

# Policy Brief

## How can third-sector employability providers support the 'good work' policy agenda in the UK?

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### Summary

*Job quality matters for workers' health and wellbeing as well as for their engagement, motivation and productivity. The UK Labour Government has signalled its intention to overhaul public employment support to help claimants into 'good work' as part of a commitment to 'Get Britain Working'. Third-sector organisations (TSOs), active in the employability-support space, can make an important contribution. Job quality is a complex and multi-dimensional concept, however, and many users have complex employment barriers and restricted choices in the labour market. This policy brief presents a **three-dimensional framework** and a **practical toolkit of activities** designed to help TSOs work with users and employers to achieve better and more sustainable employment outcomes. It also suggests there is an opportunity for the UK government to capitalise on the potential contribution of the third sector to its intended ambitions.*

### Introduction

The UK Labour government (2024-) recognises that employment support, delivered through the Department for Work and Pensions/Jobcentre Plus, needs major reform if it is to help people into 'good work' rather than simply pushing them into just 'any job' (HMG, 2024). The 'work-first/any-job' approach, centred on benefit conditionality and sanctions, has been applied to both the unemployed and, more recently, to 'in-work' claimants on Universal Credit. However, a wealth of research has documented its limitations (Wright et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2024). Not only can this negatively impact claimants' well-being, but it frequently results in claimants 'cycling' through a 'revolving door' between low wage, insecure jobs, often with limited progression opportunities, and the benefit system (Shildrick et al., 2012). This is not a good outcome for individuals, employers, the economy, or the public purse.

There are a significant number of third sector providers who also support unemployed and economically inactive persons to access paid work. Some operate as contracted providers within the government-funded 'welfare-to-work' system (Egdell et al., 2016; Rees et al., 2024), while others operate on its margins with alternative sources of funding (Lindsay et al., 2022; Ecorys, 2022; Payne and Butler, 2023). Research has shown that TSOs can be particularly effective in delivering holistic, personalised support to vulnerable groups with complex employment barriers

as part of a mission to help them find sustainable routes out of poverty (Lindsay et al., 2014; Irvine et al., 2026). Unlike the DWP/Jobcentre-Plus, they are not encumbered by the challenge of having to turn around their organisational reputation and culture to secure users' trust. Many are specialist organisations rooted in their local communities and bring substantial place-based knowledge. TSOs already start from a strong foundation that makes them well-placed to contribute to the Government's ambitions. However, they face significant funding challenges in a 'post-Brexit' context where available funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is significantly lower and more short-term compared with what was previously available through European funding (Irvine et al., 2025; Rose et al., 2025).

## **The challenge of job quality**

Addressing job quality is challenging for *any* employment support provider, including TSOs, for several reasons. First, the UK is a neo-liberal economy with a relatively weakly regulated labour market that has given a green light to employers seeking to compete through business models that rely on cheap and disposable labour. As Bode (2024: 155) notes, the UK's labour market and welfare regime presents a particularly 'thorny terrain when it comes to ensuring decent work for all'.

Second, employment support providers operate on the 'supply-side' of the labour market. Their focus is 'employability', usually defined in terms helping users into work, rather than the quality of employment that employers make available on the 'demand side'. In other words, making people 'work ready', rather than making employers 'people ready'.

Third, the 'supply-side' approach to employability, because it is so familiar and deeply engrained in 'what we do', may be wired-in to existing organisational cultures and mindsets, and therefore difficult to shift (Johnson et al., 2023). This may impede attempts to think more broadly about 'employability', as both a supply-side and a demand-side challenge (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

There are clearly limits then to what employment support providers can do, on their own, to address the quality of jobs their users enter. This is why wider policy interventions on the 'demand-side' of the labour market remain vital, whether it is the uprating of the National Living Wage, the Labour Government's Employment Rights Act, the Fair Work and Decent Work agendas of the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales, or the efforts of city-regions to champion and progress 'good work'.

