Evaluation Report

2022

This-Ability Evaluation Report

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Introduction to the This-Ability Programme

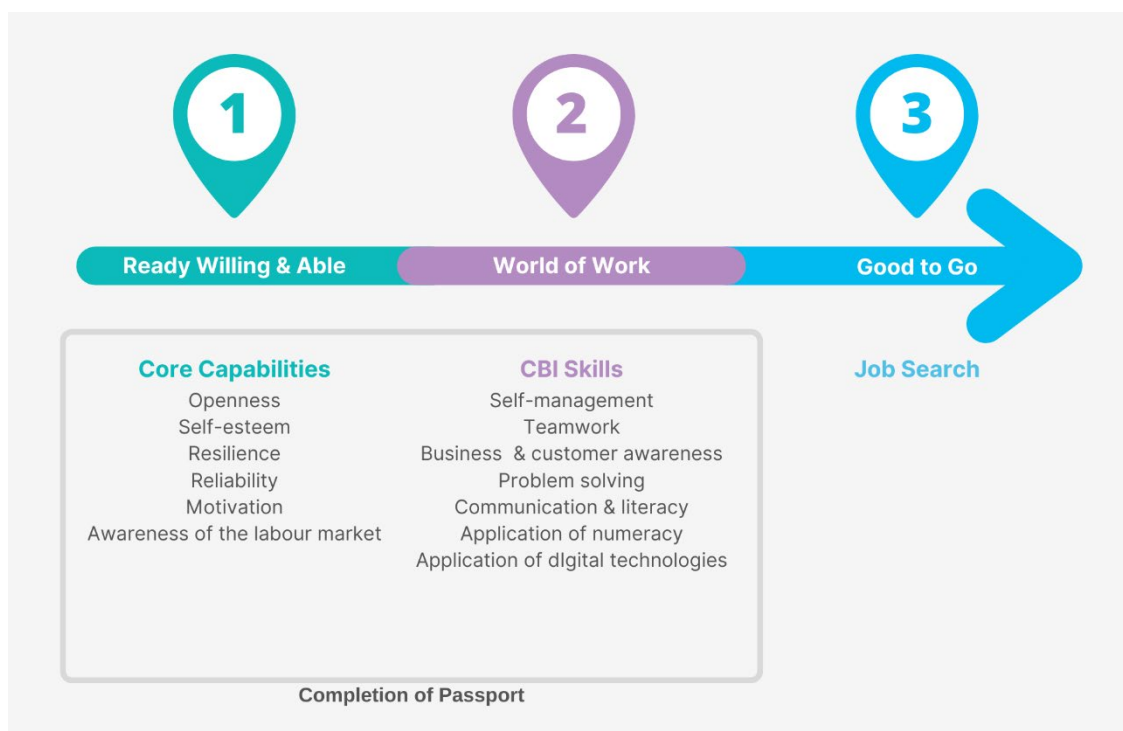<div style="text-align: right">1</div>

1.1. Programme beginnings and objectives

Beginning in 2019, This-Ability is a four-year programme led by the Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. It has been extended by a year (until December 2023) to allow for the challenges caused by the pandemic, although with no additional funding. Covering Hull and East Riding, the programme aims to provide specialist support and training for young people aged between 18 – 29 with a disability, learning disability/difficulty, long term health condition or mental health condition, to gain employment.

This-Ability was born out of the successes of the original five-year national Talent Match programme funded by the National Lottery (2014 – 2018) and developed through coproduction with young people with learning disabilities; the group identified as requiring the most support to find and sustain employment when delivering Talent Match. A key principle of This-Ability centres on changing employer perceptions of disabilities and employing people with disabilities.

1.2. Routes through the programme

There are three different routes through the This-Ability programme. The standard programme has three core components: 1) Ready, Willing and Able, 2) the World of Work, and 3) Good to Go. Firstly, This-Ability staff work with young people on developing and instilling the six core capabilities to ensure they are ready, willing and able to move onto the next stage. This part of the programme is largely classroom based but includes: outdoor team building; problem solving activities; and labour market awareness.

Completion of Passport

Next, young people move onto the World of Work, to gain sector specific employability skills with one of the This-Ability partners (known as providers). Some young people are also able to undertake work experience with the four providers focusing on different sectors across Hull: health and social care (and related jobs), the creative and digital sector, the sports sector, and retail, catering and hospitality. The following outlines the This-Ability partner organisations and their offers:

- **Goodwin Development Trust**: creative and digital sector, including animation, film, tv, radio, libraries and museums.

- **Hull FC Community Foundation:** the sports sector, including retail, coaching, community engagement and customer service.

- **Hull Kingston Rovers Community Trust**: stadium related offer of warehousing, retail, catering and hospitality and stadium management.

- **Working for Health**: health sector, including care and support, health services and wider NHS sector jobs, including retail, cleaning, logistics. Young people undertake up to 15 Care Standards via this route.

Whilst gaining sector specific employability skills and experience, young people are supported to demonstrate how they meet the criteria for the seven Confederation of British Industries (CBI) skills *(see appendix 1)*, evidenced in an *Employability Passport.* Employers in the Humber region regard the CBI skills as essential for employees. Co-production with young people informed the development of the employability passport around which the entire This-Ability programme is built. The passport is a physical document that belongs to the young people as they work through the three stages of the programme, showing through tangible examples how they have gained core capabilities and employability skills and experience. Pictorial evidence and narratives reaffirm skills, and the passport is intended as a tool for young people with disabilities, reminding them of their skills, experience, achievements and can be used in workplace scenarios such as interviews to help them to better articulate their skills and needs, including reasonable adjustments.

Stage Three, a variation from the earlier Talent Match programme, focuses on the Job Club working closely with each young person to ensure they are supported into

employment. Activities include job search, writing / amending CVs and or covering letters, completing job applications, developing interview skills and techniques and so on.

The second route is as the standard model, but the partner providers deliver all the components, including the core capabilities. In the third route participants do not complete the first two stages but go straight to job search.

	Core Capabilities	CBI Skills	Job Search
Route 1 (standard model)	This-Ability Classroom	Provider	Provider or Job Club
Route 2 (with provider)	Provider	Provider	Provider or Job Club
Route 3 (jobsearch)	n/a	n/a	Job Club

1.3. Making Our Business Yours (MOBY)

In some cases, individuals receive support from Making Our Business Yours (MOBY), which works with local employers to create roles exclusively for those on the This-Ability programme. Both the employer and potential employees (via This-Ability) are supported through an accessible recruitment process and when an individual is selected, a dedicated MOBY Mentor provides support to ensure that the young person is adequately trained (for example, using systematic instruction to simplify tasks) and the employer has made reasonable adjustments, is knowledgeable and better equipped and more confident taking on a young person with a disability.

Evaluation aims

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With co-production at the heart of this evaluation, the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) worked closely with the HLC staff leading the This-Ability programme and the young people on the programme to evaluate the This-Ability model (outlined above) to determine the following:

- The referral routes into the programme.

- The impact of the pandemic on young people and on their learning.

- The challenges faced by young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long term health conditions or mental health conditions, when:
  - accessing learning
  - seeking and / or securing employment

- The type of support provided; what worked and what might be changed.

- Whether the intended benefits of the passport were realised.

- Whether young people were able to influence delivery of, and changes to, the programme.

- The impact of the This-Ability programme on:
  - young people on the programme
  - employers

Methodology

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Based on a commitment to developing the skills of the individuals involved in the programme and building organisational (HLC's) capacity, CRESR provided Peer Researcher (qualitative) Training to young people on This-Ability and This-Ability staff in December 2019 and refresher training in June 2021 prior to commencing the research. Qualitative research methods (i.e., semi-structured qualitative interviews) were best suited to gaining an in-depth understanding of the views and experiences of the various stakeholders of the programme, ranging from the young people on the programme to those delivering it.

3.1.   Peer Researcher Training

The table below outlines the content of the peer researcher training.

Session	Content
Session 1	Introduction to the evaluation; about the peer researcher role; what is qualitative research; key interviewing skills; effective listening skills.
Session 2	Ethical considerations, including gaining informed consent; researcher safety and wellbeing; introducing the interview; the research fieldwork pack; using the topic guide; arranging the interview.
Session 3	Refresher training on the key topics covered in session 1 and 2 (above).
Research began	
Session 4	Debrief and analysis: Peer researchers reflected on their experiences of conducting the interviews, discussing any issues which emerged in the field. Thematic analysis: analysis of interview transcripts and identifying themes for the report.

In the event, only one/two interviews were conducted by young people on This-Ability due to difficulties in arranging remote interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, as learners were reluctant to commit to interview dates. There was also a change to a more 'drop-in' based approach to arranging and conducting interviews, with most interviews conducted by This-Ability staff, some at short notice. It proved difficult to take peer researchers along, for example due to peer researchers shielding, being unavailable due to work /volunteering commitments or poor transport links from rural locations. In total, thirty-one qualitative interviews were undertaken with representatives from the following groups:

- Young people on the This-Ability programme (n=16).

- This-Ability Mentors (n=7). Four mentors were interviewed in all, but three of them were interviewed twice to gain additional insights on specific cases during the course of the research.

- This-Ability Managers (n=3).

- This-Ability Providers (n=4).

- This-Ability Employers (n=4).

3.2. Methodological challenges

The unforeseen and unprecedented *world-wide pandemic changed day-to-day life, including working practises* suddenly, and inevitably impacted on the research and evaluation activities. National lockdowns prevented the interviews from happening face-to-face as planned; instead, these were done virtually, but this medium for communication introduced many challenges.

Firstly, not all young people had access to the technology to participate in interviews virtually, and some of those who did only had standard broadband, causing slow internet connection, particularly for those living in rural areas. Others who were able to do interviews via Zoom using mobile phones were left with little or no data allowance after their involvement in only short (30 minute) interviews due to the Zoom method utilising a large amount of bandwidth.

Technical difficulties prevented rapport being built between the interviewers and young people – especially important for gaining in-depth information considering the disabilities and learning difficulties of those interviewed. The use of virtual platforms created a distance; an extra barrier to communication which affected interviewer ease, and presumably the comfort of those interviewed.

When attempting to arrange interviews, interviewers found that young people were reluctant to participate as they were unsure about how to use Zoom. Some of them would not commit a date and time for interview possibly due to their uncertainty using the virtual platform. However, prior to lockdown young people eagerly spoke to staff (including those involved in the evaluation) in their learning / work experience environments. Underpinning this interaction were relationships based on familiarity and trust.

Prior to provision reverting to face-to-face in classrooms, providers and mentors were relied on to explain the evaluation and recruit young people for interviews, but without doing the recruitment themselves, interviewers were uncertain whether the evaluation was being explained correctly and if young people were given the reassurances they needed to put them at ease, leading to participation.

As lockdown restrictions eased, the new cohorts of young people who had joined This-Ability only knew their mentors / providers (virtually) and had not met the interviewers before – something that would have happened pre-pandemic when accessing classrooms for face-to-face provision. Building trust with the young people and increasing familiarity was necessary to gain their participation in a process involving signing a consent form and answering questions about their personal experiences. The main researcher who conducted the bulk of the interviews dropped into classroom sessions so that the young people could familiarise themselves with her prior to committing to an interview.

3.3. Adaptation of research tools

In response to the needs of young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long term health conditions or mental health condition, the research tools were simplified to prevent overwhelming and or worrying them with too much information which was difficult to make sense of. A *pictorial consent form (see appendix 2),* for example, was created using large font size for people with visual impairments and simple images conveyed what young people were consenting to. This form was produced in consultation with CRESR ethics leads and approved for compliance with the university's ethics guidelines.

Careful attention was paid to ensuring that the topic guide used with young people was easy to understand and not lengthy – no more than eight questions were asked during interviews. The interviews with young people were intended to last between 30 – 45 minutes, but in the event lasted no longer than 20 – 30 minutes. Interviews with other stakeholders lasted longer.

3.4. The analysis of interviews

Consistent with the principles of co-production, a peer researcher interested in gaining skills in qualitative data analysis was provided training by CRESR so that they could contribute to the process of analysis and report writing. The principles of thematic analysis and how to conduct it by identifying, analysing, and interpreting themes in the qualitative data (transcribed verbatim) were explored together, with opportunities for hands - on practice using the data set.

Of importance, wherever possible in this report, the voices of young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long term health conditions or mental health conditions, are presented as verbatim quotes to convey their experiences and views in their own words – voices that are rarely heard in social research and society more generally.

Of note the terms 'young people', 'participants' and 'learners' are used interchangeably throughout this report when referring to those individuals previously or currently on the This-Ability programme. Pseudonyms are used for all the young people referred to in the report to bring to life their experiences, making the report more accessible.

The following labels are used in the report when referring to the various people participating in the research:

- Those managing/leading the This-Ability programme = Manager 1, 2, 3.
- Provider organisations = Provider 1, 2, 3, 4.
- This-Ability Mentors = Mentor 1, 2, 3, 4.
- Employers of young people from the This-Ability programme = Employer 1, 2, 3, 4.

Next, the 'findings' from the research are presented below in chapters 4 – 11.

Referral routes into the This-Ability programme

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Interviews with the This-Ability employees revealed that initial recruitment of young people onto the programme was slow, particularly as the strong links that were necessary with potential referral agencies such as the Jobcentre Plus (JCP) required time to build. Nevertheless, progress was made on working closely with the JCP's dedicated Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs). This-Ability staff attended case conferencing meetings with the DEAs at the Job Centre on a weekly basis to discuss individual cases as potential referrals to the programme. Some headway was made in recruiting young people to This-Ability, but the programme had begun during a time of flux; when the local JCP (Hull) was undergoing extensive restructuring (resulting in loss of DEA roles, later restored), followed by the country going into lockdown due to the pandemic. This point was emphasised in the following account:

> *Like with any new project that starts up, you need a couple of really good referral points and them to really understand your project and we didn't have that initially. I think we just started to get that when we went into lockdown and then all JCP, DWP [staff] started working from home (Manager 1).*

A marked difference in recruitment resulting from opening a Youth Hub (Hull) on the same premises as This-Ability was reported in several accounts. Based on the concept of a one-stop shop under one roof, and partnership work with JCPs, charities and so on, Youth Hubs provide people aged 16-29 specialist employment focused work coaches, key workers (for housing, debt management support), and mental health therapists. This-Ability benefited from direct referrals from the Youth Hub onto the programme, where young people could simply move (sometimes accompanied by a Youth Hub worker) from one part of the building into another to access the programme. The effectiveness of this referral system was recognised particularly in light of the low confidence of some young people, and or, their difficulty navigating places which could result in them missing appointments or not turning up at all. Co-location with the Youth Hub largely addressed the problem summarised in the following narrative:

> *The amount of people that we must lose that the job centre have referred cos they don't ever turn up, but when they're in our building it's so much easier because the guys from the youth hub just walk them down (Manager 1).*

Further, co-location created more opportunities for young people accessing the Youth Hub to have informal conversations with, and to familiarise themselves with the This-Ability team prior to commencing the programme. Conceivably, this relationship building in an environment familiar to the young person provided them with comfort and reassurance before embarking on the This-Ability programme. In instances where the This-Ability team struggled to contact any new referrals to the programme, an informal chat with staff at the Youth Hub facilitated access to individuals swiftly. The following comment conveys this:

The youth hub team are in front of the building so if we need to talk to the youth hub team we can just pop through and chat to them. That's worked really well, we've got a really good relationship with them now to get referrals in. If we've got problems, if they give us a referral and we can't get through we talk to the youth hub team and they'll go we'll get them in for you, we'll bring them straight through to you, so that's worked really well (Manager 2).

Albeit gradual, both JCPs (Hull and East Riding) were described as having grasped what the This-Ability programme was about, consequently referring more young people to the programme than they did previously. Importantly, the referrals were more 'appropriate' demonstrating a better understanding of the programme.

This-Ability Mentors reiterated the increased referrals to the programme and the closeness of their working relationships with both the JCP and Youth Hub. Many of the young people accessing these agencies had complex support needs and were ideal prospective participants for This-Ability. The following comments relay these views:

We've got a really close relationship with the Job Centres now and the Youth Hubs and we seem to be getting a lot of referrals (Mentor 2).

