How-to Guide

This guide offers more detailed information and advice for those who may be interested in adopting or adapting the initiative in their local area.

This document comprises the following sections (click hyperlink to skip to that section)

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Title	The Equal Programme – supporting North Ayrshire residents over the age of 16 living with disabilities to find sustainable employment pathways.
Organisation	North Ayrshire Council
Category	Promising Local Practice
Poverty Impact	Mitigation, Reduction

Introduction to the Project

The Equal Programme targets North Ayrshire residents over the age of 16 with physical, mental health or neurological conditions that impact their ability to work. The programme provides support in two ways: 1) by encouraging members to learn new skills through engaging in activities, and 2) by providing tailored, one-to-one support to help each member find a long-term job that suits their unique strengths and aspirations. This free-of-charge holistic training is provided by employment advisors both during and after the job search. The Equal Programme further extends to support new employers on how best to assist their new employees.

Initial Idea

Who had the initial idea?	
North Ayrshire Council (NAC)	
How did the idea for the project come about?	
The idea for the Equal Programme came about as NAC wanted to implement a specialist employability service within NAC for those with additional support needs. NAC thought a specialist employability team would reach a wide range of people in need. Linda was tasked with developing the initial idea and considered barriers she experienced in past employability programmes, such as engagement issues. The initial idea was to create a programme that would keep members engaged through activities that catered to various hobbies and interests whilst also learning transferrable skills and acquiring qualifications.	
Were plans informed by any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice from elsewhere?	
No	
Yes	✓
Linda and her colleagues analysed all evidence available on supported employment. This involved evidence on what supported employment should entail and how the knowledge acquired could be adapted to the resources, staffing, and number of members for the NAC programme. They also looked at other councils and their services. Additionally, they looked at information from the Scottish Government and the requirements and expectations of supported employment services. As a council, the NAC collects statistics and figures about vulnerable groups who may benefit from an employability service. These statistics supported the funding of the Equal Programme and continue to support its existence and development.	

Was anyone else involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	
No	
Yes	✓
The NAC developed the idea of having an independent, standalone team that worked directly with North Ayrshire residents in need of an employability service.	

Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	
No	✓
Yes	

Was funding required to support the development of the initial idea of the project?			
No		**Yes**	✓

Please provide details of the funding that was used to support the development of the initial idea of the project.	
Which organisation provided funding?	European Social Fund (ESF) and NAC.
How much was required?	Unspecified.
What was the specific source of funding? **(e.g., particular grant or policy)**	Unspecified.

Were specific resources – other than funding - needed when developing the initial idea of the project?			
No		**Yes**	✓

Pease provide details of the resources that were required when developing the initial idea of the project.	
Staff/Volunteer Time	An independent, standalone team that worked directly with North Ayrshire residents in need of an employability service was developed.
Facilities / Workspace	An outdoor garden plot was allocated to the Equal Programme. The programme was initially based in a NAC building but it became clear that this building was an intimidating barrier for potential members. The Equal programme staff agreed that a more inviting and approachable building was needed, so they are now based in a church annexe.
Equipment	The Equal programme staff has developed a programme to create video CVs ('calling cards') for members to send to employers so that potential employers get an insight into what the member has to offer and how they would fit into their team.
Local Knowledge	N/A
Food and Drink	N/A

Did any barriers have to be overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?	
No	
Yes	✓

One initial barrier that had to be overcome was a knowledge barrier about what the Equal Programme has to offer. Many people, including referral providers and the general public, thought the service was only for people with severe disabilities. Another ongoing barrier involves stigma in relation to employers who have misconceptions about disability. The project is currently working on an employer engagement piece to break down misguided conceptions of what disability actually means and what it entails.

Did anything in particular enable development of the initial idea of the project?	
No	
Yes	✓
It was helpful to receive feedback that the council building initially used as a base was intimidating, and that a church annexe would be more approachable. It was also helpful to have a garden plot outside for members to work on. The plot was particularly vital after COVID-19, when members were hesitant about meeting indoors, and proved to significantly impact members' well-being and health. Currently, produce from the garden goes to food banks to help those in need.	
How long did it take between having the initial idea and starting the project?	
The timeline between the initial idea and the start of the project in March 2019 was less than 6 months.	
Who made the decision to introduce the project?	
NAC.	

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Early Development – Pilot Project or Feasibility Study

Was there a pilot project or feasibility study?	
No	
Yes, a pilot project	✓
Yes, a feasibility study	✓

What did the pilot study or feasibility study involve?

A feasibility study was conducted to determine which path would be best going forward. They were deciding whether to outsource a project search service or formulate a team within NAC. It was concluded that the latter would be most effective, as there would be an opportunity to scale up and accommodate as many people as possible. There was also a pilot project prior to COVID-19. The NAC began a partnership with ASN schools to support young people transitioning from school to employment or further education. This pilot was developed to determine whether there was a need for an employability service for young people with additional support needs. After a review meeting with parents, it became evident that many schools needed similar support.

Who was responsible for the design and/or delivery of the pilot or feasibility study?

Rather than recruiting a specialist, the NAC appointed a transitions officer within the initial team. They collaborated with careers advisors, mental health advisors, and school leadership teams to facilitate the service.

Were those with lived experience of poverty among those involved in the design or delivery of the pilot project or feasibility study	
No	✓
Yes	
Those with lived experience were primarily members with additional support needs, rather than staff.	

Was funding required to support the pilot project or feasibility study?			
No		**Yes**	✓

Please provide details of the funding that was used to support the pilot project or feasibility study.	
Which organisation provided funding?	The ESF and the Scottish Government.
How much was required?	Unspecified.
What was the specific source of funding?	Various external funds were utilised, including Young Person's Guarantee funding, but the primary source of funding was from the ESF and the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Fund.

Were specific resources needed to support the pilot project or feasibility study?			
No		**Yes**	✓

Please provide details of the resources that were required for the pilot project or feasibility study.

Staff/Volunteer Time	A transitions officer was appointed within the initial team. They collaborated with careers advisors, mental health advisors, and school leadership teams to facilitate the service.
Facilities / Workspace	N/A
Equipment	N/A
Local Knowledge	Local knowledge from schools, parents, and students.
Food and Drink	N/A

Was the pilot project or feasibility study evaluated?

No	
Yes	✓

No formal evaluation was completed due to COVID-19. However, Linda conducted an informal evaluation that was passed on to the North Ayrshire education department for review. Linda evaluated the pilot's nature, how it was conducted, and what was accomplished, which facilitated further requests from schools.

Ws there evidence from the pilot project or feasibility study that confirmed that it was working / it would work?

No	
Yes	✓

Lived experience testimonies were the primary evidence that the pilot project was working. Most members moved to a ‘positive destination’, meaning they progressed to further education, received qualifications, or were offered paid work.

Who made the decision to continue with the project beyond the pilot or feasibility study?	
NAC.	
Was the design of the project modified following the pilot project or feasibility study?	
No	
Yes	✓
The appointment of a transition officer for the pilot was successful. The Council decided to implement one at the Equal Programme to support them in understanding the unique barriers present for young people. The pilot also influenced the shape and experience of the Equal Programme team and the activities currently on offer.	

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Accessing the Service and Engaging with Service Users

Is there a referral process?	
No	
Yes	✓
Potential members can refer themselves, or friends, family, or a carer can refer on behalf of them. Potential members may also be referred by a job centre, an employment specialist, or a healthcare worker. Once the referral is received, an employment advisor will reach out via phone within seven days. A suitability assessment will then be made, and a potential member will receive specialised support to ensure any additional barriers (i.e. anxiety or dyslexia) are addressed. Following this, a meeting will be arranged within two weeks to discuss the steps going forward.	
Is referral the only way that potential clients are made aware of the project?	
Yes	
No	✓
Other than referral, how do potential clients come to know about the project?	
Potential members may be informed through a job centre, employment specialist, or healthcare worker. The service is also advertised on Facebook, LinkedIn, and the NAC website.	
What is the most common way through which users typically access the service?	
Information not available at this point in time	

Do you take steps to keep in touch / reach out to service users?	
No	
Yes	✓

Members can contact their advisors during open hours (9:00-16:30) via telephone, text, or email. Personal preference tends to be email or telephone. An employment advisor provides all contact details, and members are kept in touch with them until they no longer require help. There is no end date for service provision, as support tends to fade out over time on the member's own terms.

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Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty

Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?	
No	✓
Yes	

Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project or project governance?	
No	✓
Yes	

Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project? *If so, please describe below*.	
No	
Yes	✓

All of the Equal Programme's members provide feedback for each activity. Steering groups have formalised this process; there is one for the garden and a general steering group. There is also a partnership with local food banks. Fruit and vegetables from the garden are given to food banks, and the food banks offer volunteer placements to Equal Programme members. A needs-based assessment also occurs at the start of all members' journeys. Advisors figure out how to support members financially if needed. They also conduct a benefits calculation before a member goes into employment and recommend how many hours, they should work to ensure they are as well-off as possible.

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Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working

Who is responsible for managing the project?	
NAC.	
Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?	
Yes	
No	✓
As a council, the NAC has various responsibilities related to the welfare of their residents. The Equal Programme is under the umbrella of Working North Ayrshire, which offers a range of support services for those looking for work; including support for non-English speakers, modern apprenticeships, and employment mentors.	
What proportion of the manager's overall workload is given over to this project?	
Most of it	
About half of it	
Just a small proportion of it	✓

Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group?	
No	
Yes	✓
There is a Steering Group for the garden as well as a more general one for the Equal Programme's members. When Equal staff come up with an idea they then broach this to the Steering Group, who provide feedback on whether or not they think it will be successful. Similarly, members can bring their own ideas, opinions, and thoughts to Equal staff for consideration too. These meetings are conducted with a lead advisor and a support advisor. The general Steering Group meet quarterly, and the Garden Steering Group meet every eight weeks for a discussion. Some members from the Garden Steering Group have lived experience of poverty and have provided feedback on what they would have liked to have seen at the food banks.	

Are any other governance arrangements in place to review strategy and performance?	
No	✓
Yes	

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Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements

In your opinion, is the project aligned with national and/or local anti-poverty strategies and priorities (e.g., local authority or health board priorities)?	
Don't know	
No	
Yes	✓
The Equal Programme is now linked to North Ayrshire's Cost of Living and Child Poverty Board through an employability action link.	

In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?	
Don't know	
No	
Yes	
Cannot be answered at this point in time.	

Is the project part of any other strategy?	
Don't know	
No	
Yes	✓
The Equal Programme is part of a broader strategy within North Ayrshire Council to increase and support disability-confident employers.	

In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this strategy?	
Don't know	
No	
Yes	
Cannot be answered at this point in time.	

Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?	
No	
Yes	✓
There is a requirement for the Scottish Government to fund programmes like the Equal Programme.	

In your opinion, what has been the impact on the project of having this statutory commitment?	
Don't know	
None	
Negative	
Positive	
Cannot be answered at this point in time.	

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Funding

Has external funding been secured to support the work?	
No	
Yes	✓

Please provide details of the external funding that was used secured to support this work?	
Which organisation provided funding?	The Scottish Government.
What was the specific funding stream/source/scheme?	The pilot was supported by the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Fund and other external sources. The Equal Programme now receives payments from the Scottish Government that supports its continued existence.
How much funding was secured?	The project's current budget is roughly £500,000. The initial budget was £350,000, with staff costs being the primary cost at £310,000. There were additional operating costs. The increase in budget now covers paid work experience trainees at £150,000.
For how long has funding been secured?	Unspecified.

Is future funding from the same external source a possibility?	
Don't know	✓
No	
Yes	
Is future funding from the same external source based on pre-agreed outcomes or outputs being delivered from this work?	
No	✓
Yes	
No, although they do have performance expectations.	
Has a specific sum been secured from the host organisation to support this work?	
No	✓
Yes	
Is future funding from the host organisation a possibility?	
Don't know	✓
No	
Yes	

Is future funding from the host organisation based on pre-agreed outcomes or outputs being delivered?	
No	
Yes	
N/A	

What are the future - longer-term - prospects for this work if existing funding sources were no longer available?
Unspecified.