There has already been useful discussion of how the DWP might begin to reorientate itself to proactively engage with the challenge of job quality (Jones, 2025). Where there has been less attention is around how providers, including those in the third sector, can practically support users, given existing constraints and challenges. So far, the UK Labour Government has had relatively little to say about the contribution of third-sector employability providers, which constitutes a significant oversight. This policy brief, therefore, is aimed both at TSOs and national and local policy makers

concerned to Get Britain Working. It seeks to support TSOs in their efforts to address the challenge of job quality for their users and bring them more into the policy conversation. As we discuss below, 'job quality' is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. It is worth thinking more about what 'good work' means for individual users as a way of helping them to secure more sustainable employment, while also being mindful of the challenges many users face and the knock-backs that they are likely to experience on the way.

## **The concept of job quality**

The nomenclature around 'job quality' includes terms such as 'decent work', 'good work', 'meaningful work' and 'fair work', which have distinct policy lineages and uses. Many frameworks have been developed, outlining key characteristics, with considerable overlap between them (Warhurst et al., 2017). The following objective features are, however, broadly typical:

- job security;
- adequate pay;
- strong working relationships and social support;
- health, safety, psychosocial wellbeing; voice and representation;
- varied and interesting work;
- a fair workplace;
- learning and skills use;
- a good effort–reward balance; autonomy and task discretion;
- good work–life balance (Marmot et al., 2020: 61).

'Bad jobs' typically feature the absence of these elements. It is important to note, however, that good jobs rarely encompass all these good job features. Entry level jobs can also be highly variable in terms of their quality (Jones et al., 2025). There is then a job quality spectrum that is more nuanced than simple 'good job' versus 'bad job' binaries might suggest.

Job quality also includes a subjective dimension as it partly depends on workers' perspectives. Jobs with many 'bad job' features may be seen as 'satisfying' or 'meaningful' by some workers, even if that does not imply satisfaction with all aspects. Great care must be taken here, as users with very restricted choices in the labour market may interpret decent or acceptable work in terms of what is realistically available to them, making them potentially vulnerable to unscrupulous employers (Beck, 2018; Payne and Butler, 2023). Consequently, employment support providers face challenges addressing the issue of job quality for their users, which can be particularly acute for TSOs given their ethos. These typically include:

- Deciding what constitutes good work and which employers to engage with when seeking to open employment opportunities for their users.
- Deciding which aspects of job quality matter most for individual users, given their needs and circumstances, and how to respect their choices while also

recognising that some jobs can be more harmful to users' wellbeing than having no work at all (Beck et al., 2025).

- How to work with employers 'on the demand side' to alter aspects of their employment offer in order to open up decent sustainable employment opportunities for their users, while helping employers to address recruitment and retention challenges.

## Towards a job quality framework and toolkit

Based on our research with third sector employability providers (Payne and Butler, 2023; Butler and Payne, 2025; Payne et al., 2026), we found that they can engage with job quality in three ways:

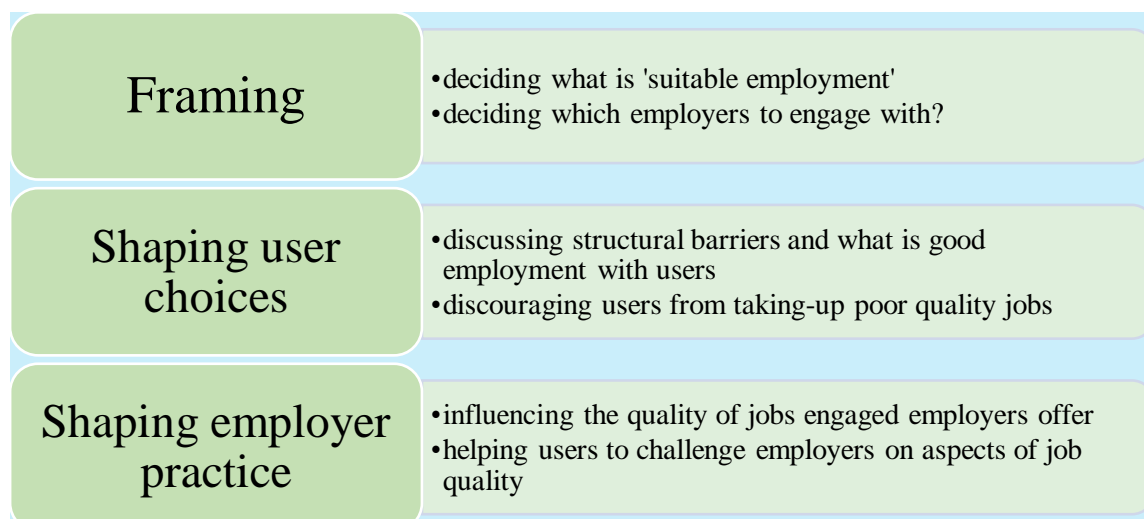
(1) Through **framing the issue** internally, i.e. deciding what constitutes 'suitable employment' and which employers to engage with.

