



Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Addressing complex barriers to work

**Local multi-agency place-
based solutions**

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Summary

- This report summarises findings from a series of roundtables held by the Wales Centre for Public Policy in January 2026, to identify lessons from existing multi-agency partnerships to reduce economic inactivity.
- Economic inactivity is rarely caused by a single factor, reflecting the complexity of people's lives and a range of interrelated barriers influencing people's access to work. Evidence suggests that individuals typically face four to six barriers. While health is a common driver, other factors include personal circumstances, preferences and wider structural factors.
- Addressing economic inactivity requires coordinated, multi-agency approaches that reflect the complex and overlapping barriers people face. Effective responses rely on joined-up working between partners with complementary expertise, including local authorities, health boards, and third-sector organisations such as charities and social enterprises.
- A person-centred approach is critical to effectively address barriers to work, recognising that multi-dimensional barriers require tailored support. Key workers play a central role, working one-to-one with individuals to understand their needs and challenges. As a single point of contact, they coordinate access to wraparound services through multi-agency partnerships and engage with employers to identify suitable, sustainable pathways into work.
- While multi-agency collaboration can help address economic inactivity, data-sharing challenges can limit its effectiveness. These often arise from real or perceived concerns about sharing information securely. To overcome them, organisations need a clear, shared purpose for data sharing, supported by formal protocols and shared systems.
- Multi-agency efforts to address economic inactivity are often constrained by short-term funding. Building strong partnerships and trust requires sustained investment. Short-term funding arrangements can limit scope for person-centred support (as people with complex needs often require long-term engagement) and create workforce challenges, making it harder to retain experienced staff. Roundtable participants called for longer-term funding to support effective collaboration and lasting outcomes.

Introduction

Economic inactivity (EI) remains a significant challenge across Wales and UK, with many people excluded from the labour market while employers struggle to fill vacancies (Department for Work & Pensions et al., 2024). Although UK EI rates have recently declined, they remain above pre-pandemic levels (Department for Work & Pensions, 2024; Department for Work & Pensions et al., 2024; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2025a). In response, both UK and Welsh Governments have prioritised increasing labour market participation. Following the publication of *Get Britain Working*, its strategy for tackling the root causes of EI, the UK Government committed £125 million of funding to mobilise 8 place-based Economic Inactivity Trailblazer pilots across England & Wales (Department for Work & Pensions et al., 2024).

In April 2025, the then Welsh Government launched Economic Inactivity Trailblazer pilots in Blaenau Gwent, Denbighshire and Neath Port Talbot, outlining its plans to support localised approaches to reducing EI (Welsh Government, 2025). These locally designed initiatives prioritise supporting people who are outside of the labour market (those who are described in official statistics as ‘economically inactive’) and are disabled, have health conditions or have caring responsibilities through a person-centred, place-based, multi-agency approach, recognising the complexity of barriers to employment and the need for flexible, joined-up support across health, skills, and employment systems (Welsh Government, 2025).

To support the delivery of the trailblazers, the 2021-2026 Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to examine existing evidence on the following two research questions:

- What are the key features of successful local multiagency approaches to reducing economic inactivity?
- What key lessons can be drawn from existing place-based multiagency partnerships to reduce economic inactivity?

To respond to these questions, WCPP convened two roundtables in January 2026. Each session included presentations from national and international experts on multi-agency approaches to tackling economic inactivity. The roundtables were attended by stakeholders and experts from across Wales and the UK, including academics, Welsh Government officials, representatives from the three trailblazer pilots, policy experts and practitioners. This report summarises the key messages and reflections that emerged during the roundtables.

Policy context

EI has become a central policy concern in Wales due to its impacts on economic growth, public finances, and individual wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2024). After falling steadily since 2011, EI rates rose sharply during the pandemic and have since declined only slightly, leaving nearly 15,000 more people outside of the labour market than before COVID-19. Recent increases in EI are concentrated among young people (16-24) and older workers (50-64), driven largely by rising numbers in education among younger groups and, more significantly, by increases in long-term sickness across all ages (WCPP analysis of ONS, 2025b).

