

# Evaluation of Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus: Stage 1 (process evaluation and theory of change)

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## Executive Summary

### 1. Research aims and methodology

1.1 This executive summary focuses upon the first stage of the process evaluation of [Communities for Work \(CfW\)](#) and [Communities for Work Plus \(CfW+\)](#). The objectives were to:

- review the theory of change for the programmes;
- review the effectiveness of the delivery of the programmes, including:
  - new elements of the CfW programme, such as the 'in work support element';
  - the extent to which the delivery models meet the needs of specific groups; and
  - the extent to which the programmes take into account the Welsh language skills, needs and aspirations of participants; and
- provide an update on progress against targets for the programmes.

1.2 The programmes' theory of change was discussed with senior programme managers and data gathered through the evaluation, was used to test and refine it. This included:

- a desk-based literature and document review;
- analysis of programme data; and
- qualitative research with stakeholders, including interviews with senior managers (n=six) and operational staff from nine local authorities (LAs) (n=64).

1.3 Further details on the methodology are provided in section three of the main report.

## 2. Key findings: rationale, design, and delivery of CfW and CfW+

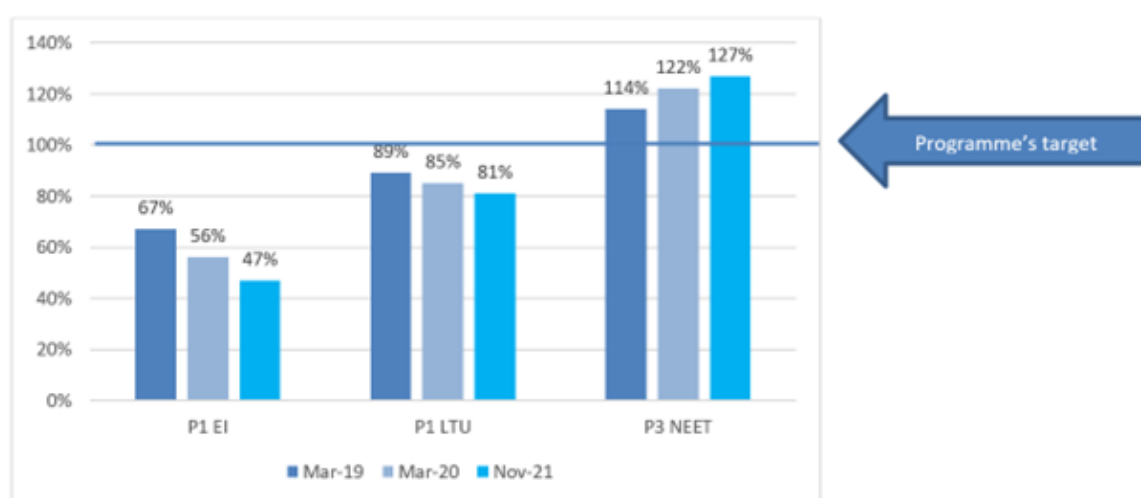
- 2.1. On paper, CfW and CfW+'s offer to participants appears similar to the offer of other employability programmes, such as Job Centre Plus' (JCP's) (e.g., information, advice and guidance to improve job searching, access to training and financial support). However, the offer is qualitatively different, as CfW and/or CfW+ advisors and/or mentors have more time and flexibility and they often have a different relationship with participants than JCP Work Coaches have. Therefore, CfW and CfW+ complement other employability programmes, and the evidence suggests they can support participants that other programmes struggle to.
- 2.2. CfW's voluntary, community-based approach, aided initial and sustained engagement with the programme, but did not prove as effective as anticipated in supporting direct recruitment to the programme. As a consequence, CfW struggled to engage as many participants as envisaged and was more dependent upon JCP for referrals than anticipated. Therefore, the programme was potentially missing those who were not engaged with JCP, not least, economically inactive individuals. However, the programmes' relationship with JCP was a key strength and proved crucial during the pandemic, when referrals from other sources sharply contracted.
- 2.3. The take up of in work support (after participants entered employment) was reported to be low on both programmes, but important where taken up. However, unlike CfW, CfW+'s more flexible eligibility criteria meant it could work with those who were in work, but who remained at risk of poverty and almost one in ten of CfW+ participants (8.6 per cent) were recorded as employed upon entry, suggesting this was an important feature of the CfW+ programme.
- 2.4. The partnership between the Welsh Government, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Lead Delivery Bodies (LDBs) (local authorities or Community Voluntary Councils) is one of the key innovations of CfW and as noted, was critical to the programme's capacity to recruit participants. However, cultural and organisational differences between the DWP and LDBs, and/or competition between DWP and LDB teams, particularly where areas were struggling to achieve targets, have sometimes hampered team working at an operational level.
- 2.5. Despite offering services in both English and Welsh, the number of participants expressing a preference for Welsh was lower than expected. It is not clear why this is the case, but may reflect a lack of confidence on the part of participants whose language preference would be Welsh on expressing this, or a fear that it would be more difficult to access services in Welsh, when services' default language is English (see e.g. [CAB, 2015](#)).

### 3. Key findings: programme performance

#### CfW performance: engagements

3.1. In the period from May 2015 to February 2022, CfW engaged over 34,000 people. As Chart 3.1. illustrates, CfW programme performance against engagement targets (set by the Welsh Government and agreed with the Welsh European Funding Office) for Priority 3 (P3) has been much stronger than expected, compared to a somewhat more disappointing performance across Priority 1 (P1).

**Chart 3.1. CfW cumulative programme performance against engagement targets for Economically Inactive (EI) and Long term Unemployment (LTU) participants (Priority 1) and Young People who are NEET (Priority 3), March 2019, March 2020, and November 2021**



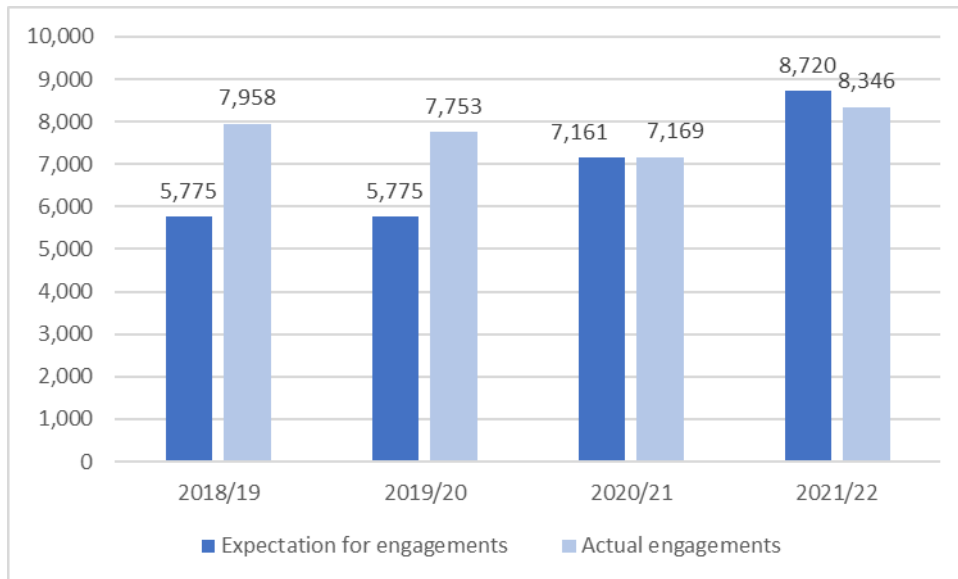
Source: Welsh Government

#### CfW+ performance: engagements

3.2. In the period from April 2018 to the end of February 2022, CfW+ had engaged 30,304 people. As Chart 3.2 illustrates, CfW+'s performance in 2018/19 and 2019/20 was strong, and Welsh Government expectations for engagements and job outcomes were exceeded.<sup>1</sup> The programme's strong performance was sustained even in the face of the challenges posed by the expansion of the programme and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> Unlike CfW, CfW+ does not have centrally determined targets. Instead, there was an expectation that each CfW+ delivery team would generate at least 30 job entries a year and it was assumed that the programme would require around 3-4 engagement for each job entry, this would require each of the 55 CfW+ teams to engage around 4,950-6,600 individuals a year in total.

### Chart 3.2. CfW+ Welsh Government expectations and actual programme performance: participant engagements



\*This sets the expectations for engagements as midway between the Welsh Government’s lower and upper expectations of 4,950-6,600 engagements a year, and increases them in line with the increase in funding in 2020/21 and 2021/22.

Source: Welsh Government

### Participants’ characteristics

3.3. Table 3.1 outlines the percentages of CfW+ participants with different characteristics. It supports the qualitative research where it was reported that in general CfW+ participants had fewer and/or less complex barriers than CfW participants. It is also notable that the percentage of disabled CfW and CfW+ participants is lower than the estimated proportion of disabled working age adults. However, it is also notable that the percentage of CfW and CfW+ participants reporting a Work Limiting Health Condition (WLHC) is considerably higher, and given the similarities between the definition of a disability and WLHC, this may indicate some under-reporting of rates of disability.

**Table 3.1. The percentage of CfW and CfW+ participants with selected barriers, February 2022 compared to the Welsh population (CfW data is for the period May 2015 to February 2022; CfW+ data is for the period April 2020-March 2022)**

Characteristics*	% of CfW+ participants	% of CfW participants	Welsh population (%)
No qualification	14	22	7
Work limited health condition	13	30	23**
Disabled	5	11	22**
Care and childcare responsibilities	20	45	N/A
From a jobless household	42	68	N/A***
Homeless or affected by housing exclusion	4	3	N/A

\* Because participants can identify more than one barrier, they may for example report both a work limiting health condition and a disability

\*\*Based upon the population aged 16 to 64 identified as disabled in the Annual Population Survey (APS). ([WG, 2022](#))

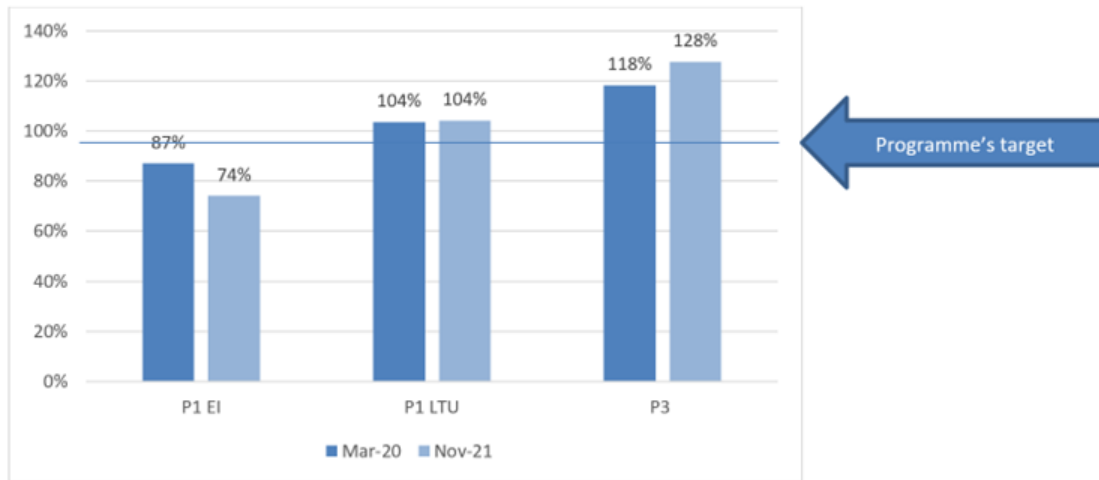
\*\*\* Data on the number of workless houseless are collected – but not the proportion of adults living in workless households

Source: Welsh Government; [Statistics for Wales, 2021](#)

### **CfW performance: job outcomes**

3.4. By the end of July 2022, CfW had supported 13,458 people to enter work. Because the proportion of participants entering work was higher than anticipated, this helped offset the lower than anticipated number of engagements (discussed above). As Chart 3.3 illustrates, despite the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, performance against job entry targets for Priority 3 has been very strong. In contrast, programme performance against job entry targets for Priority 1 while fairly good, was weaker, with strong performance in relation to LTU participants helping somewhat offset disappointing outcomes for EI participants.

**Chart 3.3. CfW cumulative programme performance against job entry targets for Economically Inactive (EI) and Long term Unemployment (LTU) Participants (Priority 1) and Young People who are NEET (Priority 3), March 2020 and November 2021**



Source: Welsh Government

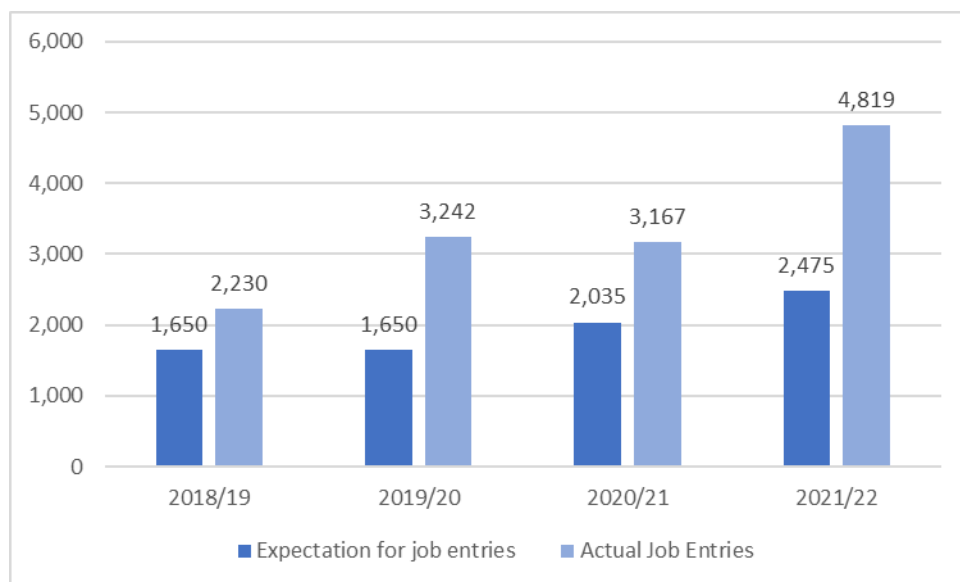
**CfW+ performance: job outcomes**

3.5. As outlined in Chart 3.4, CfW+ continued to perform strongly even in the face of the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic posed, and the programme continued to exceed expectations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There was an expectation on the part of the Welsh Government, that each of the 55 CfW+ team would generate at least 30 job entries a year. In order to allow for the expansion of the programme in 202/21 and 2021/22, expectations have been raised in line with the increase in funding (a 24% increase in 2020/21 and a 51% increase in funding in 2021/22 compared to levels in 2018/19 and 2019/20).

**Chart 3.4. Welsh Government expectations and actual performance: CfW+ job entries**



Source: Welsh Government

## 4. Conclusions

- 4.1. The programmes were largely implemented as planned, and the process – the pathways participants followed (triage, advice and support, access to training, work placements and/or volunteering opportunities) - broadly reflected that envisaged in the programmes’ theory of change.
- 4.2. Nevertheless, while CfW struggled to engage as many participants as envisaged, CfW+ exceeded its expectations. The evaluation identifies that:
  - the closure of the Communities First programme somewhat undermined CfW’s community-based delivery model, and later and more significantly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, severely constrained CfW’s community based delivery model; and
  - most fundamentally, the referral pipeline from partners proved less diverse (with greater reliance upon JCP than anticipated) and less productive than anticipated (with smaller numbers referred, or directly recruited, than anticipated). In large part, this was due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was not the only reason, and as community-based programmes, both direct recruitment, and the cultivation of relationships with local partners (other than JCP) who could help refer people to the programmes, was weaker than anticipated.
- 4.3. The evaluation identifies that the difference in performance between the two programmes was primarily because:

- CfW+ benefitted from more flexible eligibility criteria, which meant the programme was open to larger numbers of potential participants, across wider geographical areas. Although this created challenges, most notably in covering large rural areas, overall, it made it easier to engage participants, even allowing for the ‘priority’ given to CfW for those prospective participants eligible for CfW<sup>3</sup>; and
- the expectations for CfW+, in terms of engagements, were lower than those for CfW, (and this helps explain much of the difference in each programmes’ performance against Welsh Government expectations).

4.4. In contrast to engagements, job outcomes for both programmes were stronger than anticipated (or expected), despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the effectiveness of the programmes’ support model. Nevertheless, the qualitative research also identifies that elements of the CfW programme model such as Barriers Fund and to a lesser degree the procured training model, were not as flexible as their equivalents in CfW+ and therefore not as responsive or effective as anticipated.

### **The effectiveness of the programmes in contributing to key Welsh Government and EU objectives**

- 4.5. The programmes’ strong performance in terms of job outcomes means they are likely to have made important contributions to reducing poverty. However, concerns about the quality of work participants have entered into, and in-work poverty, mean the impact is probably not as great as it could have been.
- 4.6. The programmes also make important contributions to Welsh Government equality objectives, such as reducing inequalities linked to gender, ethnicity, or disabilities. However, differences in the degree to which the programmes have worked with different groups is likely to mean the impact of the programmes upon different groups has been uneven and lower than anticipated for some groups.

### **Reflections on the CfW and CfW+ models**

4.7. Both CfW and CfW+ have similar models and approaches and are both effective. The main difference is the greater flexibility CfW+ has in who it works with (given more flexible eligibility criteria), how it supports them (most notably the greater accessibility and responsiveness of training and the Barriers Fund) and how it records this (as it is not

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<sup>3</sup> If someone is eligible for CfW they will typically be referred to CfW rather than CfW+.



required to comply with EU requirements). The combination of greater flexibility and less bureaucracy, was widely reported to make the CfW+ programme:

- more accessible and more open;
- more responsive to, and therefore more effective and/or swifter at meeting the needs and aspirations of participants;
- more efficient, given less paperwork/bureaucracy and greater flexibility around training; and
- more resilient and better able to respond to programme wide shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.8. Nevertheless, there are also aspects of the CfW model, such as the more comprehensive data collection and longer-term funding commitment, that were stronger than CfW+'s model.

## **5. Recommendations and reflections for future employability programmes**

### **Recommendations for CfW and/or CfW+**

- 5.1. In order to maximise the programmes' contribution to the Welsh Government's equality goals, more proactive action is needed to reach out to, and engage key groups, such as economically inactive people, disabled people and Black, Asian and minority ethnic people.
- 5.2. Although there is no 'silver bullet' that can increase engagements or diversify the referral pipeline, the evidence suggests that practical steps, such as raising and maintaining awareness of the programmes with partners; swiftly contacting those who are referred; and both helping them and providing feedback to referral partners on how they have been helped and any outcomes achieved, can build trust and encourage future referrals. Sharing good practice in this area across the programmes will be important.
- 5.3. Given the uncertainty about the reliability of the identification of disabled participants by the programmes, considering adopting a new question for participants as part of the enrolment process would be appropriate. There is a strong case for using the same questions across different employability programmes (to facilitate benchmarking), and this could, for example, use the Government Statistical Service question: (a) Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more? and if yes (b) Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities? Participants answering yes to both would be recorded as having a disability.

- 5.4. The pandemic has helped accelerate the delivery of support and training online, or by phone, and going forward, a flexible, person-centred approach, that blends face to face and online or phone contact, is appropriate.
- 5.5. Given the apparent mismatch between demand and capacity in some areas, exploring the scope to give CfW delivery managers greater flexibility in, for example, the allocation of advisers and mentors to different areas (within a LA) and/or groups (such as those who are judged more than 12 months from work and those judged to be closer) would be appropriate.
- 5.6. Managing the potential impact of the loss of staff upon the programmes, given the end of the European Social Fund (ESF) which has supported CfW, will be important. The evaluation has not identified a simple solution and exploring what can be done to retain staff alongside contingency planning on how the impact of unfilled staff roles will be managed, is likely to be appropriate.

### **Key lessons and recommendations for future employability programmes**

- 5.7. There is clear need and demand for employability support from programmes like CfW and CfW+. However, in order to maximise their impact upon reducing poverty, further work to support progression in work may be required, and changes to the outcome measures (which currently focus upon entry into work, rather than the quality of work) may be warranted to reduce the risks that people get stuck in 'poor work' (and being exposed to in work poverty).
- 5.8. A community-based model can increase the visibility and accessibility of employment support programmes and help foster a distinct identity from JCP, but is not of itself sufficient to generate engagements from communities. Further research and piloting new innovative approaches to increase engagements may be warranted.
- 5.9. CfW and CfW+ suggest that a voluntary model of engagement can help increase people's motivation and engagement with employment support programmes, but more work is required to improve ways to engage those who are demotivated. 'Soft conditionality', where, for example engagement with a programme like CfW or CfW+ forms part of a claimant commitment, can help introduce people to such programmes that could help them, but will not in and of itself ensure they engage effectively.
- 5.10. The effectiveness of employment support programmes like CfW and CfW+ cannot exceed the effectiveness of its frontline staff and recruiting, training, and retaining staff with the right skills and ethos is therefore vital.