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Staffing and Resources

Do existing staff from the host organisation contribute toward the work of this project as part of their broader work for the organisation?	
No	
Yes	
Not specified.	

Are existing staff from the host organisation paid extra (for example, taking on extra hours) to contribute toward the work of this project?	
No	
Yes	
Not specified.	

Have additional paid staff been employed to contribute toward the work of this project?	
No	
Yes	✓
Equal advisors are paid staff who provide one-to-one, tailored support for each member during and after their job search.	

Are volunteers involved in delivering the project?	
No	
Yes	✓
There are some volunteers from the Equal Programme's member base who lead activities, such as a creative writing group, gaming group, football group, and the garden.	

Are specific resources – other than staff/volunteer time and money - needed to support the delivery of the project?			
No		**Yes**	✓

Please provide details of the resources that are required to deliver the project?	
Facilities / Workspace	The church annexe and garden are needed to deliver the project.
Equipment	Gardening equipment is required as are other forms of equipment for hobby-related activities, such as that for a proposed bicycle refurbishment group.
Local Knowledge	The most vital resource is the knowledge of experienced staff members. This knowledge includes the barriers members face and suitable employment opportunities for them. Staff are also equipped to educate employers and address misconceptions of disability.
Food and Drink	N/A

Are any of the resources needed to deliver the project provided in-kind, rather than budgeted from project funds?	
No	
Yes	✓
The church annexe is part of Trinity Church in North Ayrshire. The garden plot is provided by Eglinton Community Garden. Equipment and local knowledge is provided by the Equal Programme and NAC.	

Were new IT systems, additional software, or upgrades to existing software (databases, Apps) required to deliver this project?	
No	✓
Yes	

Was additional training – for staff or volunteers - required to deliver this project?	
No	
Yes	✓
The project required both internal and external staff training, including mental health and autism awareness training courses. Specific learning sessions on ADHD, autism, and epilepsy have also occurred to ensure understanding and safety. Every staff member also completed National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) training, and several did Individual Placement and Support (IPS) training. There has also been specific training for advisors to support their work with their members.	

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Monitoring and Evaluation

Is there baseline data to describe what things were like before the start of the project?	
No	
Yes	✓
As a council, the NAC generates annual reports that contain data on the area's conditions. They have completed reports prior to the Equal Programme that demonstrate this, including on supported employment. Prior to the project, the NAC published a report in 2018 that detailed plans to close the disability employment gap.	
Is the difference that the project is making measured or monitored by the host organisation?	
Yes	✓
No	
Who within the host organisation is responsible for monitoring the impact of the project?	
The Equal Programme staff collects the data.	
How often is the impact of the project monitored or measured by the host organisation?	
Reports are generated and submitted to the Scottish government quarterly. This is done to show progress and receive evaluation and recommendations. The Equal Programme staff collects the data.	
What methods, techniques or strategies are used by the host organisation to measure the impact of the project?	
The Equal programme team also sent out 120 questionnaires to members. The survey asked questions related to their thoughts and feelings about the service. They received around 60 responses, all of which shared positive feedback.	

What information is collected by the host organisation about the project?

Number of users	**Yes**	✓	**No**	
Profile of users	**Yes**	✓	**No**	
Experience of users	**Yes**	✓	**No**	
Outcomes for users	**Yes**	✓	**No**	
Anything else	**Yes**		**No**	✓

Has the data that has been collected by the host organisation been used to adapt the way the project works?

No	
Yes	✓

The data collected, whether demographic information, data collected from Steering Group meetings, or surveys, is always used to improve and adapt the Equal Programme. An example of this would be that they realised activities need to be adapted to suit older members.

Has an external organisation been employed to formally evaluate the project?

No	✓
Yes	

No, although the Scottish Government have cited the project as a Model of Good Practice having visited Equal's job fair and garden site.

Has the insight from the external organisation's evaluation been used to adapt the way the project works?	
No	
Yes	✓
The data collected, whether demographic information, data collected from Steering Group meetings, or surveys, is always used to improve and adapt the Equal Programme. An example of this would be that they realised activities need to be adapted to suit older members.	
Is there an intention to employ an external organisation to evaluate the impact of the project in the future?	
Don't know / no current plans	
No	
Yes	✓
Is there an intention to undertake your own formal evaluation in the future to estimate the impact of the project?	
Don't know / no current plans	✓
No	
Yes	

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Impact

To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?	
Fully met	✓
Making progress toward meeting Aims	
Not making progress	
Following the results of the survey, it is very clear that the aims of the project have been achieved.	

