



Final Report Executive Summary April 2024



This-Ability Final Report: Executive Summary

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Evaluation aims	2
3. Methodology	2
4. Key Findings.....	2
5. Recommendations	5

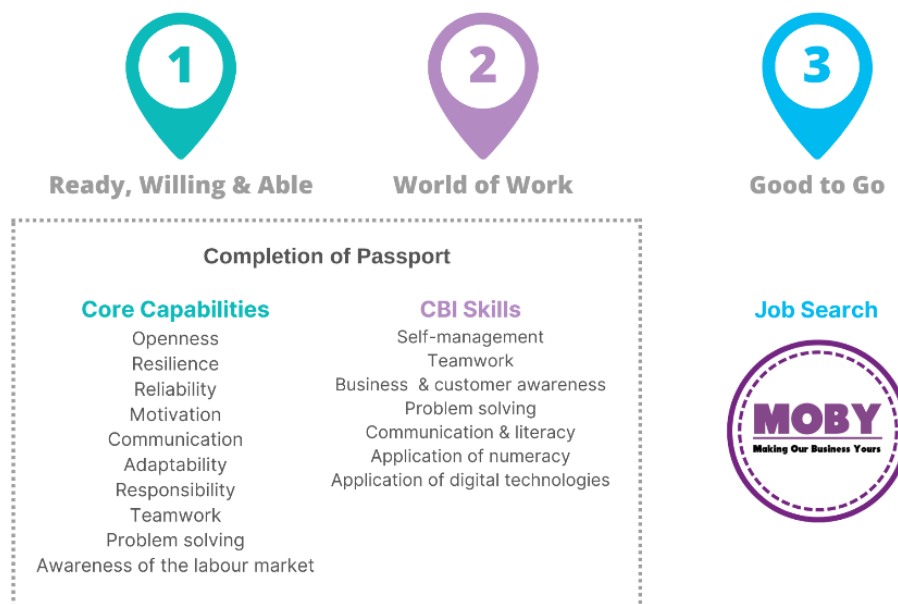
1. Introduction

This-Ability was a five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Led by Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) – a voluntary and community organisation – the programme aimed to support young people (aged 18-29) with disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, long-term health conditions or mental health conditions into sustainable employment lasting at least six months. The programme was open to young people living in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Overall, 291 young people were supported by This-Ability between 2019 and December 2023. Of these, 98 young people secured employment.

The three-stage programme was designed around the completion of an Employability Passport, comprising ten soft-skills (or core capabilities) and seven Confederation of British Industries (CBI) employability skills.

1. **Ready, Willing and Able:** Learners developed and evidenced the ten 'core capabilities'.
2. **World of Work:** Learners developed and evidenced the seven CBI skills with a This-Ability partner provider of sector specific training.
3. **Good to Go:** Learners were supported in job search and could access MOBY in-work support (a bespoke service for employers who provided paid work / work experience for This-Ability learners).

Figure A: the three stages of the This-Ability programme.



2. Evaluation aims

Staff from Sheffield Hallam University, the Humber Learning Consortium and a Peer Researcher worked together as partners – in line with co-produced principles – to evaluate the This-Ability programme. The following themes were explored:

- How and why learners (and employers) joined the programme.
- Learner challenges and needs.
- What worked and what did not work.
- The impacts and outcomes of the programme.

3. Methodology

Adopting a collaborative approach, training in qualitative research methods was delivered prior to the start of the research, enabling learners to become research capable and confident.

The following research methods were used to collect data for this report:

- Focus groups with:
 - Staff and managers¹ of the This-Ability programme.
 - Learners on the This-Ability programme.
 - Employers involved with the programme.
 - Partner providers delivering This-Ability programme provision.
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews with This-Ability learners potentially discussing sensitive subjects, hence inappropriate to explore in a focus group setting.

Data were included from a deep dive study (Bashir & Richards, 2024)² into the This-Ability in-work support model, collected concurrently with the data for this report.