We've got a lot since we've been working with the Youth Hub…they're part of the Job Centre and we've been working quite closely with them cos they're getting a lot of people that have quite high support needs and usually that's people that would fit into our programme (Mentor 2).

Young people reported finding out about the programme through the People's Awareness of Disability Discrimination (PADD) group, via Work-Link, and a local college, however, the two main sources for referral into This-Ability were the Youth Hub or JCP. These places were accessed when signing on for benefits, seeking support from JCP Work Coaches, and or receiving specialist employment support from the Youth Hub – a couple of examples evidence this:

I came to find out about the course through the Job Centre, I used to work for a family business which sadly closed so I had to start signing on due to the business closing. I've been signing on for nearly three years now and about two months [ago] they told me about this building and this course which got me interested to try and help me get back into work (Brendan).

I got into it through Job Centre, so was on universal credit…they put me through to This- Ability first which then put me through to Goodwin (David).

Conversely, providers (at Stage Two of the programme) such as Goodwin, also acted as a referral mechanism for This-Ability, due to the partnership between the providers and This-Ability. However, as a community development organisation, during recruitment events, Goodwin's aim was to inform individuals about the provision that was best aligned to individuals' interests and was likely to have the best outcomes for them. This was stressed in the following account:

When people call up looking for support and they'll explain a little bit about their position and if they seem eligible off that phone call or if it seems as though they'll benefit from it then I'll suggest This-Ability knowing that they could eventually end up with us but again I'm just really, having been on similar kinds of projects as I was growing up and having you know being on Job Seekers and they'll send you to employability course after employability course it just really matters to me that once people have a fully informed decision on what they are stepping into and it matters to me that we do our best to make sure that people aren't churned through

you know these institutions where they are having to go from place to place (Provider 3).

Anticipated referrals of young people to the programme from local colleges did not come to fruition, initially, due to the This-Ability programme being too in its infancy to take on young people, and by the second year when the programme was ready to admit young people, the country went into lockdown, significantly impacting on how and what the programme could deliver. In both situations, a potentially large number of referrals did not occur due to the timings for programme delivery, largely coupled with circumstances beyond the control of This-Ability staff:

As we were winding down Talent Match and setting up This-Ability, we'd been talking to some of the local colleges…and we expected that we'd get lots of people coming off supported internships from local colleges, they were chomping at the bit, but at the beginning of the year when they're looking at where are their young people going to be going…we weren't quite there at that point in the first year to take those people on so we missed that point where we could have got a lot of referrals. Again, coming round to the second year, that time of year was when we went into lockdown so all those referrals that we thought we'd be flooded...then it just didn't happen, it was all about timing really (Manager 2).

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Undoubtedly the world-wide pandemic and the succession of lockdowns that followed its onset had an impact on This-Ability learners in terms of their motivation, concerns, and most significantly, on their mental health. This-Ability staff and partner providers recognised the potential impact of these periods of isolation on learners and in some cases the negative impact warranted temporarily withdrawing learners from provision to focus on supporting their wellbeing instead:

> *...Mental health-wise it's impacted quite significantly a lot of the learners and how we approach things and our motivation and our worries and our management of anxiety and being shut away on our own, but taking that away, there's a couple of people, we've had to press pause for a couple of people... let's try and support you well-being wise and then get you re-engaged (Provider 1).*

The welfare of learners was placed at the forefront of the programme during the pandemic, for instance, the delivery of food parcels to individuals' homes not only ensured that they had food during a time when people were panic buying, but, most importantly, the face-to-face contact allowed the This-Ability team to see if their learners were okay. Around this time, they created Covid Champions to support other young people struggling with anxiety directly related to Covid-19 and the lockdown. A This-Ability Manager relayed their response to the unprecedented events:

> *That was a key for us, that we could physically go and see somebody, have that chat with them to make sure they was alright, so that's what we did and we implemented food parcels straight away and then we looked at adapting delivery online to engage our young people online. The focus wasn't really about learning as such, it was about that one-to-one mentoring to make sure they was alright. From there we created what we called our Covid champions, so it was a group of young people that was very anxious about Covid, or really understood Covid and could share their experiences with other young people to almost alleviate the fear factor that was out there about Covid (Manager 1).*

Initial contact with learners during lockdown took the form of pastoral phone calls. As it became apparent that the lockdown would be measured in months, not weeks, the move was made towards online delivery so that learning could continue. A new online teaching platform was developed, and teaching resources adapted for online use.

The enrolment process was also adapted. The eligibility criterion regarding length of unemployment was reduced from six months to no minimum, to enable the project to help those young people that had lost employment due to the pandemic. Enrolment forms were also changed to utilise an online system that could be completed and signed by learners remotely.

The move online presented extra barriers for **digitally excluded** young people. Some learners did not have their own email addresses to complete the enrolment process, or in some cases internet access as recounted by Manager 2:

> *I remember one [learner] particularly in a hostel, the only contact we could get with him was through his key worker or on the communal phone in the hostel. We did manage to sign him up eventually, but he didn't really stick with it, but it was a huge issue for a while (Manager 2).*

The programme responded by taking steps to ensure young people would be able to participate, for example, by providing technology and online access to provision. This allowed continuation in learning and addressed potential isolation – a point relayed by Manager 1:

> *So, we provided tablets for young people to enable them to go online, we provided data for young people so they could go online, so they wasn't isolated (Manager 1).*

In other cases, young people were reluctant to engage with online learning, either due to unreliable internet access or a perception that it would be "*weird*", perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the technology and/or this method of communication. The narratives communicated that the pandemic introduced an entirely different way of learning, far removed from the preferred face-to-face scenarios that learners were accustomed to:

Interviewer (I):	*When you first started would you have had access to Zoom, or was that something you had to sort out a bit later?*
Respondent (R):	*I didn't initially have access to Zoom because I didn't, well I didn't have it, I just didn't think I needed it then I got asked to have, I got told we're going to do Zoom calls and this will actually help you and I'm like okay.*
I:	*Were you not keen on the idea?*
R:	*It's not that I'm not keen, for me it's better than having a phone call, especially now because sometimes data or phone signal can be exceedingly dodgy where I live so I do prefer it to phone calls, but I'd rather have neither, I'd just prefer face to face (David).*

> *I got involved with This-Ability...but it was during Covid, so it was quite weird cos everything was over Zoom and I started coming in after new year, February or something (Poppy).*

> *You know this thing you were saying about when the pandemic started and everything, obviously cos all that's now been and gone, I never experienced a thing of having to do it all online so by the time I started it was already going back to doing it in here which is good because I like doing things face to face, I don't like the idea of doing things remotely (Thomas).*

Even where young people were engaging with the online learning, Provider 1 described challenges where young people were in some instances unwilling or unable to turn their cameras on or had difficulty viewing learning resources. It became increasingly difficult for providers to create a sense of group connectedness when delivering content online:

The one thing I would highlight is some people, their reluctance to put their cameras on means that sometimes when we've delivered things online and you're delivering to a lot of black screens with names in the middle it's hard work and it's hard to feel as a group if you can see some people and not see some people. There were some people who didn't have web cams and have got their phone but if you've got a little phone and you're looking at a presentation screen sharing... (Provider 1).

As the lockdowns ended and the world started opening up again, Provider 2 identified that the young people exhibited mixed feelings about returning to face-to-face learning; in some cases, continued anxiety about the virus but also consolation in some semblance of normality due to getting out and about again and socialising with people:

Once we've come back to face-to-face learning there was some anxiety there because of the impacts that Covid had had but there was also a bit of relief because they were back out and they could see faces again, mix, socialise, even though the surroundings was a bit different (Provider 2).

This was corroborated in an account from Leon, speaking about returning to the classroom after lockdown. In his situation, the restrictions of lockdown had minimal impact on him, but it was the fear of returning to the public sphere and contracting the virus that concerned him the most. Nevertheless, the following extract reveals that This-Ability staff provided him with the choice of learning remotely or face-to-face, and the latter option that he took calmed his worries due to the strict observation of social distancing in the classroom:

No, the lockdown didn't really affect me, not as much, I thought it would but it wasn't, but when they started opening stuff that's when it got me, I thought why's everything opening for, that's when it hit me, why do they want me in with this coronavirus in case anybody has it, I thought why are they letting me in, cos I didn't have my two jabs then. [Mentor 1] said you don't have to come in, we could do it through Zoom it's entirely up to you, you're an adult, it's your responsibility, I said I'll come in, see what I was like and he pulled me to a side and said what do you think to it, to me we're all spaced out, I said it's all perfect here, I can't fault you and ever since I've stayed (Leon).

Provider 1 expressed concerns that, apart from anxiety about returning to face-to-face learning, young people had possibly got too comfortable in 'the digital world', and required encouragement and support to make the transition back to the 'real world', she commented:

My concern with it is on the flip side of that, are people too used to, now, the digital world, it's really easy to get out of bed and roll to your computer… but then there's got to be that time when you think is this the right form for you and do you need to just step outside the comfort zone and decide that you're going to come in. So, I think what it is is, has being able to do everything from your bedroom made that too easy and then when it's coming to life opening up again, we need to make sure that we're offering the right blend but also encouraging and supporting people to do things differently, because yes there are jobs where you can, like mine at the moment, work on Zoom largely, but we've got to get out and about in the real world at some point (Provider 1).

Despite these challenges, the experiences of online provision demonstrated that **face-to-face learning was the best option** for learners on the programme. Firstly, **the importance of establishing a daily routine** in preparation for each day was identified as vital for young people on a programme aimed at getting them work ready, and secondly, accessing learning outside their homes corresponded with employment scenarios, the majority of which would be outside the home. The testimonies of those closest to the programme with in-depth understanding of what worked / did not work for the learners, reiterated this point:

> *I think as well in practical terms we're trying to get young people ready to go to work so if you look really coldly maybe at the sorts of jobs that young people are likely to go into, it's not going to be for the most part jobs that you can do from home. We do have a couple who are actually in work and working from home, but that's not going to be the majority so we've got to get them in the routine and the habit of you get up, you get showered, you get dressed, you go into the classroom and you're there and then you go home and that's what you'll be doing when you're at work (Manager 2).*

> *We've gone back to all delivery face to face, online delivery served its purpose but face to face delivery is ultimately the way forward especially for the young people we work with (Manager 1).*

This-Ability Manager 1 went on to explain that a lot of their work with employers for example, involved physically demonstrating concepts (such as simplifying tasks for those with learning disabilities) that were difficult to do virtually – "*we do TSI [Training in Systematic Instruction] training for a start, you can't do that over Zoom*". Face-to-face interaction was necessary to show employers how they might break down tasks to accommodate the needs of young people on the programme when they entered employment.

As the world continued to open post-lockdown, This-Ability continued to identify gaps in provision and adapt the programme to meets the needs of the learners, for example taking on more staff to support the job search and employer engagement element at the end of the programme:

> *We just plodded along with the upskilling of businesses, making them more disability aware but when we started to come out of lockdown and the employment market changed, we realised it wasn't enough for me to just do that. So, we recruited a team... (Manager 3).*

The This-Ability Job Club supports young people by providing support with job search, CV writing and interview skills. During lockdown, learners were not introduced to the job search element until nearing the end of their programme, and this was identified as detrimental to success, so provision was again adapted to ensure learners were able to build relationships and trust with the whole team:

> *We identified a couple of months ago that there were gaps in our programme and that had come from lockdown. What happened was we had the core capabilities there at the beginning that were just working with their learners, they didn't get to meet us, they got an idea of what 'good to go' was but they didn't get to see the bigger picture… So, we've made sure that good to go MOBY is embedded into every element of the project (Manager 3).*

Manager 2 also described how the Job Club element was supporting learners who had lost their jobs at the beginning of the first lockdown; two of them had been furloughed and several young people lost their jobs after only being in work for a short period. This-Ability supported those young people when the Job Club opened up after lockdown, explaining, "*so we continued that support there as well to get them back into work because we always said if one job doesn't work out, we'll help you find another*" (Manager 2).

On a positive note, the changes in the job market due to Brexit and the pandemic led to employers being more receptive to working with the This-Ability programme due to the difficulties they were experiencing in recruiting staff. The appeal of an employee being matched to a particular job role and supported by This-Ability staff on the job encouraged employers to provide young people with opportunities, as the following account highlighted:

> *They have to look harder to find members of staff now so I think they want to make sure they're getting the right members of staff and because we can say we can match and place and support they feel a bit more comfortable with saying yes which is great. Then we've got Kickstart and they [employers] say yes because they're not paying. But on the whole, they are more open to working with us which is great (Manager 3).*

6

The challenges faced by young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long term health conditions or mental health conditions

6.1. In Learning

Undoubtedly, the learning disabilities / difficulties of young people on the programme impacted on how they gained and retained the information presented to them in the classroom and work placement environments. Will, for example, described how due to his autism he struggled to put together an application, explain things, and write about his achievements. In another example, the young person shared that he did not know how to interact with people. James' mentor relayed that whilst his dyslexia made it difficult for him to retain information, the This-Ability team addressed this problem by repeating information until it was understood:

> I: So, could you give me a bit of background on James and what his barriers are?
>
> R: Well, he's come with dyslexia, so he does struggle with some aspects of retaining information, so obviously he asked for support with that and he's really good, he's proactive in that, so sometimes we need to go over things a few times, so it sinks in, and he does flutter between different things (Mentor 4).

Besides learning disabilities and or learning difficulties, **the mental ill health of young people** on the This-Ability programme impacted on all aspects of their lives, including when learning in the classroom, in work placements, and when seeking / securing jobs. Signs of mental ill health (captured in young peoples' testimonies) ranged from anger, anxiety, panic attacks in social situations, to self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts:

> *Really want to find a job at the moment. I've struggled in situations which involve social interaction and when it comes to meeting new people and I find that my anxiety can get pretty bad, especially when I've previously tried to apply for things on my own and there's a lot of questions and a lot of thinking through what you want to say to somebody and then I just kind of have this real bad panic attack (Will).*

> *I have stress-induced psychosis so basically, I hear voices (Kevin).*

> *A number of times I've been trying to kill myself, jumping off bridges or whatever…I've been self-harming as well, but I don't do it anymore, I stopped it (Charlie).*

Those with mental ill health were receiving support for their conditions, inevitably over a long period of time, however, when on This-Ability their existing mental health conditions were manifest in a lack of self-belief, unpredictable behaviour, fear, and uncertainty about coping in new situations such as in work and so on. Anxiety relating to the latter point was expressed in a young person's narrative:

> *I got asked to come for the interview over the coming weeks I was like what happens if I get the job, it was the what ifs, what happens if I get the job and my mental health deteriorates…how am I getting there as well…that was how I was thinking and I've not even got the job, I was thinking of all these before I even went to the interview (Kevin).*

The interviews revealed the **complex, often multiple day-to-day challenges** experienced by young people accessing the programme. Several cases presented by the This-Ability Mentors outlined the instability experienced by young people on the programme, for example, due to family breakdowns, loss of family members, being in the care system for many years / most of their lives, involvement with different authorities, moving from hostel to hostel and so on:

> *John has been in foster care his whole life and he's been moved from hostel to hostel recently…there's been a lot of people in the hostels that he doesn't get along with, so he's had to move again recently, and I just don't think he's in a good place to be looking for work (Mentor 2).*

> *Joshua's been in the care system throughout his life, he's always had family breakdowns and things, he's slowly starting to build a relationship with his parents in XXXX [name of area] but he says that's never been great and he's had a lot of trauma from past foster carers and a lot of abuse and neglect and things (Mentor 1).*

Having lost close family members and experiencing both a learning disability and learning difficulty, Mandy was living in supported housing with her partner. Financial and psychological abuse was described as typifying the lives of all three young people as well as use of drugs and or alcohol:

> *Him and his partner from what I can gather didn't have the best relationship so there seemed to be some domestic issues there, he was often upset that she broke his things, or she'd kicked off. John again had drug use, so he'd smoke cannabis, said he smoked it quite a lot (Mentor 1).*

> *Joshua does smoke cannabis so there's a substance issue there and he's said he used to drink quite a lot, doesn't drink as much anymore (Mentor 1).*

