

## Project Evaluation Report - Covid-19 Recovery Academy

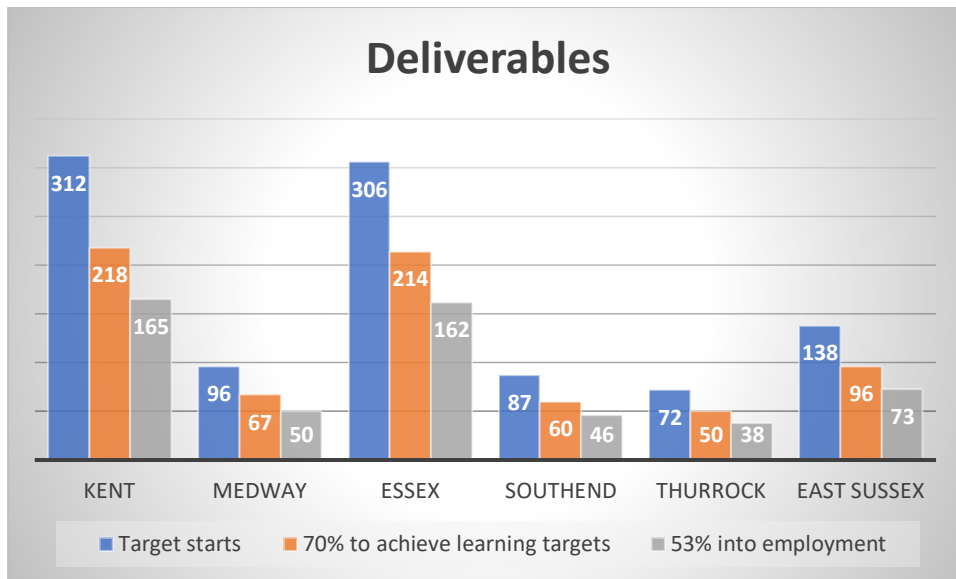
### Section 1: Background

The contract was designed to support 1002 residents of the South East LEP region to reskill in priority sectors that continued to recruit during the lockdown period. The sectors that were identified were Care, Construction, Digital skills, Food production, Manufacturing and Logistics. Delivery would be through a series of short entry-level courses that would be delivered over a 4-week period with additional employability support. The target areas were Kent, Medway, East Sussex, Southend, Thurrock, and Essex. The Covid Recovery academy was mobilised specifically to deliver the outcomes and support people back into sustained employment. It was staffed by a dedicated team who provided person-centred employment and wellbeing support to the local participants.

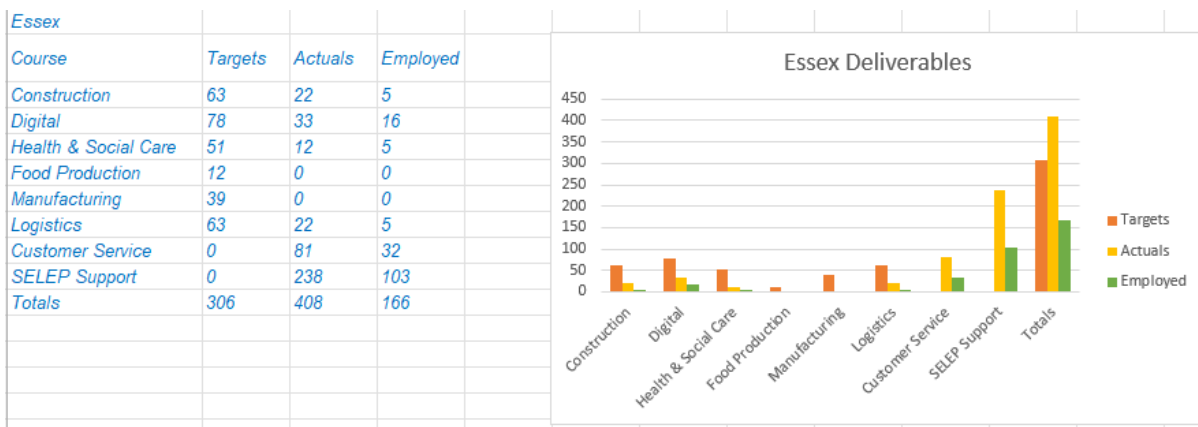
What was the need for the contract?

