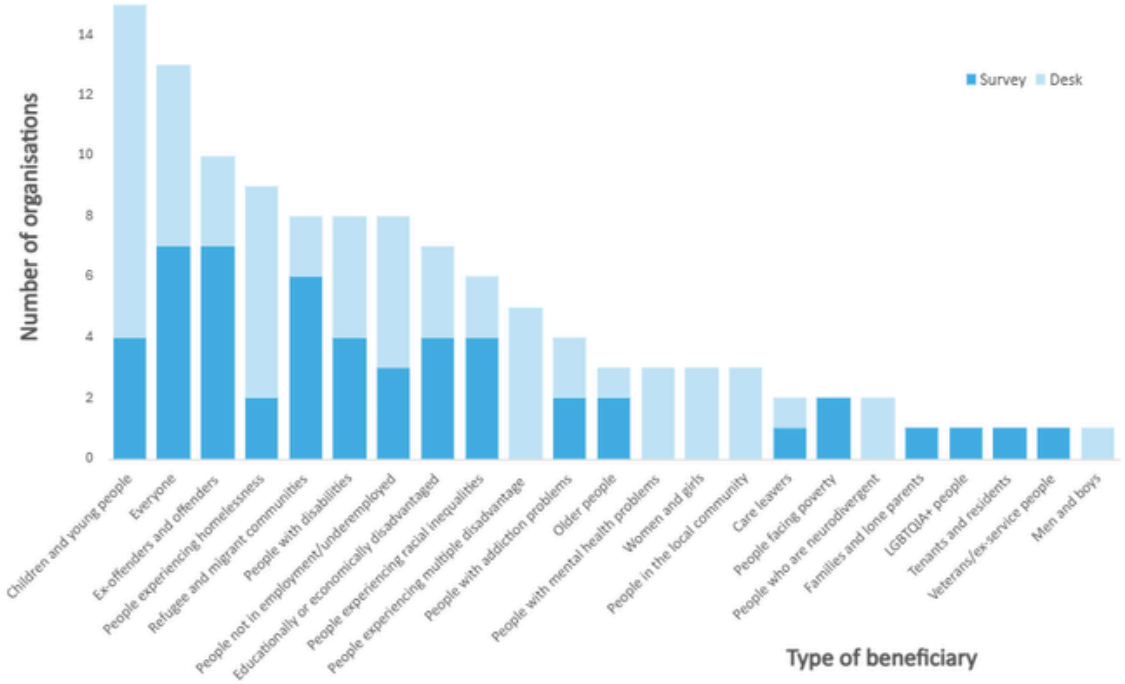
Who are the organisations main beneficiaries?

The survey asked respondents who their main beneficiaries are, and publicly available information was used to ascertain which groups of people that the organisations identified through desk research targeted.

15 organisations overall had children and young people as one of their main beneficiary groups. Youth unemployment is a big issue nationally, with various factors such as technological changes, skills gaps and a competitive job market leading to an estimated 12.7% of people aged 16 – 24 years not in education, employment or training ('NEET') in September 2025. In the June 2025 figures, the number of young people that were NEET in Manchester was 878 (5.9%). Although this is comparatively lower than the national average of 12.7%, it is an increase of 8.3% since 2023, demonstrating the increasing need to focus on young people and the particular barriers they face when it comes to employment support.

13 organisations overall served everyone, followed by 10 and 9 organisations serving people with experience of the criminal justice system and people experiencing homelessness respectively. People with disabilities and refugee and migrant communities were the next most common answers, with 8 organisations citing them as their main beneficiaries. Nationally, people with disabilities are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as people without disabilities. In Manchester in 2025, there were 24,841 Universal Credit claimants that had Limited Capability for work- and work-related activity,

Figure 3: Bar chart showing the main beneficiary groups of VCSE organisations providing employment support in Manchester



a figure which has grown by 36.2% since 2024, with a 12.1% increase in the number of PIP claimants over a similar time period, demonstrating the need to focus on people with disabilities when considering employment support. 'Psychiatric conditions' is the top medical reason for PIP claims, showing the need for targeted support for people with mental health conditions, which is something that the VCSE sector can and does play a vital role in in Manchester. Disability is heavily linked to youth unemployment, as 45.8 per cent of NEETs are classed as disabled.

