

CIPD

Championing better
work and working lives

CIPD Northern Ireland | *February 2022*

Better work and working lives for Northern Ireland

2022 NI Assembly election manifesto



The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. As a registered charity, **we champion better work and working lives** and have been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years.

We have more than 160,000 members across the world, provide thought leadership through independent research on the world of work and offer professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development. **The CIPD has around 4,000 members across Northern Ireland.** We sit at the heart of a proud, growing community of practitioners, members, partners, policy-makers and thought leaders in the world of work. We work with the NI Executive, its agencies and several academic, business and voluntary partners on a broad range of public policy issues.

We are key partners on multiple working groups and serve as a conduit to our network of members, who both inform changes in policy and deliver them. **Our membership is spread across businesses from the public, private and third sectors and across businesses of all sizes.** This puts the CIPD in a strong position in the public policy sphere.



Report

Better work and working lives for Northern Ireland: 2022 NI Assembly election manifesto

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1 Executive summary

The 2022 Assembly Election will be held under an unprecedented cloud of uncertainty, even in the context of Northern Irish politics. Political parties will need to reflect this in their manifestos and provide solutions for these immediate challenges as well as a longer-term vision for Northern Ireland focused on recovery. Our manifesto seeks to help policy-makers in this task.

The CIPD in Northern Ireland is well placed to do this. After all, it was the people profession that had to navigate unprecedented changes to working patterns, get to grips with ever-changing regulations and support schemes, and support employees and their wellbeing through some of the most difficult times they have ever faced. People professionals' experience and expertise are valuable resources, and we aim to share some of that here.

This document, the CIPD's 2022 NI Assembly election manifesto, is based on a series of roundtables we held late last year with senior members from a range of sectors, industries and organisational sizes, as well as several online surveys distributed to members of our Policy Forum. We make recommendations in areas of devolved responsibility over three sections:

- Job quality in a changing world ([Section 4](#))
- Flexible and responsive skills development ([Section 5](#))
- A modern and inclusive labour market ([Section 6](#)).

In **Job quality in a changing world**, we argue that job quality should be at the heart of public policy as we emerge from the pandemic. The Executive should press ahead with its plans for the Better Jobs Pledge and do whatever it can to promote awareness and adoption of good work practices across businesses large and small. Improving management skills to boost demand for training and improve productivity is key.

In **Flexible and responsive skills development**, we argue that the published [Skills Strategy](#) is a great first step and provide some suggestions for further progress. Central to our proposals is the rebalancing of funding towards vocational, work-based skills development and lifelong learning. This should include an enhanced Individual Learning Account model that is buildable, flexible and responsive.

In **A modern and inclusive labour market**, we make the case for a new Northern Ireland Employment Bill as a route to the consolidation of employment and equalities legislation that has – not always intentionally – diverged too far from GB law. We also want to see pay gap reporting requirements finally enacted as well as a range of policies to support those who face additional challenges to access employment and education opportunities.

The last two years have been incredibly challenging. But with all challenges come opportunities for change. Our manifesto lays out where we think these opportunities should be seized.

Our top five recommendations:

- Embed job quality across all Northern Irish Executive policy.
- Change the right to request flexible working to a day one right.
- Rebalance public funding towards demand-led vocational routes like apprenticeships.
- Boost lifelong learning, for example, by introducing enhanced Individual Learning Accounts.
- Introduce a new Northern Ireland Employment Bill.





2 Introduction

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The last two years will likely be remembered as the most turbulent ones in recent memory. A global pandemic arrived in Northern Ireland just as businesses and employees grappled with the changes as a result of the UK's departure from the European Union and the NI Protocol in particular. And if recent months have shown anything, it's that both of these issues are far from behind us and, in fact, have now been compounded by labour shortages, rising costs and upskilling challenges.

The 2022 Assembly Election will be held under an unprecedented cloud of uncertainty, even in the context of Northern Irish politics. Political parties will need to reflect this in their manifestos and provide solutions for these immediate challenges as well as a longer-term vision for Northern Ireland focused on recovery. Our manifesto seeks to help policy-makers in this task.

The CIPD in Northern Ireland is well placed to do this. After all, it was the people profession that had to navigate unprecedented changes to working patterns, get to grips with ever-changing regulations and support schemes, and support employees and their wellbeing through some of the most difficult times they have ever faced. As we begin to transition out of the pandemic, with new ways of working embedding, there is a new set of challenges for our members to tackle. People professionals' experience and expertise are valuable resources, and we aim to share some of that here.

The impact of the pandemic on the world of work will be felt for years to come. On one hand, we have seen incredible resilience, flexibility and scale of response by individuals, families, communities and governments. We have seen shifts to ways of working that many did not think possible, with long-term impacts on business models as well as employee wellbeing. We have seen many employers and managers act with compassion and trust, so crucial to effective remote working.

On the other hand, the stark differences between occupations and the experiences of different types of employees have never been as exposed as now. The unequal impact of the pandemic on women, people with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities, differences in job security by age, or skills mismatch and overqualification issues are all underlying labour market challenges that need to be addressed.

These experiences of the last two years – both good and bad – should be used to shape Northern Ireland's recovery, leading to better work and working lives for all. CIPD members, working across businesses from the public, private and third sectors and across businesses of all sizes, stand ready to help. We are responsible for attracting, developing and retaining talent in organisations across Northern Ireland. We link employers with the right employees, develop skills and careers, and look after employee wellbeing. We inform policy, but we also translate policy into practice. This gives us a unique strength.

This document, the CIPD's 2022 NI Assembly election manifesto, is based on a series of roundtables we held late last year with senior members from a range of sectors, industries and organisational sizes, as well as several online surveys distributed to members of our Policy Forum. We make recommendations in areas of devolved responsibility over three sections:

- Job quality in a changing world ([Section 4](#))
- Flexible and responsive skills development ([Section 5](#))
- A modern and inclusive labour market ([Section 6](#)).

The last two years have been incredibly challenging. But with all challenges come opportunities for change. Our manifesto lays out where we think these opportunities should be seized.





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3 Our 22 recommendations for 2022

Job quality

- 1: Embed job quality across all Northern Irish Executive policy.
- 2: Provide any additional support to NISRA in the development of work quality indicators.
- 3: Introduce a well-designed and supported Better Jobs Pledge.
- 4: Conduct a large-scale job quality campaign.

Flexible work

- 5: Change the right to request flexible working to a day one right.
- 6: Introduce a Flexible Work Challenge Fund.

Management skills

- 7: Support the development of management skills, including through a People Skills small business support scheme.
- 8: Rebalance public funding towards demand-led vocational routes like apprenticeships.

Work-based learning

- 9: Make targeted apprenticeship recruitment incentives permanent.
- 10: Introduce a ring-fenced training fund for Apprenticeship Levy payers.

Developing school links

- 11: Formalise a framework for business-school co-operation.
- 12: Improve the provision of careers guidance.

Lifelong learning

- 13: Provide a targeted skills subsidy to cover lost income while training.
- 14: Introduce enhanced Individual Learning Accounts.
- 15: Put the SKILL UP programme on a permanent footing.
- 16: Co-create a new framework for employability skills.

Inclusive labour market

- 17: Introduce a new Northern Ireland Employment Bill.
- 18: Enact gender, ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting legislation.
- 19: Expand paid bereavement leave provisions.
- 20: Introduce paid carer's leave.
- 21: Change Carer's Allowance eligibility rules to support skills development.
- 22: Boost the provision of publicly funded childcare.

4 Job quality in a changing world

The last two years have been described as the largest flexible work experiment this country has ever seen. After only a marginal increase in the uptake of flexible working in the few years leading up to the pandemic, the first lockdown in March 2020 saw an unprecedented shift to homeworking. We know from our own [research](#) that both employee and employer attitudes towards homeworking and its impact on productivity or wellbeing





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have shifted throughout the course of the pandemic. Initial scepticism gave way to cautious optimism and today we can confidently say that more flexibility is here to stay.

However, the shift to homeworking has exposed clear differences – between those whose jobs can and cannot be done remotely, between those who have suitable home office premises and those who do not, those who have access to fast internet and those living in not-spots, those living alone and those within social bubbles or with caring responsibilities. Work relationships have changed, mental wellbeing has been under strain, and the lines between work and life have become blurrier for many.

Focus on job quality

All of this leads to conversations around job quality, something which is at the heart of what the CIPD stands for. Job security, work-life balance, and health and wellbeing are all crucial elements of job quality. No matter what the trajectory of our recovery looks like, no matter what economic changes are coming down the line, we strongly believe that job quality has to be at the centre of the debate.

Governments across the UK as well as regional administrations have started to recognise this. This includes the NI Executive, which has recently announced its intention to introduce a Better Jobs Pledge, tying public funding and procurement to job quality metrics.

We welcome these developments. The CIPD's purpose is to champion better work and working lives, and therefore our first recommendation is for the NI Executive to continue deepening its focus on job quality. This means embedding job quality across all areas of public policy, applying job quality principles as a large employer and throughout the public sector, and continued support for job quality research.



Recommendation 1: Embed job quality across all Northern Irish Executive policy.

Of course, any policy work relies on robust data and evidence. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is actually further ahead on this than other parts of the UK. For example, it has included a unique job satisfaction variable in its Labour Force Survey since 2018 and publishes work quality bulletins.

Despite this, gaps in data remain – for example, statistics around voice and representation, job autonomy and task complexity, as well as conflict at work are some that are notably absent. In November 2021, the CIPD published its first job quality report for Northern Ireland: *Working Lives Northern Ireland*. This provided a snapshot of the quality of working lives across seven dimensions of good work. The report covers some of the gaps, but this is not based on a survey that can take the place of an official national statistics publication. NISRA is planning to develop indicators further and the NI Executive should stand ready to support them in any way should they require it.



Recommendation 2: Provide any additional support to NISRA in the development of work quality indicators.





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One of the most eye-catching proposals in last year's [Skills Strategy](#) consultation – certainly for our profession – was the plan to introduce a Better Jobs Pledge, seeking to improve job quality through public sector procurement and grant conditions. The CIPD has been conducting [research](#) in this area for years and we have a considerable evidence base that we use to develop recommendations for HR practitioners, employers and public policy-makers. We hope that our first job quality report in Northern Ireland, [Working Lives Northern Ireland](#), provides useful insight to the Executive that can help guide the development of the Pledge.

In our experience, the key challenge in this area is the translation of academic research into employer guidance. There still is little understanding of what job quality means in practice and, crucially, what investing in good people practice can result in. There is a growing body of research which shows that improving job quality leads to a more engaged and satisfied workforce, with improved staff retention and productivity. This in turn means more productive businesses and, ultimately, better labour productivity for the country as a whole. Given Northern Ireland's particularly acute productivity challenges, it makes sense to focus on job quality alongside other productivity drivers.

Improving understanding, showing evidence and providing guidance and support to change practice should therefore be a key plank of the approach to job quality. Introducing a scheme that ties financial support or procurement to job quality metrics will have to be done carefully and gradually. We agree with the five-year timescale attached to the development of this proposal, since this gives employers the chance to improve their understanding of the new metrics as and when they are developed. It is also important to recognise that many employers already invest heavily in good people practice and that the new Better Jobs Pledge does not become a significant additional administrative burden.



Recommendation 3: Introduce a well-designed and supported Better Jobs Pledge.





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While the NI Executive can show leadership and effect change across the public sector, the biggest gains to be made are across the private sector. Close collaboration with the business community, with guidance and advice on changing practice, is therefore a crucial piece of the puzzle. In addition to this, support for ongoing research into the links between job quality and productivity (and dissemination of its findings) can provide a good evidence base for employers thinking about job quality.

However, there is a step before this that needs to be taken. We know from our own conversations with CIPD members and employers that there is a significant gap in understanding what job quality actually means in practice. Improving this understanding should therefore be a key plank of the Executive's approach to job quality. We believe that a large-scale awareness campaign, underpinned by signposted content and interactive tools, could make a difference to the understanding of job quality among employers and employees.

There is a particular need to target some of the poorer performing industry sectors as well as some of the smallest businesses across Northern Ireland. Many simply do not know where to turn or what specific steps can be taken on issues like flexible work, inclusion or voice. The potential for job quality improvements through relatively easy steps is considerable.



Recommendation 4: Conduct a large-scale job quality campaign.

Flexible work

The rapid increase in homeworking forced by COVID-19 was a watershed moment for flexible working across Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole. Two years later, we now know that some of this flexibility is here to stay, with our research showing that the majority of employees whose jobs can be done from home are looking to continue working from home at least some of the time after the pandemic.

However, while we welcome a more flexible approach to working lives, there is a danger that the focus on homeworking results in both employers and employees losing sight of the broad range of other flexible work options. It is crucial that homeworking does not become synonymous with flexible working – not all jobs can be done from home, not everybody can work from home and not everybody wants to work from home. Compressed hours, flexitime or job-sharing may be more suitable options for some employees.

Our *Working Lives Northern Ireland* report shows that persistent gaps in the availability of flexible working options remain. More than half of all Northern Irish employees reported unavailability across all of the flexible work options we asked about (bar homeworking), but this proportion is much higher for some – for example, compressed hours were unavailable to 63% of employees and term-time working was unavailable to 70%. In some cases, there is a lack of understanding about these options and the pandemic may well exacerbate that.

Legislative attempts to shift the dial have so far not been successful, which is why the CIPD campaigns for the right to request flexible working to become a day one employee right. The UK Government has recently announced its intention to legislate for this change and we hope the NI Executive can replicate this as soon as possible. We have more to say on employment law reform in [Section 6](#) of this document.



Recommendation 5: Change the right to request flexible working to a day one right.





In addition to legislative changes, we also encourage employers to advertise their jobs flexibly – something that the pandemic has changed considerably in the interim, but underlying challenges remain. Given access to flexible working is a key element of job quality, we hope it can be a part of the NI Executive’s approach over the coming years – including the Better Jobs Pledge. More broadly, the perception of flexible work only being for those with family or caring responsibilities also needs to be challenged, as there can be considerable benefits for both employees and employers.

From our research we also know that there are significant differences between industry sectors, with different challenges that need to be overcome. We also know, however, that there are examples of creative approaches even in traditionally more challenging sectors like manufacturing or health care. In order to encourage these, we think there would be merit in the Executive introducing a Flexible Work Challenge Fund to find the most creative business solutions to enable flexible working, which could then be scaled up. This would build on best practice as informed by the pandemic and would seek to embed change for the long term.



Recommendation 6: Introduce a Flexible Work Challenge Fund.

Importance of management skills

Much has been written about the UK’s so-called productivity puzzle that has been on policy-makers’ agenda since the last economic downturn. Productivity is a particular challenge in Northern Ireland, which is at the bottom of the UK’s regional productivity table, some 20% below the UK average. We do not yet know the full impact of the pandemic on productivity, although it is clear that some of the initial fears employers had over the negative impact of homeworking have not materialised. More research is needed to explore this as well as the long-term impact on economic productivity over the next few years.

What is unlikely to change, however, is what research tells us about the key drivers of productivity – the importance of capital investment, business innovation or skills development. More recently, links between job quality and productivity have been explored, overlapping with existing work around skills or management quality.

The last of these – management quality – is of particular interest to the CIPD. Our own *Working Lives Northern Ireland*, corroborated by discussions with members, highlights





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the crucial importance of good management to employees' job quality. Improving management capabilities can therefore achieve better results – for managers, employees and the organisation as a whole.

One of the clearest examples of where good management can play a key role is in shaping an organisation's culture around health and wellbeing. The impact of this culture on levels of 'presenteeism' (where employees feel the need to work when unwell) and 'leavism' (where employees use their holiday allowance to work), both of which are widespread across workplaces, can be significant.

The Department for the Economy's Skills Strategy recognises the importance of management skills. It also highlights that existing support is patchy (provided to only specific groups of companies) and this needs to improve, in particular for the smallest of businesses. Better leadership and management skills also stimulate employer demand for skills, with good managers usually driving upskilling of their workforce. This is just as important as the supply of skills development opportunities we primarily discuss in [Section 5](#).

In the past, the CIPD ran a series of so-called People Skills pilots across the UK, aiming to offer small businesses expert support. The participants had access to a range of services, including one-to-one advisory support, learning from a team of experienced HR professionals who had worked with other small businesses. Through the service, small businesses could make sure that they had the right policies and practices in place to find, recruit and develop the best staff. It also served as a source of help towards improving management skills. Take-up of the service considerably exceeded expectations and an independent [evaluation](#) concluded it was a highly effective operating model. A variation of this in Northern Ireland could make a real difference.



Recommendation 7: Support the development of management skills, including through a People Skills small business support scheme.

5 Flexible and responsive skills development

With CIPD members driving workplace [skills development](#) across many businesses, skills policy is one of our key areas of interest. While the pandemic changed the context within which policy-makers and people professionals operate, it has not changed some of the fundamental trends that our economies – and our skills development systems in particular – need to prepare for. The spread of automation and technological advances, Northern Ireland's changing demographics and our ageing workforce in particular, as well as persistent economic inequalities all require a flexible, responsive skills development system.

Discussions with our members in preparation of this manifesto brought up a range of issues that can be grouped around three kinds of balance that we believe need to be re-evaluated in Northern Ireland.

First, the balance between vocational and academic skills development: over the last two decades, the UK as a whole has favoured the latter – both in terms of the levels of funding committed by governments and in terms of the cultural perceptions over the value of





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particular qualifications that exist. Given the levels of overqualification we see in Northern Ireland, it seems clear that some rebalancing towards vocational education and work-based learning is necessary.

Second, the balance between adult and youth skills development: the vast majority of funding in Northern Ireland (and other parts of the UK) is front-loaded and aimed at youth skills development. This is understandable, especially in the context of economic recovery, considering young people are more likely to be adversely impacted by COVID-19. That said, given the looming economic transitions we are facing – not least towards green technologies – much more emphasis needs to be given to upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning.

Third, the balance between long courses leading to qualifications and shorter, flexible buildable routes to qualifications: a greater emphasis on lifelong learning will need to be coupled with a different approach to skills development, be it in-work or classroom-based. The pandemic has forced some rapid changes in how some courses are delivered, but much more needs to be done to add flexibility into the system.

Strengthening work-based learning

Northern Ireland's skills development system is in good shape, but it risks falling behind not only some of our international competitors, but also other parts of the UK. The Department for the Economy's Skills for a 10x Economy Strategy is a significant step in the right direction, provided it gets cross-departmental support and buy-in. One of the most significant points made in the strategy is in relation to the levels of funding targeted at skills development. Even considering the UK-wide programme of public spending reductions following the 2008–09 economic crisis, the education and skills portfolio has seen disproportionate decreases. The statistics make it clear that education and skills development funding needs to be boosted. We strongly feel that a flexible and responsive skills development system, which matches changing labour market demand, underpins the country's economy and is crucial in tackling poverty and reducing inequality.

Beyond overall public funding levels, one of the key pieces of feedback we have received is that Northern Ireland's skills development system can feel unresponsive and too centrally directed. Again, this is something that is recognised in the Skills Strategy, and the formation of the NI Skills Council – which first met in December 2021 with the CIPD as one of its members – is a positive step, and we hope it can lead to meaningful engagement between employers, training providers and policy-makers.

We also know from conversations that many employers still find it challenging to navigate the apprenticeship system in particular and sometimes do not realise the breadth of apprenticeship frameworks nor what funding may be available to, for example, cover training costs. Organisations that help link apprentices to employers (for example, Work+) have been well received among our members who made use of them, so any ongoing support of this kind would be worth exploring – for example through a permanent Apprenticeship Challenge Fund. This could also continue to support the development of shared apprenticeships, which have the potential to appeal to smaller businesses in particular.



Recommendation 8: Rebalance public funding towards demand-led vocational routes like apprenticeships.





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Making the apprenticeship system easier to navigate could also be coupled with targeted recruitment incentives. The two schemes (Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result, and the New Apprenticeship Incentive) that have been put in place in response to the pandemic have been welcome, but our evidence so far suggests that incentives work best when they are generous and targeted at small businesses, which are less likely to take on apprentices.

In addition, the Executive could also examine additional incentive payments targeted at specific groups of people or types of apprenticeship – for example looking to attract more STEM apprentices, achieve improved gender balance across some programmes or additional payments for apprentices with disabilities.



Recommendation 9: Make targeted apprenticeship recruitment incentives permanent.

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy and its operation has been a hotly contested topic in any skills employer forum, and our discussions with members across Northern Ireland are no exception. Unsurprisingly, the levy has come up in all of our discussions, and the frustrations that are well known to the Executive have been expressed too – put simply, the levy is perceived as an additional tax on business with little direct benefit. It is clear that it was introduced without much thought to the devolved skills development systems, which even now causes frustrations among employers. For those operating UK-wide, in particular, linking the levy paid to training received is a challenge, undermining the very purpose of the scheme.

We have long made the case for Apprenticeship Levy reform, arguing that it should evolve into a broader Training Levy that employers in England could use for a range of training interventions beyond just apprenticeships. In a Northern Irish context, the easiest way to achieve similar objectives would be to introduce a ring-fenced fund available to levy-payers (and perhaps their suppliers). This would be similar to the Scottish Flexible Workforce Development Fund, although a discussion needs to be had about spending limits and mix of providers.



Recommendation 10: Introduce a ring-fenced training fund for Apprenticeship Levy payers.





Developing school links

The one area that consistently came up during our member discussions is whether the Northern Irish school system is adequately preparing pupils for the world of work – with some referring to a missing bridge between school and employment. This can be in the context of the development of essential and employability skills, a better understanding of what working lives can mean, but also a broader encouragement of entrepreneurship and a global innovative mindset.

It is important to recognise that there are significant benefits to be gained through a closer co-operation between employers, schools, colleges and universities. Our members gave us examples of where such engagement happens, but it is often ad hoc and inconsistent, although some more formal relationships can be found between colleges and employers. There are also examples of charitable organisations that do work in this area, but there is no unified approach that covers the whole of Northern Ireland.

The Executive should therefore consider whether a semi-formalised framework could be put in place to facilitate such relationships on a local basis. A range of activities can be organised, from school presentations to work placements, that benefits both pupils and employers (through talent development). More generally, as part of continual curriculum development, there would be merit in including more options for pupils to spend part of their week in structured work experience.



Recommendation 11: Formalise a framework for business–school co-operation.

The importance of easy access to information was also emphasised in our discussions. Personalised real-time labour market information, signposting to relevant programmes and careers guidance, should be available in one place. We thoroughly welcome the recent proposal to introduce a consolidated online portal providing open access to careers and skills information but would urge a faster development than the currently planned five years.

Careers guidance is particularly important to the prospects of young people, as well as any lifelong learning advice. We note that a review of the careers service was announced towards the end of 2021, with similar work ongoing in other parts of the UK. CIPD [research](#) across the UK suggests that there are gaps in the amount of guidance received, the type of guidance provided (primarily academic) as well as the quality as rated by those who received guidance.

Linked to the point above in relation to vocational education, we need to ensure that careers services are not primarily geared to drive students towards higher education, but also spend enough time explaining the breadth and value of work-based learning pathways across Northern Ireland. In addition, those who engage with careers services should also be able to access help with job applications, CV writing or up-to-date labour market information.



Recommendation 12: Improve the provision of careers guidance.





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Lifelong learning

The CIPD has long argued for an overhaul in public policy around lifelong learning. The fact that this is one of the three key objectives of the new Skills Strategy is therefore very welcome. Creating a culture of lifelong learning, however, will require a combination of steps, some short term and others long term. Providing skills development opportunities is of course only one part of the puzzle – removing barriers and stimulating demand are just as important.

We know that for those in employment, the inability to take time off work for skills development can be a significant barrier. We have welcomed the proposal to address this through a form of training leave allowance in Northern Ireland, although we await further details on this. In our view, there are two primary options available to policy-makers, which can work in tandem. First, using employment law powers, the Executive could introduce a statutory right to request training leave, although the policy in the form it currently exists in England simply does not work, as it is both limited in scope and in public awareness.

The second option would be the introduction of a form of subsidy to cover lost income during skills development. There are a few reasons why this latter approach may be preferable. First, many employers already offer time off for skills development as a part of their benefits package, with others providing unpaid leave on request. Second, the introduction of a subsidy may be faster than employment law changes. Third, the loss of income during training is a bigger barrier than the ability to take unpaid leave for those on lower incomes. A subsidy targeted at those who need it most, perhaps coupled with a sectoral focus, could make a big difference in the context of lifelong learning.



Recommendation 13: Provide a targeted skills subsidy to cover lost income while training.

Linked to the removal of barriers for learners is the issue of stimulating demand from learners. We believe this is an area where a form of Individual Learning Account (ILA) could make a real difference. In early 2021, the CIPD published an in-depth report titled *Skills to Grow*, which explored international and domestic evidence around individual learning accounts. The series of recommendations in the report are applicable to a Northern Irish context too.





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Our evidence shows that ILAs work best when targeted at upskilling for those furthest away from the skills development system, with a buildable scheme and ‘use it or lose it’ funding. Employer buy-in is key and sectoral approaches should be explored. The report also recommended the introduction of a form of support to cover the loss of income for workers (as above) as well as other smaller incentives.



Recommendation 14: Introduce enhanced Individual Learning Accounts.

While enhanced ILAs can make a useful contribution in the upskilling space, they cannot, however, take on the heavy lifting of retraining in the face of unemployment. For one, getting existing employer buy-in for full reskilling could prove challenging, but it is also likely that deeper interventions are required.

We were pleased to see the announcement of SKILL UP – The Flexible Skills Programme last year. As things stand, however, SKILL UP is designed as a temporary measure that has evolved in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Given the pace of economic change that we are likely to see over the next decade, this should expand to cover more courses and become a permanent feature of the skills development system in Northern Ireland, with sufficient funding available to meet demand.



Recommendation 15: Put the SKILL UP programme on a permanent footing.

The other area of significance in the context of future-proofing our skills systems are essential/transferable/meta skills like communication, collaboration and critical thinking, the importance of which will only increase in the face of automation. There is a point to be made about language, as ‘essential skills’ in a Northern Irish context refer to basic literacy and numeracy skills (contrary to other parts of the UK), whereas the term ‘employability skills’ is used in a broader sense, covering basics like time-keeping as well as more complex skills like problem-solving.

The CIPD was one of the members of the Essential Skills Taskforce that developed a full framework for England that is now being used across schools and businesses. We have also had discussions with Skills Development Scotland around the development of their meta skills. The objective is to create a common framework, with consistent language that employers and employees can navigate, and which can be used to develop transferable skills in schools, workplaces or other skills development settings.

The NI Executive has announced its intention to define what employability skills mean for the education system, but in our view, this is a narrow approach. This project should not just be confined to the education system and, in fact, should seek to develop a collaborative framework that can serve as the blueprint for the development of these skills throughout a learner’s lifetime – from school, through any further education or training, to employment.



Recommendation 16: Co-create a new framework for employability skills.





6 A modern inclusive labour market

Many of the day-to-day issues CIPD members have to navigate are linked to the legislative and regulatory employment framework in Northern Ireland. Much of this is under direct control of the NI Executive and it is incumbent on our policy-makers to ensure that employment law stays nimble, proportionate and up to date. As we start to look at how the world of work has changed due to the pandemic, we also need to think about where we need to make progress, while recognising the historical specificities of the existing set of rules.

It is true to say that the pandemic has had an impact on everybody. However, we also need to recognise that it did not have an impact on everybody equally. At its most direct, we know that COVID-19 mortality rates are worse for those from ethnic minorities and for older people. Surveys show mental health has deteriorated further for women than for men. People with disabilities reported worsening physical health. And the economic impact of the pandemic was just as unequal, with young people and women disproportionately affected by the downturn.

The rather unexpected speed of the economic recovery, although fragile, has meant that concerns over spiking unemployment were swiftly replaced by rising labour shortages. The reasons for this are more complex than many would recognise, but changes to immigration policy, drops in apprenticeship starts and rising economic inactivity levels are all contributory factors. Tight labour markets, however, can also lead to better employment outcomes and job quality improvements, especially for those further away from the labour market – be it people with disabilities or the long-term unemployed. In consequence, with more diverse workforces, companies tend to put more effort into inclusion strategies.

However, we know there is still a long way to go in achieving inclusion across workplaces in Northern Ireland. For example, our *Working Lives Northern Ireland* report found that around a fifth (19%) of all employees believe that people in their team sometimes reject others for being different. Over a quarter (26%) of all employees experienced at least one type of conflict at work, with 6% saying they experienced discriminatory behaviour.

The Black Lives Matter movement has had a profound impact across the world, and Northern Ireland is no exception. Racism remains deeply rooted in society and it remains a lived experience for all ethnic minorities and particularly for black people. There is much more to be done to build fair and inclusive societies and organisations. It is incumbent on us all to challenge others as well as ourselves to stamp out covert and overt racism.

It is important, in this context, to make a distinction between inclusion and diversity. Both employers and policy-makers are prone to focus on diversity – be it various targets, data-gathering or discrimination legislation. While this is absolutely crucial, it is only a part of the journey towards equality. Where diversity recognises the many differences between people (alongside everything we have in common), inclusion sees these differences as a benefit – to individuals, to businesses, to communities and to countries.

Our discussions with members suggest that they feel equalities law in Northern Ireland is fragmented and would benefit from being consolidated and updated to reflect the broader diversity in the Northern Ireland workforce. While recognising the historical evolution of regulations, a conversation should be opened on whether equal opportunities reporting in particular has had the desired outcome and whether the remit of the Equalities Commission should not be broadened, including on gathering monitoring information more widely across protected characteristics.





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More broadly, our members working for UK-wide organisations told us that the complexity of navigating the growing differences between GB and NI employment legislation is now a significant burden. While a case may be made for some areas of differentiation, some of the divergence is accidental and the result of the collapse of the Assembly and Executive in 2017. From loopholes around holiday pay to different compensation limits, we would like the Executive to bring forward a new Employment Bill with the aim of consolidating employment and, ideally, equalities law where appropriate. This is even more important given changes, for example around rights for those on variable hours, being planned by the UK Government in the near future. The Executive will need to be responsive to ensure both employees and employers aren't disadvantaged.

One area where the CIPD has consistently argued for reform is around employment status. The UK Government has signalled change around this, which will need to be considered in a Northern Irish context too. However, regardless of any future developments, given the importance of properly defining individuals in the workplace and the problems for employers on the identification of relevant employment status, additional Executive guidance should also be drafted.



Recommendation 17: Introduce a new Northern Ireland Employment Bill.

Northern Ireland was set to lead the way in the UK on pay gap reporting. While gender, ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting has been legislated for, the aforementioned collapse of NI institutions meant that regulations enacting these measures were never passed. This remains the case today, even though gender pay gap reporting requirements exist across Great Britain, with steps to introduce ethnicity and disability reporting being taken too.