The chaotic lifestyles of individuals shaped by for example, crime and criminal histories; anti-social behaviour; insecurity in relationships and housing situations, coupled with mental ill health, learning disabilities / difficulties led to challenging behaviour, difficulties engaging with learning (attendance, punctuality) and or getting along with other learners and 'fitting in'. This-Ability Mentors recounted some of the

challenges they experienced in the classroom and beyond when supporting those with complex and chaotic lifestyles and the potential or actual consequences for the young people discussed:

> *I found he [John] was a risk taker, I didn't feel comfortable, he was doing anything he could to do dangerous things like he was walking on the side of the road where the barrier was, he was climbing on things, he was jumping off things, he was rapping songs with swear words and inappropriate lyrics…He was unpredictable, I just felt like he was a bit erratic and he could have caused harm to himself but others [learners] as well (Mentor 4).*

> *The biggest barrier I think is the fact that he [John] is not reliable at all, he'll turn up to one session and then miss three. He doesn't have a phone so we said to him if can commit to the programme we'll get you a phone so that we can contact you for sessions and things…I gave him the dates…and then he'd misplace the date and time to come in and he'd turn up at the wrong time or the wrong day and then he wouldn't come the next day cos he'd already been in the day before (Mentor 2).*

> *So, Joshua when he first started was very sporadic, he'd turn up to some sessions and other sessions I'd ring him and he'd be asleep or he'd been out the whole night the night before with his friends, he's got some homeless friends and didn't want them to be on their own (Mentor 1).*

In a different example, James, from a less chaotic background but, seemingly **with little or no parental involvement** in his daily life, had struggled to establish a sensible bedtime and sleep routine. This resulted in James being late for his This-Ability classes if he made it in at all. When asked why he was finding it difficult to get up in the morning, his mentor explained:

> *Because he's apparently playing games so he's in a bad routine, I mentioned this in his review saying that he needs to be starting now to be looking at changing his routine because it's going to have a major effect on his opportunities to do work experience and get a job if he can't alter his sleeping pattern and I said because you've got into such bad habits it ain't going to change overnight because your body has adjusted, you've got to readjust it. I did give him a website address when I did my second review with him…about sleeping patterns (Mentor 4).*

Evidently, where young people were living independently, they found it **difficult to manage their finances, cook for themselves, and take care of their health and hygiene.** Additional support was required with such aspects of their lives, whilst attempting to engage them with This-Ability provision. One mentor's description of Joshua's difficulties (who was living relatively independently) reflected the challenges of other young people on the programme who were also living independently - *"regular day to day things like money maintenance, cooking…meals, hygiene, clothes and finance"* (Mentor 1).

Without guidance from adults in their daily lives, evidence suggested that young people were more likely to get distracted by other people who were also lacking direction and support. A mentor's narrative about Joshua underlined that in such situations, an individual was led by what they enjoyed rather than what was best for their future i.e., learning:

> *I think with Joshua obviously he's living in a shelter or a home or something like that and I think really when you're with a bunch of people in a similar situation you tend to drift off doing things that you want to do rather than things that maybe will help you move forward (Mentor 4).*

Financial hardship emerged as a challenge for some of the young people on This-Ability, although they themselves did not openly claim to be struggling to make ends meet - it was the professionals that provided them with support who shared this information. Several This-Ability staff involved in supporting James expressed concern about his lack of clothes and one of them reiterated, *"I think his biggest barrier from what I can see at the moment would be his clothing because if he's relying on one pair of clothes which he's having to wash…that would suggest reading between the lines that perhaps they are on a tight budget"* (Mentor 4). Therefore, James was unable to maintain his hygiene which held consequences for his integration in learning environments, including, in his future workplace. A further indication of his money worries surfaced in the same interview:

> *So, I've approached that [idea for a placement] with him and introduced the idea but he was more concerned about the cost of it, how would he get there, how much would it cost, how far away and stuff, so I think his questions were more about the sustainability of being able to do it rather than maybe an interest (Mentor 4).*

Travel to and from This-Ability premises / providers was reported as problematic for some of the young people involved in the programme, although not primarily due to the costs involved in travelling but related to their fears about travelling long distances alone:

> *A lot of the learners are finding it difficult to travel. Although we do offer travel training it's sometimes really hard for them to push themselves out of their comfort zone and travel long distances. For example, if they're living in East Riding it can be up to an hour bus ride or even longer (Mentor 2).*

In one example, not having a driving licence was perceived as a barrier to work, however, in both situations regarding travel, This-Ability staff attempted to work with the young people to promote independence. A challenge encountered when trying to do so were the barriers inadvertently put up by parents (through their concern), not allowing the *"learners [to] speak for themselves or do things for themselves" (Mentor 2).*

When discussing the challenges, **consistent pressure applied by the Jobcentre** on young people to job search and attend job centre appointments was raised as an issue, particularly as those on the programme were not ready for work. The pressure worked against the realistic timescales set by This-Ability staff, disrupting the learning of individuals by causing them undue stress. The relentless pressure on This-Ability's learners by the JobCentre was conveyed in the following account:

> *We're working with the learners on Stage One because they're not quite ready for work yet but the Jobcentre will still put pressure on them to apply for jobs and get a job as soon as possible really, so we put a timescale in place that's quite realistic to prepare them for work and the Jobcentre are sort of putting barriers in place for us to be able to do that because they've got so much pressure to complete their job diaries and apply for so many jobs a week and attend all the appointments at the same time as coming to us and it does put a lot of pressure and give the learners quite a lot of anxiety around working because they're thinking they're going to have to go for a job before they feel ready and that's what we're trying to stop and help them get ready for (Mentor 2).*

6.2.   Seeking and / or Securing Employment

A lack of work experience was described as a major barrier to securing employment particularly for those young people with disabilities, for example, Autism. In two accounts, it was suggested that due to receiving inadequate support in mainstream education and misconceptions around what courses young people with disabilities were best suited to, they were sometimes directed onto courses such as animal care, which did not correspond with their interests. Without any work experience, individuals had a lack of knowledge of their own capabilities and what job(s) they wanted to do:

> *XXXX [name of young person] hasn't got any work experience and he's a little bit unsure about what he wants to do (Mentor 1).*

Indeed, when asked why he got involved in the programme, a young person reiterated that he had never worked before besides a small work experience gained at school. To be able to get closer to finding work would require *"getting used to working and learning"* and gaining an understanding of how to make a living, he commented:

> *I'm 23 years old from Yorkshire, I essentially came onto this course because I've never worked before, in terms of getting paid to do so. I've done a bit of work experience during school and that, but this course has really been the first step in terms of going to the next level and hopefully finding a job…but it's just getting used to working and learning what it takes to make a living essentially (Adam).*

Further, the interviews revealed that in many cases young people did not have the qualifications for the jobs that they were interested in doing and they didn't always know what qualifications were necessary for particular jobs. Their expectations in terms of the jobs they wanted to do were sometimes firmly fixed and unrealistic, requiring honesty and tactful negotiation from This-Ability staff when setting personal goals.

When recounting the challenges faced by the programme's target group, providers (This-Ability partners) expressed concern that **employer attitudes** might act as a barrier to providing young people with disabilities / learning difficulties and or long-term conditions with employment opportunities. The time and effort required, for example, to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace and put support in place for individuals with specific needs was perceived as potentially leading to a reluctance to employ such people. In one narrative, the provider articulated the concerns of young people on the programme who questioned how realistic their prospects were when employers could take on able bodied people without additional challenges and responsibilities of having to support them. The following accounts outline the issues that potentially shape employer attitudes:

> *In terms of the employers you would like to think that employers are fair and open and willing to, if it's the right candidate for the job, support and apply what's reasonable in terms of adjustments to make that person able to perform to the best of their abilities but we all know that in reality what's going on in an employer's mind could sometimes be this is going to be a lot of work for me, let's be blunt about it, I think that's what some people are up against, if somebody's got a significant list of things that they need to do differently and employers I think can sometimes, I don't think it's because they're not good people, I think sometimes that can be scary for them and they don't want to make more work and they don't have time (Provider 1).*

They've come on this course, they've done the employability skills but are other employers willing to take on young adults with a learning disability because you're not just taking on another employee, you're taking on possibly their challenges and their difficulties as well. That's my only concern for them and they're quite open about that as well, they would say why would they choose me over someone who's quite able bodied and come with less challenges? (Provider 2).

Financial considerations emerged as a challenge and potential barrier to young people progressing through the This-Ability programme and seeking / securing employment. A This-Ability Mentor shared that she had encountered young people (some with several disabilities) living with their parents who were keen to work but were discouraged by their parents because they did not want to lose the income from the various disability benefits their children were receiving. The account revealed that benefits were paid into parents' accounts as appointees for their children. In one case, the mentor recalled how a parent inhibited her son's aspirations for employment by stressing his inability to adapt to, and cope in, the workplace:

The thing is with this young man, he is constantly told, and it's reinforced in him that he's too emotional, he doesn't have the ability, he'll be too scared because there'll be these kinds of people in the workplace, the kind of people that scare [intimidate] him (Mentor 3).

In such scenarios, This-Ability staff having seen first-hand the development and progress of individuals, attempted to counter the narratives of parents by highlighting the strengths and abilities the young person had demonstrated during the programme. Such conversations proved futile in situations where the dominant and constant narratives of parents reinforced to the young person (already lacking confidence) their inability to fit into, and cope with, the workplace.

Renting in hostels and supported housing was reported as being costly, potentially resulting in some young people being worse off in work. This-Ability staff carried out 'better off calculations' with learners to determine their options:

Another thing that's in the back of my head is sometimes with hostels when they gain employment, they don't end up better off cos of the large amount of money that the hostels take so I need to find out what he's paying and what his options are (Mentor 1).

So, the issue there, supported housing is notoriously, the rent is extremely high so we had to do some better off calculations just to make sure she wasn't going to be out of pocket as Kickstart is 25 hours a week at the minimum wage (Mentor 3).

Economic and psychological abuse, both forms of domestic abuse, also emerged as a finding when exploring the barriers encountered by young people accessing work opportunities. A specific case relayed in an interview outlined how a young person (Mandy) co-dependent on her partner was prevented from having her 'better off calculation' done (as he hid the necessary paperwork) and he prohibited her from working. All the welfare benefits went into his account, and he controlled how much she received and for what purpose:

Mandy has also kind of naively divulged that all the benefits go into her partner's bank account, and he will then transfer a certain amount to her bank account, she can't tell me how much that is, she just knows she then has to pay certain bills with that money and go food shopping (Mentor 3).

Co-dependency of young people on either parents or partners and vice versa was highlighted, for example, Mandy's partner relied on her for navigating mainstream services due to his difficulty in reading and writing and on the flipside, he reminded her to take care of her personal hygiene, to set her alarm – things she would forget due to her learning disability. Such co-dependency clearly had significant mutual benefit but as described above could also inhibit personal growth and progress into employment.

A lack of self-belief and confidence to step outside their comfort zones was identified as a barrier to work for young people, particularly those accustomed to regularly receiving benefits and or having their lives organised in a specific way. The uncertainty and potential disruption in their lives by embarking on something new was unnerving for young people when considering work. This point was emphasised in a mentor's account:

> *Often it can be the person themselves being unsure when the right time is, if they can do it, if they have got that confidence in themselves, because I think sometimes it is quite a big leap to go from I've got my universal credit, or I know the situation, everything's reliable and regular, I don't need to be getting out there and putting myself out of my comfort zone and then okay right, what if I get the job, and oh I've got the job and is this all going to be too much too soon and that doubt that can come in (Provider 1).*

The self-doubt and low self-esteem outlined in the above account was reiterated in an interview with a young person on the programme who emphasised that the 'what ifs' were constantly in his mind about how a situation might unfold, especially when thinking about starting a job. He commented:

> *I would be able to do on the job training and stuff like that but again the 'what ifs' came there (Kevin).*

7

The This-Ability programme: what worked?

7.1. Stage One: Ready, Willing and Able

At the first stage of their journey on the programme, This-Ability staff determined and understood the needs of the young people through completion of **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)** forms before supporting them to gain their **six core capabilities skills** in preparation for the second stage:

> *The work we do on Stage One puts them in a position where they're confident in their abilities and skills, they have some awareness of the kind of role they'd like to go into, and they understand the labour market a little bit more. So, it's about understanding themselves really and what they're capable of and what support they'd need (Mentor 1).*

Another mentor explained the importance of supporting young people to evidence the six core capabilities (reliability, openness, motivation, awareness of the labour market, self-esteem and resilience) in the first section of their passports. Photographs and narratives describing how an individual had demonstrated a core capability, were added to the passport as a permanent reminder for the young person and as evidence for potential employers:

> *So, all of our sessions are tailored around those capabilities to give the learners the opportunity to demonstrate them so we can then evidence them in the first half of their employability passport once they've taken part in their sessions (Mentor 2).*

In some cases where a young person accessed the programme directly through a partner organisation, usually seen at Stage Two, **provider organisations were permitted to offer core capabilities skills themselves** rather than the young person being sent back to the This-Ability Mentors. This departure from the initial model reflects how This-Ability responds to evolving needs, putting the needs and well-being of young people at the forefront of the programme, allowing them to stay and learn with the organisation they feel most comfortable / familiar with, sustaining engagement with the programme. A provider recounted:

> *Initially when people come for Stage Two, everybody would come through that route and as it's changed and evolved now, we generally do get people from the start and do everything with them now. There are a couple that start with HLC and do one or more of the core capabilities and then come to us but largely now our role is to take the young person from the very beginning of their sign up with the project (Provider 1).*

The need to build trust and rapport with young people, particularly in light of their disabilities, to encourage openness and honesty was stressed in the account of another provider, who also offered Stage One core capabilities skills sessions. He explained:

It's building up that rapport as well because when they've got learning disabilities, they're quite within themselves so coming out of themselves and talking and being open, obviously in the core capabilities we try to make them open and be honest and sometimes that might take more than one session so it's just trying to build that trust (Provider 2).

Various examples of the issues that This-Ability staff supported learners with highlighted **the sensitivity and skill with which staff approached and dealt with delicate problems** such as personal hygiene, poverty, criminality and so on. When recalling a particular case, the mentor emphasised the importance of dealing with sensitive issues with young people in a way that avoided causing any embarrassment:

I do get the impression that there maybe is a financial restriction there or difficulty because he does come in in the same thing and he looked as though his dad had cut his hair the other day. So, there's a lot of issues and I think embarrassment and feeling uncomfortable is a big issue as well. Like I said I'm used to talking to people about delicate situations and you have to do it in a special way, sense of humour and make people feel comfortable and deflect it onto yourself (Mentor 4).

Flexibility in the delivery of the programme to meet individual needs emerged as a significant finding during the interviews. This-Ability employees accommodated the needs of learners by meeting them at times and in places that suited them. An understanding of the barriers experienced by young people with specific learning disabilities / difficulties was apparent in employee narratives, who addressed obstacles by delivering education / training face-to-face, remotely, and so on – essentially, employing methods that responded to individuals' needs to keep them engaged in the programme:

If they're having a hectic home life we'll try and meet them at times that are more suitable to them, we can engage with them via Zoom or by their mobile, we can send them work by email or by post. If they're having panic attacks, we're happy to meet them in the station or a member of staff will travel to them and do travel training with them. So, home life, it's a big part of life that often gets in the way yeah (Mentor 1).

Another example of flexibility in the programme emerged in an interview when discussing whether every learner was required to begin the programme at Stage One, progressing through each stage to gain employment. In this account the mentor clarified that This-Ability was flexible in allowing some learners closer to gaining employment to skip a stage, moving onto the stage most relevant to their needs, she reported:

[If] somebody goes straight onto Stage Two it's because in their IAG it's become apparent that they're already work ready, and they already have an idea of what they want to do for a job and they are already confident and feel like they're ready for that work experience element of the programme. It doesn't always happen; a couple of learners have gone straight onto Stage Two and a couple of learners have gone straight onto Stage Three which is the job club (Mentor 2).

