

Employment and wellbeing experience: Qualitative report

By the Research & Citizen Insight team, Policy Unit



Essex County Council

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Background and aims

With the gradual ease out of lockdown and the furlough scheme ending in September 2021, ECC needs to proactively plan for the increased and changing demand on employment services.

These circumstances will potentially create a new cohort of individuals who have not needed to previously engage with these services.

A broader programme of work is underway to understand financial resilience across the county, but there is a need to build on the broader financial resilience programme and gather **views, perspectives and feelings** from residents and businesses to **bring the experiences** of changed employment due to Covid-19 to life.

This research will inform and support the development of the employment services strategy.

Desired outcomes and objectives

The qualitative deep dive is aimed at understanding:

- How the employment experience during Covid-19 impacted **wellbeing**
- How Essex residents are **feeling** about their employment opportunities
- The internal and external **challenges, barriers and opportunities** to re-entering the job market
- What **support** Essex residents need to realise employment opportunities as the country eases out of lockdown
- The challenges, barriers and opportunities for **SMEs** seeking new employees
- Identify what **support SMEs need** to recruit and skills match

RESEARCH APPROACH



RESIDENT EXPERIENCE

- We conducted In-depth virtual interviews with residents that have experienced impacts to their employment due to Covid-19.
- **12** residents participated in one to one virtual interviews:

Characteristic of interest	N=
Male	2
Female	10
Younger residents (under 34 y.o.)	3
Households with children	2
Lower income HH (<£25k)	3
Furloughed	7
Redundancy	6
Actively job hunting at time of interview	8

- A survey screener was circulated to recruit participants to interviews. We reached a total of 296 residents.
- Please note the sample is not representative of the Essex population due to a primarily social media focused sampling method.



BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

- In-depth interviews with SME business owners that have had their businesses impacted in a way that affected their employees or employment plans.
 - For example, putting employees on furlough or changing recruitment plans.
- All business owners were either actively recruiting or looking to in the near future.
- **4** business owners participated in one to one virtual interviews.
- A survey screener was circulated to recruit business owners to interviews. We reached a total of 79 businesses.
- Please note the sample is not representative of the Essex business population, results are indicative only.

SUMMARY

Lack of confidence and uncertainty are the core underlying internal barriers to overcome; reinforced by an overwhelming job market where support for specific needs is hard to find

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Clear information and tailored advice would boost confidence in job hunting; supporting overall mental and emotional wellbeing

- External barriers to job hunting focus on:
 - Not knowing where to start due to **volume of routes**
 - **Lack of jobs** available either within sectors or at the right level
 - Difficulty finding **appropriate information and advice** that is individually tailored
 - Lack of appropriate/transferable **skills**
- Sector switchers, those out of the job market for a while, senior or newly skilled are particularly vulnerable to these barriers.
- This can result in the process feeling demoralising, confusing and adding to a lack of confidence which could prevent 'serious' job hunting.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Services centred around emotional support would help residents overcome the initial internal barriers and create future plans

- The **uncertainty** and **loss of control** over individual situations trigger feelings of **stress, anxiety, loss of confidence / self-esteem** and **depression**.
- The unexpected situations could cause some feelings of shame and a reluctance to seek help.
- Emotional responses are the first hurdles to overcome when re-entering the job market; many citing the need to **'re-gain' lost confidence**.
- Some felt employers were not supportive enough during the process; though employers acknowledge challenges but felt **ill-equipped to appropriately support** employees.