(2) Through **shaping the choices** that users make which may include, for example, informing them of worker rights, discussing structural barriers to 'good work' so as to help users avoid internalising a negative self-image of it being their own fault when decent sustainable work fails to materialise (Sharone and Vadsquez, 2017). This includes helping users find work that fits their own understanding of what constitutes a 'good job' as well as helping inform those decisions.

(3) Through **shaping employer practice** in terms of persuading employers to alter aspects of their employment offer to make jobs more 'doable' for their users (e.g. offering sufficient hours, employee-friendly scheduling, improving pay etc), and giving users the knowledge and confidence to challenge employers when attending interviews for example.

On this basis, we developed a **three-dimensional framework** (see **Figure 1**) to help providers engage with the challenge of job quality, which provided the basis for **a toolkit of activities** to support their work with users.

**Figure 1:** Three-dimensional framework



Using this framework, our research found that organisations could take, what we term, a more **expansive** or more **restrictive** approach on each of these dimensions, depending on many factors and the constraints under which they work (see **Table 1**). Organisations which take an expansive approach will tend to give more emphasis to job quality and try to shape user choices and the opportunities engaged employers offer. This might also involve discussing with users the structural constraints to obtaining decent sustainable work presented by the labour market, welfare system and how employers structure jobs to avoid them internalising ‘self-blame’ when struggling to access decent sustainable employment. Those who take a more restrictive approach are likely to leave it down to users to decide what constitutes fair or acceptable employment, place few restrictions on the types of employers they are willing to engage with, avoid discussion of structural barriers, and make little effort to influence the quality of work offered by engaged employers.

**Table 1:** Restrictive and expansive approach to job quality

Restrictive Approach	Expansive Approach
little reference to job quality in framing ‘suitable employment’	Reference to more demanding job quality criteria in framing suitable employment
little attempt to screen-out unscrupulous employers	Screening out of unscrupulous employers
No group discussions of structural barriers	Group discuss about structural barriers
Steering users towards ‘doable jobs’ with little reference to job quality criteria	Steering users towards doable jobs while taking into account job quality criteria
Attempts to influence employers’ hiring practices <b>DO NOT</b> extend to employers’ wider employment offer (e.g. Real Living Wage, secure contracts, sufficient hours, and employee-friendly flexible scheduling).	Attempts to influence employers’ hiring practices <b>AND</b> employers’ wider employment offer (e.g. RLW, secure contracts, sufficient hours, and employee-friendly flexible scheduling).

It is important to emphasise that the expansive-restrictive framework above represents two extremes and, in practice, TSOs are likely to be positioned across a spectrum between either end in terms of their engagement with job quality. Furthermore, there are likely to be good reasons why different TSOs have adopted different positions, which may reflect factors such as funding constraints, ethos, or the complexity of their user group. Our own research with TSOs in Scotland and England suggests policy narratives and associated supports also make a difference, with the long-standing Fair Work agenda in Scotland seemingly helping to shape a more expansive approach among some third-sector employability providers (Payne et al.,

2026). This may change, however, as the UK Labour Government gives greater emphasis to 'good work'. The question then is what elements of existing practice can be feasibly changed by a TSO, given existing constraints, to enable it to move further towards a more expansive approach.