Adjustments in the classroom allowed young people to easily access their place(s) of learning, be comfortable when learning, using the tools and equipment required to aid their learning. When asked for examples of the adjustments that were made, This-Ability Mentors explained:
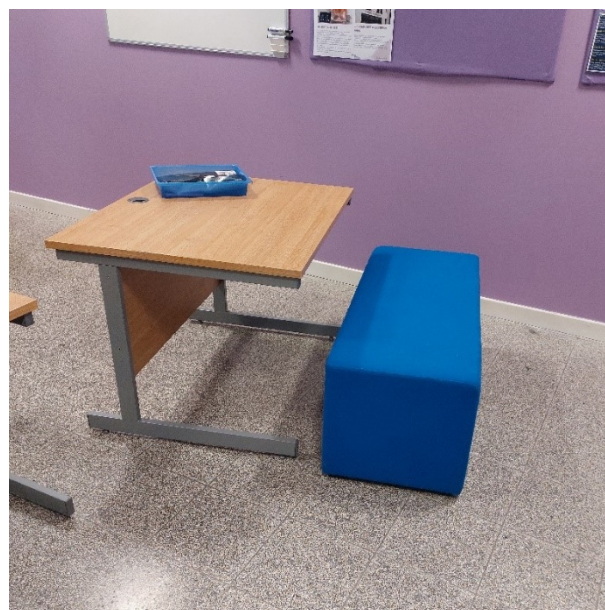
We have things like readers, we can provide laptops for those who prefer to learn from laptops, we have visual readers and text to speak, we have [coloured] overlays for papers…we can make the building accessible. We've changed some of the seating in the room, so at the moment we're working with a young lady who's got some mobility issues and struggles to sit in the generic classroom style seats, so we've changed them to benches so it's easier for her to sit (Mentor 1).

We've provided everything from coloured overlays to easy read information, so we're providing text to speech software for people with visual impairments, for one learner in particular we put quite a lot of adjustments in place due to the nature of his disability and his visual impairment, for example we had to use hazard tape on all of our equipment so he could see that because he didn't have no sight at all, he could see certain colours, so we used the tape to mark out a pathway to his desk and with Covid and all the clear screens that were put in place that was quite dangerous for him because he couldn't see them so we had to stick tape on the edges of all these partitions so he could see them and wasn't going to bump into them (Mentor 2).

Figure 1: Floor hazard markings to aid a visually impaired learner

Figure 2: Adjusted seating for a learner with mobility issues

In the last example, to further support the young man with a visual impairment **all This-Ability Mentors undertook training** in using the cane whilst he was also receiving training for the first time. They did this to be able to properly support him through his training and to encourage him to keep using his cane.

A person-centred approach with provision tailored to individuals' requirements was articulated in the accounts. As a result, many adjustments were made by This-Ability staff, to respond to the different career interests of different learners. Additionally, the exercises and worksheets for sessions were reported as being easily adapted to allow for individual hobbies, interests, and personalities to be showcased to potential employers. A mentor stressed the following:

Obviously, everybody's aspirations are different and we're running sessions for groups of learners that have all these different aspirations, so we do tailor our sessions quite a lot to the individual learners (Mentor 2).

The research highlighted that at Stage One, learners were supported to recognise what they wanted to do and where their skills lay, considering where they would feel more comfortable working and what kind of environment they'd like to work in. Positive reinforcement by staff was described as helping young people to change their mind sets about what they perceived to be outside their reach i.e., employment:

We've helped them to recognise all of the positive things about themselves that they never knew that they had, a lot of our learners are lacking in confidence, and we help them to recognise all the amazing qualities that they've got, and we've brought out confidence in them. We help them to understand that they can do all of those things that they've been told that they'll never be able to do, and it might just be a small adjustment that needs putting in place (Mentor 2).

Further, activities and exercises exploring the skills and personalities of individuals as they went through the programme helped them to consider careers that they would not have otherwise realised they were suited to, leading to changes in career aspirations – Lucas' experience was a case in point:

Well, I'd say so yes, after doing a lot of things like personality tests and stuff, I thought I was maybe, I could get involved in other stuff like I considered childcare for a while, so I started a bit of volunteer work at a local charity I know of where I was in a small part involved with kids so I came along as a volunteer and got a bit of childcare experience which was a lot of fun.

Importantly, young people were dissuaded from considering work placements (for Stage Two) that were determined as not benefiting them, instead, they were encouraged to pursue opportunities that helped develop a range of skills that would prove beneficial in gaining and sustaining future employment – a point emphasised in the following narrative:

I'm not sure he would really benefit from working on something he already knows and I did discuss it with him, I said to him I felt that by going to a new setting it will open up the opportunity for a range of skills that he will need later in life such as customer service, handling cash, working with other people, unloading goods, checking them off lists...it's just a skill set that is invaluable (Mentor 4).

In Mentor 4's interview, **the importance of correctly 'matching' learners to provider opportunities** was raised and the issue that sometimes learners did not know what was best for them. There was a tension between what the learner wanted, what opportunities the providers were selling to learners and what mentors actually thought was best for them. In the subsequent excerpt the mentor reported how they had tried to reason with a learner who had based his choice of provider on 'liking' the individual who had sold the package (of work experience) to him in an appealing way – an opportunity that was perceived as not providing long-term engagement or benefits. The Mentor's objection to the learner taking up the particular opportunity was probed by the interviewer:

I: *The leaflet drop, you said he wants to be a postman when we were talking before, leaflet drop again sounds like something that he'd enjoy so can you explain what your objection is?*

R: *I think my objection is because he chose to go to XXXX [name of provider] based on that one activity. The leaflets from what I understand*

is for one particular date for a Christmas do ...So to me it seems like a one-off activity but because he bought into it because of how it was sold, and he liked the person who was selling the package (Mentor 4).

Evidence revealed that time was spent with each young person to determine how the programme could "get the best out of them" (Provider 2) whilst ensuring engagement with the programme was optimised. Individual learning styles and needs were accommodated, for example, consideration was given to whether the young person preferred working on their own or was able to work in a group when tailoring the programme to meet their specific needs.

Provision of tailored support responsive to learners' individual circumstances outside the classroom emerged as an important finding. Without support to deal with issues related to their homelife, arguably some learners would not have made progress in getting closer to the labour market. Practical assistance buying a learner new clothes was a good case in point whereby a young person on the programme who was taken shopping embraced the experience, and since then exudes confidence and was reported as making more effort in his appearance – *"he's just generally gone through an entire transformation, that's all I can really describe it as being, one of the biggest changes in anyone I've seen since I've been on This-Ability"* (Mentor 4).

A holistic approach to supporting young people was central to meeting the different needs of learners. Besides support for their social and emotional wellbeing, some learners required financial help, others needed support with money management skills, or travelling to This-Ability premises and so on. Various narratives highlighted the range of needs and **the practical support they were provided**:

Their finance can also be one which we're happy to support, so we reimburse bus fares and things like that. Some people just struggle with food and paying their bills and coming into a classroom… [12 to] 18 hours a week is the last thing on your mind when you don't know what you're going to have to eat when you get home. So, we work with the local food bank we've got in the building to support that, we work closely with the job centre to help them with those housing bills and things (Mentor 1).

If we have a learner, say for example with autism, who isn't comfortable travelling on a bus with groups of people, that can be quite a challenge so we've tried to put quite a lot in place to overcome that and we have a specific person that will go out and do travel training until that person's ready (Mentor 2).

Recognising that the ability to cook was essential for living independently, the programme's Cook with Ability sessions took young people back to the basics of growing fruit and vegetables on This-Ability's allotment and then taught them how to cook basic foods using some of the ingredients. The ability to cook was described as a life skill closely linked to employability skills – skills and experience that brought young people closer to job opportunities:

That was another huge piece of learning from out of lockdown because we started doing these food deliveries and it became apparent that young people just didn't know how to cook and it's like okay so we're going to put you into work, we want you to live independently, you want to live independently, you can't do that if you can't cook, it's such a basic skill, everybody should know how to cook, so that's where that came from (Manager 2).

We give out the ingredients to the young person and all we ask in return is they take pictures and videos of themselves cooking it. They get a box of store cupboard ingredients like salt, pepper, oil, oxo cubes, they get a book and in the

book we go through basic things on how to wash your hands, temperatures of ovens, what utensils are. So, it's not just about cooking it's also about looking at literacy and numeracy as well because they'll be using that within the book. Then what we'll be doing once young people get engaged, we'll be linking that to employment opportunities, look at your transferable skills now because you understand how temperatures work on an oven, you understand basic food hygiene, because we'll be putting people through basic food hygiene, which in turn leads to employment. So, everything we do is an ultimate goal of employment in there (Manager 1).

Fun and hands-on practical activities were central to learning, helping to develop key skills in an engaging way – a change from solely traditional textbook / classroom-based learning, arguably apt for young people with learning disabilities/difficulties. When asked about their involvement in the hands-on practical activities, young people provided concrete examples of the skills they gained. The following excerpts from several interviews convey this:

I: So, with the escape room and the fish trail, can you tell me a bit about that?

R: Yeah, the escape room was to do with solving problems and working in a team to solve problems and the fish trail was kind of similar as well, solving the problem of where the fish are and again working in a team.

I: And do you think you gained anything from doing that?

R: Yeah, I definitely gained communication skills doing things I've never done before, I've never done them activities before (Brendan).

R: Did the escape rooms a couple of times, that was actually a lot of fun.

I: What do you think you learnt from doing that…from doing the escape rooms specifically?

R: Problem solving, actually thinking of ways to do the task and also teamwork was a big part of it as well (Daniel).

I: How did you find that [the rock climbing]?

R: Quite daunting actually…I did an escape room as well, again never done that before, and there was five of us altogether, we actually did it quite quickly, more than anyone in that specific one ever did.

I: You said you were quite worried about going up the wall and stuff like that, how did you feel after you'd done it?

R: Top of the world…We also did a treasure [trail] round town which I was actually bricking that the most…because it was our first task working as a group or with someone else and again that's one thing I've been lacking skill-wise is working with others cos I've never been that, well I either fall out with someone or there's a miscommunication and all of that but it actually worked out really well, once we knew what we were doing and we got a rhythm going it was really good (Adam).

We'd go out of the classroom together and sort of test our navigation skills in terms of being able to, we'll use our communication skills as well to use each other's knowledge to find different areas and places and tick off and that would count towards resilience and we'd do other tasks as well ranging from group tasks which again I've mentioned would involve lots of communication and working with each other (Will).

In the classroom, young people learned more about the labour market; the different types of jobs available; different job sectors; and the skills, qualifications and education required to enter specific jobs.

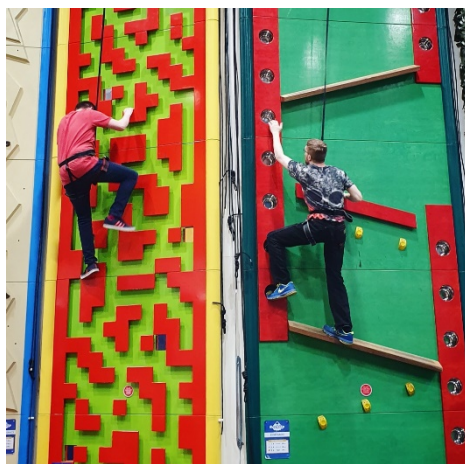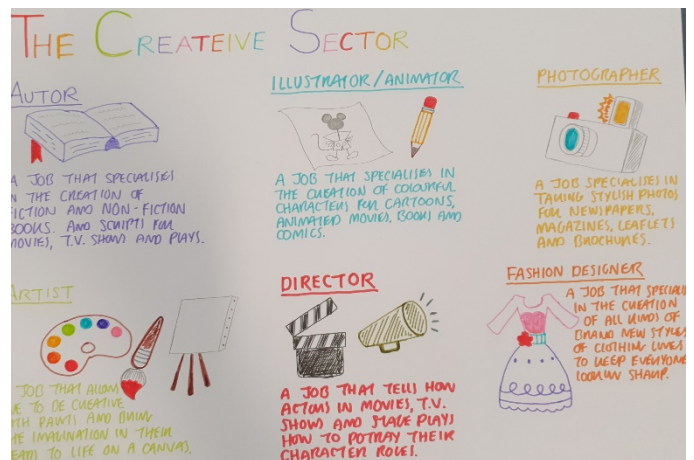**Figure 3: Learners taking part in rock climbing activities**

Figure 4: An example of work exploring employment sectors and the labour market

Learning in environments with other young people in similar situations was reported as reassuring and lessened anxiety due to not feeling too different to others or being judged if unsuccessful when pursuing job opportunities. The high level of support provided by This-Ability was emphasised in a young person's narrative:

I: *So, what do you think it is about this sort of environment that's made you feel a little bit less anxious?*

R: *Just knowing that there's other people in my boat, in similar situation and maybe struggle to apply for things that are out there and put together an application to sell yourself in the best way, it's comforting knowing that there's all these people who won't be judging me once I'm out of the classroom and knowing that there's so much support in place so if say one opportunity doesn't work out for me then there's other options after that to carry on (Will).*

Figure 5: A group of learners celebrate completing a teamworking task

This-Ability's aim to make real change in young peoples' trajectories was noted by the young people themselves – "in dole they just told you what to do, not how to do it and all that in here" (James).

In preparation for Stage Two i.e., undertaking work placements with This-Ability provider organisations, **young people watched videos of the providers in the workplace and visited the organisations**, so they knew what to expect when starting their work placements. The adjustments made in the classroom went with them into the workplace, and they embarked on the next stage of the This-Ability programme knowing they were, *"going to have somebody there supporting them the whole time they're working"* (Mentor 1).

7.2. Stage Two: The World of Work

The World of Work involved the learner going to a provider organisation to gain employability skills and, in some cases, undertake work experience. In this part of the programme the learners developed the 7 CBI (Confederation of British Industries) Skills that completed the This-Ability Employability Passport.

During Stage One of the programme young people had worked with their mentors to decide which provider was right for them. This was done through a process of information dissemination and visits to providers, an aspect of the programme recalled by the learners:

> I: *When you was in the classroom did you go and look at all the different providers?*

> R: *Yeah, I saw the videos for each one and Hull KR seemed like the one I was most interested in (Daniel).*

Recognising the importance of consistency for the learners on the programme, for example in seeing familiar faces - people that the learners had put trust in – This-Ability staff ensured that they **supported learners transition from Stage One to Stage Two by accompanying them to their chosen provider organisation** in the first instance if they expressed the need for assistance. A young person's testimony emphasised this point:

I: So, was it a little bit daunting then when you first came to KR, finding your way down here?

R: It's funny, it does seem daunting at first but the more you do it the less difficult it seems.

I: Did you have any support in finding your way here that first time?

R: When I first visited here, I did come with [Mentor 2], it was the first visiting… (Daniel).

Further, a mentor reiterated that although young people had the opportunity to visit the provider organisation prior to beginning Stage Two, and the provider would know how to work with each learner having received their personal profiles in advance, nevertheless, those young people who were anxious about their first day were accompanied by a mentor to **help them adjust to the new environment.** He explained:

Alongside that those that still feel anxious and are a little bit unsure we're happy to travel with them on that first day, we've worked with them for 10+ weeks at that point, we have a really good relationship with them…so we send the providers personal profiles…but often it's a lot easier when you've just got somebody there with you who can maybe say some of the things you forget when you're really nervous or just point you where to go on your lunch on your first day, sometimes it's a bit nerve wracking when you don't know anyone (Mentor 1).

The research evidenced that the young people carefully considered their choices for provider organisation and their aspirations and interests were a key factor in deciding who they decided to go to:

I'll be real, I had no idea when I first came here, I didn't have a clue, then I brought up the fact that I go to the gym quite a lot, I like to go at least one, maybe two or three times a week, I'd do that with my dad cos he's been doing this for years, so I brought that up and that's when the providers came in, Hull FC, Hull KR and they do a lot of sports activities and stuff like that and I mentioned how I wanted to do coaching, whether it be on a one to one basis or maybe do groups. (Adam).

I: So, could you tell me a bit about what sort of work you're actually looking for?

R: Looking for warehousing work and manufacturing type of work.

I: So, is that why you chose KR as your provider?