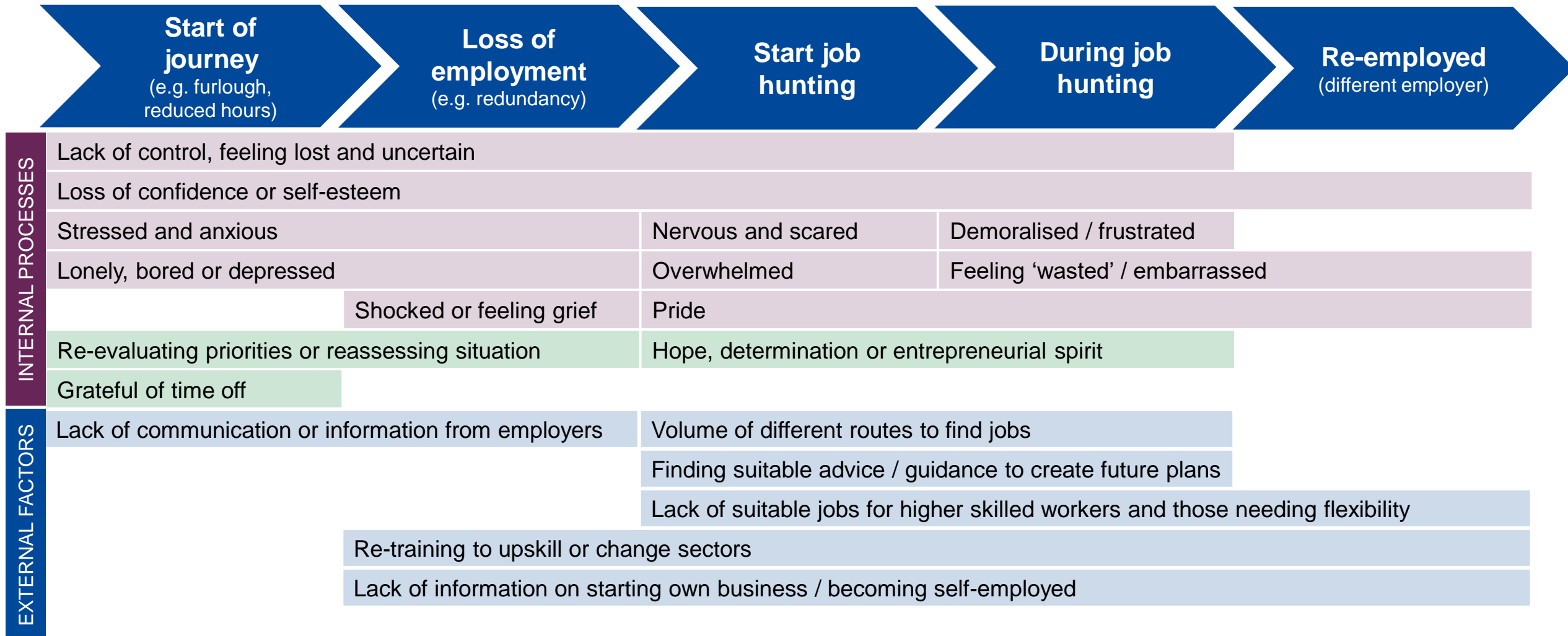
CHANGED PRIORITIES

Residents are increasingly looking for flexibility and a work / life balance which can be difficult to find

- Unplanned changes to circumstances prompted **re-evaluation of priorities**
- Redundancy, furlough and casual working providing a 'safety net' around finances.
- **Flexibility** and a **'change of pace'** for a better work/life balance become higher priorities; particularly for working parents and older residents.
- Adding to the frustration of job hunting; employers seen to be inflexible leading to a feeling of 'wasting skills'.
- Employers response to changing priorities:
 - A need for flexible working/ hiring themselves but uncertain of options
 - Unable to find employees willing to fit to the mould required.

JOURNEY OF BARRIERS

External factors beyond the individuals' control can escalate loss of confidence, uncertainty and frustration with the job hunting process



SUPPORT NEEDED FOR RESIDENTS

A holistic approach to employment support, considering wellbeing as well as practicalities, is needed to de-mystify the job hunting process



PRACTICAL SUPPORT:

Simplify a daunting process for all

Personalised recruitment service – staff need to recognise suitable cross-sector skills and how to boost confidence; focus comms around careers services tailored to individuals (e.g. Talk to Paul).

Easily accessible information – reflect on navigation through support services e.g. looking to switch careers, becoming self-employed etc; 'cheat sheets' tailored to sectors e.g. C.V. writing, interview questions, job platforms.

Short term, flexible training courses – Sign-post courses that are flexible and fast turnaround to provide candidates with the 'on paper' skills to re-enter employment or explore different sectors.

Careers events – Provide a flavour of 'what else is out there', targeted at all age groups, for example those switching sectors, looking for a change of career or looking to make contacts.

Flexible careers match – support required to match higher skilled individuals with flexible working; consider language used in job adverts or incorporating high skilled employers within the U-Flexi Portal (or similar).



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

Mentally and emotionally prepare to start a new journey

Smoothing over the practical barriers to the job market for residents will support emotional wellbeing and personal motivation during the re-employment process.

Counselling - targeted at people going through this process to help to come to terms with the changes and move forwards. Particularly for those further on in their careers.

Peer to peer coaching or mentoring schemes - help build confidence and exposure to different types of employment; target at all age groups e.g. the younger groups starting careers and older groups changing careers.

SUPPORT NEEDED FOR BUSINESSES

Businesses desire simple, accessible advice and guidance. A personal touch is vital, either via employment experts or SME peers

Information on how to expand small businesses / reach more customers

For example, simple, practical guides on how to:

- effectively promote businesses (cost effectively) through social media.
- Pivot or repurpose business areas that are no longer a viable business option (e.g. function spaces).

Information and support on how to recruit for flexible hour / part-time contracts

- U-Flexi portal has the potential to fill this gap, by offering a service to match employers and employees flexibility needs.
- Support around how to write job profiles to advertise flexible working.
- Clearer information on how to employ via apprenticeship scheme or work experience at part-time or flexible hours.