The academy is not only a response to the already identified skills shortages in the sectors but also a structured response to Covid-19 pressures. Our focus therefore is to help people to train/retrain via the academy to get back into work into sectors that are stable and expanding. In designing the Covid Recovery Academy, we mapped the impact of Covid-19 using local evidence with insight from the LEP strategic plans. Evidence showed that pre-Covid disadvantaged areas, low paid work force and minority groups were disproportionately impacted. Sectors hit hardest include non-food retail and hospitality and tourism. The following objectives were set:

| Area        | Target starts | 70% to achieve learning targets | 53% into employment |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Kent        | 312           | 218                             | 165                 |
| Medway      | 96            | 67                              | 50                  |
| Essex       | 306           | 214                             | 162                 |
| Southend    | 87            | 60                              | 46                  |
| Thurrock    | 72            | 50                              | 38                  |
| East Sussex | 138           | 96                              | 73                  |



### Section 2: Assessment of Deliverables - Essex



As you can see from the data above, we were targeted on training in the sectors that were identified as still recruiting during the Covid-19 outbreak, however the reality is that most people wanted the softer skills and wrap-around support such as having their CV updated, having coaching sessions to prepare for interviews and being sent links to employment opportunities. We spent a lot of time offering one-to-one sessions when we could meet face-to-face again delivering this service and as you can see from above, the highest return on employment was a direct result of the SELEP support. In short, the overall conversion rate for Essex was 41% which is very positive. This conversion rate surpasses the national average for employability contracts who support a similar client group.

Our delivery model during this period was to deliver remotely via online learning but this presented numerous other problems. People’s digital skills and having the kit to be able to learn was an issue, then the compatibility with documents and Teams was an issue and finally just getting people to engage on the courses was a challenge. However, we did prevail and

had some successes with the training. This mirrors the experience of our employability contracts delivered across the county, which identified digital poverty as a contributory factor to disengagement and/or an inability to fully engage.

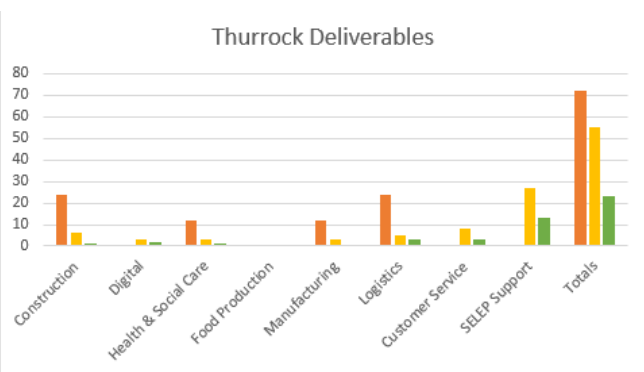
One of the first tasks we did when the project was launched in June 2021 was set up a document that we could populate with a single point of contact for stakeholders. We held 27 stakeholder meetings and only 6 continued to engage and support the provision. This demonstrates that there still needs to be development with collaborative working and a joined-up approach, as evidenced by the fact that the more interventions that can be accessed, then the more likely it is that a person will move into sustained employment. One of our recommendations would be the continuation of forums and working groups across the region, to facilitate this horizontal integration.

We ran multiple marketing campaigns to promote the provision and set up a dedicated website: [Covid-19 Recovery Academy | Ixion Holdings](#) and we had our own inbox so people could email us directly and one of the team would pick it up.

We also held several jobs fairs in key locations and invited actively recruiting employers. It was during one of these jobs fairs that we discovered that employers are struggling to recruit after Covid as it seems people would like access to more flexible working, for example, only working during school hours. Some of the employers we have been talking to are in the process of making these changes in the hope that it will increase their recruitment of new staff. Educating employers and supporting them to become more adaptable to the changing needs of the workforce has been another of the successful outcomes of this project. The requirement for this has been reinforced by the latest figures suggesting that unemployment is at a record low, whilst vacancies remain at a record high. Bridging this gap was key to ensuring the jobs started by our learners, were sustainable for them and for the employers we worked with.

### Assessment of Deliverables – Thurrock

| Thurrock             |         |         |          |
|----------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Course               | Targets | Actuals | Employed |
| Construction         | 24      | 6       | 1        |
| Digital              | 0       | 3       | 2        |
| Health & Social Care | 12      | 3       | 1        |
| Food Production      | 0       | 0       | 0        |
| Manufacturing        | 12      | 3       | 0        |
| Logistics            | 24      | 5       | 3        |
| Customer Service     | 0       | 8       | 3        |
| SELEP Support        | 0       | 27      | 13       |
| Totals               | 72      | 55      | 23       |



We

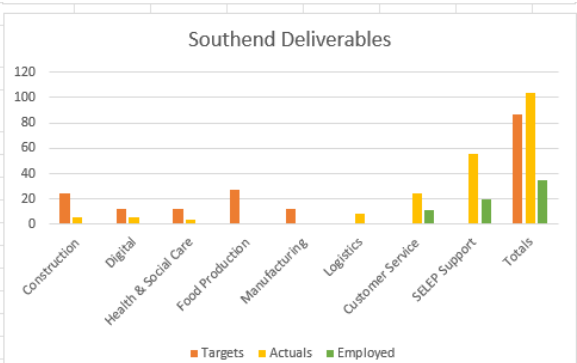
struggled to meet our targets in Thurrock, and we this may be in part due to the individual behaviours of some of the population. Many people work in London as Thurrock has an easy commute route. One main cohort was unemployed single mums who we experienced often lacked the motivation or had barriers to work, therefore remaining in receipt of their benefits. Childcare costs and high rent make it very challenging for this group of people to enter the workplace, without significant adjustments made by employers, many of which were unreasonable to request. As has been noted above, there remains an abundance of vacancies

available, but many people believe they will not be better off if they work, despite the use of Better Off in Work Calculations, facilitated by JCP. As you can see from the data, it presents a false positive in that we did manage to find 23 out of the 55 people we supported work which makes a conversion rate of 44% but this will not benefit the area.

Assessment of Deliverables – Southend

For Southend we achieved over the target, this was due to using our internal referrals from

| Southend             |         |         |          |
|----------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Course               | Targets | Actuals | Employed |
| Construction         | 24      | 6       | 1        |
| Digital              | 12      | 6       | 1        |
| Health & Social Care | 12      | 4       | 1        |
| Food Production      | 27      | 0       | 0        |
| Manufacturing        | 12      | 0       | 0        |
| Logistics            | 0       | 8       | 1        |
| Customer Service     | 0       | 24      | 11       |
| SELEP Support        | 0       | 56      | 20       |
| Totals               | 87      | 104     | 35       |



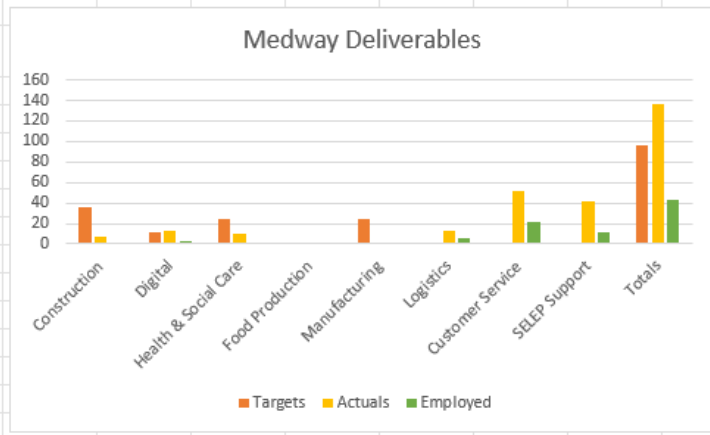
the JETS teams and a positive relationship with an external stakeholder called Unity Works. The success of Southend was also increased as when restrictions were lifted, there was a lot of face-to-face activity between our caseload advisors and the participants on the programme. We believe the success of the employment result, conversion rate of 34%, was again due to the delivery of softer skills support rather than direct training to change careers or upskill. The evidence we must support the ‘softer skills’ support is the number of people who did not wish to engage in training but did want to gain employment and did not necessarily have the confidence to put themselves forward. With gentle persuasion and coaching in interview skills, the softer approach had more success.

At the start of the project, we delivered a lot of promotional activity by having stands in the local shopping centres and in the local foodbanks. We gave out flyers and just generally talked to people about the support we could offer. As we were concluding the contract, we held a jobs fair in Southend in St Mark’s Church, and it was attended by 25 actively recruiting employers and we were visited by the Deputy Mayor who spent a good couple of hours talking to the employers to understand their needs. This will have a positive impact in that it helps the mayor to understand the local labour market and observing the people that attended, understanding that our contract has credibility.

In addition to the above we made sure we were present at other jobs fairs including the national jobs fair and the one arranged by the local council.

Assessment of Deliverables – Medway

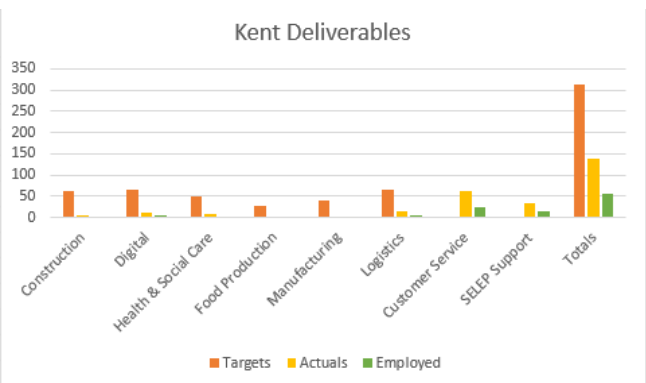
| Medway               |         |         |          |
|----------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Course               | Targets | Actuals | Employed |
| Construction         | 36      | 7       | 1        |
| Digital              | 12      | 13      | 3        |
| Health & Social Care | 24      | 10      | 1        |
| Food Production      | 0       | 0       | 0        |
| Manufacturing        | 24      | 0       | 0        |
| Logistics            | 0       | 13      | 5        |
| Customer Service     | 0       | 51      | 22       |
| SELEP Support        | 0       | 42      | 11       |
| Totals               | 96      | 136     | 43       |



Medway overachieved on the targets due to a high need for support in the area, internal referrals from Jets and marketing/outreach of the team. However, except for Logistics, Customer Service and SELEP Support which were added to the contract, the training targets were underachieved in each area. This is due to the needs of the area being complex- many didn't have the motivation, or resources to attend training courses. Many of the participants required intensive support and had many barriers, and so whilst the conversion rate stands at 32%, many softer outcomes were achieved for many participants, such as increased confidence, more comprehensive CV's, increase in IT skills such as creating an email account, having someone present to support with online job applications. The job fair was the most disappointing, and this is due to a range of factors including the lack of engagement (including from employers- 3 did not turn up to exhibit), a lack of available central locations to host and no staff members being based in the area, and so less opportunities to market/promote than for Essex events. Staff established many contacts in the area, including with Reed in Partnership but there was a reluctance from some organisations for collaborative working. The project was due to be part of the Refernet trial from Kent County Council which would have involved being part of a digital referral system whereby organisations in the area could refer participants for additional support. The launch of this however was pushed back and in the end launched after the closure of the SELEP contract.

## Assessment of Deliverables – Kent

| Kent                 |         |         |          |
|----------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Course               | Targets | Actuals | Employed |
| Construction         | 63      | 6       | 2        |
| Digital              | 66      | 13      | 5        |
| Health & Social Care | 51      | 7       | 3        |
| Food Production      | 27      | 0       | 0        |
| Manufacturing        | 39      | 1       | 1        |
| Logistics            | 66      | 15      | 6        |
| Customer Service     | 0       | 61      | 24       |
| SELEP Support        | 0       | 35      | 15       |
| Totals               | 312     | 138     | 56       |



underachieved against our targets, however, we had a higher conversion rate of 41%. Kent is a

densely populated area with long distances between towns and across the region, commuting in a car is the vital element to getting to various locations. Many communities such as the seaside communities are cut off from the rest of the region and there is a lack of employment opportunities. We also recognised that there was poor engagement and the attitudes from many participants proved challenging. Many were unwilling to travel to huge retail outlets such as Bluewater where there were opportunities and communities such as Dartford for example, chose to work in London as the travel links into the city make it an easy commute. From a marketing perspective we did not have strong knowledge in this area and relied on building strong referral links and delivering flyers to promote the contract. The calibre of participants needed long-term one to one in person support, and this wasn't as time effective as we would have liked. We had dedicated staff travelling long distances to provide intervention and the results we have achieved come from gritty determination, persistence, and a passion to positively impact as many lives as possible.

## Assessment of Deliverables – East Sussex



For East Sussex, although we achieved a conversion rate of 41%, this figure does not demonstrate the true picture. When contacting external stakeholders, we found initial support and positive feedback but then no referrals were received from these stakeholders. The demographics in this area made it hard to infiltrate as there is a high retirement age population but then on the opposite spectrum, there is a disheartened attitude of some young people who do not see a positive future for themselves due to the lack of employment opportunities. The team was mainly located in Essex and travelling distances to and across the region to see participants, proved very timely and costly especially when attitudes in the area towards working and courses were poor, whilst college leavers often preferred to head to London to work and move away from the area. The large towns were seaside towns and seasonal work so a combination of Covid and a lack of employment opportunities made this very challenging.