Understanding the drivers of these rises in health-related economic inactivity is of key concern for policy makers in both Wales and the UK. Increases in health-related EI have coincided with general declines in healthy life expectancy and in self-reported health among the working age population in the UK. Areas with poorer health outcomes tend to experience higher levels of EI, while those with lower qualifications are at greater risk of leaving work due to ill health. Limited job opportunities can also be a factor influencing transitions from unemployment benefits to incapacity benefits for people with long-term health conditions, reinforcing cycles of poor health and exclusion from the labour market. Wales faces additional challenges due to higher disability rates and a larger disability employment gap than the UK average; analysis by the Bevan Foundation indicates that if the rate of disability and employment rates for disabled people were the same in Wales as the UK average, 57,000 more disabled people would be in employment than are currently working (Bevan Foundation, 2025).

Evidence shows that individuals who leave work due to health reasons are far less likely to return within a year (3.8%) than those who become unemployed for non-health reasons (47%), prompting policymakers to prioritise prevention and rapid reintegration where possible (Department for Work & Pensions and Department for Business & Trade, 2025). Publication of the UK Government's *Get Britain Working* White Paper and the subsequent launch of the EI Trailblazer pilots in England and Wales reflect growing recognition of EI as a critical socio-economic challenge.

Wales operates within a complex and evolving policy landscape shaped by devolution. While matters such as housing, education and transportation are devolved to the Senedd, responsibility for employment law remains with UK Parliament (Jenkins, 2024; Phillips, 2026). Although aspects of employment policy are not devolved, the broader UK context is shifting, with ongoing debates calling for deeper devolution of employment services to increase integration and local accountability. Evidence suggests that workers generally support devolution across

most policy areas. However, views on devolving employment rights are more divided, with younger workers more supportive than older workers (Jenkins, 2024). As such, the devolution of employment support remains a live policy issue that is likely to continue, with no clear indication of how any such further devolution could look. Despite this, the previous Welsh Government set a clear policy direction through its Fair Work agenda, signalling its priorities and intentions for shaping employment standards across Wales, including fair remuneration, collective representation, secure employment and opportunities for training and development (Fair Work Commission, 2019; Jenkins, 2024).

A multidimensional issue

Economic inactivity is rarely the result of a single barrier or issue. Individuals' lives are inherently complex and shaped by a range of interrelated factors, meaning their ability to participate in the labour market is often constrained by multiple challenges at the same time. Academic qualitative research presented during the roundtables reinforced this point, while practitioners reported that individuals seeking to enter or re-enter the labour market typically face between four and six distinct barriers.

Health is a key factor shaping access to work among those outside the labour market, with experts identifying mental health conditions and musculoskeletal conditions as particularly significant barriers among younger and older people respectively. During the roundtables, experts highlighted that individuals experiencing mental health challenges - especially anxiety and depression - often described their symptoms not only in terms of emotions but also through their physical effects, including fatigue and low energy levels.

However, health is only one dimension to the barriers influencing access to work among those outside the labour market. We heard from one expert who shared insight from their research into self-perceptions of factors affecting capacity for work. Participants in the research situated health challenges alongside a wide range of other factors including a lack of suitable opportunities aligned with their career aspirations, skills and experience, as well as a lack of roles that offer appropriate hours, work patterns and working conditions.

Personal circumstances further complicate pathways into employment. Participants stressed that factors such as homelessness, lone parenthood, and experiences of violence or abuse can all affect an individual's ability to work, often intersecting with mental health challenges but requiring targeted support in their own right. Additionally, intergenerational worklessness can shape attitudes and self-perceptions, reinforcing cycles of exclusion from the labour market. Crucially, many of these barriers originate earlier in life and accumulate over time. Disruptions to education, early caregiving responsibilities, or traumatic life events such as bereavement can have long-term consequences for labour market participation.