Peer to peer forums or coaching schemes for businesses

Bringing small businesses in similar situations / sectors together to provide support in terms of how to expand, diversify or go to recruit suitable candidates

Work closely with businesses to identify skills required to ensure job profiles are manageable

Incorporate coaching around skills matching from different sectors i.e. which candidates would hold skills required from different sectors, how to advertise more openly for a broader spectrum of candidates (i.e. manageable job profiles) and where to advertise.

Requires a tailored, personalised service which is also a desire of candidates.

Advice and guidance around how employers can support employees wellbeing; in the short and long term

Immediate need to help employers navigate how to support employees returning to work off furlough or reduced hours.

Longer term opportunity to utilise focus on wellbeing over the pandemic to promote training, such as MHFA, as beneficial to maintain employees mental and emotional wellbeing



PRACTICAL SUPPORT

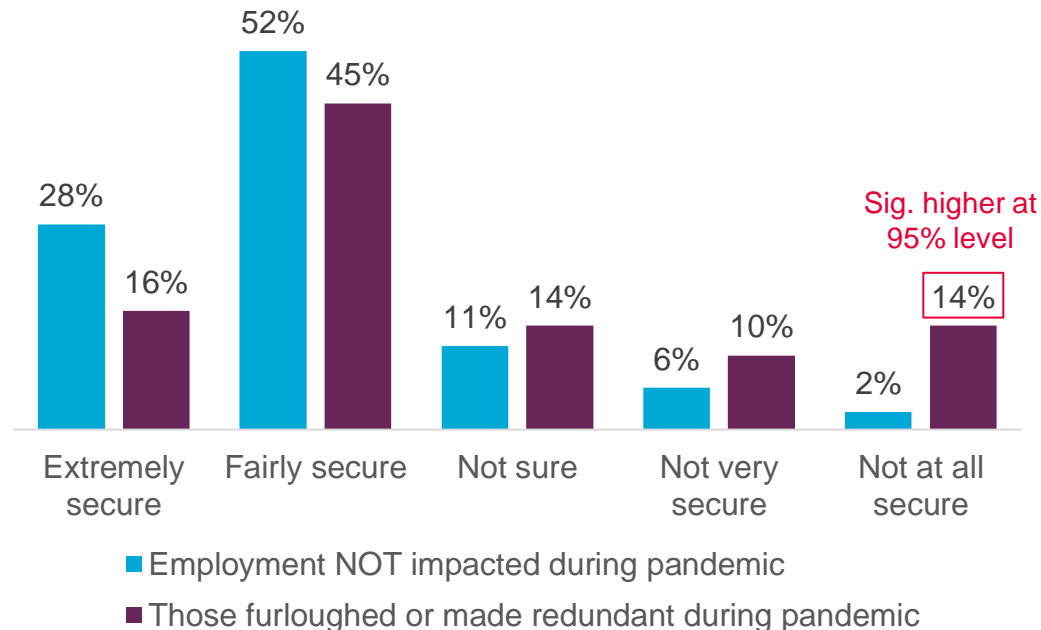
Clear information and tailored advice would boost confidence in job hunting; supporting overall mental and emotional wellbeing

JOB MARKET

Job market confidence is low; driven by a lack of jobs, volume of job hunting routes, difficulty finding information and a need to shift sectors and skills

Those experiencing job loss or furlough understandably feel significantly less secure in their employment situations

How are you currently feeling in terms of job security?



Candidates currently job hunting lack confidence in having the right skills to find employment:

- **17%** of those currently job hunting feel very / fairly confident in finding suitable employment (n=71*)
- This declines to **5%*** if employment has been impacted since the pandemic (n=21*)

Participants cite a tough job market is driven by:

- The volume of different routes into the job market
- Lack of jobs on the market – resulting in fierce competition
- Difficulty finding appropriate information and advice
- Need to shift sectors and difficulty skills matching

OVERWHELMING STARTING POINT

Getting started feels overwhelming and de-moralising; particularly for the highly skilled, older residents and those changing sectors

Volume of routes

Volume of job sites feels overwhelming, candidates are unsure where to start or where to go for advice.

Most impacted:

- **Older candidates:** less equipped to navigate digital landscape
- **Sector changers:** unsure which job site to start with

Lack of jobs

Perception of tough competition for few job vacancies (note that vacancies once again on the rise*)

Most impacted:

- **Sector changers:** aware they are up against candidates with relevant sector skills.
- **Higher skilled workers:** relevant job roles few and far between can feel like a 'waste of skills' applying for junior roles.
- **Working parents:** few part-time/ flexible opportunities available
- **Specialised sectors:** not all sectors have a big presence in Essex, meaning competition is greater.