### **Co-production with third-sector employability providers**

The framework was discussed at a half-day workshop with a group of third sector members of the Employment-Related Services Association (ERSA) held on June 2025, as part of a process of co-creation. The qualitative feedback we received focused on the following key points:

- The toolkit has the potential to help TSOs to empower users to think 'in a more structured way' about the quality of jobs.
- Care has to be taken, however, that this expands rather than limits options for those with few employment choices.
- Some jobs may not be 'good jobs' but can still provide confidence, valuable experience and important social connections with fellow workers.
- TSOs wanted to learn more about the elements that make up 'good work' as well as the constraints employers face in delivering them.
- They also noted that individual users may give some elements higher priority than others.
- The framework is likely to have greater utility for users that are not funded through universal credit and potentially subject to benefit sanctions.
- TSOs' influence over employer practice, whether this is inclusive hiring or adjusting aspects of the job offer to fit around the needs of their user group, is often greater where employers are experiencing recruitment and retention problems.
- Further work could focus on making the framework a more usable and interactive resource that can be used in both development sessions for key workers as well as in their interactions with users.

### **Practical activities to explore the toolkit**

Based on the feedback we received, we developed a suite of practical activities with TSOs to help them engage with the challenges presented by job quality, which we have been trialling through a series of regional workshops. The workshops revolve around three activities that make up the toolkit.

#### ***Activity 1: What aspects of job quality matters most for different users?***

The first activity focuses on the key worker/user interaction in terms of helping users to think about what 'good work' means for them. Users are presented with 16 easy-

to-grasp statements on coloured cards, reflecting key aspects of job quality as highlighted in the academic literature<sup>1</sup>:

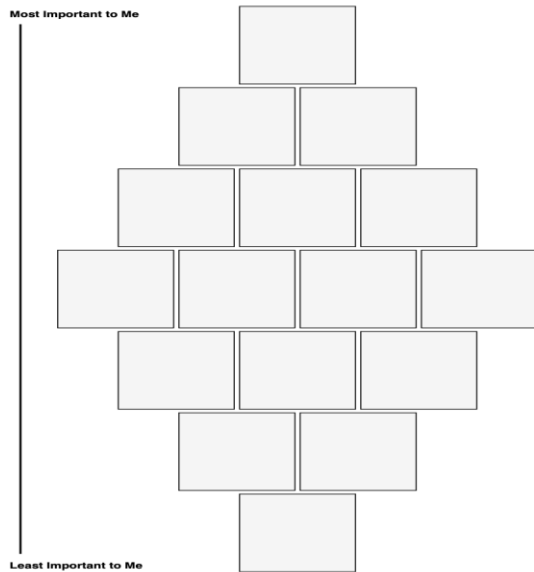
- 'Sufficient hours'
- 'The pay is sufficient and fair for what is being asked of me'
- 'My job allows me to mix with other people'
- 'The work gives me the opportunity to use my skills'
- 'The work allows me to learn new things'
- 'I find the work satisfying and meaningful'
- 'The job is varied, and I have some control over how I do it'
- 'My job is secure'
- 'I am provided with training to do my job and to develop'
- 'I have the opportunity to progress in the job'
- 'My job allows me to balance work and life'
- 'Predictable hours'
- 'The job is not stressful or pressurised'
- 'I am treated fairly and with respect'
- 'Good working environment and conditions'
- 'Having a say at work and feeling listened to'

Users are asked to rank these on a diamond-shaped matrix, comprised of 16 boxes, with the most important at the top and least important at the bottom, and intermediate rankings in between (see **Figure 2**). The aim here is to facilitate more structured conversations between key workers and users around job quality. The assumption is that, while this does not change the quality of jobs available locally, if users can be supported to find jobs which are more closely aligned to what they personally regard as decent work, they themselves are more likely to sustain such employment.

**Figure 2:** Diamond shaped matrix.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rendell et al (2025) who have used similar descriptors as part of Q-sort research aimed at understanding user views of job quality among social enterprises supporting users with highly complex employment barriers.