### Section 3: Assessment of benefits

- Were the deliverables achieved within the timescale specified in the contract? The deliverables were supposed to have started in March 2021 but due to a delay in the

contracts, the actual delivery started in June 2021. The project was only supposed to run for 12 months until June 2022, but as we had already moved into the next financial year, SELEP agreed we could continue delivery into Q3 2022. This allowed us to get closer to the overall targets and achieve the minimum levels of performance.

- Was the contract used for the purpose originally intended? Yes, the contract was used as intended, although there was a change when it was identified that we could support a wider range of people who would also benefit from our offer. This was in response to further identification of people in need such as people on zero-hour contracts where work was not necessarily guaranteed.

#### Section 4: Assessment of Project Management Arrangements

Were the monitoring arrangements put in place to manage the contract satisfactory?

Yes, there was regular dialogue between us as the deliverer and the LEP and Essex County Council as the commissioner of the funds. We provided regular updates on numbers and discussed the challenges that became apparent as the project progressed. Internally the project was monitored closely by our internal management team and included weekly meetings to discuss progress against targets, and weekly financial meetings to ensure the financial health of the provision against organisational objectives

Was there an opportunity to influence performance or change at interim stages?

Yes, the LEP have been very supportive throughout the delivery period. When the project was launched, it was specifically designed to support those that were unemployed or made redundant as a direct result of Covid, but we saw an increased demand for our support for people with other circumstances. This was discussed with the LEP, and a change control agreement was signed off in January 2022 as follows.

‘The contract currently supports those who are recently unemployed or redundant because of Covid-19. We are proposing expanding this to support people who are also ‘under-employed’. This would include:

- Someone on a zero-hour contract
- Someone in work but in receipt of benefits
- Someone in an entry level job (for which no qualifications are required) wishing to move to a new role or new sector
- Someone earning the minimum wage
- Someone with no qualifications and with no higher than level 2 skills

This was the reasoning behind the change:

When this contract was first put in place, levels of unemployment had seen a sharp increase. Although still higher than usual, numbers have not been as great as anticipated and there are labour market shortages overall, with more vacancies than people to fill them in many cases.

This is coupled with new national employment programmes entering the landscape, such as the Department for Work and Pensions ‘Restart’ programme and other local programmes.



Shaw Trust has been doing a lot of outreach and marketing, including attending events and having presence in local locations. Despite this, the numbers are lower than forecasted which is predominantly due to a lack of demand as described. This has been confirmed also by local Job Centre Plus and who we have facilitated meetings with for all our contract holders.

Shaw Trust have been receiving increasing requests from people on zero-hour contracts, such as those only doing a few hours' work a week or those in receipt of benefits but who are in work. They are therefore not eligible for support as it stands. The pandemic has led some individuals to take up short-term or low paid work and therefore this programme could support such cohorts into longer-term and better paid opportunities. Additionally, many of the current national and local programmes as described are not supporting this cohort so there is arguably a gap in provision.

This change will enable us to support individuals impacted by Covid-19 into longer term opportunities and should also bring the numbers up to those originally forecasted. It will also provide some useful learning in terms of support required by under-employed people'.

## Section 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion we have done very well towards our targets, but it has been challenging due to the lack of collaboration from some external stakeholders across all areas of the region. In addition, 12 months to support 1002 individuals is a very short period. We have only been able to do as well as we have due the internal links with our own employability programmes.

During our delivery, we were approached by the North Essex Economic Board who had some funding they wanted to spend, and they wanted to use the Covid Recovery Academy model. We started this delivery in April and again, as in SELEP, it has been recognised that the employment market can change and therefore our offer needs to be fluid so we can respond to local needs immediately. This contract has been considerably well received by external stakeholders as it is in a smaller demographic, and we are very much out in the community delivering face-to-face training. As SELEP has come to an end, we can only offer support in the following districts: Chelmsford, Colchester, Braintree, Maldon, Uttlesford and Tendring but it would be wonderful if we could support other districts with our offer which is training using short courses with wrap-around support and coaching to gain employment.

In summary, we are incredibly proud of the number of lives we have been able to positively transform through the funding for this project. We are of the opinion that good education and good employment are key drivers in changing the fortunes of the most disadvantaged in our society. Given the success of this model in improving engagement in disengaged communities and ultimately, sourcing sustainable employment for residents across the region, we are looking to replicate this in other parts of the country. As has been noted above, the opportunity to support more people, change more lives and improve the communities we work with, is one which we would be excited to discuss further across the regions targeted by this project. We are looking to replicate this successful model where possible to support national skills and employability challenges. We welcome conversations with Local



Authorities and LEPs regarding UKSPF allocations whereby we seek to work collaboratively and innovatively to implement local solutions.