Emotional triggers

Can be **de-moralising**, particularly when teamed with the lack of confidence and nervousness about job hunting to begin with:

- Nervousness / fear of getting started
- Confused
- Overwhelmed
- De-moralised
- Trigger a lack of confidence in applying for roles which can run through to interview stage

"[I thought] wow this is the worst time for this to happen...particularly for me as I was pretty senior there are not going to be that many roles at that level anyway...this is going to be long and painful...scared and worried about financial future". (Female, 35-44, redundant)

"If you've got a specialist skills, you feel like there is no hope, unless you go back to working full time and in that case I feel like I am sacrificing the kids". (Female, 35-44, redundant from part-time role, working parent)

NAVIGATING OPTIONS

Desire for a personalised job service to help candidates navigate the job market and provide support to lift confidence



Finding the information

Acknowledgment that information and basic advice is available but higher level support is hard to find.

Many cited the need for a personal service to help with:

- how to transition skills / skills match
- tailor C.V.s to new sectors
- identify interview questions to expect
- identifying opportunities / routes to upskill

Some realising the best route would be to start their own business or go self-employed, but unsure where to go to find basic information about how to do this.

"I was job hunting, and, I have applied for six jobs and never go an interview with any of them, so I'm following my environmental passion, and I want to open up a refill shop plastic-free" (Female, 35-44).

Tailored advice

Online careers advice feels 'out of the box' and not relevant to what many were looking for.

Desire for a more personal touch that would help candidates formulate future plans.

- This will further help to build confidence going for jobs outside of current sectors.

Emotional triggers

- Overwhelmed
- De-moralised
- Confused
- Frustrated
- Lack confidence

"I feel very isolated at the moment, I can look online for job, but it will nice to be able to have a face to face contact with someone that can go through and support with looking, you know" (Female, 55-64)

Information and support currently available / in pipeline primarily aimed at younger people (e.g. Business Accelerator pilot programme; mentoring schemes).

A potential gap identified for our older residents that have experienced employment loss at the 'top of their game'.

*"I used a government career website and put in my experiences, but it felt a bit **unpersonal, a bit scatter gun** on the options [of new careers] it gave you, I need to **speak to an actual person** to talk through options". (Male, 55-64, furlough)*

TRANSFERRING SKILLS

Changing sectors is a core trigger for lack of confidence due to difficulty finding support to transfer skills or upskill in a new area

Those in sectors most impacted by Covid-19 accepted the need to switch sectors. Yet, this felt overwhelming due to:

- 1 **Uncertainty** of what they wanted to do or suitable sectors.
- 2 Senior, highly skilled candidates struggled to **convey transferable skills**. Job descriptions felt too detailed so despite having transferable skills they can't 'tick the box'.
- 3 Believe employers '**write them off**' for having too much or different experience. Linked with a **reluctance to take less skilled roles**.
- 4 Difficulty finding the **right support and information**.
- 5 Open to retraining but struggling to find information; perception that **retraining was not flexible** around needs.

These barriers to shift employment can culminate into feelings of:

- 1 **Feeling lost and uncertain** – a need for direction and ability to make future plans.
- 2 **Nervousness and loss of self-esteem** – for example, when applying against those with sector experience.
- 3 **De-moralised** – for example, when rejected for jobs they feel they could do.
- 4 **Embarrassed** – at having to take lower skilled, lower paid work vs. previous vocation.

Felt most strongly by older candidates that tended to be higher skilled and less willing to completely retrain or move sectors. **Younger candidates displayed more emotional resilience** in terms of shifting future focus despite this still feeling daunting.



CASE STUDY - REBECCA, 51, JOB HUNTING

Rebecca* was made redundant shortly before the pandemic hit, from a senior role she was very passionate about which had a high profile within her community. This had a big impact on her emotionally.

*“I actually felt like I had a **bereavement**. I felt a lot of grief and I didn’t really know what I wanted to do...it was very unique... it’s **hard to find another job** where you feel you’re having **that much impact** on a lot of people.”*

Following redundancy, Rebecca worked front-of-house in a B&B for a short period before it closed during lockdown (not eligible for furlough), as well as a delivery driver for a friend’s local business. Rebecca has found the change difficult, but describes some benefits of ‘slowing down’.

*“I’ve gone from earning £45K a year to £78 a week. I had to **lower my expectations**...found it very **difficult to content myself** with low income, basic wage jobs...feel you’ve had a **fall from grace**...can feel a bit **embarrassed** [when seen as delivery driver by people who know her]...but it’s quite nice to have some leisure time...when you’re forced to get off the wheel you start to **view your life in a different way**.”*

Rebecca has a marketing degree and while she feels she has the necessary skills and experience, she finds it difficult to ‘tick the box’ and evidence this through the first hurdle of the application process. She feels that employers’ expectations are too high, while salaries are too low.

*“I look at these jobs that I know I could do with my eyes shut, but I **get put off** because of the job spec, they are **so long** it’s ridiculous...I try really hard to show I might not have this title, but **I’ve got this skill**...it’s almost like if you don’t come up with X points, you don’t get progressed. We’ve **lost the humanity** and personal thing of actually reading someone’s application.”*

Rebecca feels she has lost confidence, and fears the longer she is out of the ‘professional’ world, the more confidence she will lose, and the harder it will be to get back ‘in’. Rebecca has accessed some advice and support around job hunting, but finds the choice of places to register for jobs overwhelming, and would benefit from something more advanced or tailored to her.