- 5.11. A whole systems approach to planning employability support, which considers (i) the strategic fit of different employability programmes to ensure they complement rather than duplicate their offer, and which offers a single point of access; and (ii) the current and anticipated future demand for employability support – and therefore the capacity that is appropriate to meet this. Indeed, this is set out as an aim in the Welsh Government's Employability Strategy, *Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills* (WG, 2022c). For instance, the aim to 'prioritise and consolidate Welsh Government led, national employability support to target young people, those under-represented in the labour market and those in and out of work with long term health conditions to find work and progress in employment'. However, decisions by the UK Government (and DWP) and the replacement of the ESF, with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, may complicate this. The Welsh Government may therefore 'need to achieve more through influencing the wider employment system than through directly funding and commissioning new programmes' (IES, 2021).
- 5.12. The partnership between the Welsh Government, JCP, LAs and CVCs, was a key strength of the CfW programme (and should be considered in future programmes), and its contribution to the referral pipeline has been crucial to the success of CfW and CfW+. However, it also created tensions at an operational level, and it took time to overcome barriers linked to cultural and organisational differences and contributed to an overreliance upon JCP for referrals (which also need to be considered if this model is replicated in the future).
- 5.13. CfW and CfW+ suggest that models such as co-location of different teams and employment programmes can help strengthen collaboration at an operational level, provided that there is sufficient demand, so that services or teams are not competing for the same potential participants.
- 5.14. The CfW+ model, which is more open and accessible and more flexible than CfW's, is more responsive and was generally favoured by those delivering the programmes but is also less precisely (or effectively) targeted upon those furthest from the labour market.
- 5.15. The volume of data collected about CfW participants creates a rich dataset and provides scope to explore, for example, the characteristics of, and the effectiveness of the programme in supporting different groups of participants. However, collecting this data adds costs and the scope to analyse and use it effectively is hampered by the decision to input it into a spreadsheet rather than a more sophisticated client management database. There is a need to assess current and future data requirements (for programme management,

research and evaluation), and to consider what data is collected, how it is stored, and the costs of doing this.

- 5.16. The evaluation illustrates the impact that the initial expectations of a programme in terms of engagements and job entries (and therefore the targets set), have upon judgments of programme performance. Regularly benchmarking performance against comparable programmes, is likely to be important in calibrating the expectations used to set targets for programmes, so that they are challenging but achievable, and that the relative performance of different programmes can be more easily considered.
- 5.17. The value for money offered by CfW's centrally procured training model compared to alternatives such as CfW+ market-based model, warrants further investigation.
- 5.18. The extent to which effective approaches to engage and support groups who may have complex barriers, such as some disabled people, can be mainstreamed, is not clear. Their needs may sometimes be better met by targeted programmes, such as Engage to Change<sup>4</sup>. It is possible that both mainstreaming support for different groups into programmes like CfW and CfW+ and the development or funding of more targeted programmes, like Engage to Change, is appropriate. As outlined above, consideration should also be given to the planning and management of different employability programmes, as part of a systems wide approach, to ensure coherence (and minimise unnecessary duplication or competition); accessibility (for example, through single points of access to employability programmes); and assessment and assignment, to match people to the most appropriate programme (for example, through roles such as triage workers).

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<sup>4</sup> Engage to Change is an employability programme that supports young people aged 16-25 who have a learning difficulty, learning disability and/or autism.

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Full Research Report: Holton, D; Burrowes, E; Bryer, N; (2023). *Evaluation of Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus: Stage 1 (process evaluation and theory of change) Executive Summary*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 24/2023.

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-communities-work-and-communities-work-plus-stage-1-process-evaluation-and-theory-change>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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