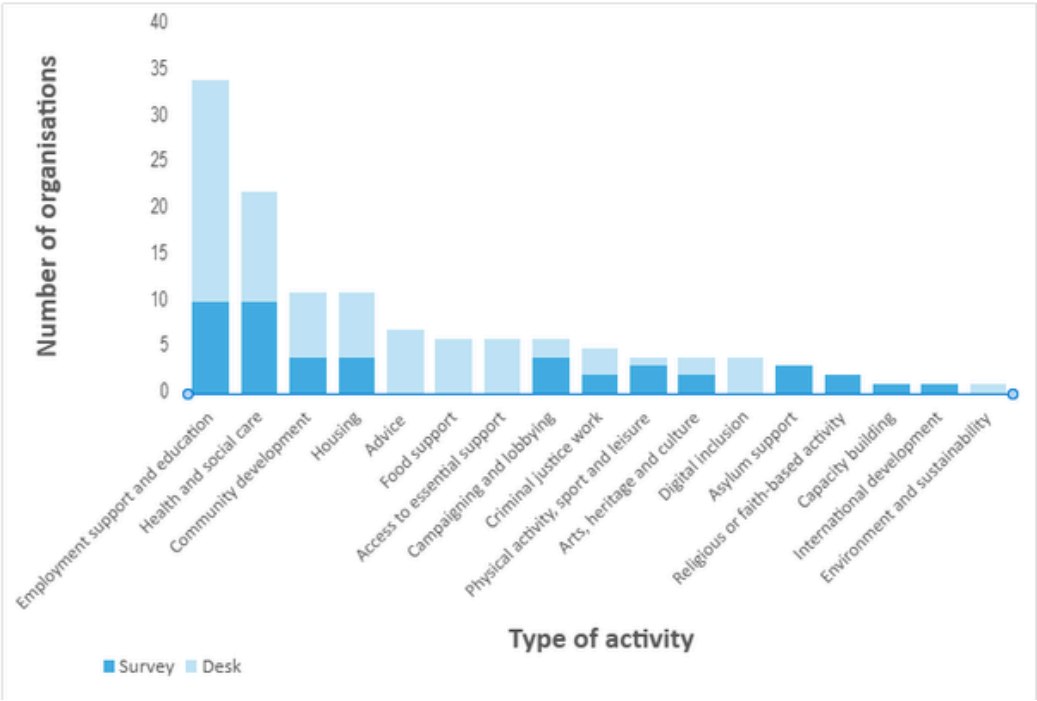
6 organisations served people/communities experiencing racial inequalities, with 4 organisations serving Arab/Middle Eastern communities, 3 organisations serving African communities, 3 organisations serving South Asian communities, and 2 organisations serving Carribean communities. One organisation served the Muslim community. The Arab community, although already sizeable in Manchester, is sometimes considered an 'emerging' or growing community, showing the ability of VCSE organisations led by and for ethnic minority groups to engage them.

6 organisations served people who are educationally or economically disadvantaged, including one organisation that works with people who have faced barriers to education. In addition to this, one organisation served people they describe as 'very long-term unemployed' and one organisation worked with people who are already in work but want to progress into 'better' work.

What are the organisations' main areas of activity?

The survey asked what organisation's main area(s) of activity are, with the choice to select multiple options. 34 of the organisations that responded said that one of their main activities was employment support, education and training, while 22 organisations also said that one of their main activities was wellbeing, health and social care. As has been alluded to previously, employment is a significant factor that shapes the health

Figure 4: Bar chart showing the main areas of activity for VCSE organisations providing employment support in Manchester

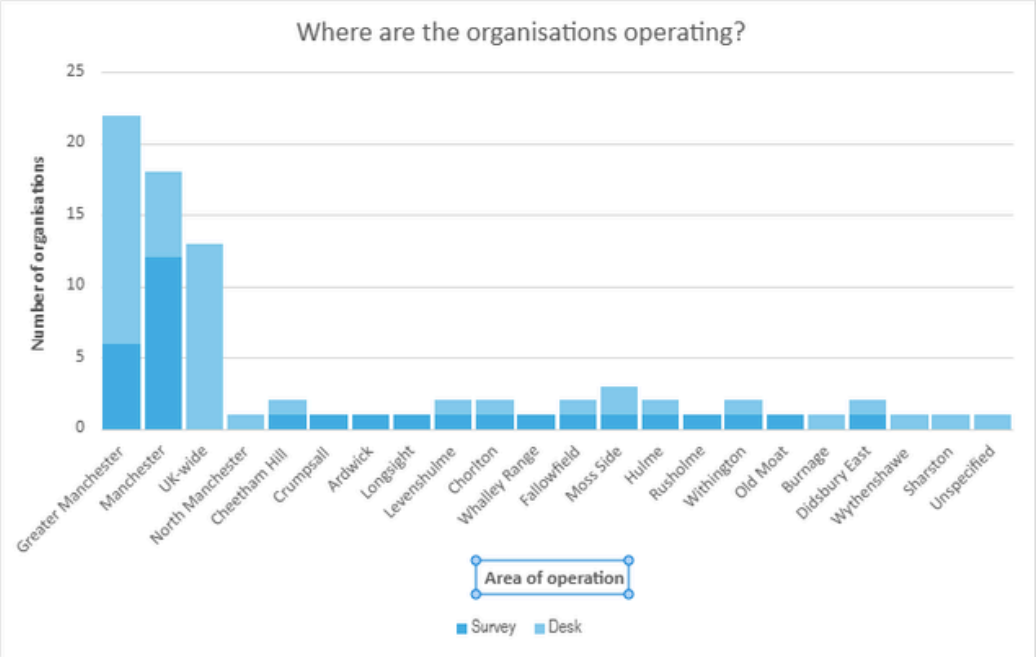


outcomes of both individuals and communities, with ill-health and disability being one of the major barriers preventing people from finding and sustaining meaningful employment both locally and nationally. Many of the voluntary sector organisations providing employment support in Manchester consider this in their provision, offering wellbeing activities alongside their employment support offer, demonstrating their whole-person approach.

The third most common types of activity were housing support and community development, with some of the organisations included in the research being rooted in a particular neighbourhood of Manchester. Organisations like these, such as community centres, provide a range of key services for everyone in the local community, from children's activities to work clubs, and play a vital role as accessible hubs for job seekers.

The fourth and fifth most common activities for VCSE organisations providing employment support were advice, food and other essential support like clothing and household items.

Figure 5: Bar chart showing the areas of operation for VCSE organisations providing employment support in Manchester



Where are the organisations operating?

In terms of where the VCSE organisations providing employment support were operating, the majority operated across Greater Manchester, followed by 18 organisations operating in Manchester. The third most popular area was UK-wide, with these organisations operating nationally but having services delivered locally in Manchester.

Moss Side was the ward with the highest number of organisations operating in it, perhaps related to it being one of the wards with the highest unemployment rate in Manchester – 10.8% of residents of Moss Side are claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit. However, other wards in South Manchester with lower claimant rates, such as Chorlton and Didsbury East, had a higher number of organisations serving them compared to wards in North Manchester with a higher claimant rate, such as Harpurhey and Crumpsall. This potentially reflects the lack of services available in North Manchester.

What types of employment support do the organisations provide?

Figure 6: Circle packing chart showing the types of employment support that VCSE organisations provide in Manchester

The majority of the organisations surveyed provided multiple types of employment support to their beneficiaries, alongside other types of support or signposting to other support, demonstrating a joined-up and whole-person approach.

One-to-one support was the most common type of employment support offered, sometimes continuing after beneficiaries have gained employment. Respondents described this support as 'bespoke' and 'person-centred', with one organisation saying that they work with people to 'identify [their] dreams and goals and support them to take their next steps', demonstrating that they work collaboratively with people to find opportunities that are best suited to them, and therefore more sustainable. **Help with CV and application writing and interview preparation** was another common type of support that the organisations offer.

Training, courses and workshops was the next most common type of employment support provided, often in tandem with a follow-on offer; for example one organisation offered an '8-week employability programme with guaranteed job interviews at the end'. The majority of the training focused on developing skills, with some leading to the opportunity to gain qualifications, while a couple of the organisations gave training to employers.

Support with job placements and searching for opportunities was the third most common type of employment support offered by voluntary sector organisations, consisting of work experience and vocational training opportunities, as well as partnerships with employers.

Some organisations specified that **they continue to support individuals once they have been successful in finding employment**, for example with their physical and mental health needs. Many organisations offered **wrap-around support** to the people that access their services, with the main areas of support being with: digital and IT access, supporting with skills for longer-term economic wellbeing (like budgeting), help with interview clothes, and confidence building. Although not direct forms of employment support, these types of offers are essential to remove the barriers that individuals face gaining employment.

What challenges do the organisations face in helping individuals get on track for employment?

The survey asked organisations what the main challenges are that they face in helping individuals get on track for employment. There were four broad themes which emerged from the responses: funding, sustainability and organisational capacity, external factors (for example, relating to the job market or education systems), underemployment and in-work poverty, and other factors which individuals experience which impact employment.

Funding, sustainability and capacity of organisations providing employment support

The most common challenge that respondents face is around finding and securing funding to carry out their employment support, especially over the longer-term, with six respondents cited funding, financial support and income generation as one of the main challenges they face in delivering employment support. Some organisations needed funding to maintain activities they are already delivering, while others wanted to expand their offer (see X). Closely related to funding and sustainability is the issue of a lack of staff capacity, which two organisations cited as a challenge, as well as the time-pressured nature of the shorter-term programmes which organisations deliver. Two organisations cited a lack of partnerships and support from organisations like the DWP as a challenge that they face.

Systemic issues/barriers in employment, the job market and the education system

External factors in the job market, education system and with employers were another set of challenges which organisations face when supporting people into employment. Challenges with the current job market and supporting people into employment include a lack of suitable jobs, a mismatch between supply and demand needs, and skillsets which have become redundant. Recruitment processes generally were cited as a barrier to employment, as well as a lack of application and interview skills from the people that organisations were supporting.

Specific barriers for supporting disabled people into employment were also cited, such as disabled people leaving the education system without work skills, and large organisations recruiting disabled people but not learning how to support them with reasonable adjustments, leading to them leaving. There were also some specific challenges with supporting people from migrant communities into employment, such as a lack of ‘good quality early employability interventions’ (such as support with ESOL, digital skills, volunteering and CV writing) and challenges getting qualifications from other countries recognised in the UK.

Other factors which impact individual's ability to gain and stay in employment

Factors directly relating to employment, such as application skills and recruitment processes, are not the only determinants in gaining and staying in employment – there are a range of other circumstances that individuals face that shape their employment outcomes.

Three respondents cited low levels of confidence and self-belief amongst the people they work with as a challenge to supporting individuals into employment. Health and learning needs and neurodiversity were also other barriers to employment.

People facing multiple disadvantage, for example individuals experiencing homelessness and those who have had contact with the criminal justice system, face particular challenges in gaining and staying in employment. For example, respondents cited 'finding a stable home' and 'being able to gain employment while living in temporary accommodation' as challenges, as well as 'knowing what is available for people who have criminal offences [and] knowing the best routes and getting the support to get back into work'.

People from migrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities also face unique challenges in gaining employment, especially language barriers, which three respondents mentioned as a challenge, and the asylum system and housing. Access to technology and a lack of money to access training opportunities were other challenges which this group face, which can be assumed to be faced by other groups with low-income.

What types of support would be most beneficial for your organisation to improve employment outcomes and reach more individuals?

The survey also asked organisations what types of support would be most beneficial for them to be able to improve employment outcomes and reach more individuals. Five broad themes emerged from their answers, which partly mirrored the challenges that they faced: funding to sustain and expand their work; partnerships with employers, the DWP and other services; education and training; awareness; and employment support for people who are in work but are on a low-income or who are under-employed.

Funding to sustain and expand their work

The joint most common support that organisations need is funding to sustain and expand their employment support offer, with 8 organisations mentioning this need, mirroring the challenges that organisations face finding and securing funding.

Some respondents detailed why they needed funding in their answers. The most common reason was to fund employment opportunities and increase staff capacity, with 4 organisations mentioning this. One organisation wanted to be able to employ their volunteers and clients, while another wanted to fund

"[We need] More staff capacity to develop a strategy and plan and deliver employability support(with staff / volunteers). We don't have a specific programme for this, it just happens as part of our holistic support offer. We would like to do more!"

> **"[We want funding that is] not tied to targets for getting into work – more flexible and tied to sustained employment and advice for employers in maintaining reasonable adjustments and supporting disabled employees"**

apprenticeship opportunities. One organisation wanted funding for a specialist worker, while another wanted to generally increase staff capacity so that they can develop a strategy and offer more.

Another organisation wanted financial grants to be able to keep stocked with tools and equipment, while another wanted to see a different approach to funding, one that prioritises sustained employment.

Partnerships and engagement with employers, the DWP and other services

The other most common need that organisations had, in order to improve their employment support offer, were partnerships, with 8 organisations mentioning this in their responses.