R: Yeah (Daniel).

The providers described how they were able to **adapt their provision** to meet the needs of some young people. The following was a good example of how provision was **tailored to the specific interests** of a learner. The provider recounted:

I've got a young lad who's come to the Stage Two with me, he wanted to do bike maintenance, we've got a wheelchair rugby league club, so I thought just the transferable skills from bikes to wheelchairs, to sports wheelchairs, that was more suited to him. So, it's just looking at each learner and trying to give them the best experience within our programme (Provider 2).

The length of the programme also varied depending on the provider, and the needs of the young people. Providers reported programmes lasting from 10 weeks to 26 weeks or more where learners required additional support.

Interviews with the This-Ability providers highlighted **the range of employment sectors available for young people** on the programme to experience such as retail, sports coaching, creative industries, and media. When asked about their involvement in the second stage of the programme, the young people conveyed the **wide variety of activities** they had taken part in and detailed what they had learnt during this stage with their chosen partner provider:

> I: Can you give me some examples of what sorts of activities you've been doing?
>
> R: The first day here we basically moved boxes between buildings and sorted out the clothing within them, so what sizes and what types of clothing they were like shorts, joggers, polos, t-shirts, that sort of thing.
>
> I: What do you think you learned from doing that?
>
> R: Like organisational skills, knowing how to sort them out because we were taking inventory of them and seeing how many we had (Daniel).

> I: Do you know which care standards you did, cos you don't do all 15 do you, or you don't have to?
>
> R: One of them was health and safety and is it the ethnic description type standard?
>
> I: Equality and diversity?
>
> R: Yeah, that one (Angie).

> We had to present a new idea, I guess the comparison you could give is like pick something like Dragon's Den of here's a thing that I made, here's a problem that people definitely have and here's our solution, now give us money. We had to do something very similar to that. I designed a multi-purpose blind that had three blinds and you could select which one you needed to use and I built that idea way further than I thought I would make it cos I just thought you could use this for decorative purposes or you could have them for practical use, but I went ahead and here's one for a projector screen, here's a green screen, I went further than I ever intended to and I kind of like that I did that (David).

> So, we had to test the equipment out and that was the first activity I did. The second activity was doing the score board, listening to a live commentary... the person who's listening to the score, the game, tell the people on the score board and radio it through and we have to, it's a maths thing, it's quite interesting, been helping XXXX [name of staff], the manager at the bars and all sorts (Charlie).

Figure 6: A learner organising an inventory

Figure 7: A learner taking part in the scoring activity

The research showed that some young people had the opportunity to access work experience placements through their chosen providers, in a variety of sectors. Two young people recalled their work experiences: one working in a food bank run by a provider and another work experience with the grounds team with a different provider:

> *Well when I did The Pantry for several weeks I got everyone to the desk, made sure everyone signed in and out so they can keep track and only a certain amount of people are allowed in at a time and they'd be all numbered and I called out everyone's numbers when they were needed, helped them with any questions that any customers might have had, stuff like that (Lucas).*

> *I had a bit doing what they call landscape and gardening, I've been helping them with XXXX [name of staff], he does the pitches and all that. I know a little bit about gardening but I didn't know a lot of it, he told me there's plenty more to do here, you need to do this, this, there's about five other things you need to do to keep the grass well fed and that, I thought you just cut in and leave it, he said no…do one day of this, have a little break, do little bits each time. It has been really helpful for me (Leon).*

By gaining hands on work experience young people shared that they were able to get a sense of what type of job suited them – this experience reaffirmed for one of the young people interviewed that he wanted to work in a small retail environment, he commented:

> *I: Do you think that [work experience] might have helped you with the stuff you wanted to do for a job?*

> *R: Yeah, that sort of work is what I was talking about when I said I wanted to start off in retail somewhere small, I'd probably start off doing something like that (Lucas).*

In some cases, young peoples' narratives revealed that although their career expectations were unrealistic, they received guidance or hands-on experience on the programme that led to them considering or trying other, more achievable job options. In particular, the work placements provided young people opportunities to try

something completely new, think through job preferences and or experience jobs closely aligned with their favoured job sectors.

Regular reviews of each young person's progress during Stage Two ensured that provision was as person-centred as possible, allowing the provider to pick up on any issues or additional support needs:

> *Everyone's experience even with the same condition is widely different but I think that's why we choose to operate on a person-centred basis and why regular reviews are so important to make it as person centred as possible (Provider 3).*

> *Where a young person expressed dissatisfaction with their placement or realised that it was not suited to them, **they were given the opportunity to change their placement** – a point reiterated by one of the mentors: "so they'll go to a provider and we ensure that they know that it's not set in stone, even [if] they want to go and experience something in retail and then realise that actually I really hate retail and I never want to do this again we can always change" (Mentor 2).*

A This-Ability provider relayed that he **worked with the more confident learners on different days to those who lacked confidence and struggled to work in large groups**. Consistent with Stage One provision, at Stage Two, learners had relatable material within their exercise books that was fun and not too formal. Again, the research conveyed that the needs of learners were at the forefront of delivery of employability skills – a point reiterated in the provider's narrative:

> *Obviously, I will listen to their needs, if they're quite capable of working on their own I'll assess them more on a one-to-one basis. I have noticed that some of the learners are quite more advanced than others, especially if they've been on the programme for quite a while and their confidence has built and they are confident in the work, I set out different days for different learners, so for the more capable I do one day, for those that need extra support it'll be a small group on a separate day (Provider 2).*

Where the support of **Making our Business Yours (MOBY)** was required – a bespoke mentoring service for employers who recruit young people on This-Ability – the team could be called upon, even at Stage Two, to help individuals to develop specific skills. A provider described a situation where a young person gaining experience in retail was supported by MOBY to develop his communication and telephone skills. In another example, MOBY staff supported a young person to produce a CV and write letters to employers, but it was the reasonable adjustments in the workplace that she expressed needing most assistance with:

> *I: Are MOBY helping you with anything?*

> *R: They've helped me how to write a CV, how to apply for jobs and how to write a speculative letter and a covering letter.*

> *I: So [do] you need any support in the workplace…or do you think you're happy getting on with a job?*

> *R: I think I might need some help with putting my special requirements, reasonable adjustments in place cos if I tell them I've got dyslexia and I need to time to sit down from time to time they might not understand what I'm on about.*

> *I: Yeah, so hopefully MOBY will be able to come in and support with some of that stuff with the employer?*

> *R: Yeah (Mandy).*

In some of the interviews **a clear understanding of MOBY's role was articulated** by the young people and evidence revealed that they had already had discussions about the type of adjustments they might require in the workplace – the following narrative of a young person conveyed this:

Some of the things we've discussed in MOBY is some of the reasonable adjustments for the type of role I want to go into, like the employer to have short and simple instructions for me to follow because at work I get quite easily distracted, when I'm doing one task, I often get a bit off track with certain things so every so often I would need a constant reminder to stay on the task (Angie).

In addition to the activities undertaken as part of the programme, the providers reported that they offered young people a wide range of **enrichment activities free to access** outside of the core programme, for example at evenings or weekends. Activities included a learning disability rugby league, yoga, art and craft sessions, an allotment and further learning opportunities. The providers highlighted **the social and wellbeing benefits** of these enrichment activities for the learners, in the form of **new friendships and increased opportunity for social interaction**. Provider 1 recalled how, during the first national lockdown, they set up a social media server for learners to access and share photos and conversation. She *shared, "some [learners] don't comment much and don't really get involved but I've spoken to everybody about it and they say we're really glad we have this, it's really useful".*

The **added value** from accessing some of the providers was also evidenced in the accounts in the form of free sports kit and tickets to selected rugby games. An account from Provider 2 revealed how accessing the programme gave learners access to parts of the organisation not usually available to the general public:

Where our education class is right next to the owner's office so they're seeing the owner, the chief executive and these faces to them I suppose are quite famous and they might feel quite comfortable and confident coming in as well.

7.3. Stage Three: Good to Go, including, the Job Club

At this final stage, 'Good to Go', the programme worked with young people to keep them motivated and confident until they found employment. The reasoning behind this stage of the This-Ability model was explained in more detail:

We continue to keep them motivated and confident to enable them to move into a job, because what you find is young people will do these employability skills, they'll finish but they're still out of work, two months down the line they're not motivated anymore because they've been knocked back so many times, they're not confident anymore, so we work with them to keep that motivation there at the end (Manager 1).

In their interviews, several young people shared that they had **received support from the Job Club** with job search, interview preparation, developed interview skills, undertaken mock interviews, had help completing job applications and creating CVs:

> R: I have had help, XXXX [name of MOBY Mentor] has helped me tweak my CV for certain jobs and I've been able to do some research on the company before the interview.
>
> I: So that kind of falls into the next question, did you actually get some support with interview preparation, did you do practice interviews or anything like that?
>
> R: When I had my first Zoom interview [MOBY Mentor] helped me with some of the prep then (Angie).

> I: Could you tell me a bit about what you were doing today?
>
> R: Today I was doing a CV workshop, we were looking at CVs, I've got a CV because when I was younger, I wanted to be a chef but again due to mental health I was not doing that. So, we were doing a CV workshop looking at different ways to do a CV, what's important to put on a CV and what is the best way to, like should it be a one page or one and a half and that (Kevin).

A young person with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) spoke about his experience of being referred to This-Ability by the Youth Hub to improve his confidence, interview skills and knowledge of the labour market. Having progressed through two stages of the programme and identified which sector his interests and strengths were aligned to, the young person secured paid work. He recounted the support received to apply for a job and prepare for the interview, and when asked what helped, he reported:

> I: So, with the mock interviews what was it that helped you there?
>
> R: What questions to ask, what to look out for, what not to say, what's good to say, what to wear, I always dress smart, formal, tie, boots, I'd wear proper smart clothes no matter what job it is (Max).

MOBY was identified as widening opportunities for young people with learning disabilities/difficulties to enter employment, playing a key role in articulating their specific needs to prospective employers, and ensuring that reasonable adjustments were made to allow them to carry out their new roles. Two case studies underscore the crucial role of MOBY in serving both young person interests and those of the employer:

Case study one: Employment with a construction company

A large construction company won a contract in Hull specifying several commitments to engagement with the local community as essential requirements of the contract. This resulted in communication with the MOBY team and preparations for providing a young person on This-Ability a paid job opportunity.

Jack (pseudonym), a young person living with autism and high levels of anxiety, previously struggled to stay in work *"because of the lack of understanding about him [his learning difficulties] and his lack of understanding about how to work and how to interact with his colleagues" (Manager 3)*. With support from MOBY, he secured a position as a labourer with the construction company. Having learnt through the MOBY Mentor about how his condition impacts on him, the employer made Jack's work colleagues aware of how tasks should be explained to him, she commented:

> *We've made a point of making sure the people he works for know that and perhaps we…manage him in a different way to make sure that he achieves what we need him to achieve because at the end of the day he's earning good money but equally that we communicate with him and manage him in a way that makes him comfortable in that work. We haven't had to change the role so much as the way we communicate how the role is to be done (Employer 4).*

When the interviewer asked the employer to provide an example of how she changed the way she communicated the role to Jack, she described the following scenario:

> *If it was one of the general labourers, we'd say your job is to always keep this yard tidy and leave it at that and they know what tidy is. He [Jack] needs more specifics, so someone will come on a morning and say we've identified that A needs moving to B, B needs moving to C, D needs putting on a shelf and it all needs sweeping down, and we probably say it needs doing by 11 o'clock, he needs more. It isn't that he isn't intelligent cos he's hyper-intelligent, it's just that he needs structure, a lot of our guys don't need structure (Employer 4).*

The employer described how they had worked closely with a MOBY Mentor who had helped them to communicate better with Jack, particularly in situations when it proved difficult to gain his cooperation or if he wasn't performing, explaining, *"she will come along and she'll almost hold our hand through making sure that we are always setting out to be fair but sometimes we don't even know the words to use and she's been really good at being there, not only for [Jack] but for us, so we can help him get the best from himself"*. Sometimes, the mentor would meet with both parties in person to help them to better understand each other and resolve any issues – *"she'll come in and she might say to us it was really that you didn't explain it to him, but on other occasions she's said no they have explained it to you, you're being paid a decent wage, now come on, you have got your part to play"* (Employer 4).

Such mediation alleviated pressure for the employer who stressed how taking on someone with a learning difficulty created fear about upsetting or offending them when challenging issues. Equipped with relevant knowledge, the MOBY team were perceived as 'experts' on what a young person from the programme could or could not do. The benefit that both employer and employee could gain from MOBY's support was highlighted in an account:

> *That is the type of thing that's quite valuable about MOBY, particularly for learners on the autism spectrum, either the learner or the employer comes back to us, can you just come in and usually that mediation session takes 10 minutes, half an hour, just to have that reset if you like, that refresh, and it makes the world of difference. It is the difference between them succeeding and not (Manager 3).*

Jack completed his first three months working for the construction company and was taken on for a further three months with the intention of employing him permanently.

Case study two: Kickstart Scheme

The Kickstart Scheme, introduced by the government, funds employers to provide new job roles for young people (aged 16-24) in receipt of Universal Credit. The aim of the scheme is to prevent unemployed young people from experiencing long term unemployment.

Two young people were involved in the **'Kickstart' six-month paid placements** offered by Humberside police. These roles were recognised as widening opportunities for young people with learning difficulties/disabilities and or long-term health conditions to access a field usually difficult to enter primarily due to the interview process. This was described in the following account:

> *I think, as a lot of organisations do, when we come to recruit people, they're competency-based interviews so if you don't have that experience in the first place you'll struggle to get past the interview stage. We can make adjustments for people with disabilities but it's difficult to get the job in the first place, whereas with Kickstart the purpose of the scheme is to give people that opportunity, to give them the experience (Employer 2).*

The employer simplified the application forms for Kickstart applicants to encourage applications from people who might usually struggle to complete more complicated forms. MOBY staff worked closely with two young people to complete their forms and next prepare them for their Kickstart interviews. One of them (with autism and anxiety) recounted the support that he received in preparation for his interview:

> *So, the interview prep, it consisted of, it was split between CV prep and general research. I found that I'm somebody who gets quite overwhelmed with lots of masses of information and specifically on the internet as you're trying to prepare yourself knowledge-wise for an interview. So, I felt as though when me and [Mentor 3] broke it down bit by bit then different parts of what I needed to memorise and then we went over what I'd written about myself making sure I'd included everything…I felt it was very beneficial (Will).*

During the interview, he was accompanied by the mentor who not only offered moral support but prompted him when he forgot to mention key information. Will reaffirmed the benefit of the mentor's presence – *"when it came to the interview date as well, even though I didn't need [Mentor 3] to chip in at any point and I was able to answer all the questions, I felt it was beneficial having a mentor there, someone to generally support me, more for the confidence side of things so I felt I was able to provide good answers".*

In the event, Will required little assistance from her, but the mentor played **a vital role discussing his support needs with the employer in relation to his learning disability and mental health** condition and this resulted in the employer allocating Will a mentor in the workplace when he began his placement with them. The intermediary - type role played by MOBY was stressed in an account:

> *When we're talking to a business about a learner, we know that learner and we know that we're placing them in the right organisation, and we know what adjustments they're going to need and what support the business is going to need (Manager 3).*

Will required two **reasonable adjustments** by the employer: the first ensured that he was situated in a quiet space, close to his supervisor, away from the hustle and bustle of the office, he explained:

> *They've situated my desk away from the other colleagues in the office and at the present time I work closely with Mr XXXX [name of Supervisor] cos he's sort of my supervisor and my mentor and I found that, because I am somebody who's quite*

introverted and quite shy by nature, I can get quite overwhelmed when there's lots of people around me so I did ask if that was a reasonable adjustment that could be put in place as I felt that it was better for me to be just with a bit of space (Will).

The second adjustment was based around how he was given tasks - a specific need conveyed to the employer by the mentor - which was recalled by the employer in his interview:

I think one thing he had asked for was that when he's given tasks he's not just given a massive task and expected to do it, he has to have things broken down to him in smaller pieces, so that I suppose is the only adjustment we've had to do, just be mindful of how we give him work to do and how we deliver it to him, how we teach him how to do things (Employer 2).