What difference has the project made?
The Equal Programme has made a profound impact on the lives and wellbeing of its members. One of Equal's strengths is that it offers engaging, hobby-oriented activities that ensure indirect learning occurs among members and they acquire transferrable skills. When members are engaged, they open up and are ready to communicate and negotiate with one another. Staff noticed an increase in confidence levels and communication skills among members, which is particularly vital in the aftermath of the pandemic. The garden has also played a pivotal role for those involved. Being outside has helped improve the well-being and general health of members, as has seeing the product of their efforts in the growth of the garden. Members also report an increase in their overall quality of life, even if they don't go directly into employment. Some are getting their first-ever jobs or getting back into work after a gap.

Have conditions or demand changed since the project was introduced?	
No	
Yes	✓
Demand for the service has changed over time, primarily due to the pandemic. Some members with health issues were hesitant to return. Currently, the Equal Programme is thriving in both the number of members and the work it is achieving.	

Has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?	
Yes	✓
No	
It is clear that the project has been successful whilst there is room for continued growth. They were also successful in re-engaging members following the pandemic with popular activities, such as the gaming group.	

Has the project changed through time?	
No	
Yes	✓
What changed	The Equal Programme has moved. It is now located in a church annexe rather than a council building. The services on offer for employers have improved over time. Equal advisors now provide an in-work support service for employers. If consent is given, they act as an intermediary between the member and their new employer. Advisors can also provide additional training for members if tasks at their new job prove to be difficult. This is done to support the employer and ensure that the work placement will be sustainable for both parties

Why has it changed	The Equal Programme staff strive for continuous improvement, and these changes demonstrate that. They have led several initiatives to improve its service. Linda led an open day during which parents, carers, and members provided feedback and discussed service provision in North Ayrshire. This was done to improve what is on offer in the Equal Programme and to reduce the disability employment gap within the Council. They also led a 'reverse job fair' event for employers, during which members had individual stands with their CVs and details of their achievements and activities. They also led an event for service providers in the area to coordinate their efforts effectively. They discussed findings that were eventually passed on to the local employability partnership. All of this has been done for the purpose of continuous improvement of the Equal Programme.

Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?	
No	✓
Yes	

In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?	
No	
Yes	✓

The Equal Programme staff support their members by increasing their income through supported employment and improving their quality of life. They advise their members on the best possible routes to progress with their goals and ambitions. One outcome of this is paid employment, which improves the quality of life for those experiencing poverty. Equal also collaborates with other organisations that provide specialist financial support. One of Equal's core aims is to find members sustainable employment that will make them better off.

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Learning from Experience

What is working well?
Everything at the Equal Programme is working very well. The model in place is the best avenue they have found to support those with additional support needs.
What, if anything, is working less well?
There are no apparent issues within the Equal Programme. Equal staff tweak or halt activities that are not working well.
What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?
Be flexible about proposed ideas and using members' feedback to improve the service. Look after staff and their well-being alongside the well-being of members.
Are there plans to develop or expand the project in the future?

No	
Yes	✓

The Equal Programme looks to develop its service in line with the Scottish Government's Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Fidelity Scale. The Scale is a tool used to gauge if evidence-based practices are being implemented in supported employment services by evaluating staffing, organisation, and services. The Equal Programme team aims to incorporate all of the IPS Fidelity points they feasibly can, although they have already achieved most of the items. They are also looking to expand the activities on offer and have included a bicycle refurbishment course to support families who cannot afford to purchase one. They further plan to expand collaboration with various agendas (i.e. North Ayrshire Council's poverty and environmental agendas) and related groups, such as the community mental health team. All of these steps are done to ensure they provide the best possible service they can.

How easily do you think this project could be replicated in another setting?
The Equal Programme could easily be replicated in another setting, particularly if it is supported by an employment council service such as Working North Ayrshire.