

About You	
1.	<p>Your Name</p> <p>Linda Ford</p>
2.	<p>Your Employer / Organisation</p> <p>North Ayrshire Council (NAC)</p>
3.	<p>Your Position</p> <p>Programme Manager</p>
4.	<p>Your E-Mail at Work</p> <p>lindaford@north-ayrshire.gov.uk</p>
5.	<p>Your Address at Work</p> <p>Trinity Annexe, Bridgegate, Irvine, KA12 8BJ</p>
6.	<p>Your Telephone Number at Work</p> <p>07545 346780</p>
7.	<p>Your Role in the Project</p> <p>As a programme manager, Linda leads a team of six. She manages the flow of referrals from various sources and distributes them equally amongst her colleagues. She also monitors and implements policies and procedures according to North Ayrshire Council's guidelines. She ensures transparency within the programme, implements GDPR and health and safety regulations, and collaborates with her colleagues to develop the Equal Programme further.</p>
An Introduction to the Project	
8.	<p>Which partner organisations are involved in delivering the project (local authorities, organisations, community groups, etc.)?</p> <p>Whilst no partners co-deliver the programme, two partners work alongside the Equal Programme and provide specialist support: Salus (mental health support for members) and North Ayrshire's Health and Social Care Partnership's Literacy and Numeracy Team.</p>
9.	<p>Does the project have specific aims and/or objectives?</p> <p>The aim of the Equal Programme is to help people with disabilities and long-term health conditions find sustainable employment. The programme focuses on fostering transferrable skills through activities that cater to members' unique hobbies and interests. In engaging members in this way, the project enables them to pursue their passions whilst also fostering skills and attributes (i.e. confidence, acceptable behaviours, collaboration and teamwork, social integration) that are vital for potential employment.</p> <p>The Equal Programme is accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority to award members with qualifications that will increase their job prospects. It provides tailored, one-to-one assistance for each member during and after the job search, aiming to find a job that suits each member's strengths, ambitions, and needs.</p>

	The programme further supports new employers by providing guidance on how best to support their new employees.
10.	Does the project have a title?
	The Equal Programme
11.	When did it start?
	March 2019.
12.	Has it finished? Is it on-going? Does it have an end date?
	On-going with no end date.
13.	Which groups of people, if any, are targeted by the service provided?
	Any North Ayrshire resident over the age of 16 with a long-term health condition or physical, mental, or learning disability.
14.	How many people have been served by the project?
	Equal takes on roughly 130 members annually, and nearly 500 people have been served so far.
15.	Where is it delivered?
	Throughout North Ayrshire.
The Initial Idea	
16.	Who had the initial idea?
	North Ayrshire Council.
17.	How did the idea for the project come about?
	The idea for the Equal Programme came about as North Ayrshire Council (NAC) wanted to implement a specialist employability service within the Council for those with additional support needs. The NAC thought a specialist employability team would reach a wide range of people in need. Linda was tasked with developing the initial idea and considered barriers she experienced in past employability programmes, such as engagement issues. The initial idea was to create a programme that would keep members engaged through activities that catered to various hobbies and interests whilst also learning transferrable skills and acquiring qualifications.
18.	Did you draw on any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice you had seen elsewhere to inform your plans?
	Yes. Linda and her colleagues analysed all evidence available on supported employment. This involved evidence on what supported employment should entail and how the knowledge acquired could be adapted to the resources, staffing, and number of members for the NAC programme. They also looked at other councils and their services. Additionally, they looked at information from the Scottish Government and the requirements and expectations of supported employment services. As a council, the NAC collects statistics and figures about vulnerable groups who may benefit from an employability service. These statistics supported the funding of the Equal Programme and continue to support its existence and development.
19.	Who was involved in developing the initial idea of the project?

	The NAC developed the idea of having an independent, standalone team who worked directly with North Ayrshire residents in need of an employability service.	
20.	Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	
	No.	
21.	What funding was used, if any, to support the development of the initial idea of the project?	
	Half of the funding came from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the other half was provided by the NAC.	
22.	What in-kind resources were needed when developing the initial idea of the project?	
	Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An outdoor garden plot was allocated to the Equal Programme. The programme was initially based in a NAC building, but it became clear that this building was an intimidating barrier for potential members. The Equal programme staff agreed that a more inviting and approachable building was needed, so they are now based in a church annexe.
	Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Equal programme staff has developed a programme to create video CVs ('calling cards') for members to send to employers so that potential employers get an insight into what the member has to offer and how they would fit into their team.
23.	What, if any, barriers did you have to overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?	
	One initial barrier that had to be overcome was a knowledge barrier about what the Equal Programme has to offer. Many people, including referral providers and the general public, thought the service was only for people with severe disabilities. Another ongoing barrier involves stigma in relation to employers who have misconceptions about disability. The project is currently working on an employer engagement piece to break down misguided conceptions of what disability actually means and what it entails.	
24.	What, if anything, was helpful when developing the initial idea of the project?	
	<p>It was helpful to receive feedback that the council building initially used as a base was intimidating, and that a church annexe would be more approachable.</p> <p>It was also helpful to have a garden plot outside for members to work on. The plot was particularly vital after COVID-19, when members were hesitant about meeting indoors, and proved to significantly impact members' well-being and health. Currently, produce from the garden goes to food banks to help those in need.</p>	
25.	Did you conduct a feasibility study?	
	Yes, a feasibility study was conducted to determine which path would be best going forward. They were deciding whether to outsource a project search service or formulate a team within NAC. It was concluded that the latter would be most effective, as there would be an opportunity to scale up and accommodate as many people as possible.	

26.	What was the timeline between the initial idea and the start of the project?	
	The timeline between the initial idea and the start of the project in March 2019 was less than 6 months.	
27.	Who made the decision to introduce the project?	
	NAC.	
Pilot Project		
28.	Did you run a pilot project?	
	Yes.	
29.	What did you do?	
	Prior to COVID-19, the NAC began a partnership with ASN schools to support young people transitioning from school to employment or further education. This pilot was developed to determine whether there was a need for an employability service for young people with additional support needs. After a review meeting with parents, it became evident that many schools needed similar support.	
30.	Who was involved in the work of the pilot project?	
	Rather than recruiting a specialist, the NAC appointed a transitions officer within the initial team. They collaborated with careers advisors, mental health advisors, and school leadership teams to facilitate the service.	
31.	How, if at all, were those with lived experience of poverty involved in the pilot of the project?	
	Those with lived experience were primarily members with additional support needs, rather than staff.	
32.	What funding was used, if any, for the pilot project?	
	Various external funds were utilised, including Young Person's Guarantee funding, but the primary source of funding was from the ESF and the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Fund.	
33.	What in-kind resources were used for the pilot project?	
	Facilities	N/A
	Equipment	N/A
	Local Knowledge	Local knowledge from schools, parents, and students.
	Food and Drink	N/A
34.	Was the pilot project evaluated?	
	No formal evaluation was completed due to COVID-19. However, Linda conducted an informal evaluation that was passed on to the North Ayrshire education department for review. Linda evaluated the pilot's nature, how it was conducted, and what was accomplished, which facilitated further requests from schools.	
35.	What evidence, if any, from the pilot project was used to confirm that it was working?	
	Lived experience testimonies were the primary evidence that the pilot project was working. Most members moved to a 'positive destination', meaning they progressed to further education, received qualifications, or were offered paid work.	

36.	Who made the decision to continue with the project beyond the pilot project?	
	NAC.	
37.	How did the pilot project inform the final design of the project?	
	The appointment of a transition officer for the pilot was successful. The Council, therefore, decided to implement one at the Equal Programme to support them in understanding the unique barriers present for young people. The pilot also influenced the shape and experience of the Equal Programme team and the activities currently on offer.	
The On-going Development of the Project		
38.	Has The Equal Programme changed through time?	
	Yes.	
39.	In what ways has it changed?	
	Scale	N/A
	Location	The Equal Programme has moved. It is now located in a church annexe rather than a council building.
	Population	N/A
	The Offer	The services on offer for employers have improved over time. Equal advisors now provide an in-work support service for employers. If consent is given, they act as an intermediary between the member and their new employer. Advisors can also provide additional training for members if tasks at their new job prove to be difficult. This is done to support the employer and ensure that the work placement will be sustainable for both parties.
40.	What were the reason for these changes?	
	The Equal Programme staff strive for continuous improvement, and these changes demonstrate that. They have led several initiatives to improve its service. Linda led an open day during which parents, carers, and members provided feedback and discussed service provision in North Ayrshire. This was done to improve what is on offer in the Equal Programme and to reduce the disability employment gap within the Council. They also led a 'reverse job fair' event for employers, during which members had individual stands with their CVs and details of their achievements and activities. They also led an event for service providers in the area to coordinate their efforts effectively. They discussed findings that were eventually passed on to the local employability partnership. All of this has been done for the purpose of continuous improvement of the Equal Programme.	
Accessing the Service and Engaging with Members		
41.	Is there a referral process? If yes, how does the referral process work (self-referral, referred by other agencies, identified from an existing database)	
	Yes. Potential members can refer themselves, or friends, family, or a carer can refer on behalf of them. Potential members may also be referred by a job centre, an employment specialist, or a healthcare worker. Once the referral is received, an employment advisor will reach out via phone within seven days. A suitability assessment will then be made and a potential member will receive specialised	

	support to ensure any additional barriers (i.e. anxiety or dyslexia) are addressed. Following this, a meeting will be arranged within two weeks to discuss the steps going forward.
42.	How are potential members made aware of the project?
	Potential members may be informed through a job centre, employment specialist, or healthcare worker. The service is also advertised on Facebook, LinkedIn, and the NAC website.
43.	How do you keep in touch with members? Do your members have a preferred method of contact?
	Members can contact their advisors during open hours (9:00-16:30) via telephone, text, or email. Personal preference tends to be email or telephone. An employment advisor provides all contact details, and members are kept in touch with them until they no longer require help. There is no end date for service provision, as support tends to fade out over time on the member's own terms.
Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty	
44.	Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?
	No.
45.	Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project, <u>supervision</u> within the project, or project <u>governance</u>?
	No.
46.	Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project?
	Yes. All of the Equal Programme's members provide feedback for each activity. Steering groups have formalised this process; there is one for the garden and a general steering group. There is also a partnership with local food banks. Fruit and vegetables from the garden are given to food banks, and the food banks offer volunteer placements to Equal Programme members. A needs-based assessment also occurs at the start of all members' journeys. Advisors figure out how to support members financially if needed. They also conduct a benefits calculation before a member goes into employment and recommend how many hours they should work to ensure they are as well-off as possible.
Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working	
47.	Who has overall responsibility for The Equal Programme?
	NAC.
48.	Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?
	No. As a council, the NAC has various responsibilities related to the welfare of their residents. The Equal Programme is under the umbrella of Working North Ayrshire, which offers a range of support services for those looking for work; including support for non-English speakers, modern apprenticeships, and employment mentors.
49.	Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group or Organising Committee?

	<p>Yes. There is a Steering Group for the garden as well as a more general one for the Equal Programme's members. When Equal staff come up with an idea they then broach this to the Steering Group, who provide feedback on whether or not they think it will be successful. Similarly, members can bring their own ideas, opinions, and thoughts to Equal staff for consideration too. These meetings are conducted with a lead advisor and a support advisor. The general Steering Group meet quarterly, and the Garden Steering Group meet every eight weeks for a discussion. Some members from the Garden Steering Group have lived experience of poverty and have provided feedback on what they would have liked to have seen at the food banks.</p>
Staffing	
50.	Are there any paid staff?
	Yes. Equal advisors are paid staff who provide one-to-one, tailored support for each member during and after their job search.
51.	Are volunteers involved in delivering the project?
	Yes. There are some volunteers from the Equal Programme's member base who lead activities, such as a creative writing group, gaming group, football group, and the garden.
Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements	
52.	Is the project part of a wider anti-poverty strategy?
	Yes. The Equal Programme is now linked to North Ayrshire's Cost of Living and Child Poverty Board through an employability action link.
53.	Is the project part of any other strategy?
	Yes. The Equal Programme is part of a broader strategy within North Ayrshire Council to increase and support disability-confident employers.
54.	Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?
	Yes. There is a requirement for the Scottish Government to fund programmes like the Equal Programme.
Funding	
55.	Who funds the project?
	Equal is currently funded by the Scottish Government.
56.	How is the project funded?
	Initially, Equal was funded by the ESF and the NAC. The pilot was supported by the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Fund and other external sources. The Equal Programme now receives payments from the Scottish Government that supports its continued existence.
57.	What is the budget for the project / how much does it cost to deliver?
	The project's current budget is roughly £500,000. The initial budget was £350,000, with staff costs being the primary cost at £310,000. There were additional operating costs. The increase in budget now covers paid work experience trainees at £150,000.
58.	Is future funding based on pre-agreed outcomes or outputs being delivered?
	No, although they do have performance expectations.

Resources		
59.	What in-kind resources do you need to deliver your project?	
	Facilities	The church annexe and garden are needed to deliver the project.
	Equipment	Gardening equipment is required as are other forms of equipment for hobby-related activities, such as that for a proposed bicycle refurbishment group.
	Local Knowledge	The most vital resource is the knowledge of experienced staff members. This knowledge includes the barriers members face and suitable employment opportunities for them. Staff are also equipped to educate employers and address misconceptions of disability.
	Food and Drink	N/A
60.	For each of the in-kind resources listed above, who provides it?	
	Facilities	The church annexe is part of Trinity Church in North Ayrshire. The garden plot is provided by Eglinton Community Garden.
	Equipment	The Equal Programme and NAC.
	Local Knowledge	The Equal Programme's staff.
	Food and Drink	
61.	Did you have to buy or develop new IT systems, software (databases, apps) or technology to deliver your project?	
	No.	
62.	Was additional staff training required to deliver your project?	
	The project required both internal and external staff training, including mental health and autism awareness training courses. Specific learning sessions on ADHD, autism, and epilepsy have also occurred to ensure understanding and safety. Every staff member also completed National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) training, and several did Individual Placement and Support (IPS) training. There has also been specific training for advisors to support their work with their members.	
Formal Monitoring and Evaluation		
63.	What information, if any, do you collect about your project?	
	Number of users	The number of users (around 130 per year) is collected.
	Profile of users	The following data is collected to garner a holistic picture of each member and adapt the service if need be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condition, disability, and/or health problem experienced • The member's locality and its correlating deprivation index • Source of the referral • Age range
	Experience of users	The experience of users is collected, primarily through survey questionnaires.

	Anything else	N/A
64.	How often is data collected? Who collects the data?	
	Reports are generated and submitted to the Scottish government quarterly. This is done to show progress and receive evaluation and recommendations. The Equal Programme staff collects the data.	
65.	Do you have baseline data on what things were like before the start of the project or before users started the project?	
	As a council, the NAC generates annual reports that contain data on the area's conditions. They have completed reports prior to the Equal Programme that demonstrate this, including on supported employment. Prior to the project, the NAC published a report in 2018 that detailed plans to close the disability employment gap.	
66.	Do you produce an annual report?	
	Yes. Employability Lead Laura Neill produces an annual report about employability in North Ayrshire which contains a section about the Equal Programme.	
67.	In what ways, if at all, do you use the data that you collect to adapt the service that you provide?	
	The data collected, whether demographic information, data collected from Steering Group meetings, or surveys, is always used to improve and adapt the Equal Programme. An example of this would be that they realised activities need to be adapted to suit older members.	
68.	Have you employed an external organisation to formally evaluate your project?	
	No, although the Scottish Government have cited the project as a Model of Good Practice having visited Equal's job fair and garden site.	
69.	Do you intend to employ an external organisation to evaluate the service that you provide in the future?	
	The team proposed that the Programme be evaluated as an Individual Placement and Support (IPS) service, an evidence-based approach to supported employment proposed by the Scottish Government. It is unknown which external organisation will do this, but the aim is to get recommendations and improve from there.	
Impact		
70.	What difference has the project made?	
	The Equal Programme has made a profound impact on the lives and wellbeing of its members. One of Equal's strengths is that it offers engaging, hobby-oriented activities that ensure indirect learning occurs among members and they acquire transferrable skills. When members are engaged, they open up and are ready to communicate and negotiate with one another. Staff noticed an increase in confidence levels and communication skills among members, which is particularly vital in the aftermath of the pandemic. The garden has also played a pivotal role for those involved. Being outside has helped improve the well-being and general health of members, as has seeing the product of their efforts in the growth of the garden. Members also report an increase in their overall quality of life, even if they don't go directly into employment. Some are getting their first-ever jobs or getting back into work after a gap.	
71.	How do you know this? What evidence demonstrates impact (metrics, interviews, feedback)?	

	<p>The project has been cited as a Model of Good Practice by the Scottish Government. The Equal programme team also sent out 120 questionnaires to members. The survey asked questions related to their thoughts and feelings about the service. They received around 60 responses, all of which shared positive feedback. In 2024, Equal's garden project has delivered over 100 bags of fresh produce to local food larders. A new bicycle refurbishment project, which has been running since January 2024, has received 170 bicycle donations that would otherwise have gone to a landfill. 65 have been fully refurbished and 35 have been returned to families in the community who would not otherwise be able to afford a bike.</p>
72.	<p>To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?</p> <p>Following the results of the survey, it is very clear that the aims of the project have been achieved.</p>
73.	<p>How, if at all, has the demand for the service provided by The Equal Programme changed since it started?</p> <p>Demand for the service has changed over time, primarily due to the pandemic. Some members with health issues were hesitant to return. Currently, the Equal Programme is thriving in both the number of members and the work it is achieving.</p>
74.	<p>If yes, has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?</p> <p>Yes. It is clear that the project has been successful whilst there is room for continued growth. They were also successful in re-engaging members following the pandemic with popular activities, such as the gaming group.</p>
75.	<p>Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?</p> <p>No.</p>
76.	<p>In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?</p> <p>Yes, the Equal Programme staff support their members by increasing their income through supported employment and improving their quality of life. They advise their members on the best possible routes to progress with their goals and ambitions. One outcome of this is paid employment, which improves the quality of life for those experiencing poverty. Equal also collaborates with other organisations that provide specialist financial support. One of Equal's core aims is to find members sustainable employment that will make them better off.</p>
Learning from Experience	
77.	<p>What is working well?</p> <p>Everything at the Equal Programme is working very well. The model in place is the best avenue they have found to support those with additional support needs.</p>
78.	<p>What, if anything, is working less well?</p> <p>There are no apparent issues within the Equal Programme. Equal staff tweak or halt activities that are not working well.</p>
79.	<p>What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?</p> <p>Two key learning points are 1) being flexible about proposed ideas and using members' feedback to improve the service and 2) looking after staff and their well-being alongside the well-being of members.</p>

80.	What plans do you have to develop or expand the project in the future?	
	<p>The Equal Programme looks to develop its service in line with the Scottish Government's Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Fidelity Scale. The Scale is a tool used to gauge if evidence-based practices are being implemented in supported employment services by evaluating staffing, organisation, and services. The Equal Programme team aims to incorporate all of the IPS Fidelity points they feasibly can, although they have already achieved most of the items. They are also looking to expand the activities on offer, and have included a bicycle refurbishment course to support families who cannot afford to purchase one. They further plan to expand collaboration with various agendas (i.e. North Ayrshire Council's poverty and environmental agendas) and related groups, such as the community mental health team. All of these steps are done to ensure they provide the best possible service they can.</p>	
81.	How easily do you think your project could be replicated in another setting?	
	<p>The Equal Programme could easily be replicated in another setting, particularly if it is supported by an employment council service such as Working North Ayrshire.</p>	
Social Media		
82.	Please enter social media contact details and weblinks to supporting documents or resources below:	
	Web Pages	https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/jobs-and-training/help-finding-work/additional-employment-support.aspx
	LinkedIn	https://uk.linkedin.com/showcase/equalnorthayrshire/#:~:text=About%20us,with%20disabilities%20can%20work%20effectively
	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/groups/equalnorthayrshiregroup/?locale=en_GB
	Instagram	N/A
	Twitter	N/A
	Tik-Tok	N/A
GDPR Consent (Add yes or no in the box)		
	I give my permission to be named in the tackling poverty locally directory and associated public outputs.	Yes
	I give permission for our organisation to be named in the tackling poverty locally directory and associated public outputs.	Yes
	I give permission for me to be contacted by directory users.	Yes
	I am willing to be contacted if more details are required	Yes