4. Key Findings

The challenges experienced by learners when attempting to move closer to employment, to secure it, and to sustain it were often multiple and complex. A range of disabilities and learning disabilities/differences, including difficulties reading, writing, and concentrating, taking longer to grasp and do tasks impacted learning. Additional health problems, especially poor mental health - severe in many cases – exacerbated the challenges arising from learners' disabilities and or learning disabilities. Experiences of bullying, issues related to sexuality, low confidence and self-esteem

¹ Including overall Contract Manager, MOBY Manager, Management Information Systems (MIS) Officer and Contract Co-ordinator

² Bashir, N & Richards, N (2024). *Deep dive: the effectiveness and outcomes of the This-Ability in-work support model*. [deep-dive-outcomes-this-ability-model \(1\).pdf](#) DOI: 10.7190/cresr.2024.7567897180

and previous negative experiences of education contributed to mental ill health. Rejection in education, and by employers were also a source of anxiety.

Socio-economic factors impacted learner progress. Some were living in poverty, in dire conditions, and had got into debt. The burden of providing unpaid care within families, parents exerting significant influence on their lives not only subdued their aspirations but prevented some learners from taking up job opportunities. Negative perceptions amongst employers about employing people with disabilities, or lack of knowledge on reasonable adjustments created a distance between learners and the labour market – a situation made worse by a lack of entry level jobs and learners having little or no work experience. Parental and learner fear of losing welfare benefits also presented a barrier to employment. Other factors: a lack of routine; poor personal hygiene, instability, and the dysfunctional nature of family life; online gaming during antisocial hours compounded other barriers to employment.

Personalised support was provided by highly skilled This-Ability staff to meet the educational, emotional, and social needs of individuals. During stage one, in small groups, learners engaged in fun and creative learning activities, building trust, communication and team building skills. In the classroom, learners gained knowledge of the labour market, whilst the allotment provided a relaxing environment to develop practical skills – as did the Cook with Ability sessions. This-Ability staff worked with learners to help increase their confidence, step outside their comfort zones whilst learning which jobs they were suited to. Stage two focused on partner provider organisations helping learners to gain employability skills and, in some cases, work experience. Support with interview preparation, CV writing, and job search was provided as well as educating learners about their legal rights under the Disability Discrimination Act. Mentors worked closely with learners who secured work placements – providing **social, practical, and emotional support**.

Comprehensive sessions with the Job Club prepared learners for employment at stage three. The Making Our Business Yours (MOBY) team helped learners to prepare CVs, covering letters and undertake mock interview scenarios. Learners received guidance on researching the values of potential employers, the distance and travel to the workplace. MOBY Mentors engaged with prospective employers to seek work opportunities matching closely with the job aspirations of individual learners. Having secured employment, mentors continued to check in with learners and their employers, providing ongoing support to both parties. Staff delivering This-Ability were understanding, sensitive and approachable. They facilitated access to mental health support, ensuring that learners attended appointments; created a safe learning environment; and opportunities for learners to take up enrichment activities. Both learners and employers articulated that the benefits they had experienced would not have happened without This-Ability support.

Core capability skills laid a vital foundation for learners to build their employability skills and for further progression into work placements or work. The skills proved essential for continued engagement with the programme. Developing skills such as teamwork and communication were necessary for building social skills – priming learners to cope in prospective workplaces. Sessions in core capabilities enabled learners to better understand their own skills and how they related to the workplace. Mentors set clear expectations regarding attendance and punctuality to develop reliability, preparing learners for the reality of the workplace environment.

The **Employability Passport** was conceived as a tool for evidencing and reminding learners of the ten core capabilities and seven CBI skills they had gained whilst on This-Ability as well as recording any reasonable adjustments identified. The document went through several iterations since the start of the programme to reduce the administrative burden on providers and mentors. Whilst evidencing the passport was

challenging for a few programme staff, the passport was recognised as a useful tool to record learner progress and showcase skills with visual evidence of learner achievements. Evidence suggested that the passport was used as intended in a few cases, however, overall, learners either did not understand how the passport should be used or were reluctant to use it in an interview situation – indicating the need to better embed the tool in prospective programmes.

Learner views gained through ongoing evaluation of the This-Ability programme informed and influenced changes. Rather than a formal mechanism such as a co-production group, This-Ability embedded learner views into the programme. Changes were made quickly and discreetly without pursuing formal channels such as meetings, avoiding awkward conversations with learners on sensitive subjects which only a few had the confidence to engage with. A suggestion box, for example, was used to collect the thoughts of learners, anonymously. Staff delivering the This-Ability programme were very tuned into and responsive to learner needs. They were encouraged to complete feedback questionnaires, provide honest verbal feedback, complete online forms and slips at the end of sessions to have their say about provision. Learner views directly fed into and improved aspects of the programme that didn't work or required further attention / resources.