*“Sometimes it is quite **basic advice**. When you’re more of a professional you’re looking for the **most up to date way of being successful** in an interview at a **more professional level**...the jobs I’m looking at it’s quite complicated things to demonstrate – I probably do need a bit of a hand with that, would be **nice to know that was out there**.”*

SME'S OPEN TO OPTIONS

Willingness by employers to give those changing sectors a chance, but better skills matching and support is required for businesses as well as candidates

Openness to hiring candidates outside of sectors, yet this can be difficult due to:

Some roles require **specific skillsets**; the cost of hiring a less qualified 'trainee' doesn't differ greatly from an experienced candidate, so the cost / benefit doesn't always work. A struggle for **young people** where 'lack of work experience' is already the biggest barrier to employment*.

Perception that people are '**applying for anything**' rather than **tailoring skills**; Kickstart and Job Centre were mentioned within this as not matching appropriate candidates e.g. no transferable skills or motivation for the job.

Difficulty navigating the apprenticeship / job schemes and what options are available to bring people on board to help the businesses pick up. Particularly important to encourage SME's to take on **younger candidates** building skillsets.

Difficulty finding candidates in any sector that are willing to **perform lower skilled jobs**.

"I can get a qualified cook for £11 per hour and an 18 y/o coming out of college is on £9.20 an hour and [they] don't know what they are doing"(Female, business owner)

"I've given up using the job centre, that was just a disaster... if you were advertising for a high profile job you would have someone who had been made redundant in a complete different world, who probably had the ability to do it but were just going for the interviews really" (Female, business owner)

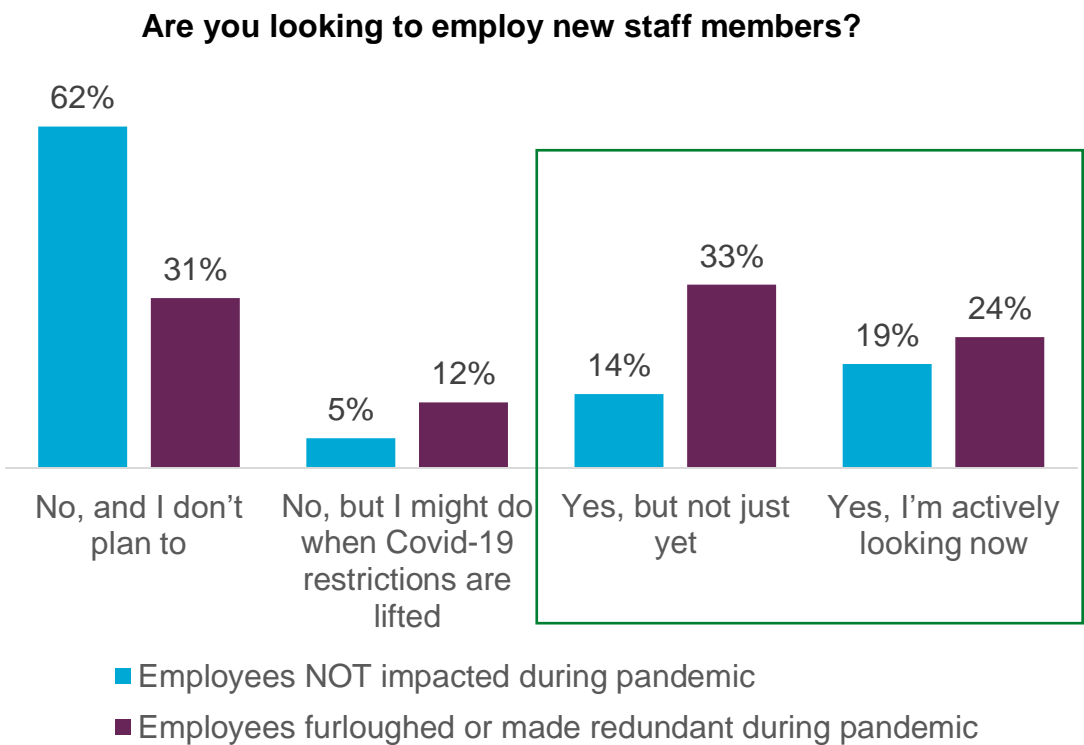
"We had quite a few referrals from DWP [for Kickstart] but nothing comes from it. DWP refers claimants over to say they will send a CV, and we never get it. Claimant just doesn't follow through – only 2 out of 30 referrals." (Female, business owner)

If higher skilled candidates are applying for junior roles or those in different sectors this will have a knock on impact on opportunities for younger residents typically looking for more junior roles. Younger candidates may be emotionally more resilient but greater competition is a hurdle to overcome.

TAKE A STEP BACK

Prior to this, businesses need support to get back up and running to feel confident employing more staff; a requirement for recovery

Encouragingly, businesses that have had to furlough staff or make redundancies are open to recruitment



Yet, a balance is required between hiring to survive / grow, and ensuring position is secure enough to confidently recruit

SME's have seen priorities change. Many citing the need for initial support to grow, prior to any recruitment support, to feel confident providing staff with the job security desired:

Pre-recruitment support ideas include:

- **Business to business mentoring** - pairing smaller / newer businesses with experts in pivoting or business management
- **Courses in how to promote to increase customer base** - e.g. how to utilise social media
- Information or **'how to' guides** on recruiting / interviewing to find suitable candidates

'Lack of information' cited as a key barrier to accessing support during Covid-19*; desire for more support pre-recruitment, suggests there is a need for information beyond financial

"Having some mentor that could help you to build a business and some link to services with seminars and training for the business owner. [Also] Having a little bit of training/info on how to conduct an interview, what questions ask or how to score etc." (Female, business owner)

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Support that is appropriately targeted at the unique situations caused by Covid-19 is vital to help candidates and businesses regain confidence



CANDIDATES:

Personalised / tailored recruitment service – work closely with candidates and businesses to provide the tools to recognise suitable cross-sector skills and skills matching. For the services in this space already available (i.e. Talk to Paul) requirement centred around reassurance that ‘in person’ support is available (virtually or face to face)

Easily accessible, bite size ‘hints and tips’ aimed at a higher level. For example,

- Beyond ‘how to write a C.V.’, tips on how to draw out transferable skills in C.V.s and covering letters
- How to approach interviews for different sectors
- How to navigate the job searches / how to get started

Information on where to find shorter term, flexible training courses targeted at those looking to enter a new career (i.e. ‘taster courses’)



BUSINESSES:

Guidance on what business support is out there beyond monetary grants, for example:

- Information on how to pivot or to expand business / customer base using different marketing platforms (e.g. social media)
- Job schemes or apprenticeships
- How to write job profiles that cover the necessary skills while taking into account transferable skills
- How to interview candidates / find best route to recruit

Peer to peer forums, coaching schemes or webinars for businesses to provide support in terms of how to expand, diversify or recruit suitable candidates – consider these outside of working hours



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Services centred around emotional support would help residents overcome the initial internal barriers and create future plans

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

As Covid-19 progressed, mental and emotional wellbeing swiftly became a key focus – initially focusing on personal lives

When situations worsened or did not 'return to normal', outlook shifted to:

- **Anxiety and stress:** questioning future options
- **Worthlessness:**
 - feeling of not being needed at work
 - no structure to days left them feeling meaningless
- **Grief:** the loss of a fulfilling job once enjoyed
- **'Imposter syndrome':** feeling guilty about being paid for 'doing nothing'

All participants experienced a combination of these emotions. Leading to insecurity over personal and professional life

- For some, this sudden change of routine significantly impacted mental health, triggering feelings of depression.
- Many reported a lack of support from employers during the process
- For SMEs we spoke to, mental health issues were recognised, and attempts to address this were made, but some felt ill-equipped as were unaware themselves of changing circumstances and how to deal with it.

"It was the not knowing what was going to happen...the amount of times I cried was unreal." (Female, 25-34)

"I woke up and thought, 'I don't know what day it is', the weekends just felt meaningless, that's when I decided I needed some routine" (Male, 55-64)

"My job is important to who I am as an individual, I had always been well respected for what I had done and always managed a team, so for me it was a self-esteem thing." (Female, 35-44)

*"It was lockdown so there was nothing else to do, there was no one to go and see or family and friends to entertain you, so if you didn't work what the f*** were you going to do...[I feel] worthless and s***, a little bit beyond frustrated, and hopeless, where is the route out of this, I'm used to working and working long hours without that what should I do all day!" (Female, 35-44)*

"[I was] very aware of trying to keep everyone happy - tutors, learners, family etc. One tutor could not cope with shift to online, the tutor felt 'it was not for me', and got stressed and upset. I had to find another one to take over...[I've been] really mindful of mental health during this time – tutors, learners, myself, we were all freaking out." (Female, business owner)

UNCERTAINTY AND LACK OF CONTROL

Uncertainty, the feeling of being lost and lack of control over future options is an underlying trigger to the emotional ‘ups and downs’

- All participants we spoke to had to re-evaluate their future employment plans in some way. For most this felt like completely unknown territory.
- Shifting from employment positions with future prospects, and unwillingly pushed into a position with a lack of control over the future is unsettling and left people feeling lost.

“I wonder what’s going to happen when I come out of this, at some point I need to earn money, that was the point I felt I needed to speak to someone as I didn’t feel entirely right...there was just nothing I could do, I have no control, it’s something I’ve had to slowly come to terms with” (Male, 55-64, furloughed)

“I’d like to think I could do something else...I just really don’t know what I want to do” (Female, 25-34, redundancy)

“It’s been a real struggle, I’ve gone into a pigeon hole in my career so it’s hard to get out of and move into anything else, so there are limited options because there is nothing out there at my level...having to rethink (Female, 35-44, redundancy)

Lack of control and uncertainty is exacerbated by:

- **Age:**
 - **older age groups** worry more about the need to potentially move into new sectors with different skills
 - many wanting to start ‘winding’ down to retirement but the need to find new employment has thrown plans ‘out of the window’
 - **Younger groups** felt uncertainty but were more optimistic over future, longer term, options.
- **Furlough:**
 - considered a safety net, but furlough stalls future employment plans and job hunting due to technically still being employed.
- **Changing sectors:**
 - Uncertainty of what sectors appropriately match current skillset
 - Felt going up against candidates with relevant skills was too daunting and difficult.
- **Seniority:**
 - Those in senior positions felt options were more limited and felt forced to reconsider future plans, and junior positions, due to lack of options.
- **Flexibility:**
 - Particularly for **working parents**, previous employment often ‘fit into family routine’, the need to find something new that might not be stressful.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Uncertainty drives the lack of confidence that is the initial hurdle to overcome to get back into employment

There were varying degrees of 'active' job hunting across participants. Most expressing emotional barriers that prevented 'serious' job hunting.

Confidence

- For some their job gave them a sense of identity, losing that element of their lives had an impact on confidence and self-worth
- Some 'shame' of redundancy felt, causing questions around ability to succeed

"For me there was a feeling of shame for being made redundant, a bit of me thought 'if I was really good at my job I wouldn't have been made redundant', although actually I know that that isn't the case at all...it took me a while to get my head around that, there might be people not feeling confident, I definitely took that to interviews with me, thinking I was still a bit crap for being made redundant" (Female, 35-44, redundant)

Fear and nervousness

Particularly apparent for those who haven't been in the job market for a while:

- How do I get started?
- What if I can't find something?
- What if I don't have the right skills?
- Am I going to be rejected again?

"I'm nervous about the whole prospect of changing careers, the process is completely unpredictable now, it's different time after Covid-19 than it was before and I'm not sure how I would navigate it" (Male, 55-64, furloughed)

"It's terrifying, I don't know how to look for jobs anymore, the local paper doesn't have adverts, it's feels like it's for a different cohort now" (Female, 45-54, furlough)

Pride

- Reluctance to take a less skilled job
- Not wanting to reach out for help from institutions associated with unemployment and benefits due to pre-existing stigmas.

"If I'm honest I did like the status of a demanding, senior level professional job. It made you feel like you'd 'arrived'. Found it very difficult to content myself with low income, basic wage jobs" (Female, 45-54, redundant)

"I would hate to go to the job centre...I know I shouldn't say it, but I think it's just seen as for scummers" (Female, 25-34, redundant)

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

To encourage re-employment, offer support centred around emotional wellbeing, preparing individuals with internal tools to explore future options



CANDIDATES:

Counselling – aimed at helping individual's 'come to terms' with change of situation, providing internal tools to boost confidence and jump into the job market

Employment or careers fairs - Provide a flavour of 'what else is out there' to help individuals make informed decisions over future employment

Peer to peer / mentoring schemes - help build confidence and exposure to different types of employment



BUSINESSES:

How to effectively bring employees back off furlough and support mental wellbeing in the workplace in the long-term

For example, offering the Mental Health First Aider training to SMEs to better equip employers to recognise and deal with mental health needs



Work is already underway in some of these areas by ECC and partners (e.g. employment fairs and mentoring schemes). However, schemes are aimed more at younger cohorts. Although this is absolutely appropriate given larger numbers being impacted, there is a gap in support for the higher skilled, older workers that have potentially 'more to lose' if struggling to find employment.



CHANGED PRIORITIES

Residents are increasingly aspiring for flexibility and a work / life balance which can be difficult to find

TIME TO RE-FOCUS PRIORITIES

Unplanned time-off, though sometimes stressful, is valued. Many enjoying the change of pace and some optimistic about future opportunities

Change of pace (Impact on personal life)

Participants, particularly those on furlough, enjoyed the time to reflect on social and personal life:

- Spending time with friends / family (during last summer)
- Ability to get on top of household chores and projects
- Taking up new hobbies such as cooking and cycling

Time to reassess is most important to:

- **older candidates**, those closer to retirement plans, or those more highly skilled.
- **working parents**, taking time to find employment that fits around busy family schedules

"I've learnt that work doesn't have to be all encompassing – when you're forced to get off the wheel you start to view your life in a different way." (Female, 45-54, redundancy)

"It feels like it would be really tough to get into a new profession which is the only option now. But I will go and do something, whether it's going into a school to become a teaching assistant or ranger services, I've got to put a positive spin on it, I will find something" (Male, 55-64, furlough)

Future optimism (Impact on employment opportunities)

- Some optimism started to shine through, particularly for those that were unhappy in their previous working life
- The situation was seen as an opportunity to find employment that would positively add to their overall wellbeing

Time to reassess is most important to:

- **Younger candidates**, uncertainties feel manageable as they have time to find what they want to do.
- **Sector changes**, those where Covid-19 has significantly impacted their previous industry

*"I enjoyed the time off work, for me it gave me a chance to **actually think** about what I was applying for, what **lifestyle I wanted**, how I wanted to work in that company and consider different questions to ask in interviews, not everybody's in that position, you feel like you're in a really difficult position, but **it's a good opportunity to take the time**, thinking about it a little bit more might give you an advantage overall, the jobs for you not just the employer, what I've taken away from it is that I'm a human being" (Female, 25-34)*

"I took me 4 months to take this job, and finally I got it, now I can have my apartment and pay my bills, so keep trying!" (Female, 18-24)

SHIFT TO FLEXIBILITY

As a result, many are actively looking for flexibility and a better work / life balance

Shift in priorities

Change of pace resulting in many now actively looking for employment that would provide:

- A better work / life balance
- Shorter commutes
- Shorter or 'normal' working hours (i.e. no over-time)
- Flexibility

Most important to:

- **Working parents** – requiring flexibility to work around childcare; enjoying more freedom at being able to do school runs or be home for dinner etc.
- **Older candidates** – those thinking about retirement and wanting to 'wind down' but not completely give up work

“Good thing to come out is that I don't need to be doing the daily grind, it doesn't mean as much to me as I thought, I would be open to different types of jobs that supported a better work/life balance or that make me more happy” (Female, 35-44, redundancy)

“You can't tell me how to work, because I will just go and work for another company who will let me work from home” (Female, 25-34)

Furlough and redundancy allowing time to reflect and look for flexible working.

Yet, despite an awareness of these acting as 'short-term' solutions and the 'ticking clock', there's a sense of **putting off the inevitable decision around future employment and learning opportunities.**



There is a forecasted a risk of increased unemployed (by 20,000-35,000*) as furlough comes to an end in autumn 2021. Therefore the need make swifter decisions over employment path becomes more urgent.

“We've had another chap who doesn't want to work so many hours as he likes being at home, the younger ones were ready to come back to work, the older ones were thinking 'what am I doing it for. The younger ones were looking to come back for the social side of things” (Female, business owner)

“People that would have taken up learning [aren't] – I'm getting the sense that they would rather just see friends, socialise etc. now they have been 'let out'” (Female, business owner)

BARRIERS TO FLEXIBILITY

Shift in priorities can add to the anxiety and frustration of job hunting; for employers as well as candidates



CANDIDATES:

Fear and reluctance of returning to work with stress, long hours and long commutes; impacting motivation to continue searches

Frustration with the process as it's a struggle to find work that fits in around changing needs

Employers deemed 'inflexible' and not willing to cater to needs; particularly for those needing part-time work

Disconnect between wanting flexibility to suit them, with the job security that doesn't necessarily come with flexible roles

Most impacted:

- **Higher skilled candidates:** Jobs in higher brackets are often less flexible
- **Working parents:** inflexibility makes it difficult to work around family needs (identified as a core barrier in various robust national research*)

"Very anxious [about returning to work], I don't want to spend a lot of time commuting and being away from my family". (Male, 45-54, furlough)



BUSINESSES:

Some wanting flexibility in workers but;

- struggling to find information on how to bring in apprenticeships of interns on flexible contracts
- Finding employees don't want flexibility on employers terms

Noticed that more candidates are looking for shorter and more flexible hours which makes it difficult to recruit full-time specialised roles (e.g. chef), or roles that required 'unsociable' hours (e.g. leisure).

"Flexibility of working, being inclusive of parents who want to do the school run, there are so many parents with so many good skills that are just being wasted, because employers just want all or nothing" (Female, 35-44, working parent)

"Our hours and days are so random so is hard to find a description or a contract that will suit somebody to give the stability and their reliability" (Male, business owner)

"People don't want to work full-time anymore, they have got out of the habit, even youngsters are only looking for 30 hours a week...it's not a good start" (Female, business owner)

FLEXIBLE SUPPORT

Provide the means and information required to support candidates and businesses that require flexible working or an ease back in to employment



CANDIDATES:

Flexible careers matching – linked with the proposed U-Flexi Portal but support to match individuals with flexible working, incorporating higher skilled work if possible would be beneficial.

For SMEs', this would support the need to find flexible working to suit their terms; promoting clarity of expectations

Advice and guidance on flexible options within individuals control – including how to become self-employed or start a business, flexible training courses to fit in around lifestyles



BUSINESSES:

Advice and guidance on how to provide flexible options for employees – successful case studies on what works and how to incorporate flexible working in to day to day business, lead by example via anchor institutions; advice on job sharing.

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Policy Unit

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