On the other hand, another member of the MOBY team spent (and continues to spend) a great deal of time working with the employer to ensure that the learner undertaking the second Kickstart placement (living with a visual impairment, autism, and a hearing impairment) is provided with the correct software for his visual impairment.

In the case where the reasonable adjustment was made for Will, he was able to make good progress, demonstrate his ability and meet his goals – as his employer reported, *"he's really getting more experience, more confidence, more knowledge and also, we've looked at using his skills in IT" (Employer 1).* There was optimism that he would be kept on by the employer after the six-month placement. However, an update revealed that Will independently applied for, and secured, a different job (full-time Admin Assistant for large public sector employer) beginning after the six-month Kickstart placement. His confidence had surged due to attending and doing the interview without any assistance. Nevertheless, MOBY would be continuing to support him in his new role. In the example of the second learner, still awaiting reasonable adjustments, less optimism was expressed about him sustaining employment beyond his Kickstart placement due to limited opportunity to show the employer his skills.

The Passport

The This-Ability programme was conceptualised around an Employability Passport, which young people would build throughout the programme and act as a tool for them, when applying for jobs and attending interviews. Interviews with the partner organisations revealed that buy-in to, and understanding of, the passport from providers was high. The passport was described as a positive tool for young people, to showcase their skills and *"to look at what they're good at rather than focus on what they're not so good at" (Provider 2).*

This-Ability employees recalled how, during lockdown, they were unable to access the office to print the passport pages, and while the learning was taking place remotely the physical document could not be embedded into sessions. This was reiterated by the young people:

> I: *So, your employability passport, have you seen that yet?*
>
> R: *No not yet. I think I'm just waiting to get it from XXXX [name of Mentor] but it's not a big issue for me (Max).*

> I: *Have you started on your passport yet, do you know what your passport is?*
>
> R: *I don't know what it really is.*
>
> I: *Have you actually seen it yet?*
>
> R: *No (James).*

> *I was told that my employability passport would be sent to me by HLC or there maybe a presentation but as yet I have heard nothing (Emma).*

Despite this, the interviews revealed that general understanding of the passport among the young people was high. The accounts conveyed that young people understood the aims of the passport and how it might be used with employers:

Yes, it has some of the things that you have done with some pictures and evidence, in other words it's a bit like a CV that I can show future employers (Angie).

In a sense yeah, it's almost like a compilation of everything, what my qualities are, what I've done here and that will hopefully help me leading to get a job or work placement in the future (Adam).

What it was for me was an employer getting to know me, I can talk about myself for ages but when it's on paper or electronically it might jump out to them better than some boring CV (Kevin).

I know it's to help employers, show employers what you've been doing while you've been here and it's going to show, when they ask you certain questions you can show them in the passport what you can do and stuff (Max).

Based on what I've heard being described to me about the employability passport, I'm aware it's something which I would take into an interview to give an employer to help provide them with the knowledge based around my difficulties and my autism and I feel like that, to me, again it's a weight that's been lifted off my mind as I found putting together an application and writing lots of things about yourself, again it's not very easy for me at all (Will).

Yeah, it's something I can give to an employer I guess; it could maybe sell me a bit more than I could (Poppy).

You can take that [the passport] into your interview and if they say what did you do in outside gardening or summat then you can go back through your pages and it's there in front of you and I can say I did outside gardening with the groundsmen workers, he said it's just little simple things what you can take in (Leon).

Evidence from the interviews also showed that young people understood, in broad terms, the difference between the six Core Capabilities and the seven CBI Skills – the following excerpts from learners' interviews conveyed this:

I think one's more how I would behave in the workplace and also what I'm capable [of] in the workplace (David).

I guess core capabilities are something that are very broad and then employability skills are a bit more, I don't know the words, they're like targeted skills if you know what I mean (Poppy).

I think one's based on yourself, and the other is based on what you do with an employer so so one's based on who you are as a person and helping your confidence and your socialising and the other one is helping you realise what employers want and how to apply for jobs (Max).

However, recollection from the young people about the specific skills that made up the passport was weaker. Presumably this was due to not having had access to the physical document, and/or the way in which young people with learning disabilities/difficulties retain information, so without the constant reinforcement of the actual passport, they perhaps struggled to retain the level of detail it contained. Several narratives of young people underscored the difficulty they experienced in recalling the specific skills covered in the passport:

I: I'm going to put you on the spot, off the top of your head could you name any of the core capabilities?

R: I'll be honest, no, when I think about it, no (Max).

It's team building and all that, I can't remember how much it is about, but I know it's team building, getting you into work and all that (Charlie).

I: …Can you remember any of the skills that are in the passport?

R: I wish I could (Adam).

Both Angie and Mandy were on the programme before the pandemic and had received their finished passport as a physical document. In both examples, they had a better grasp of the skills included in the passport, for example, Mandy was able to recall more of the Core Capabilities, she relayed the following:

I: Do you remember any of the skills that are in there?

R: I think there was openness, motivation, awareness of the labour market, resilience.

> I: You said the programme's helped you with one of them earlier, that was at the beginning, I think?
>
> R: Self-esteem, cos there was six of them.
>
> I: Yeah, there was six core capabilities at the beginning, well remembered.
>
> R: Have I got five? There's reliability, openness, motivation, self-esteem, resilience, and awareness of the labour market (Mandy).

When asked about the passport, Angie confidently recalled the CBI Skills:

> It's like problem solving, self-management, teamwork, application of [numeracy] and application of digital technologies and business and customer relations (Angie).

In another account, Leon also demonstrated that understanding of the links between skills was also weak. Again, this could be due to the way in which young people with learning disabilities/differences interpret information. Expertise suggests that young people with learning disabilities or Higher Functioning Autism tend to concrete thinking. They sometimes see the world in a very black and white way and find it difficult to understand the reasoning behind certain actions or procedures. This may make it difficult for them to form connections between the tasks they are performing and the skills they are using while doing it. Leon's response to the interviewer's questions highlighted this point:

> I: Do you remember what any of the, there's like 13 skills in it that you're working towards?
>
> R: That's the one thing I didn't know, no…
>
> I: So, do you understand what we mean by employability skills?
>
> R: Not really.
>
> I: So, have you, for instance, done anything here that has improved your problem-solving skills?
>
> R: No not really, everything's been perfect.
>
> I: See you said no but you've already told me one really good example that you did, the paint on the fences where you said you start that end and you start that end and you get it done quicker, that's problem solving.
>
> R: I didn't even know, I thought it was just teamwork (Leon).

Although the interviews revealed a good level of understanding around the use of the passport, the evidence suggested that, in practice, it was not being used as expected:

> I: Are you aware, did either of XXXX [name of learner] or XXXX [name of learner] bring with them their employability passport?
>
> R: I think they probably did, I think maybe [Manager 3] had that, I can't quite remember, it's not something we looked upon too much, I do think [Manager 3] brought them.

> I: But it wasn't really used in the interview then?

> R: No (Employer 2).

In one example this was because the young person had not had an opportunity to use it in an interview situation. In another instance, the young person had not felt that it was necessary to use the passport in a specific interview scenario because he was able to respond to the interview questions unassisted, but he did not rule out the possibility of using it in a different role with his employer to potentially make new colleagues aware of his learning disability and support needs – a point emphasised in his account:

> *When it came to the interview [Mentor 3], who attended the interview with me, she had it on her person at the time, I just felt it was not really necessary, I was able to go through the questions I was asked and provide what I felt was adequate answers to what was asked. It's not something I've used quite heavily this time but I found it's something which I'm happy to keep just in the event of, say if I branch into a different department when I apply for internal roles in the XXXX [name of organisation] after my Kickstart, it would be handy to have to present to people in the office just to make them aware (Will).*

In a third example it transpired that the young person looked at their passport before an interview but did not use it during the interview. Nevertheless, the subsequent excerpt underlined that although the passport was used prior to the interview, it did help the learner during her interview:

> *I: You've had an interview so you must have done some applications, so at what point in that process do you get your passport out and look at it? Are you just giving it to the employers when you get to the interviews or are you looking at it yourself?*

> *R: Before the interview I did briefly look at it just in case they may have wanted to ask me any questions on it.*

> *I: And did that help you, looking at it before the interview?*

> *R: Yes, it did because I was able to pick up on some things that I had forgotten that I had done (Angie).*

Interviews with the This-Ability employees highlighted that they were aware of the issues related to the use of the passport (albeit a lack of use) and were taking steps to address them, particularly as the restrictions due to the pandemic had ended resulting in learners returning to face-to-face sessions:

> *So, we're trying to embed it a lot more in the classroom now we're fully face to face again cos we don't want to come back in two years' time and do another big evaluation and find people still don't understand the passport (Manager 2).*

Did learners have their say about provision?

When researching whether learners were able to have their say about This-Ability provision, one interviewee made a significant point, stressing that the very existence of the This-Ability programme had in fact been due to the heavy influence of the People's Awareness of Disability Discrimination (PADD) group – a group set up during the Talent Match programme, run by and for young people with learning difficulties / disabilities and or long-term health conditions, to support employers to become disability confident and employ local talent. It was PADD's feedback that shaped This-Ability provision in the first place – a point relayed in the following narrative:

We created This-Ability because of what PADD was telling us about they don't just want that generic employability skills, you get your certificate at the end and off you go, we tailored it around the individuals and what they were telling us that they needed (Mentor 2).

Several interviews emphasised that once the programme began in the classroom, monthly reviews (in a one-to-one discussion) with learners were embedded in the programme, allowing them to feedback whether any part of the programme (such as method of delivery, resources and so on) might be changed to improve learner experience.

Beyond this structured approach to obtaining feedback, This-Ability staff and providers used different methods for encouraging young people to share their views. One account revealed the importance a provider placed on gaining independent feedback from learners, and her efforts to ensure that they could share their views anonymously, free from her influence:

At the moment XXXX [name], my colleague over at HLC, will come in periodically and again do a bit of review with them, so away from me so if there was anything they wanted to speak about that was about say me or the way we did things they could do that with her. What we also do is I've been sending out a Google forms little feedback forms about some of the events and workshops, the most recent one was just about your experience from January and February basically because we've just broke for half term, so they get to do that anonymously if they want to, they get to say what's working, have you got any suggestions about how we could improve things, anything that is a challenge (Provider 1).

Interviews conveyed that those delivering the programme encouraged learners to be open and honest when sharing their views on what might be changed to improve the programme and attempts were frequently made to gain informal feedback from learners whilst they were engaged with This-Ability provision:

On a day-to-day basis we reflect you know just informally, or we'll chat to people and say 'how do you think that went?' a lot of it you can pick up from body language really but yes as I say… we're constantly looking for feedback (Provider 4).

But every time they come to me, I am constantly checking, I will ask them the question all the time, are you happy, are you sure it's what you want, is there anything that you can do different, and I ask them to be honest with me (Provider 2).

In the narrative of the latter interviewee, reflexive practice was expressed; involving consistently reflecting on her own delivery of components of the programme so that it was appropriate to meeting learners' needs, she stated, "*I always check myself anyway that I'm delivering correctly*" (Provider 2).

Another provider explained that the large number of changes already made to their provision indicated that they were responsive to the feedback gained from learners, he commented, "*we're completely re-structuring a lot of our programmes*". It was claimed that those operating in the ethos of community development and youth work were committed to encouraging feedback in all their work, including, the This-Ability project, and acting on that feedback to improve provision – a point emphasised in one of the accounts:

A lot of us identify as community development workers and youth workers and a big part of that is public consultation in a meaningful sense and actually listening to it, changing what we do (Provider 4).

This provider went on to explain how any changes or proposed changes to provision were discussed at their weekly staff meeting. The idea of having a more structured cohort was given as an example of change to This-Ability provision as a direct result of young peoples' comments.

Changes or improvements to the This-Ability model

<div style="text-align: right">10</div>

Various narratives reaffirmed that the This-Ability model evolved with changing circumstances to reflect changing needs, allowing learners to access provision and retain engagement. A case in point was the change in the model during the lockdown, which included a number of key changes: programme eligibility criteria that learners be unemployed for six months was dropped to accommodate young people losing their jobs during lockdown; a dedicated online learning platform was developed with input from learners; This-Ability provided a 'blended learning' offer; and a Covid Champion Group was established to inform learner needs (Manager 1).

Initially, each referral of a young person went directly to This-Ability, and everyone embarked on Stage One in the classroom, then going out to the providers of work placements before entering the final stage of job search. However, in recognising that not all young people needed to complete all three stages, the model was adapted, allowing flexibility where individuals could for example, skip Stage One and go straight to Stage Two or three. In addition, to increase referrals to the programme, the model was adapted to allow providers of work placements to recruit their own learners and support them through Stage One. Whilst the retention rate of learners dropped slightly, the numbers of learners on the programme increased.

Recognising that the interconnection of the three components of the This-Ability model: Ready, Willing and Able; World of Work; and Good to Go, was not understood by learners as being part of the same programme, a change was made to address this issue. Drawing on existing staff, a new role was created to ensure engagement with learners throughout the three stages, helping them to understand that the three stages were part of one programme, i.e., This-Ability. In this role, the employee *"went out on a fortnightly, three weekly basis to continue to review and keep contact with the young people so that they understood that they were still with [This-Ability]"* (Manager 1).

When the employability passport was conceived it included the six core capabilities and seven Confederation of British Industry (CBI) skills and each one of those was categorised as bronze, silver and gold. The research revealed that within the first few weeks of using the passport in the classroom it became evident that the passport would need to be simplified. One interviewee reported, *"[it] was onerous, it was far too much writing, trying to get the quality of the text out of the mentors, it was a lot to write up, we weren't really getting the quality written up that we wanted…So we stripped it right back, now each sub-skill is just one paragraph, like 60 words that you've got to write, five to six lines of text which is working a lot better"* (Manager 2).

Another change in the programme model emerged from narratives when discussing Making Our Business Yours (MOBY). Having noticed that some learners were confused about their involvement in different aspects of This-Ability, MOBY was recently embedded into all three stages of the programme for consistency, reminding learners that they were part of a bigger project with the ultimate goal of employment. The following account relayed the issues identified and the response addressing them:

> *It's something we really noticed, that lack of continuity and lack of awareness of who we are and what we do was affecting their [learners] journey and they were going off in different directions according to who they speak to, there was no consistency, so they do need those consistent faces to keep them on track and that constant reminder of do you know what the short-term goal is, because some of our learners do struggle with their short-term memory and their concentration levels so they need it as well (Manager 3).*

Several interviewees identified potential changes to improve the programme. In one example, the provision of more holistic support was discussed. Whilst support with personal development was necessary to make an individual work ready, in a small number of cases additional support accessing benefits and or housing was identified as necessary to enter employment. The provision of phones, laptops, and so on through the This-Ability programme equipped young people with the tools they required but staff could not be sure whether those they had signposted to agencies for housing support for example, actually received that support.

When asked how the model might be improved, another response highlighted the need for more providers, stating: *"we work with four local providers who are brilliant and who will source placements and things like that, obviously the more providers we had the more opportunities we'd be able to offer young people"* (Mentor 1). He gave the example of young people wanting to do mechanics, who were unable to access opportunities in that field due to neither of the four providers offering such placements.

Conversely, a different interviewee stressed that relationships with too many providers could compromise the effectiveness of those relationships and prove difficult to maintain. She recalled the challenges pre - This-Ability (i.e., during Talent Match) when there were approximately 30 different providers (Manager 2). Ultimately, the clear message emerging from the research was that the programme was centred very much on adapting provision and doing what was in the best interests of learners:

> *We need to be able to mould to work with the learners, the providers and the employers and I think that's what we're very good at, we can see the bigger picture, we're not about targets, we're not about tick boxes. It's a key thing we've said right from Talent Match and we still say it now, if it's in the best interest of the learner we will do what we can to make it work and that's at every level, employer level, provider level or when they're with us (Manager 1).*

Flexibility from their funder allowed improvements to be made at any point during the programme. The same funder (previously called the Big Lottery) had implemented a test and learn principle to the national Talent Match programme whereby projects were actively encouraged to test ideas, and learn from what worked or did not work, making changes during the course of each project to best meet the needs of young people. This ethos, although not explicitly promoted for subsequent projects funded after the Talent Match programme, evidently remained very much at the heart of the now named National Lottery Community Fund's approach to funding and supporting projects; a point underlined in the following account:

> *The Lottery think how we think, if it's in the best interest of the young person then do it, it's not about money, it's not about, like XXXX [a different funder] we have*

> *to tick the right boxes, the focus is very much around the young person, not around the funder and I think that's why it works (Manager 1).*

In this interview, an example was provided of a recently obtained allotment to benefit young people in terms of their health and well-being, mental health, and employability skills – whilst recognising that a different funder would not have provided financial support for their plans, developed during the pandemic in response to learner needs.