Changes to the programme, to better meet the needs of learners, were made through a process of ongoing reflection and learning. The delivery model was changed to allow providers to deliver the core capabilities; core staff were recruited as mentors to be placed with provider organisations, improving communication between providers and core staff; a second IAG was introduced after two weeks on programme to ensure learners were on the right path; and the Employability Passport was condensed to ease the administrative burden on providers. We also found that: Cook with Ability provision was extended using cooking facilities at a partner provider organisation; and the flexibility and the longevity of National Lottery funding helped This-Ability to respond to the COVID-19 global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

No **improvements to the programme** were suggested by learners who all expressed positivity and satisfaction with This-Ability. Improvements to the programme identified by This-Ability managers and providers included the need for doing a more thorough assessment of each young person's suitability to the programme at the point of first meeting them rather than determining their suitability at the formal Information, Advice, and Guidance (IAG) meeting; an electronic version of the Employability Passport to include audio and video and further embedding the passport into all stages of programme delivery. While the funding model was identified by This-Ability managers as potentially problematic, core staff embedded within partner organisations was conveyed as being a better option for similar programmes in the future.

Learners recounted a lack of support in **mainstream education** (at school and college) as impacting on them academically and socially. In contrast, This-Ability's individualised and person-centred provision allowed mentors to build relationships and trust with learners and promote independence in safe spaces where learners felt supported. Relationships were built with employers to educate them on reasonable adjustments and how best to support learners in employment. A strong ethos emerged of 'doing what is best for the learner' which extended to an open-door policy for learners and employers to receive support at any time. A commitment to helping learners to stay in work was evidenced – a key difference from other provision where the emphasis may be placed on progressions.

Impacts for learners included increased confidence and self-belief, improved communication skills, expanded social circles and improved mental health. In several accounts, the impacts of the This-Ability programme were conveyed as transformative. Two learner interviews revealed that they had started to think more positively about

their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties since being involved in the programme. Learners shared how involvement in This-Ability had led to the realisation that employment was an achievable goal. We found that learners had gained good knowledge of recruitment processes and employer expectations and a clearer understanding of the adjustments required in the workplace. Paid work – a key objective of This-Ability – was secured by many learners on the programme.

Our research findings firmly substantiated that in addition to learners, **employers working with This-Ability also experienced positive impacts**. We found that where employers had engaged with This-Ability and received support from mentors, their perceptions about employing people with disabilities and or learning disabilities/difficulties were positive.

Added value was given by the network of partner providers, which enabled the This-Ability programme to widen the offer of work experience roles and sectors available to young people. The network provided additional benefits in enabling learners to move between different providers and signposting them to further support. A wide range of enrichment activities enabled learners to develop life skills and increase confidence and communication through sports and social clubs.

5. Recommendations

Our findings indicate there is still a need to further embed the Employability Passport into project delivery, to allow learners to feel confident and comfortable using it as intended. While a useful document to record learners' achievements, many did not receive their passport until the end of their programme due to the time taken to compile and print the document. The development of an electronic passport would greatly enhance the This-Ability programme, enabling learners to better understand their progress and take more ownership of their Employability Passports.

The programme should continue to embed core staff (employed by the This-Ability programme) as mentors placed with partner provider organisations. This embedded model offered clear benefits of shared learning and communication across the programme and is, perhaps, a more feasible option than completely restructuring the payment by results model.

As a result of the lessons learnt by This-Ability, any future provision should focus on ensuring that learners are given a grounding in soft skills, laying a vital foundation to move them closer to employment. Without these basic skills, learner progress is likely to be hampered. Evidently, some learners felt overwhelmed going straight into work experience/employment. A soft introduction to work through bite-sized volunteering placements rather than a full work experience would perhaps help learners to develop key soft skills such as confidence and communication skills, arguably in environments where they were better understood and supported.

We found that there is no similar provision to the This-Ability programme in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Without This-Ability, there is clear need for this type of service. The MOBY employment support model as a bespoke service helped bridge fundamental gaps in understanding between employers and young people with disabilities, learning disabilities/differences. MOBY sourced work experiences and working interviews to get learners into work rather than pursuing formal channels involving traditional recruitment processes. As an effective alternative to mainstream education/training public funding should be identified and allocated for such provision.