5 organisations specifically wanted to develop partnerships and relationships with employers, both local and national, and in relevant sectors, who could hire the people that access their services. One organisation wanted to see employers who are 'truly Disability Confident'. One organisation wanted support from the DWP to run employment fairs, while another wanted career advisors to come in and run career surgeries. One organisation wanted more knowledge of what services to connect with.

Education and training

The second most common support that organisations wanted in order to improve employment support was education and training, with 6 responses mentioning this. 2 responses mentioned the need for education and training that is flexible and inclusive, such as informal ESOL classes for people who are busy or aren't eligible for certain courses (such as new refugees); this is also present in another response that says the people they work with need 'confidence around accessing education/training'. One organisation wanted training for staff on how to support people into employment within their role, while another respondent wanted courses for their beneficiaries on how to apply for jobs.

Increased awareness

2 organisations wanted increased awareness of the employment support they provide, with one respondent wanting more referrals from residents who are in in-work poverty, and another wanting more awareness of their services amongst 'disadvantaged communities and individuals'.

Employment support for under-employed/low-income employed people

One organisation stated that barriers to better employment need to be removed, such as financial support for driving lessons.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the context of uneven economic growth in Manchester, unemployment and under-employment are challenges facing many people in the city, with multiple circumstances in individual's lives and systemic inequalities converging to present barriers to finding and staying in good employment.

The VCSE sector plays an important role in providing support for people looking for work, characterized by a holistic, whole-person approach that aims to address the wider barriers to work that individuals may face. This report aims to explore the types of employment support VCSE organisations in Manchester provide, what challenges they face in providing employment support and where additional support is needed, and what the gaps are in provision to specific communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- **While VCSEs providing employment support in Manchester were shown to serve a wide range of different groups, children and young people, disabled people, and refugees, asylum seekers and migrants were some of the most common beneficiary groups, reflecting some of the groups that face the most barriers to finding and staying in employment.**
- **After employment support and education, the main area of activity for VCSEs was health and wellbeing, followed by housing support, advice, and food support. There is a three-way relationship between work, poverty and health, with good employment bringing better economic and social outcomes and therefore better health outcomes, and poor health making it harder for people to participate in the labour market.**
- **VCSEs consider the link between work, poverty, health alongside other life circumstances in their delivery, providing direct employment support activities such as skills development and CV writing alongside 'wrap around support' like digital access and building up people's economic wellbeing skills.**
- **VCSEs also aim to address systemic barriers such as challenging recruitment processes and individual's ability to stay in work through activities such as working with and training employers on topics such as reasonable adjustments, and continuing to provide support once individuals are in work, considering that the wider barriers to employment that people face do not disappear once they are in a job.**
- **Funding was the most common challenge that VCSEs face, particularly longer-term funding, and organisations needed funding to both sustain and expand their employment support offer.**
- **Education and training was another key challenge and need for VCSEs to better support the people they work with, particularly opportunities which are flexible and inclusive for adult learners who are busy, ineligible for other opportunities, or lack confidence to engage.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Fund VCSE organisations providing employment support over the long term

Funders should fund VCSE organisations providing employment support. These organisations reach a wide range of people who may not be able to or want to access statutory services, filling a gap in provision, and should be funded accordingly. Funding should be longer-term, allowing organisations to meaningfully support individuals, and funders should also take a longer-term view when it comes to targets - measuring the sustainability of employment and development of 'work-ready' skills rather than strict targets for the amount of people who have gained employment.

Partnership working between VCSE organisations, employers and statutory services

Statutory services and employers should work in partnership with VCSE organisations, recognising them as key providers of employment support, and be open to learning from their experiences of supporting people into employment. For example, an employer may change their recruitment processes to be more accessible after listening to feedback from a VCSE organisation. This approach is in line with the Live Well model of service delivery that is being adopted across Greater Manchester, which brings together services such as employment support and health at a local level, working with the VCSE sector on this. The Economic Inactivity Trailblazer takes a prevention-focused approach to supporting people who are not in work.

Address wider barriers to employment

Many of the challenges which VCSEs face in supporting people into employment stem from systemic barriers that marginalised groups face. These root causes of unemployment and under-employment should be addressed. Existing work from VCSE groups and people with lived experience should inform policy changes, such as the Disability Employment Charter and research from groups such as the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit.

Manchester Community Central

Voluntary, community and social enterprise sector

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