Impact and outcomes

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11.1. For Young People

Interviews with the This-Ability Mentors revealed that they were seeing **increased levels of confidence** in the young people they worked with, as they progressed through the programme. Engagement with provision was reported as positively impacting on young peoples' perceptions of their own abilities, broadening their horizons in the realisation that they had strengths that could be harnessed by potential employers through making reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

In the following excerpt the mentor of a learner described the significant change she had seen in a particular learner over the course of the programme:

Yeah, to me he's a true inspiration, it's somebody who's really transformed in attitude and his application of himself. He's developed so much in confidence, when he first used to come in, he'd trot up to the room just at the start of the session, now he comes 15 or 20 minutes before it starts, he takes care of his appearance, he volunteers to contribute to a group where before we were having to entice things out... Every mentor has noticed the difference in him, he's so much happier, you speak to him on the phone and his tone of voice has changed... I think he doubted what he was capable of doing and to me he's opening up now to the fact that he can do things (Mentor 4).

Most significantly, young people themselves reported growing in confidence as a result of participating in the This-Ability programme. Several young people recalled how low their confidence had been when starting the programme and the progress they had since made:

I feel like the programme has made me grow as a person and it's made me become more confident and less shy. When I first started, I can remember [being] rather shy, I was in my shy shell (Angie).

When I came, I was nervous, I didn't want to do most of the work and then obviously it was, I was nervous at first and then next minute, keeping coming gradually my confidence was getting better and I'm getting to know the learners (Mandy).

Oh yeah massively, I wasn't full of confidence when I was on dole, well job seeker's now, used to call it dole, when I was there, I said I've got to get off and referred me to [This-Ability] it's been a massive improvement (Leon).

Young people explained that this increase in confidence was due to increased social interaction and opportunities for gaining new experiences through This-Ability. They stressed the importance of meeting new people and going to new places:

> *Like talking in a group and talking to different people, rather than people I'm used to talking to like friends or family (Brendan).*

> *Erm, basically just I think confidence in working with, especially when you're working with new people, confidence with working with new people and communicating (Daniel).*

> *I think it is going out cos I've made friends that go to that and that also helps, but going out and seeing new things, it doesn't necessarily open my eyes to more things, it mostly just narrows me to things that I can feasibly reach (David).*

> *It's definitely helped with my confidence, I just think coming to the group and meeting new people cos once I left college, I didn't really do anything or go anywhere to meet new people or anything and it's given me something to do and leave the house, get on a bus, cos that's something else that's caused anxiety, but it's a lot easier now cos I do it often. It's also given me a better idea of things I could do (Poppy).*

In another example, Leon relayed how being able to set manageable goals for himself in order to complete tasks boosted his confidence. His motivation and dedication was also revealed in his narrative when he described how he approached the tasks he was given:

> *Just day to day that little bit extra bit of stuff what I do. Like if I set a goal, say if the groundsman says can you cut the pitch, see if I can cut the pitch by 10 o'clock so I come in a bit early, have a brew and get started and by then I were finished, I try to set my goals in this what needs to be done, once I set that goal and I've finished it I set another goal, I always set little bit by little bit... and I feel more confidence doing that (Leon).*

In another case, Poppy shared how others had noticed a positive change in her since being involved in the programme. This was mainly attributed to increased confidence, for example, using public transport independently – something which had previously caused her significant stress. Poppy had also moved into **volunteering opportunities** to gain more work experience, presumably as a result of her growth in confidence:

> *My confidence is the main thing I think, I think people have said they've noticed a difference in me, before I'd get really stressed about getting a bus to come here but now I can just do it. Also, I've been volunteering at XXXX [name of organisation] alongside this and I've been going and doing that by myself. It's just helped me (Poppy).*

Evidently the programme had a positive impact on **reducing isolation** among the young people participating. They recalled that they had felt 'stuck inside the house' or afraid to meet new people, possibly as a result of the pandemic. Being involved in

This-Ability got them out of their homes whilst at the same time providing opportunities to learn – a point reiterated in the subsequent excerpts:

Yeah, I think it's definitely helped me just with confidence, it's getting me out of the house once a week rather than just being stuck in, I'm meeting new people, learning new skills which will hopefully help me get into work, so it definitely helps (Brendan).

It's getting me out of the house for two days and it's actually learning something and it's good to interact with other learners...it's really good to get out of the house because it's like, I'm stuck in and nothing to do... The first day I came I was nervous but now I'm more comfortable (Charlie).

Comparing his previous experience of living elsewhere Thomas conveyed how since moving into the area the programme had strengthened his support network locally, particularly due to the people he had met through his work placement provider.

Brendan and Lucas described how the programme had increased their **motivation** at a time in their lives when personal issues had left them dispirited. The pandemic was also highlighted by Brendan as impacting on his motivation to seek work. The following reflections conveyed how involvement in This-Ability stimulated positive change:

I think it was very beneficial for me cos after being, I'd say when I left uni I might have been at a bit of a low point in my life, I was sat around doing what felt like nothing for months, not knowing what to do with my life and when I got involved with Goodwin I did start to get a little bit of direction, a lot of the confidence that I needed to get ahead in the world and start to get a better life (Lucas).

Well before I joined, I'd got a little bit lazy, a bit unmotivated on looking for work with COVID and I had a couple of things going on at home which was unmotivating me but since coming here I've got more motivated again (Brendan).

In the latter example, having a routine and a place to go was described as an important factor - *"I think it's knowing that I'm coming once a week or so many times a week so having a day where I know I've got something happening"* (Brendan). The importance of **developing a routine** and structure was reinforced in the account of a This-Ability Mentor, when discussing a learner with a particularly chaotic lifestyle. He explained:

But slowly building the structure and Joshua's seeing what the project can offer, he's regularly coming in now, he's attending a lot more, his time keeping's a lot better, he tries to dress in more appropriate clothing, makes sure his clothes are clean, he's had a haircut, so he's obviously taking these things into account. So, they're some of Joshua's barriers that we're slowly addressing (Mentor 1).

Young people also recognised the **skills** they had developed while on the programme, such as problem-solving, teamwork and communication. In some of the examples the skills were developed by participating in new fun and challenging activities outside the classroom – detailed in the first two accounts:

Yeah, the escape room was to do with solving problems and working in a team to solve problems and the fish trail was kind of similar as well, solving the problem of where the fish are and again working in a team… Yeah, I definitely gained communication skills doing things I've never done before, I've never done them activities before (Brendan).

> R: *Yeah, I've been helping XXXX [name of participant] with his work what he has to catch up with so I've been helping him cos I've done it already.*
>
> I: *So you've taken on a little bit of a mentoring role?*
>
> R: *Yeah*
>
> I: *Do you think that's helping you develop?*
>
> R: *Yeah, like team leader skills yeah (Charlie).*

The increased independence among young people resulting from involvement in This-Ability emerged as an important finding in interviews with both learners and This-Ability staff / providers. Clearly, in some instances young people had been dependent on carers for most of their lives, so not only had to prove to themselves but also to their carers that they were capable of doing things for themselves. This-Ability allowed them to experience work and work environments, providing opportunities "*for them to become more independent...for them to escape their carers and to be able to stand up on their own two feet and saying, 'actually I'm doing it'*" (Provider 2). Indeed, individual testimonies of learners highlighted a growing sense of independence, such as that evidenced in Adam's account:

> *It's definitely helped in terms of building my confidence up cos again I've never been good at talking to people...It's still going to take probably a bit of time in terms of, not in terms of confidence but in just like going out there by myself cos I'm kind of used to having my mum there by my side, which there's nothing wrong with that but it's just knowing that I'm my own man out there in the real world (Adam).*

The increase in confidence reported by most of the young people on the programme led to them feeling a greater degree of **work readiness**, and more able to look for and apply for jobs. Essentially, involvement in This-Ability – the learning and support - helped young people to realise and begin to release their potential – a key finding substantiated in young peoples' narratives:

> *It's hard to pinpoint the most specific ones, in general the programme has made me feel a lot more confident and made me feel a little bit more ready for work because originally, I didn't feel quite ready, before I came onto the programme, I didn't quite feel ready to go into the world of work (Angie).*

> *With This-Ability, having the help with the confidence and being able to put myself out there, more and help with CVs... I was interested in and actually applying for Kickstarter roles that were going at the time... cos I wouldn't have thought of that in my wildest dreams, I was kind of considering it myself but I was like I don't know what I'm doing with myself… but thanks to the support of having XXXX [name of Mentor] and stuff who was one of my mentors and her help and gentle push (Max).*

> *I've had two [interviews]... one minute I was like I'm not going to get no interviews, next minute got them both (Mandy).*

A **greater labour market awareness** emerged from the interviews, with young people more aware, not just of the types of jobs that were available, but more focussed on what they wanted and what was achievable. The following excerpts from two interviews illustrated this:

> *Well, it's definitely helped me in terms of knowing what type of jobs are out there and in what sectors exactly (Adam).*

> *I think it's made me more focused on what I want. The biggest fear about trying to head into the workplace or what I'll end up doing with my life is that I did not know what, it's not necessarily I didn't know what I want, it was more I didn't know what I could achieve as well, but now I feel more focused now I actually have some goals that feel tangible (David).*

Undoubtedly, the programme was moving young people closer to employment and in several cases, helping them **into employment.** In two cases these were into roles at a This-Ability provider where the young person was already known and had proven their ability. Of benefit, employers in these examples were aware of individuals' needs and how to accommodate them to support their employment:

> *So, Mandy, after being on This-Ability programme I'd say a year and a half, has successfully got a Kickstart vacancy within Hull FC and she's been working within this role for a good five, six months so she knows the job and was interviewed for a Kickstart and she was successful in gaining it (Mentor 3).*

> *Due to my course being at HKR Craven Park I found out there were vacancies in the catering/events team. I gave them my CV and I am now working on a zero-hour contract. This was done off my own back because of the relationship I had built up with management staff. It makes a big difference when employers already knew you have a learning difficulty and what your limitations are. I will continue to work hard and prove that disabled employees do have a place in the workplace (Emma).*

In another example, Lucas secured work in an events team at a local entertainment venue. He described their role as involving ticketing, checking people in, helping people to their seats and ensuring all phones were turned off. Although Lucas was furloughed due to the national lockdowns, the evidence suggested that he was being taken back on by the company. When asked about the job he commented, "*I think I'm starting again next month, I got an email from them yesterday saying about my role possibilities, finding when I was available*" (Lucas).

The Kickstart Scheme mentioned earlier in the report led to positive outcomes for young people on This-Ability. Although four Kickstart placements were reported in an interview, in reality in excess of 15 placements were formally recorded by This-Ability. The opportunities presented by such placements for learners with learning disabilities were emphasised by an employer. He explained that without the scheme the competency-based interviews forming part of their organisation's recruitment process would have proved a barrier to employment.

Manager 3 described positive outcomes for young people coming to the end of their placements with some young people potentially moving into other roles with their employer. They reported:

We have some businesses that are allowing them to apply for roles now, like XXXX [name of business] for example, which is great, so we placed two guys in there… and they're looking for internal jobs for both of them at the minute so that's really good and we have a really nice relationship so we can support them in their new roles as well as the Kickstart roles (Manager 3).

However, the time-limited nature of the Kickstart placements meant that some young people were not kept on. Manager 3 relayed the provision the This-Ability programme had put in place to move these young people back into employment:

What we have seen with Kickstart is where the six months ends and then there's no funding for the job anymore and they come out of work. What we have done for that group is we've put on an extra session where we get them in fresh out of work experience and try to move them into other roles (Manager 3).

With Kickstart coming to an end in mid-2022, it was recognised that the long-term outcomes for young people accessing the scheme through the This-Ability programme would be better assessed once adequate information was available on those who were able to remain in employment after the six-month Kickstart period.

Not every outcome from the programme was positive however, and sometimes young people **withdrew or dropped-off** from provision. Mentor 2 described how, when this happened, the This-Ability team engaged with other agencies involved with the young person to enable the participant to re-engage with the programme if/when they felt ready:

When I spoke to XXXX [name of This-Ability staff] we said that we'd put him on pause or end his programme right now. I spoke to the Youth Hub and they're going to continue working with him until they think he's in that right place again, hopefully not the same as last time and he will actually be in a place to look for work and then we've said we're more than happy for him to be referred back to us (Mentor 2).

Evidence from the interviews underscored that the positive outcomes from the programme would not have happened without the carefully designed and delivered This-Ability project, with a strength-based approach at its core and provision focused on assisting young people to realise their potential. Lucas recalled how time spent on the programme helped him to think more positively about having a disability:

…for a while one thing that I was worried about when searching for jobs, I thought being disabled would come as a negative, I thought I'd be a less likely candidate compared to someone who wasn't disabled, so that was a worry but I'm so glad that by the time I was involved in Goodwin and applying for jobs those worries seemed to have stopped which was a great relief (Lucas).

Mentor 1 explained that staff on the programme worked closely with learners to help them to realise and release their potential by fostering positivity and self-belief in the young people during the course of the programme. In most cases, years and years of being told and believing that they were limited by their learning disability / difficulty had to be undone by staff reiterating that it was their condition(s) that required better accommodation by employers, educators and so on, and that the deficiency was not in the young people – a point firmly made in the next excerpt:

I think a lot of the time we just bring out what's already there but a lot of it is buried quite deep, they've often been told they can't do things or they can't do this because of autism or you can't do this cos of dyslexia and what we tend to do is you can do this because of autism, you are really well equipped to go and do this,

or you might have failed at that in the past but if we make these small changes there's no reason why you couldn't do this task (Mentor 1).

The tailored and sector specific employability skills offered by the programme were also identified as contributing to the positive outcomes for young people. Significantly, the 'tailored' approach of This-Ability set it apart from generic mainstream providers of education, employment and training. The responsiveness of the programme to meeting young peoples' needs was reinforced in the following account:

A lot of our learners have been through programme after programme and they've gone through employability skills and we created This-Ability because of what PADD was telling us about they don't just want that generic employability skills, you get your certificate at the end and off you go, we tailored it around the individuals and what they were telling us that they needed (Mentor 2).

A number of cases demonstrated that the This-Ability programme had been successful in engaging and meeting the needs of learners with learning disabilities/difficulties where other provision had not. For example, Kevin had previous experience of another employability skills programme that had failed to keep him engaged. He concurred that the one-to-one support from This-Ability and regularity of attendance to sessions made the difference and kept him engaged with this programme. He explained:

What's kept me engaged with this and not backing out is because I'm getting that one-to-one support, I'm getting the likes of seeing people on a weekly basis whereas if it was going to be say two weeks or we'll do this session and then two weeks' time, that would not, I would not like that because I like to be able to keep myself busy because I keep myself busy, I know what I'm doing (Kevin).

In another case, Will (who moved into employment) stressed the importance of having support from This-Ability when job searching. When asked about his difficulty job searching and the assistance that he received with it through the programme, he reported:

I did initially try [to job search] and then through my efforts of trying to find work previously I sort of had a realisation that I needed some sort of support to get interviews, so that's when college… recommended me to This-Ability (Will).