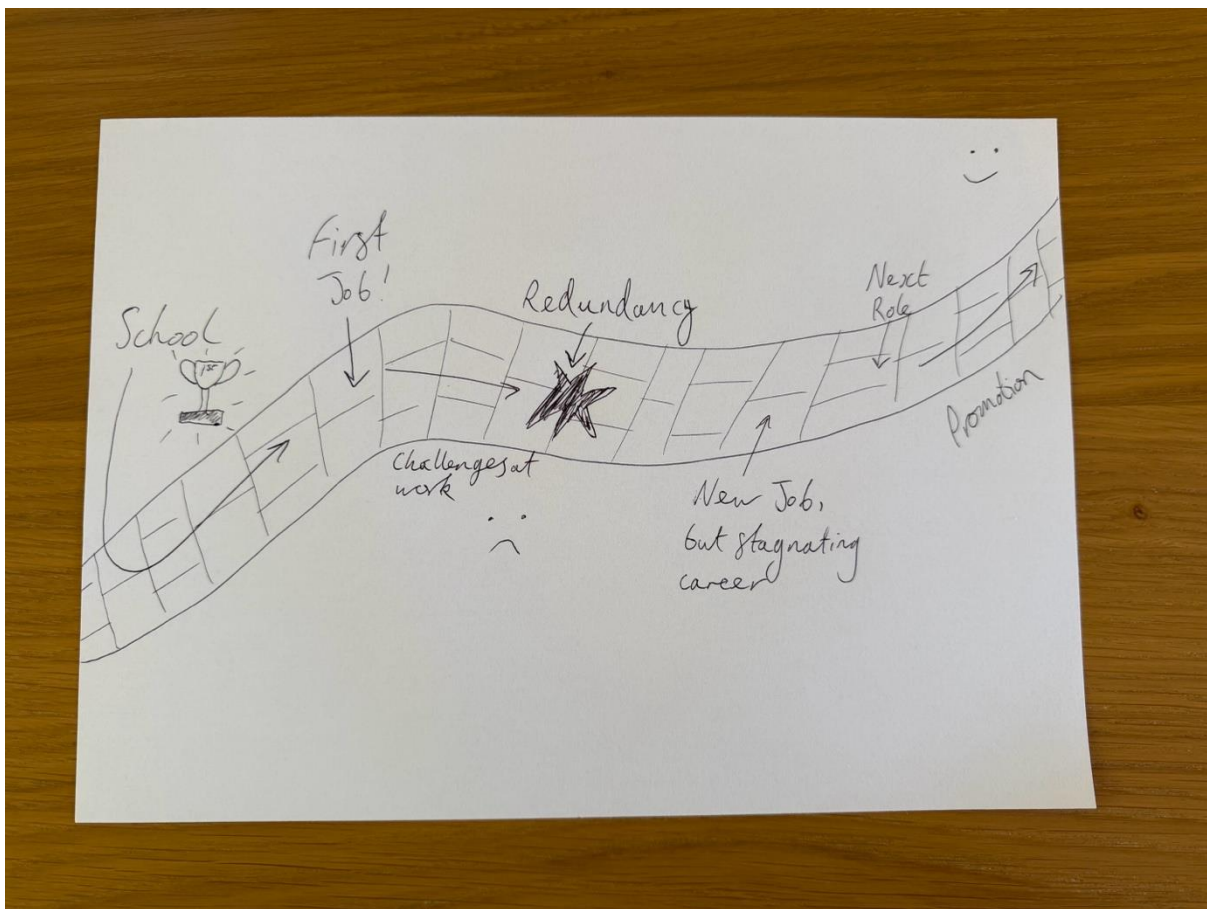


### ***Activity 2: Protecting users from 'self-blame'***

Research with white collar workers in the US experiencing long-term unemployment shows that many experience setbacks in the labour market due to the shortage of quality jobs and the problems they face in accessing them (Sharone and Vasquez, 2017). As such, they can easily internalise a negative self-image of personal failure, given the constant drip-feed of negative depictions of the unemployed in parts of the media and some policy circles. Providing space for group conversations around the structural barriers users face can help them realise that others are 'in the same boat', and that the difficulties they confront cannot be reduced to personal deficits. Such conversations can act as a form of empowering education by reflecting back 'a self that is not flawed but facing structural obstacles and experiencing the widely shared emotional fallout generated by such obstacles' (Sharone and Vasquez, 2017: 262).

