



Overcoming barriers to inclusive recruitment in Northern Ireland's tourism and hospitality sectors

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations arise from the EPIC Futures NI collaborative research project, led by People 1st International in partnership with the NI Hotels Federation, the NI Tourism Alliance, and the HATS Network. The project examined the barriers faced by employers across Northern Ireland's tourism and hospitality sectors when recruiting individuals from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

The insights highlight that policy efforts should focus on removing practical barriers, streamlining systems, and building employer capacity to drive inclusive labour market participation.

1. IMPROVE EMPLOYER ACCESS TO LABOUR POOLS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Recommendation: Develop a single, integrated system to simplify how employers engage with economically inactive and underrepresented groups.

This should include:

- A national information hub and advisory service to help employers find and connect with candidates.
- A government-funded coordinating agency to act as the central entry point, linking employers with accredited intermediaries and ensuring consistent quality.
- Streamlined application, funding and reporting processes with clear onboarding guidance.

“Getting access to these individuals would be one of the big things. We don't really know where to go and find them.”

“We need something that's simple and clear.”

“We're happy to provide them with the opportunity... but how do we get to them?”

“Please make it easy for the employer.”

2. BUILD EMPLOYER CAPACITY AND AWARENESS

Recommendation: Launch a national campaign to mobilise employers in tackling economic inactivity raising awareness of the benefits and practical ways for employers to get involved by offering short-term work placements and skills-building opportunities for economically inactive individuals.

This should include tools for employers to engage confidently with underrepresented groups such as training modules on inclusive recruitment and workplace support and facilitating peer networking and knowledge exchange.

“Get all the employers to sign up to some national economic inactivity scheme where they provide these people with a work placement for a month... they’re building their skill set.”

“...we almost just need help with understanding it all a bit better and advice for developing a very clear strategy or roadmap in this area”.

“How do we give them [employers] the confidence? Because some of these economically inactive groups there's a wealth of legislation around them, which is terrifying for some people.”

3. ALIGN FINANCIAL INCENTIVES FOR EMPLOYERS AND INDIVIDUALS

Recommendation: Introduce coordinated financial measures that make participation in work beneficial for both employers and individuals.

- **For employers:** short-term tax relief or wage subsidies combined with training grants to help cover onboarding and mentoring costs.
- **For individuals:** to encourage sustained employment, reform the benefits system to ensure people are financially better off in work, including revising the 16-hour threshold and introducing a gradual taper as income rises.

“National Insurance contributions have gone up... if there was some form of incentive.”

“Employers do need to be given some sort of financial assistance or incentive to be looking outside those traditional groups.”

“Trying not to have major reductions in their benefits so employment is actually worthwhile.”

“We have a few who will restrict their hours because... going beyond that is detrimental to them.”

4. STRENGTHEN TRAINING AND READINESS ON BOTH SIDES

Recommendation: Develop consistent, sector-specific and cross-sector standardised training programmes to ensure all candidates gain essential workplace skills and behaviours before entering employment.

“If there was almost a package that we knew the individuals have got when they were with the intermediary... They’ll be seen as the go-to people to get that.”

“Making sure that if people are coming in for employment that they are actually prepared and ready for that next step.”

5. REFORM EMPLOYMENT SYSTEMS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND SIMPLICITY

Recommendation: Improve the benefits and job-seeking system to ensure genuine engagement and follow-up and mitigate the high level of interview no-shows experienced.

“Government needs to put something in place so there’s some way of following up that the claimant is actually actively looking for work.”

“I’ve had one gentleman that’s applied for certain roles in this hotel 28 times and has never showed up for interview.”



6. ADDRESS STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Recommendation: Address systemic barriers to participation that impact the wider Northern Ireland economy.

- Public transport: Invest in extended operating hours on strategic routes, improved weekend services, and subsidised transport passes for low-income workers.

“They can’t get here... we’re missing that link with those people that are probably 100% suitable for the role but just physically can’t get here.”

- Enhance childcare support: Expand publicly funded childcare and introduce subsidies for low-income workers, including provision for non-standard working hours and employer-supported schemes backed by government funding. Extend similar support to unpaid carers through flexible care options, respite services, and employer-assisted schemes subsidised by government to help individuals balance work and caring responsibilities.

“Any support for childcare is going to be really well received.....that's [the cost of childcare] without a doubt a huge barrier for people coming back to work”.

SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

Employers are committed to supporting people back into work but face challenges of complexity, awareness and cost. They call for:

- Simplified, accessible systems with one-stop information and intermediary co-ordination.
- Stronger financial and training incentives for both employers and individuals.
- Long-term investment in infrastructure - transport, childcare and inclusive training systems to enable participation.

These actions would not only address economic inactivity but strengthen the foundations of a more inclusive and resilient Northern Ireland labour market.



The insights presented have been developed as part of the EPIC Futures NI collaborative policy research project, undertaken in partnership with People 1st International, Tourism Northern Ireland, Ulster University, NI Hotels Federation, NI Tourism Alliance, and HATS Network.