Finally, roundtable participants discussed the critical role of structural factors. Labour market barriers, including a lack of available or accessible jobs, interact with broader macroeconomic challenges, particularly in areas affected by post-industrial decline, such as parts of the UK like the North-East of England and South Wales. Financial considerations, including the perceived risks associated with transitioning off benefits, contribute to what is often described as the 'benefits trap'. Fear and

precarity can be significant issues, compounded by low levels of trust in government systems as well as concerns about interactions with the Department for Work & Pensions and the potential impact on benefit entitlements. Inadequate transport infrastructure can further limit access to employment opportunities, particularly in under-served areas.

Given this complexity, there was a consensus across the roundtables that increasing labour market participation requires a holistic and integrated approach. Interventions that focus on only one or two barriers are unlikely to be sufficient. Instead, effective support must recognise the interconnected nature of health, personal circumstances, preferences, and structural conditions, and respond accordingly to enable sustainable pathways into work.

Success factors for a multi-agency approach

Participants agreed that the multi-dimensional drivers of economic inactivity require a multi-agency response. To adequately address the complex and overlapping barriers faced by people outside the labour market, participants highlighted a need for coordinated, joined-up solutions that bring together a range of partners with different expertise.

Multiple presenters explained how effective multi-agency partnerships draw on organisations with different expertise to provide holistic support. Core partners were said to typically include local authorities, local health boards and third sector organisations such as charities and social enterprises. The most effective partnerships will ensure the involvement of partner organisations who can meet the needs of the people they interact with: for example, ensuring that careers advice is available, that there is support for accessing childcare or dependent care where this is needed, or financial advice. Involving specific agencies such as substance abuse services and close working with organisations such as probation services or youth offending teams can provide targeted support for individuals and increase chances of success.

Successful partnership working requires close working relationships and co-ordinated action. We heard that it was important to ensure that all partners share a common vision and outcomes, i.e. that they are agreed on what the aim of the programme is and how success can be measured. Regular communication, feedback loops, and performance monitoring are key governance mechanisms to increase alignment between partners and mitigate the risk of partners working in isolation or duplicating effort.

Clear leadership and co-ordination can support successful partnership working and we heard that designated lead agencies can help in this regard.¹ Participants emphasised that strong leadership is particularly important when bringing together organisations with differing objectives and approaches. In this context, a lead organisation can help convene partners, establish common language, and maintain alignment around shared goals. These lead agencies, or 'backbone' organisations,

¹ Participants also shared the view that this leadership role is best played by an agency outside government, as this can also increase trust among participants.

often function as intermediaries, not necessarily involved in direct delivery but playing a critical role in coordinating partnership activity.

During the roundtables, we heard from Better Connect, which manages and leads a partnership of 35+ organisations in the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority:

Case study: Better Connect

As the lead agency, Better Connect acts as the single point of contact with the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority and local authorities, and is responsible for managing risk, compliance, monitoring and reporting across the partnership. In managing these administrative and governance responsibilities, Better Connect aims to reduce the burden on delivery partners, enabling them to focus on frontline delivery. In addition, Better Connect conducts performance management of partners. If a partner is struggling to meet objectives, they will work with that organisation to support them. Through monthly one-to-one meetings, learning sessions and peer-to-peer support networks, Better Connect aims to help address the training needs of its partner organisations.

Participants stressed that effective multi-agency approaches move beyond a focus on solely supply-side factors focusing on individuals, such as overcoming skill deficits, motivations and other personal barriers, instead adopting a dual focus that also considers demand-side factors. Practitioners explained that, on the demand side, engagement with employers is crucial to ensure that suitable opportunities exist and that employers have the required resources to work with people facing barriers to participation in the labour market. This includes working with employers to create supportive and inclusive working environments. Participants described a range of practical interventions, including neurodiversity training for leadership and frontline staff, supporting the implementation of flexible working arrangements and reasonable adjustments, and helping organisations to develop policies and practices which can support and respond to individual needs. There was a consensus that support should not end once a person has entered employment, with participants emphasising that continued in-work support is often necessary to ensure job retention and long-term stability.

Person-centred approach

A consistent theme emerging from the roundtable discussions was the importance of adopting a person-centred approach to supporting people outside the labour market. Recognising that people often face multiple, interrelated barriers and circumstances, such approaches emphasise tailored support rather than standardised interventions.

A key feature of this approach is the time invested in developing a detailed understanding of each person accessing support. Practitioners work closely with people on a one-to-one basis to explore their needs, strengths, aspirations and the barriers they face. This often includes engagement with family members to understand the wider context in which the person lives, as family responsibilities, financial pressures and caring commitments can significantly affect their ability to enter and sustain employment. Taking these wider circumstances into account enables support to be shaped in ways that reduce pressures on the person and supports more sustainable pathways into work.

Central to delivering person-centred support is the key worker model. Key workers act as a single point of access to a range of wraparound services delivered through a broader multi-agency framework, helping to simplify navigation and improve access to support.

Working closely with people on a one-to-one basis, key workers develop a holistic understanding of their circumstances, needs and barriers before connecting them with appropriate forms of support.

The role of the key worker extends beyond that of a mentor. Effective practice requires a broad understanding of both supply-side and demand-side dimensions of the labour market and of economic inactivity. On the supply side, key workers must be able to identify and address the personal, social and structural barriers preventing individuals from entering work. On the demand side, they need insight into employer needs and workplace practices in order to identify suitable opportunities. This includes a working understanding of employment law and the ability to engage creatively with employers. In some cases, this may involve reshaping existing roles or adapting them to better align with the person's skills and needs. Engagement with employers may also include supporting the implementation of reasonable adjustments, advising on inclusive workplace practices, or helping to adapt processes to accommodate diverse needs. Through this work, key workers can help create employment opportunities that might not otherwise be accessible.

A crucial factor underpinning the success of the key worker model is trust, which takes time to develop. As a result, programmes with short timeframes may struggle to realise the full potential of this approach. Evidence from Scandinavian countries supports its effectiveness, with research indicating that strong relationships between caseworkers (or job coaches) and clients are associated with improved employment and education outcomes.

It is also important that appropriate support mechanisms are in place for key workers themselves. Participants highlighted the value of peer-to-peer group sessions and other forms of shared learning as spaces for reflection, problem-solving and professional development.

During the roundtables, the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) UK presented their five-stage supported employment model.

Case study: BASE

BASE uses a 5-Stage Supported Employment Model, also referred to as the 'place, train and maintain' model. Originally developed to support people with learning difficulties into work, this evidence-informed approach has since proven effective for a much broader group, including disabled, neurodivergent, and disadvantaged people (BASE, n.d.).

Stage 1 – Client Engagement

The first stage of the supported employment model focuses on client engagement. BASE does not rely on individuals to present themselves to the organisation, but takes a more proactive approach, going out into communities and engaging with people directly. Such an approach is attributed to a recognition that some traditional services are not always viewed as trusted. Instead, practitioners engage with individuals in their communities, speaking not only with potential clients but also with their families. Through these conversations, they raise awareness of the benefits of employment, build confidence, and present evidence around why entering work can be a positive and worthwhile step.

Stage 2 – Vocational Profiling

The second stage of the supported employment model is vocational profiling. This stage involves moving beyond a transactional level, and developing a detailed understanding of the individual, understanding who they are, what is important to them, and identifying the barriers that may be preventing them from entering the labour market. Through this process, practitioners build a rich picture of the

individual, which is then used to create a profile page of that individual, which is then used to present individuals to external partners.

Stage 3 – Employer Engagement

Following vocational profiling, the next stage involves working with employers. This can be done in several ways, including broader engagement with employers to highlight the business benefits of inclusive recruitment, as well as more targeted support with specific employers. This often begins with developing an understanding of the business – its hiring needs, retention strategies, what the workforce looks like. Through this process, practitioners conduct a job analysis, similar to the vocational profiling carried out on individuals. A job analysis involves understanding the employer's workplace culture and current or potential job vacancies.

Stage 4 – Job Match

Following completion of the vocational profiling and job analysis, the next step is to bring both together through a job match. This involves matching individuals with a suitable employment opportunity, with the emphasis being on placing the right person into the right role.

Stage 5 – Support & Career Development

The final stage of the supported employment model focuses on ongoing support and career development. This involves providing in-work support to both the employee and employer, supporting with any challenges that may arise and ensuring that appropriate adjustments are being implemented as agreed. By maintaining continued engagement after job placement, practitioners can help individuals build confidence, develop their skills, and navigate workplace expectations. This sustained support is designed not only to help individuals remain in employment, but also to enable longer-term career development and progression.

Challenges associated with a multi-agency approach

While a multi-agency approach offers significant potential for increasing labour market participation, participants also highlighted several challenges that can limit its effectiveness in practice.

One of the most discussed challenges associated with multi-agency collaboration was that of data sharing among organisations. Participants noted that barriers to data sharing often stem from both real and perceived issues. In some cases, organisations may lack the knowledge or confidence to share information correctly. While co-location can benefit data sharing in some cases, participants highlighted that, from a clients' perspective, the value of a collaborative approach is lost if people are required to repeat 'their story' multiple times to different professionals or organisations.

Several practical steps were identified to improve data sharing within multi-agency partnerships. Firstly, organisations need to clearly establish the purpose of sharing data. This includes identifying why information needs to be shared and what outcomes it is intended to support. Secondly, partners should develop clear information-sharing protocols, with a defined legal basis. This ensures that organisations understand their responsibilities and limitations. Thirdly, participants highlighted the potential values of using shared databases that can bring different, yet relevant, datasets together. Such systems were also seen as helping future programmes to start more quickly by building on this existing infrastructure and information.

Funding structures were also widely discussed across the roundtables as a significant challenge within the employment support landscape. Participants highlighted the limitations of short-term funding models. Establishing effective multi-agency partnerships takes time, particularly where organisations must develop trust in working together as well as with their clients. Short-term funding models can limit the ability to build and sustain these relationships. Short-term funding can also undermine the person-centred approach identified as key to effectively reintegrating people back into the labour force. Building trust between key workers and clients requires sustained engagement, which can be difficult to achieve when operating under finite timelines, where continuation is uncertain. This is particularly problematic for people with complex needs who require longer-term support. In addition, participants emphasised how programmes are often funded in siloes, with a lack of

funding available to bring programmes together in a strategic approach. Uncertain funding also creates challenges around workforce. Participants noted that short-term funding can make it difficult to retain experienced staff members, with organisations losing skilled practitioners due to concerns about job security. The consequence of this, participants noted, was inconsistent staffing jeopardising the momentum of programmes.

Consequently, participants called for a need to move away from short-term funding, toward longer-term, more holistic funding models.

A systems change approach in Greater Manchester

Finally, we heard from Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) about GM Live Well, their commitment to ensuring universal support is readily available to all across Greater Manchester, with the aim of removing barriers to opportunity and addressing health, social and economic inequalities (GMCA, 2026). Through GMCA's economic inactivity trailblazer, their systems change programme aims to enable a shift in Greater Manchester's employment and skills system towards a 'Live Well' model. This approach demonstrates the possibilities of joined up working across agencies and could be of interest to trailblazers as they carry forward their programme of work.

Case study: Greater Manchester Combined Authority's approach

'Live Well' Model

At its core, the 'Live Well' model envisions a system in which:

- 1 Support is joined-up and easy to access, with multi-agency partners working collaboratively to meet people's holistic needs.
- 2 Services are co-produced with local communities and delivered in trusted, community-led spaces, ensuring they are accessible and responsive.
- 3 Local systems engage with employers to shape opportunities and connect individuals to meaningful, secure employment.
- 4 Efforts are coordinated and underpinned by a shared purpose to enable people to live well and achieve social and economic justice.

To do this, the 'Live Well' model brings together health services, employment support, and debt advice at a neighbourhood level, in collaboration with the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector.

Systems Change Programme

To support a transition towards a 'Live Well Journey to Employment', Greater Manchester's Systems Change Programme draws on insights into the behaviours that either enable or hinder progress towards the 'Live Well' model. Approaches identified as enabling progress towards the 'Live Well' model in Greater

Manchester include a single point of access and a ‘one front door, many doors open’ approach, delivered through a consistently funded organisation or team. Other key enablers include clinical referral pathways, co-location within health settings, and a strong focus on employment support, including targeted wage subsidies. As the Greater Manchester Combined Authority continues to work towards the ‘Live Well’ model, its current work is centred around three key priorities:

- 1** Enabling effective data sharing while reducing digital fragmentation across services.
- 2** Enhancing VCFSE sector capacity through targeted capacity-building programmes.
- 3** Strengthening integration with Jobcentre Plus.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority found that the digital landscape is both saturated and fragmented, with more than a dozen platforms currently being used across the region for social prescribing and case management. As a result, frontline support workers often have to navigate multiple disconnected systems, depending on funding streams or locality, to engage individuals and monitor progress. This can limit their ability to deliver seamless, person-centred support.

To address these challenges, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is leading several initiatives aimed at improving data sharing and reducing digital fragmentation, including the Joint Data Collaborative and the DWP Data Sharing Pilot. The Joint Data Collaborative is designed to help health and local authority practitioners share data more effectively and efficiently, while the DWP Data Sharing Pilot seeks to improve engagement with individuals using other data sources.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority also recognised that the VCSFE organisations play a critical role in driving engagement and delivering support within communities. However, the sector has experienced uneven and insufficient investment in recent years, resulting in variations in local capacity, delivery, and user experience. It was recognised that enabling these organisations to scale up and deliver at greater scale requires long-term, sustained investment. In response, Greater Manchester Combined Authority is working to strengthen capacity and capability across the sector through ongoing investment, enabling organisations to grow, develop, and retain staff. This includes the establishment of the Live Well Implementation Fund alongside a range of training and development programmes.

Conclusion

Our roundtable series highlighted key components of a successful multi-agency approach to tackling economic inactivity as well as the challenges associated with multi-agency approaches. We heard from participants with experience in establishing and working in multi-agency partnerships, including where these have been used to develop a longer-term systems change approach. Some key reflections from the discussions included:

- Exclusion from the labour market is rarely driven by a single barrier alone, reflecting the complexity of people's lives and the range of interrelated factors that influence their access to work. Instead, people outside the labour market typically face between four and six barriers to work. These barriers can arise from a variety of sources, including health-related issues, personal circumstances, and broader structural factors.
- Addressing the complex and overlapping barriers faced by those outside the labour market requires coordinated, joined-up approaches involving multiple partners with differing expertise. These partnerships typically include local authorities, local health boards, and third-sector organisations such as charities and social enterprises.
- A key feature of successful partnerships is the presence of a lead agency that provides coordination and strategic oversight. This organisation typically manages monitoring, compliance and performance while promoting a shared vision and equitable participation among partners.
- A person-centred approach is central to supporting people outside the labour market. This approach recognises the multiple, interconnected barriers that individuals often face and therefore the need for tailored, rather than standardised support. The key worker model is one well-evidenced approach to delivering this, with research and practice demonstrating its effectiveness. Key workers work closely with participants on a one-to-one basis to understand their needs and the barriers they face, and act as a single point of contact connecting individuals to relevant wraparound services within a multi-agency partnership.
- There are challenges associated with data sharing within multi-agency collaboration. Barriers often arise from both real and perceived concerns, including a lack of knowledge or confidence in how to share information securely. Participants highlighted several ways to improve data sharing, including defining a clear purpose, establishing formal information-sharing protocols and using shared databases.

- The impact of multi-agency collaboration is constrained by short-term and fixed-term funding models. With effective collaboration and trust taking time to develop, short-term funding can hinder development and the sustainability of relationships. It can also undermine person-centred approaches, as people – particularly those with complex needs – often require long-term engagement to build trust with key workers. In addition, funding uncertainty creates workforce challenges for support services, making it difficult to retain experienced staff and disrupting programme momentum.

Multi-agency working can therefore be an effective way to respond to the complex needs of those outside the labour force, but requires time, commitment and resourcing in order to succeed. A long-term, joined-up approach with a shared vision and agreed outcomes will be more likely to succeed and, while beyond the short time horizon for the Trailblazer pilots, could inform overall strategy in tackling economic inactivity in Wales.

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