To facilitate such group conversations, users can be asked to draw in any way they prefer a 'journey map' of their employment history, beginning with school to the present day, highlighting their key 'goals/aspirations/motivations' at different points, 'obstacles/hurdles', 'knock backs', and 'triumphs/successes', and 'how I felt at different points'. While care must be taken with those who have experienced trauma, the activity can help to open up conversations around shared barriers and experiences that can be protective of self-esteem and confidence which form a crucial part of any employment journey. Such activities can be thought of as part of, what Carter and Whitworth (2017) term 'process wellbeing', i.e. the well-being that users derive from how programme support is designed and delivered, irrespective of 'outcome wellbeing', which comes through entry to decent sustainable employment. This not only gives users voice but can be considered an essential first step towards empowerment.

**Figure 3:** Employment Journey Map



### **Activity 3 – Becoming more expansive in approach**

Finally, TSOs are asked to identify their current position on the ‘expansive-restrictive approach continuum’ alongside where they would like their organisation to be. This provides a clear mapping of the organisation on this metric and allows for more productive conversations from managers and staff about the present location and future aspirations of the organisation. Using the framework, they are asked to consider how they might feasibly move towards their own ideal position and the barriers that limit progress in this direction. This activity, aimed at managers and key workers, can help support empowering team conversations about practical ways to engage more fully with challenge of job quality. It is not envisaged that every TSO will necessarily be able to embrace every aspect of a more expansive approach, but the point is that there may be some feasible aspects of which they are not currently aware.

### **Final thoughts**

These activities have been developed considering a broad body of academic research, and in conversation with dozens of third sector organisations. We are currently working with selected TSOs to test their efficacy in terms of their ability to support users into decent sustainable employment, whilst also addressing the wellbeing of

those users who do not succeed as result of structural barriers. The results so far from our engagement with the sector are very encouraging, but there is still some way to go in developing proof-of-concept. This is by no means the end of the story. TSOs, like other employment providers, will also need to think carefully about how they might shift the focus away from entry-level jobs and target employers who can offer better quality employment, along with structured training opportunities and progression (Johnson et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2025). ‘Careers Pathways’ models, which ‘combine industry training with placement support’ (Wilson and Mason, 2024), are one example. However, the more demanding TSOs become in terms of job quality, the fewer employers they are likely to find offering employment opportunities, and this is unlikely to be a solution for users with the most complex needs and barriers.

Figure 4 – Testing Activities with TSOs in the York and Yorkshire Region



Crucially, policy makers can also play a key role by acknowledging the contribution that employability-focused TSOs can make to government’s ambitions and by providing more sustainable, long-term funding for the sector (Rose et al., 2025; Payne et al 2026). In reclaiming some space for TSOs to exercise strategic agency around job quality, it is important not to overstretch the point, however, and to reiterate the role of power in delineating the limits of possibility. It is ultimately employers that determine the quality of jobs, acting within the national institutional-regulatory environment as shaped by government and other powerful social actors (Wright, 2012; Warhurst et al. 2017). Our work reiterates the need for policies to address the ‘demand-side’ of the labour market (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005, Greer, 2016, Jones et al., 2024), through stronger employment regulation<sup>i</sup> and adequate social security support to ‘de-commodify’ labour and shift employers away from a reliance on low-paid, insecure work.

It is hoped that our framework and toolkit can, nevertheless, help TSOs to make further progress within the messy realities of current policy constraints and they can become a more integral part of policy discussions around how to 'Get Britain Working' in good, sustainable jobs. It may be that there is also food for thought here for other employment support providers, beyond the third sector, who are grappling with these challenges.

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<sup>i</sup> For a missed opportunity in relation to re-building sectoral collective agreements in the foundational economy, see Sisson (2025).