11.2. For Employers

Employers described the positive impact on their organisations of taking on young people from the This-Ability programme. Akin to employees without specific needs, the young people demonstrated their **productivity** in completing tasks and providing organisations with **additional resource** in terms of their time and skills. When relaying the benefits of providing a Kickstart placement to a learner from the This-Ability programme, two employees from the same organisation recognised the young person as being an asset to their organisation who had increased organisational capacity. Their narratives emphasised this point:

He's done some work for me populating spreadsheets for evidence review and the evidence review officers because that was way behind...I believe he's already been involved as well in some of the digital uploads, so from CCTV, what the officers need for cases so that's made a massive difference because this is all time-saving as well because officers have got so much to do now they've changed the format of files and what we have to now submit to the CPS has increased in volume and the demand is there as well so that's really helped with that (Employer 1).

I think for the department people are now starting to realise certainly how he can be a benefit and how he is a benefit...whilst people have recognised that he's got learning difficulties and they've also recognised at the same time that they seem to be very mild, with me he's performing a role or roles that were performed by somebody else...it's support that's much needed and two individuals can support a department better than one and I think that's the positive impact in the department is that they can see that effectively that support has increased 100% because it's not just me doing the role (Employer 3).

Employer 4 described how the experience of taking on a young person with learning differences/disabilities had **changed their perception** of how difficult it might be to accommodate and work with someone with different needs. Indeed, the experience had been a smooth one and less time consuming than anticipated. Vital to its success was the support provided by MOBY to both employer and the young person on the placement. Arguably, without such targeted support the placement might have required more input (resource) from the employer. In the subsequent narrative, the employer's positivity about proactively working with people with disabilities in future projects was conveyed:

I've worked with people before who've had physical disabilities and we've managed really well. This has been a learning [curve] for me but I think it's fantastic because the support [Mentor 3's] given us would make me more comfortable in doing the same thing again but on a different project because it's been easier than I thought it would be and it hasn't been as time-consuming as I thought initially it might be. So, I think it's been a good experience on the whole and that's great for all us cos it's easy to shy away from and we didn't want to have to do that (Employer 4).

By focusing on the positive impacts on, and outcomes for, both employers and people with learning disabilities/difficulties, This-Ability staff demonstrated a commitment to encouraging reasonable adjustments to be made for employees with specific needs in workplaces. For example, This-Ability staff were keen to address employer fears about the costs (in time or money) involved in making reasonable adjustments, by stressing that entire workforces could benefit from certain adjustments, as Manager 3 explained:

So what we're starting to do is build up case studies of how, for example, NVDA [screen reading software] can help not just your learner who's got visual impairment or dyslexia, how it can help the whole workforce because if you install it for one person you can have it for everybody and that means if someone's got an undiagnosed condition like dyslexia they can use it...so we just need to build those relationships and show them that these adjustments that appear to be big aren't that big but they don't just benefit one person, they can benefit everybody (Manager 3).

Conclusions – Key findings and recommendations

<div style="text-align: right">**12**</div>

1. Based on a range of perspectives - the young people involved in This-Ability, This-Ability staff, and employers - the research found that the main programme aim of moving young people with learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions closer to employment was being achieved. **A whole package of support enabled young people on the programme to become work ready, and in some cases enter employment and sustain employment.** According to quantitative data collected as part of the evaluation almost two-fifths of participants who completed the programme have achieved an employment outcome (i.e., were in employment/self-employment at either the exit or post-exit stages). Those who accessed the most intensive support and were furthest from the labour market when they started the programme were most likely to have positive employment outcomes.

2. Continuity, provided through the same staff supporting young people on This-Ability, ensured that learners continued to engage with the programme, and their needs were understood in depth, encouraging trust and confidence to grow. **Familiarity and trust emerged as integral factors to retaining learners' involvement in, and progression through, the programme.**

   Where continuity was problematic in specific aspects of the programme such as MOBY, the project has begun to address gaps in learners' understanding about MOBY's role, by embedding MOBY in all three stages of the programme. Moving forward, it is recommended that similarly, the passport is also embedded in the programme - whilst learners understood the principles behind the passport, this document was not being used in interviews with employers, as envisioned when the This-Ability model was developed.

3. Further to the above, a key message from this research was the significance of building relationships and trust between project staff and learners. This enabled greater engagement in all aspects of the programme, from the core learning provision to participation in evaluation activities - allowing project mentors to more effectively support learners.

   Good working relationships between project stakeholders were also identified as an **important factor in the success of the This-Ability programme.** Close working with key referral points was shown to be an effective means of increasing appropriate referrals into the programme.

   The MOBY team cultivated relationships with employers to effectively match and support learners into employment opportunities, increasing positive outcomes for learners and the employers. Employers repeatedly discussed the importance of being able to draw on MOBY staff (often at short notice), who acted as intermediaries between employers and young people, to resolve any work-related issues.

4. The research found that the **This-Ability programme delivered positive outcomes for young people through the development of employability skills gained in both classroom activities and through work experience**. However, such programmes are part of a bigger system that simultaneously needs to align resources and ways of working to support employees with specific needs for long-term outcomes to be achieved. **Without reasonable adjustments, for example by employers, the employment aspirations of young people with learning difficulties / disabilities who are work ready cannot be realised.**

5. The interconnections between for example, **individuals' learning disabilities or difficulties and external factors such as precarious housing and or being in controlling relationships, combined to exacerbate the challenges of some individuals on the programme** attempting to move closer to employment. Efforts of staff to support young people with not only their learning but also to resolve some of their external challenges were evidenced in the research. In a few cases, the circumstances were so complex, requiring ongoing intensive support, that staff recognised it in the best interests of individuals to temporarily halt their involvement, or not continue, with the programme.

6. **A holistic approach to supporting young people was central to the This-Ability programme,** in recognition that without practical or wellbeing support, for example, young people would struggle to enter and sustain employment. By signposting individuals to mental health services, building their confidence to use public transport, buying electronic equipment and suitable clothing in some cases, providing advice on hygiene, and so on, most aspects of learners' needs were accommodated. Of note, programme employees were very aware of the importance of 'promoting' independence in young people. Growing food plants on the allotment and lessons in basic cooking skills both aimed to foster independence.

7. **The flexibility of provision allowed the This-Ability programme to adapt to meet learner needs and respond to changing circumstances**, as was demonstrated most clearly during the global pandemic. Flexibility (permitted and supported by the funder) allowed the programme to effectively meet the needs of individual learners through a person-centred approach that tailored the learning delivery and environment to different needs through simple adjustments.

    The legacy of the national Talent Match programme underpinned by **a 'test and learn'** principle was apparent in how This-Ability courageously accepted change when aspects of the programme did not work, or could work better and made the relevant changes to improve them. For example, a departure from the initial model, allowing learners to skip stages of the programme according to their needs demonstrated that responsiveness and flexibility were at the heart of the programme.

8. Whilst flexibility allowed the programme to operate during the most challenging circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, a general consensus emerged amongst This-Ability staff that **face-to-face delivery of the programme was vital to making young people work ready.** Without establishing a daily routine of waking up on time, taking care in their hygiene and physical presentation and leaving their homes to access learning environments, the young people were detached from the reality of work, which required following the same processes.

9. The **increased confidence of young people due to their involvement in This-Ability emerged as a strong and recurring theme** during the research. Undoubtedly, improved confidence underpinned the positive impacts on, and

outcomes for, young people, who pushed themselves beyond their comfort zones, motivated by self-belief and the belief that This-Ability employees and employers demonstrated in them.

10. Related to the above finding were the 'high challenge high support' principles underlying the programme, whereby **learners reported feeling challenged by This-Ability activities/opportunities which pushed them outside their comfort zones**. High support i.e., the tools, resources, mentors and so on provided through the programme enabled learners to achieve their learning and practical goals.

11. A detailed understanding of the programme and a strong commitment to achieving the best outcomes for young people with learning disabilities or difficulties and or long-term health conditions was rooted in **the longevity of the This-Ability staff team** – the same core team involved in the project since the inception of Talent Match. It was questionable as to whether without **their long-term dedication, depth of understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by young people, and continuity of learning and responsiveness**, the programme would have been so successful in moving individuals closer to employment or in some cases into employment.

12. Various components of **the This-Ability programme successfully increased labour market awareness amongst its learners,** who became aware of, and more focused on their strengths and preferences in terms of job roles. Evidently, they learnt about the different job sectors and in many cases were able to gain work experience to develop their skills and confidence, but also to confirm whether they were pursuing employment in the correct field, in line with their skill sets and interests.

Appendix 1

Core capabilities

Theme	Sub Skill	Framework Criteria: An individual…
Reliability	Time Management	• Attendance, regular attendance, timely • Attends all sessions, including 1-2-1 sessions
	Taking Responsibility	• Completing tasks given • Taking responsibility for appearance & presentation • Taking responsibility for travel
	Following Procedures	• Phoning in for non-attendance • Follows procedures for tasks
Openness	Understanding personal capacity	• Asking for help • Understanding what is reasonable
	Disclosing & barriers	• Understand and articulate own abilities • Understand advantages/disadvantages of disclosing disabilities • Understanding what is reasonable
	Honesty & willingness	• It's OK if things go wrong/taking responsibility for mistakes • Understanding importance of being honest
Resilience	Dealing with criticism	• Responding to criticism • Recognizing constructive criticism
	Managing problems	• Dealing with the unexpected • Problem solving skills • Know when and who to ask for help
	Perspective	• Dealing with knock backs • Maintains proportionate response to problems

Motivation	Responding to challenges	• Willingness to try new things • Fully engage with activities
	Goal setting	• Ability to set own long term and short goals • Ability to set realistic goals • Taking initiative
	Optimism	• To be open minded about new experiences • Being hopeful about your future
Self-esteem	Self-belief	• Dealing with nerves • Willingness to try new things
	Confidence	• Decision making • Recognising when you have done well
	Self-respect	• Taking pride in your-self and your work • Being able to take compliments/praise
Awareness of the labour market	Know what is meant by 'the labour market'	• Know what is meant by 'the labour market'
	Understanding the local labour market	• Knowing what's available locally • Understanding changes to local labour market • Know the variety of roles and levels available
	Personal capacity	• Understanding what roles/levels are suitable • Be open minded about opportunities and roles

Confederation of British Industries (CBI) Skills

Theme	Sub Skill	Framework Criteria: An individual…
Self - Management	Time Management	• Understands the importance of managing time effectively and demonstrates effective attendance & punctuality over a sustained period (min. 95% for each) • Actively plans own work independently, including monitoring progress against suitable milestones • Can prioritise work & identify key people to provide support where required
	Professionalism	• Understands & demonstrates appropriate personal presentation for the working environment • Understands & demonstrates appropriate behaviour for the working environment (e.g. use of mobile, politeness)
	Resilience	• Recognises key motivators & de-motivators in work situations, and understands the impact of motivated and de- motivated staff on other individuals & the business • Can identify what motivates self and how this may influence own performance, demonstrating resilience (being able to 'bounce back') when encounters difficulties or makes mistakes • Demonstrates a consistent positive attitude as well as ability to adapt to change or changing circumstances
Teamwork	Collaboration	• Recognises the strengths, skills & experiences of the different team members • Helps allocate roles & responsibilities within the team to achieve goals / tasks / activities • Actively & positively interacts with others to ensure team success, including: making contributions - sharing skills • & knowledge; offering help, support &/or advice; responding positively to advice & positive criticism
	Goal Setting	• Contributes to setting goals and associated tasks • Helps devise a team plan to achieve the goal/s • Follows a plan to complete the team tasks/activities
	Reliability, Trust & Respect	• Is consistently reliable & dependable • Trusts other team members to carry out their roles • Respects the contributions made by others
Business & Customer Awareness	Big picture of Business	• Understands the varying objectives & drivers for different types of business/industry within the Humber: • e.g. public v. private; national v. local; SME v large • Understands how Humber businesses/industries (min 3) differ in relation to: ownership; purpose; customer base; employment opportunities & skills required
Business Awareness & Customer Skills cont.	Customer Care	• Can identify for a range of Humber businesses/industries (min 3), both internal & external customers and their needs & expectations with respect to customer care • Can identify the types of qualities needed to be able to provide excellence in customer care • Demonstrates the ability & skills to respond appropriately to routine & non-routine enquiries, made by both internal & external customers

	Cultures, Values & Beliefs	• Understands how own cultural & ethical values & beliefs can impact own work principles & practice • Understands how work principles & practice vary between different business/industry sectors
Problem Solving	Logical & Systematic Approach	• Understands the types of problems that arise in the workplace, and how to use sources of help • Breaks down problems into manageable parts & identifying key factors • Offers a number of options to solve routine & non routine problems, considering the effectiveness of each
	Reasoning	• Deals readily with routine information & figures
	Decisiveness	• Demonstrates initiative • Makes sound decisions based on a balanced consideration of information & options available • Presents plans to carry out solutions to solve workplace problems
Communication & Literacy	Speaking & Listening	• Adapts verbal contributions to suit the audience, purpose & situation (min 3) • Uses 'open questions' effectively • Demonstrates effective listening skills, and responds effectively to questions
	Reading	• Can read, understand & use a range of different texts (min 3) to draw out relevant information • Can read & summarise succinctly, information & ideas from different sources (min 3)
	Writing	• Produces written work that is clear & well presented for a range of texts (min 3) • Constructs written work that is accurately spelt with correct grammar & punctuation, containing appropriate sentence & paragraph structures, suitable for 3 different types of audiences
Application of Numeracy	Good Numeracy Skills in workplace settings	• Carries out calculations & arithmetic (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, etc.) with numbers of any size in practical contexts, to a given number of decimal places • Checks mathematical procedures / steps taken • Demonstrates good mental arithmetic, supported by use of appropriate technology or paper
	Practical application	• Uses numeracy skills to solve problems in familiar & unfamiliar contexts & situations • Applies maths to solve straightforward work-based problems relating to quantities, fractions & percentages • Collects & represents data (discrete & continuous), using ICT where appropriate
	Budgeting & Finance	• Understands 'cost', 'profit' & 'loss' and their inter-relationship within the workplace • Solves common financial problems in a work context
Application of Digital Technologies	Safeguarding, Security & IT Management	• Good awareness of the importance of safeguarding & security practices for all types of media, consistently following agreed procedures • Stores & retrieves information securely & accurately • Respects others when using ICT-based communication
	Awareness of the digital age & its use in	• Understands the effective use of a range of social media & tools in the workplace for branding & marketing, recruitment & selection, for a range of Humber businesses/industries (min. 3)

	different sectors	• Understands the effective use, as well as the consequences of inappropriate use of social media in and outside of the workplace • Acts responsibly & within legal requirements when using social media, either in the workplace &/or for self
	Application of ICT	• Applies IT applications for routine & non routine tasks in familiar & unfamiliar contexts & situations, including for text, tables, graphics, records, numerical data, charts, graphs (e.g. through the use of word processing, spread- sheets & presentation software) • Uses appropriate search techniques to locate & select information (e.g. search engines) • Uses communication software to receive & respond to email appropriately, including electronic messages, attachments & contacts

Appendix 2

Participant Consent Form

Participants' Copy

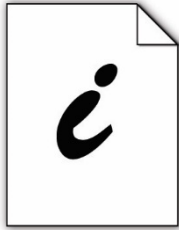| |
|---|
| **Title of project: This-Ability** |
| **Name of Researchers: Norman Richards**

Contact Number: 01482 330230

Email: norman.richards@hlc-vol.org |

Before taking part in this project you decide if you agree with this form. This is called 'giving consent'.

Please tick the box if you **agree:**

 I have read and understand the information sheet. ☐

 I understand that I can say yes or no. ☐

 I understand I can stop if I want to. ☐

 I agree to the interviews being recorded. ☐

 I agree that what I say can be used in future research. ☐

I understand that my name will be kept private.

☐

I understand that if there is a safeguarding concern, that the researcher will need to tell someone.

☐

I understand that the recorded interview will be transferred to Sheffield Hallam University's secure file storage.

☐

At the end of the study I understand that Sheffield Hallam University may have to keep the information for up to 10 years. People will be able to look at this only if my name is kept private.

☐

Please tick **one** of the boxes below.

I **do** want to take part.

I **do not** want to take part.

Name

Date

Signature

_____

_____

_____

To be filled in by the researcher:

I confirm that I have explained the research study to the person whose name is written above.

Name of researcher:

Date:

Signature: