

# Supporting women's employment

Room O, Portcullis House, 2 September 2025 2pm to 3.30pm



## Removing barriers, unlocking potential

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More than 25% of working age women are economically inactive.

600,000 women work in low skilled/low paid roles and receive Universal Credit. A requirement of Universal Credit rules is to work more hours, increase income and move off Universal Credit.

Barriers including caring responsibilities, lack of career confidence, and affordable, available childcare are significant factors for women moving into and progressing in work.

Women's circumstances, especially those with children or other caring responsibilities, will also change over time, as may their location and career aspirations. Yet with meaningful help from funding bodies, employability providers and employers, women at all stages of life can sustain good work.

Promoting the help available and supporting women to upskill, volunteer, and progress through working life is key to achieving the government's Get Britain Working White Paper ambitions. As a vital part of the UK economy, women's employment has the potential to play a transformative role in addressing employment rates and child poverty.

## Driving change: ERSA's Women's Employability Forum

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The Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) represents private, public and voluntary sector employment support providers of all sizes. Its Women's Employability Forum comprises specialists working at national, regional and community level to support women into, and onward, at work.

Supporting women new to working life, mothers, returners, career-switchers, unretirers, and those with criminal convictions demands flexible, person-centred, and innovative solutions. ERSA members are at the forefront of developing and sharing their effective approaches; their experience forms a powerful backdrop to policy and programme changes in the making.

### ERSA CONTACT DETAILS:

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[www.ersa.org.uk](http://www.ersa.org.uk)

## Shaping solutions: Some examples

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### For marginalised communities

- Supporting disadvantaged mothers in London, **Belina Grow CIC** encourage women to think ahead about their job goals, reflecting their changing parental responsibilities. Delivery is in community settings such as schools and Family Hubs, reinforced through an App which provides a community of mutual support, plus information on jobs, training opportunities and childcare.
- The Goldstar Employability and Soft Skills Programme works alongside the **Ingeus Central London Works** team to support young women from the local Charedi Jewish community. The programme delivers practical soft skills and employability support that compliments the Charedi culture, including a learning schedule aligned with the Jewish calendar, single gender classes, and a framework that doesn't require learners to work online.

### With employers

- In June 2025, **Women's Work Lab** hosted an employer engagement event in Bristol with over 65 attendees. Employers including the NHS, Hargreaves Lansdown, Lloyds, Mulberry, and Barclays came together to share solutions around recruiting women and flexible job design.
- A free job board to encourage employers to advertise flexible roles to parents is offered by the **Successful Mum's Career Academy**. As part of its Restart Scheme partnership with **Palladium**, a workshop series focused on peer support and confidence building alongside employer engagement sessions also connect mothers with businesses offering flexible, family-friendly roles.

### Via self-employment

- **Momentic** offers all-round self-employment support and has specifically adapted its support model for women. This includes running specific programmes geared around family commitments, creating women friendly environments, and developing Women in Business peer network programmes.
- The Women into Self-Employment (WISE) pilot delivered by **RIFT Social Enterprise** is designed with and for women with convictions. It is delivered both in prison and the community, providing group workshops, one-to-one support, guest speaker sessions, and peer mentoring for women to explore self-employment as a way to earn a living and build confidence.

*"I feel like self-employment is definitely an option that we all can do. You speak about the women who've left, and you give us an update on them and how well they're doing. That is possible for us as well!"*

RIFT participant

- **Around childcare**

As part of the Restart Scheme delivery, **Reed in Partnership** delivered a childcare support pilot in two of its offices. This looked at how to focus support for people for whom childcare is their key barrier, including production of a childcare toolkit to help upskill advisers.

- **Via volunteering**

**Transform Lives Company** connects women with quality volunteering placements, with ongoing support from a coach both for the participant and the placement host who they train in mentoring skills. Underpinned by a 10-week training and guaranteed interview programme focussing on wellbeing, resilience and job searching, many volunteers receive subsequent job offers.

*“Being a mum for so long, my admin skills were so out of date. I applied to volunteer and as I felt ready they’d give me more tasks to do and show me new things. My coach stayed in touch to see if I needed any extra help or training.*

*When a vacancy came up I felt I could apply because I knew the team... I was really nervous, but I got the job!”*

Transform Lives participant

## **The way forward**

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### **Encourage flexible working**

The Timewise Annual Index 2023 found only 31% of job adverts overtly offer some form of flexible working and that while legislation now gives people the right to request flexible working from day one in a new job, there is evidence that many employers remain resistant to flexibility for new recruits.

Women need greater access to flexible working, be that for an employer or via supported self-employment, including through the government's own 'Find a job' website. Working with employers to consider adaptations to job design including working from home options, staggered hours, and compressed work weeks also remains a vital part of women's employment support.

### **Boost affordable available childcare**

The high cost and lack of availability of childcare remain a significant issue for women. While there has been an increase in funded hours childcare, it is only available during term-time, some nurseries are choosing to opt-out, and competition for pre-existing spaces has increased.

The Coram Family and Childcare Annual Survey 2024 found significant increases in the cost of childcare and additional costs charged to families accessing funded places. Available and affordable childcare is essential to many mums, including when they undertake training or volunteering.

### **Encourage training and volunteering**

Women may need to improve their functional and job-specific skills, to volunteer, or be mentored before they are in a position to move into work. This will not only improve the skills and employment options for individuals but can address skills shortages in the labour market and address unfilled vacancies.

### **Enhance specialist provision**










Women require specialist support delivered within the newly created jobs and careers service as well as through devolved funding of specialist organisations in the community.

No single programme will suit all women. Employment support must be delivered at the right pace and by professionals adept at engaging women and providing the specialist support they need. Parent or Lead Carer Advisors in the new iteration of the local employment service would be a valuable source of support, with a robust network of onward external provision. Bearing in mind that benefit specialists and childcare advocates are vital.

ERSA members have a wealth of experience delivering nationally commissioned and localised programmes. Reaching far into communities, utilising familiar venues, and employing innovative methodologies, our sector needs sustained funding to upskill and empower women to take their much-needed place in the labour market.

## Expert providers: The organisations represented here today.

### ERSA's Women's Employability Forum Co-chairs

	<p>Belina Grow CiC is a specialist employability provider supporting women, particularly mothers, who face multiple disadvantages. These include those who have never worked, are long-term unemployed, have no or low qualifications, speak English as a second language, come from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, or are single mothers.</p>
	<p>Successful Mums helps women find flexible careers and self-employment through free online and face-to-face training courses, career coaching and qualifications. Since 2014, it has helped over 10,000 parents, primarily women, re-enter the workforce or start businesses, emphasising confidence-building and flexible working.</p>
	<p>Transform Lives Company provide person-focused developmental support and volunteering programmes in Liverpool City Region. They offer coaching, training and a range of wellbeing services.</p>
	<p>The Women's Work Lab's 12-week programme combines classroom training with a work placement and 1-2-1 career coaching to help mothers rebuild confidence and find roles that work for them and their families.</p>
	<p>Ingeus delivers employability, justice, youth and health services and is a prime provider of the Restart Scheme in Greater Manchester and Central and West London.</p>
	<p>Momentic provides jobseekers with support, training and mentoring to start, sustain and grow their own successful business.</p>
	<p>Palladium helps people develop new skills, overcome barriers, and find work. It supports Fedcap Employment to deliver the Restart Scheme in the South-Central area of England and ran the Home Office Refugee Employability Programme in the Southeast.</p>
	<p>Reed in Partnership provide a range of different services than transform people and their communities. A thought leader on gender issues within mainstream employability provision, it is a prime provider of the Restart Scheme in the Home Counties and North East &amp; Humber.</p>
	<p>RIFT Social Enterprise is a CIC that delivers one-to-one support for people interested in working for themselves, especially those in the criminal justice system and long-term unemployed.</p>