The introduction of gender pay gap reporting in Great Britain has ensured that the issue of gender equality is taken much more seriously by senior managers in organisations across the rest of the UK. We need to see more progress across Northern Ireland too. Ethnicity and disability reporting is certainly more challenging primarily due to data collection issues, but these can be overcome through a longer lead-in time. Our members told us that they would support regulations enacting reporting requirements, which could be done alongside a new Employment Bill or independently of it.



Recommendation 18: Enact gender, ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting legislation.

One other area of difference that the CIPD has campaigned on are paid bereavement leave provisions, which currently don't exist in Northern Ireland. The Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay Bill, which will bring us in line with the rest of the UK by giving employees the right to two weeks off if their child dies, has recently passed final stage. This provision, however, should only be the minimum legislated for and the Executive has the option to lead the way in this area.

The CIPD in Northern Ireland is part of the Coalition of Bereaved Workers, which has been making the case for the introduction of paid bereavement leave to all employees





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bereaved of a close relative, mirroring the calls we are making to the UK Government too. Our *Working Lives Northern Ireland* report found that 17% of all employees have paid bereavement leave available and have used it, with another 26% who have availability, but have not used it. That leaves a significant group of employees without any enhanced leave provision covering some of the most difficult circumstances.



Recommendation 19: Expand paid bereavement leave provisions.

One group of employees that has faced additional challenges due to the pandemic are the tens of thousands of unpaid carers across Northern Ireland. Balancing work commitments with caring responsibilities is difficult regardless of the pandemic. COVID-19 added further concerns about the wellbeing of those being cared for, in addition to job security concerns and upheaval in unpaid carers' own working lives. Our own *Working Lives Northern Ireland* report shows that unpaid carers report higher presenteeism, poorer health and wellbeing, and worse work-life balance.

An increase in the availability of flexible working has the potential to make a real difference to those with caring responsibilities. Indeed, we know from our research that those with adult caring responsibilities are much more likely to reduce their hours than those without any caring commitments. Access to other forms of flexibility can unlock further employment opportunities.

However, there is another area where employees with caring responsibilities in Northern Ireland may face fewer entitlements than their counterparts in Great Britain. The UK Government is introducing an extra week of leave for unpaid carers, which will not apply to employees in Northern Ireland unless the Executive legislates for it. Furthermore, the leave as planned is not paid and the CIPD, alongside a range of other organisations, will continue to call for the introduction of paid leave. This is another area where the Executive could lead the way.



Recommendation 20: Introduce paid carer's leave.





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In addition to a form of paid leave for unpaid carers, there is scope to improve support for them through the social security system, in particular the Carer’s Allowance as the primary form of financial support. The parity principle generally means that divergence between the social security systems is kept to a minimum, but there is one area where we believe a change could be made without a significant impact on parity.

Eligibility rules for the Carer’s Allowance have an impact on its uptake, but they also influence employment and education decisions of those in receipt of it. We know, for example, that the full-time study rule (preventing more than 21 hours of study per week in order to remain eligible) in particular acts as a disincentive for unpaid carers to engage with the skills development system. Given everything we have said about lifelong learning in [Section 5](#), we think it would be valuable for the rule to be scrapped completely, allowing unpaid carers to upskill and retrain without losing the financial support provided through the Carer’s Allowance.



Recommendation 21: Change Carer’s Allowance eligibility rules to support skills development.

As mentioned above, opportunities to find meaningful employment or to engage with the education system are impacted by the availability of jobs and courses, but also by the various barriers that employees need to overcome. Caring responsibilities are one such barrier. And despite some recent progress, there is a mountain of evidence that shows the stubbornly gendered nature of care in the UK. Women are still significantly more likely to be the primary carers for children or elderly relatives, with associated impacts on labour market inclusion.

The pandemic has unfortunately only exacerbated this. The ONS estimates that women provided two-thirds more childcare than men during lockdown. Research also shows that women were more likely to lose jobs, to be furloughed and to experience deteriorating wellbeing.

When discussing barriers to participation with our members, the gaps in publicly funded childcare provision have been regularly highlighted. While some limited support exists in Northern Ireland, the difference from other parts of the UK is considerable. We do not advocate a specific model for funded childcare – there is a range of options that could be explored, with varying degrees of public funding required – but it is clear that the lack of childcare support serves as a significant barrier to employment as well as upskilling and reskilling opportunities.



Recommendation 22: Boost the provision of publicly funded childcare.



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