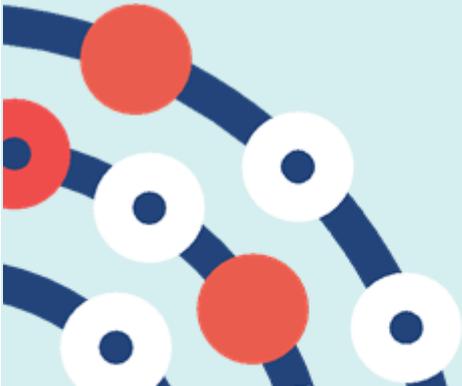




# Understanding experiences of employment and skills support in Surrey

A qualitative study exploring experiences of people who are unemployed and seeking work, or employed in insecure or low-paid roles and aiming for improved conditions

## Summary report



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## Understanding experiences of employment and skills support in Surrey

Employment and skills support plays **a vital role in reducing poverty, improving health, and strengthening economic resilience**. This research explores how Surrey residents on low incomes, whether unemployed or in insecure, low paid work, experience local employment and skills services.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups with Surrey residents and employment advisors, the study provides insight into **what is working well, what barriers persist, and how services could more effectively support residents into secure, sustainable and meaningful work**.

Although Surrey is widely seen as an affluent county, many residents experience considerable financial hardship. High and rising living costs, insecure and low -paid work, limited opportunities for progression, and gaps in accessible training create barriers to employment stability. National welfare reforms and the growing reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven recruitment tools are reshaping the job-seeking landscape and creating additional hurdles.

Within this context, **employment support has the potential to be transformative**, provided it is trusted, easy to access, flexible, and meaningfully aligned with people's day-to-day realities.

### 1. Research aims

This research sought to understand how well local services are meeting the needs of people on low incomes who are unemployed or seeking improved employment conditions. The three research aims were:

1. How do Surrey residents on low incomes who are looking for work or better working conditions hear about employment and skills services, and what are their first impressions of these services?

2. How are employment and skills services experienced by residents on low incomes (including the content and format of support)?

3. What recommendations do residents have for improving local employment and skills support services?

## 2. Methodology

This study examined how effectively employment and skills services in two areas of Surrey (Epsom and Leatherhead) support people on low incomes who engage with Good Company services. It focused on **individuals who are unemployed and seeking work or who are in low-paid, insecure roles and want better pay, permanent contracts, or more hours**. People unable to work due to long-term health conditions were outside the scope.

A **qualitative, two-stage research design** was used, combining:

- Desk research: providing a light-touch review of national and local evidence on employment, in-work poverty, and existing support offers; with,
- In-depth interviews and focus groups: eleven in-depth interviews exploring individual experiences of employment and support services, followed by two focus groups that brought together participants with lived experience and employment advisors. Focus groups used anonymised case studies and journey mapping to generate ideas for improving service accessibility and engagement. Fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2025.



**Ethical approval** was secured through the HDRC Surrey Research Ethics Review process due to the sensitive nature of the topics and the involvement of vulnerable populations.

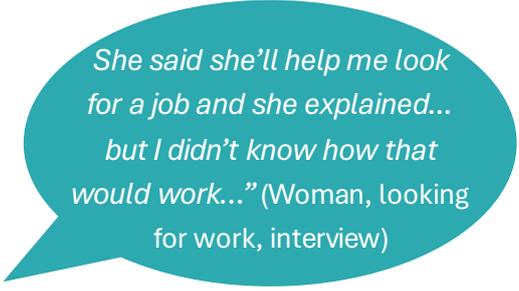
**Public involvement** was central to the approach. HDRC Surrey runs two Public Involvement Panels, made up of residents with lived experience of health inequalities, who contribute directly to shaping the programme's research activities. Two engagement sessions with the East Surrey Public Involvement Panel (August and October 2025) helped shape the study design, identify key barriers to employment support (such as stigma, lack of qualifications, and low trust in services), and refine the focus group structure.

A **thematic analysis** approach was used across both research stages to identify key patterns and insights.

### 3. Key findings

- **Awareness of employment support is low.**

Many participants first encountered services through voluntary and community organisations rather than being signposted by the Jobcentre Plus (JCP). Clarity about what each service offers, alongside stronger online visibility, would help residents identify and access support earlier and with greater confidence.



*She said she'll help me look for a job and she explained... but I didn't know how that would work..." (Woman, looking for work, interview)*

- **Experiences with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) were generally negative and impacted engagement with other employment support services.**

Several participants described receiving limited or inconsistent guidance, and some felt that their health conditions or personal circumstances were not fully understood. A few reported feeling pressured rather than supported. These experiences not only affected their trust and engagement with JCP services but also shaped how they approached other employment support initially, with some feeling cautious or sceptical until trust was established. As a result, many participants ultimately relied more on community-based employment services, which they felt better met their needs.

- **Most participants were receptive to employment support and valued the format and content of the advice.**

Participants typically received in-person support, which helped build a relationship with their advisor, and valued support that was tailored to their career goals. Advice sessions were often held in public spaces, like cafes, and some participants were concerned about the confidentiality of these locations. Some also thought that the sequencing of support could feel rigid (in that topics were covered in a set order, rather than which topic might be most useful for them at any one time).

- **Training access emerged as an area for development.**

Participants expressed interest in courses such as English language courses, digital skills training, GCSE equivalents, or sector-specific qualifications. For some, these gaps directly prevented progression into work. Broader availability or funding for these opportunities would help people progress and participate more fully in the job market, particularly where digital skills are increasingly important.



*Main thing is if I can find any English course... then I can <build> confidence, and do interviews better. (Woman, working on a zero- hours contract and looking for better paid work. interview)*

- **Participants consistently emphasised the importance of tailored, person-centred support.**

They valued employment advice that aligned with their skills, aspirations, and personal circumstances (including health conditions, caring responsibilities, digital skills, ability to travel, and confidence levels).



Feeling genuinely listened to was a critical factor in

their engagement and trust. Some participants with experience of the JCP felt that the support offered by work coaches there was not tailored to their individual circumstances, and that coaches did not take the time to understand their needs. One area that was thought could be stronger was advisors providing information about in-work adjustments to people with long-term health conditions or disabilities.

- **Ongoing encouragement and continuity mattered for engagement.** Participants wanted to feel they were making progress and appreciated regular encouragement from advisors.



Employment advisors emphasised that ongoing encouragement and

consistent communication were crucial to maintaining engagement, yet service continuity could be disrupted when advisors changed roles, leaving some participants reluctant to “start again” with someone new.

- **Stronger links with local employers might lead to better outcomes for people seeking work.** Participants wanted employment advisors to build closer connections with local employers, so that they can more effectively match people to local opportunities and help secure useful feedback after unsuccessful applications.

## 4. Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that in Epsom and Leatherhead the employment and skills support offer is helpful for many residents, particularly where advisors provide personalised support. Where support worked well, its strengths lie in the quality of relationships built with clients through empathy, encouragement, and tailored guidance.

The research also identifies several areas where the offer could be strengthened, including **increasing awareness of available support**, **expanding access to relevant training**, **improving continuity when advisors change**, and **developing stronger partnerships with local employers**. These factors represent practical levers for enhancing how employment support is delivered and accessed across the county.

By addressing these areas, Surrey has the potential to improve employment pathways, better support residents' financial stability, and contribute to reducing the inequalities that influence health and wellbeing locally.

## 5. Recommendations

Drawing on the key findings from this research, the six recommendations below highlight opportunities to strengthen local employment and skills support and address the barriers identified by participants.

1. Raise awareness of employment support services through increased and more diverse advertising formats and mediums.
2. Strengthen the Jobcentre Plus (JCP)'s signposting to employment support.
3. Improve the format of employment support by – delivery in a range of ways, and awareness of confidential meeting locations.
4. Improve the content of employment support by – better training opportunities, (including digital skills) and information about employer adjustments in the workplace.
5. Improve advisor handover processes to maintain continuity of support.
6. Enhance collaboration between employment services and local employers.

## Acknowledgements

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