

# Working Journeys

An evaluation of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS  
Foundation Trust's Skills Passport Employability Programme

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# Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Skills Passport pilot Programme Evaluation Report

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## Executive Summary

This evaluation of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Skills Passport pilot has been carried out through interviews with participants, programme tutors and organisers and with other key stakeholders, and through review of documentary evidence.

The programme has been designed to provide local solutions to local employment needs. The Skills Passport is successful, flexible and innovative. Its inclusion of a guaranteed job interview sets it apart from other similar schemes, and gives it a particular attraction to its participants.

Partnership development and partnership working underpins the Skills Passport. Partnerships are agreed and endorsed at a senior level.

Involvement with the Skills Passport has changed its participants' perceptions of the NHS as a potential employer.

Publicity for the scheme and its successes might be higher than at present, particularly if a wider recruitment pool is to be achieved.

Careful management of the scheme's entry gateway and the quality of its participants has been a key feature of its success. Commitment is seen as an important qualification for entry.

Participants are content with the quality and quantity of training they received, although they would like more advice and guidance on the support they receive through Job Centre Plus.

The most valuable aspects of the NOCN programme are those that prepare participants for their interviews, such as interview skills and CVs.

Participants would like more advance information about the programme itself, and also about any restrictions on part-time or flexible working.

The team spirit that develops through the Skills Passport is seen as important by the programme's participants, who put this down largely to the group sessions and group working.

Although most people have joined the scheme to get a job, working for a caring organisation is also important. Some people are not particularly aware of the caring nature of working with the NHS before they enter the scheme.

People passing through the Skills Passport and starting work for the NHS tend to develop plans for further study and for career progression. The stability of working for the NHS is also seen as an attraction.

There is a suggestion that there are not enough jobs available at the moment, and that broadening the remit of the Skills Passport to include social care and the independent sector might be a good idea that should be explored fully.

# The Skills Passport Employability Programme at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

## 1. Introduction

Following from, and building on, a successful Yorkshire Forward/NHS funded Employability pilot at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, the Trust was in 2008 awarded £43,000 by the Sheffield Work and Skills Board (convened under Sheffield First's Work and Skills Partnership) to carry out a National Open College Network (NOCN) pilot at Levels 1 and 2, which began as the Skills Passport pilot in January 2009.<sup>1</sup>

The Skills Passport is not an initiative confined to Sheffield, although it originated in that city through both the Work and Skills Board and the City Council's City Strategy Pathfinder (a Department for Work and Pensions funded initiative to tackle worklessness in the UK's most deprived communities)<sup>2</sup>.

The Skills Passport model, in which the NOCN Qualifications for Progression is used to bundle together the generic employability units needed to prove to prospective employers that successful candidates are 'job ready,' was picked up by the Work and Skills Boards of Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham, and the programme overall recast as the South Yorkshire Skills Passport. This has been evaluated separately by Dr Tony Gore of Sheffield Hallam University as a case study within the National Evaluation of City Strategies.<sup>3</sup>

As with the Yorkshire Forward/NHS Regional Employability pilot, the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Skills Passport initiative is specifically targeting entry level general staff working in areas such as administration, laundry, catering, and portering where there are established difficulties recruiting work ready staff. The Skills Passport pilot, though, is more than simply an effective and innovative recruitment tool. Its focus on the people of Sheffield, and initially specifically on people within the walk to work catchment of the Sheffield Northern General Hospital, intrinsically links the programme to the Trust's Corporate Social Responsibility agenda. It is well established, for instance, that lengthy periods of unemployment can be injurious both to people's physical and mental health, and that for these people, re-entering the labour market in good employment often leads to improvements in both health and general wellbeing<sup>4</sup>.

The pilot, which was expected to involve a cohort of 20 students recruited from the Trust's partner, Sheffield City College, might broadly be described as having two phases, which can be categorised by their NOCN levels.

### Phase 1 (NOCN Level 1)

The target was 20 students recruited at LLN Entry Levels 1 literacy and 3 numeracy, with phase 1 being made up of a five week programme, with two and a half days a week. Participants would develop generic skills (i.e. interview skills, time management, team building) and other skills (such as work ethic and confidentiality) that, although themselves generic, to an extent reflected some of the specific needs of the Trust.

One half day each week was to be dedicated to numeracy and literacy. The programme was expected to be delivered by tutors from both STH and the College.

<sup>1</sup> Employability can be defined as the skills, competencies and attributes that allow people to find and keep paid work. Institute for Employment Studies (1998). *Employability: developing a framework for policy analysis*. DfES, London.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/index.asp?pgid=155151&mtype=print>

<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of the South Yorkshire Skills Passport has been released in unpublished draft form (October 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health (2005). *Health, work and wellbeing – caring for our future*.

At the conclusion of Phase 1, students were to be interviewed by prospective workplace managers in the areas of laundry, portering, hospitality and catering, cleaning and administration. Students who passed these interviews would then pass through to Phase 2.

### **Phase 2 (NOCN Level 2)**

Successful students were to go through a further five weeks of the pilot, with two days classroom based learning each week, and two days in a relevant work placement, a model that reflected the successful Yorkshire Forward/NHS funded Employability pilot. A Certificate of Progression will be awarded to those students who complete the programme, which will lead to a permanent employment offer after successful completion.

There have been five cohorts of students recruited to the Skills Passport since January 2009, with a total of 67 people who have passed through the programme, and 16 currently enrolled. Of the 67, 32 (47.8%) have secured jobs within the Trust in Portering, Domestic Services, Laundry, and Catering; some have also secured administrative roles in Ophthalmology. Some students seeking administrative jobs have been referred through to the Trust's Admin Assessment Centre, where they are currently on the waiting list.

As already noted, the Skills Passport Employability programme is, from many points of view, a direct descendant of the NHS and Yorkshire Forward Regional Employability Programme that ran from 2004 until 2007.

With Dr Fiona O'Neill, we evaluated that programme using a method we coined at the time as 'constructive enquiry', which perhaps we can recognise more precisely now as a variant of appreciative inquiry, in which the evaluator is cast in the role of critical friend.

In an appreciative inquiry it is important, in our view, that the evaluation function is separated rigorously from that of monitoring. The programme sponsors and other stakeholders will be monitoring 'hard' outcomes themselves. The role of the evaluator is to tell the stories behind those outcomes: what worked well; what might have worked better; what could have been included but wasn't; and perhaps what was included that might have been better left out.

But the most important function of all, for both us as evaluators and for the Skills Passport team, is to tell the programme's story from the perspectives of the individual people who pass through it. What was the journey that brought them to the programme in the first place? What commonalities do the participants share? What was the educational experience of the programme like for them? Which new horizons and aspirations has it opened up for them? In short, what was the impact on the Skills passport programme on those women and men who passed through it?

In so far as the Skills Passport is a 'type' of regional Employability, our evaluation method reflected the method we earlier applied to that initiative. This is reasonable, as there were many similarities between the two programmes. In both cases the primary targets have been longer-term unemployed people. In both cases the mixtures of genders, ethnicities and disability have been both similar and generally reflective of their target communities. And in both cases the basic model was that of a work-skills training programme leading to the opportunity of an NHS career.

*"It's obviously an important advantage to us to have local people delivering services to local people."*

**Cliff Smith, Head, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Health and Social Care Academy**

There are, however, also fundamental differences between the two programmes. The first, of course, is the scale of the two interventions. The NHS Regional Employability Programme for Yorkshire and the Humber was a comparatively vast intervention, with active projects in Leeds, York, Bradford, Scunthorpe, Scarborough, Rotherham, Barnsley, Wakefield and Calderdale and Huddersfield, and no fewer than three projects in Sheffield.

Within the Employability Programme, there were significant variations too between one site and another. Some were offering accredited training, others non-accredited; some projects targeted specific communities, such as people with disabilities, or migrant doctors, others simply targeted the longer term unemployed.

Conversely, the Skills Passport is a locality specific, single model programme that was originally conceived to target the walk-to-work catchment of the Northern General Hospital, and expressly the people of the Burngreave district of the city. The programme has been broadened now to include the whole city, something inevitable, perhaps, given the dynamic of its relationship with Sheffield City College, but the fact remains that it is a much smaller and more intimate programme than its predecessor.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two, however, lies completely outside the influence of either of their co-ordinating teams. The economic climate has changed immeasurably since 2007, with a seemingly buoyant economy in 2004-07 replaced with a recessionary one in 2009.

This harsher economic outlook has manifested itself in a number of ways. Unlike Employability, the Skills Passport programme, for instance, has recruited several people who have recently been made redundant from what they believed would be secure, lifelong employment. This was particularly clear with the first cohort we interviewed (we worked with the first and third cohorts of students to pass through the scheme). Both the employment experiences and lifestyle expectations of these participants, who included three women recently made redundant by the same employer, were dramatically different to those of their co-participants, and, for that matter, to the experiences of the Employability participants before them.

#### **Employment in Sheffield – a few facts**

Labour market research shows that recruitment to jobs in Sheffield is likely to be harder than in most other areas of Yorkshire and the Humber, as there are comparatively more jobs per member of the working population. This situation is likely to get worse amongst women, who form the majority of NHS staff, between now and 2016. Although the demand for female employment is likely to increase by about 5% per annum in general, the demand in the health and social care sector is likely to increase by 12%.<sup>5</sup>

The employment rate in Sheffield in 2006 was 68.7% a figure that had increased steadily over the preceding 10 years. However, the indications are that this is starting to fall, something explained in part by population growth.<sup>6</sup>

Sheffield has a comparatively highly qualified workforce, and in 2006 46.2% were qualified to NVQ level 3 or equivalent or above, compared to 45.2% for Great Britain overall.<sup>7</sup>

Weekly wages rose faster in Sheffield than in any other comparable city during the period 2000-2006 (27% compared with 24.5% elsewhere), although wage levels remain amongst the lowest.<sup>8</sup>

Recently made redundant participants told us they had already been identified as 'job ready' by Job Centre Plus, and brought with them some suggestion of a two-tier system operating with employment advisors. They also brought financial commitments in the form of loans and mortgages, and took perhaps a rather different view of the opportunities offered by the NHS; in one case, certainly, there was a feeling that an entry level post in the Trust was better than

<sup>5</sup> This is largely because of the ageing population. See Capita Health Service Partners (2007). *Labour market profile of Sheffield, July 2007*.

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2007). NOMIS Labour Force Survey 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> ONS (2007). NOMIS annual survey of household earnings (ASHE), 2007. See also <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/sheffield-facts-figures/sheffield-economy/worklessness>

nothing, but that she, the participant, could not afford to overlook better paid employment outside the health service, should it come along.

We have also made a short video based on interviews with the Skills Passport programme's participants, and have integrated its production into the evaluation method. As with Employability, where the evaluation included the production of a DVD, video interviews were conducted after a period of relationship building, and with a clear understanding of why we were producing the film and how it would be used.

Unlike Employability, however, the interviews were conducted more precisely around the themes identified as significant by the evaluation, and their transcripts were fed directly back to form part of the evidence base used in our analysis.

*"The Skills Passport Programme is part of the partnership relationship with Sheffield Teaching Hospitals...it's an innovative way of working with a major employer in the city to meet their needs directly. And it has been recognised on a national stage already as a way forward to improve the service to learners."*  
**Julie Byrne, Director, Sheffield City College**

## 2. Evaluation Method

As part of this evaluation, we have gathered evidence from three separate group interviews involving participants from the first and third cohorts of the Skills Passport programme. These were supplemented by one-to-one interviews and story-telling sessions with eight individual members across both cohorts. These interviews formed the basis for the case studies included in this report, and also for the accompanying DVD.

Interview subjects included 11 women and 5 men, with a representative range of ages and ethnicities. Interviews were recorded either through digital tape or video, and the transcripts of these conversations have been fed back to form the evidence base of the evaluation. Although data were coded against the indicators specified by the Sheffield Work and Skills Board, coding was left open to make sure that all themes were captured as they emerged.

The indicators identified by the Work and Skills Board were:

- Progress against the Pilot's aims and objectives
- Key features of the Pilot
- What has worked well
- What has not worked so well, and why has it not worked?
- What could or should have been done differently?
- What barriers have there been to the Pilot's success?
- What are the barriers to the success of the Pilot's participants (the beneficiaries)?
- What additional or different support would help/ would have helped to ensure that the needs of the participants are effectively addressed?
- Was there anything included in the Pilot that might be better omitted in the future?
- Any additional learning or recommendations for future development.

An appreciative inquiry approach has been taken towards the evaluation. Appreciative inquiry has a number of attractions as an evaluation method:

- It is evidence based;
- It is participatory, which enables a formative process of iterative feedback during the evaluation process itself;
- It is built on principles of constructionism and positivity<sup>9</sup>, which may be beneficial in terms of identifying practice models that are proven to work.

Appreciative inquiry hinges on the role of the evaluator as a critical friend, a role that relies on a constructive relationship between the evaluators and their subjects, who in this case are the participants of the Skills Passport. The evaluation becomes a journey in itself, and this report is from many points of view the story of that journey.

Although story telling is an inherently creative process, it is constructed on robust social research methods,<sup>10</sup> both in terms of data collection and subsequent analysis, which in this case has been carried out using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. From some points of view there is an intrinsic conflict between the principles of qualitative analysis and those of storytelling, which centre primarily on the tendency to fragment stories through coding. To an extent this is unavoidable where specified questions require investigation, which is the case with this evaluation. It is for this reason that the case studies, which have been constructed using open and appreciative interview techniques, are central to its outcomes.

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<sup>9</sup> Preskill, H & Tzavaras Catsambas, T. *Reframing evaluation through appreciative inquiry*. Sage. 2006.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Kohler Riessman, C. 'Narrative analysis'. *Qualitative Research Methods* 30. Sage. 1993.

### 3. Outcomes of the Evaluation

#### 3.1. Context of the Skills Passport

##### Impact of Unemployment

All participants of the Skills Passport pilot we interviewed were unemployed when they entered the scheme. In practice, however, we found that participants had **widely varying experiences of unemployment** and, to a lesser extent, of its associated **economic impact**. This was particularly noticeable with participants from the first cohort, where three women had recently (within the previous three months) been made redundant by the same employer after a lifetime of working, and others had been **unemployed for as long as 12 months**. Generally speaking, participants on the third cohort had experienced longer periods of unemployment than those on the first.

Although **economic hardship** was an ever present threat for most, some participants found a period of economic inactivity an opportunity to spend more time with their families. Others discussed the **impact of unemployment** on their families.

*"My children are only young, they're four and the other one's coming up to two, they don't have the understanding as to why I'm not at work. I've tried not to say too much in front of them, it's not for them to worry about."*

**Skills Passport participant**

Those participants who had recently been made redundant were conscious of the economic hardship likely to follow, even if they were not at that moment experiencing them. "At the moment my mortgage is on a holiday break," one female participant said, "which is going to end at the end of March. Obviously, that will then kick back in again, in March."

Generally, participants fell into one of three broad categories: those people who had **recently been made redundant**; people with experience of **longer periods of unemployment** for a variety of reasons; and a small number of young people who had only **recently entered the labour market**.

Longer term unemployed participants sometimes felt they had to take a job come what may. Even so, there was some feeling that longer term unemployed people might **lack the motivation** necessary to make the Skills Passport a success for them. "They need motivation. They need something to look forward to," one person said, "they need some sort of incentive as well."

*"When you've been on benefits for as long as I have I think you're just going to have to take a job."*

**Skills Passport participant**

Some of those participants who were used to regular work found **unemployment came as a painful shock**. One young male participant felt that unemployment brought **other risks** too. Talking of drug dealers, he said "I was in education, out of education, came out, anywhere on the street corner, they would drive past or come walking...got you hooked on the drugs, so you keep buying the drugs, and then you think, 'Oh, I need the drugs to keep me going.'"

*"I don't remember not working, even at twelve I had a paper round, at fourteen I was at college for a day, at sixteen coming up to forty one I've never not worked, and really, it's like I've had my arm chopped off."*

**Skills Passport participant**

One feature of unemployment that participants discussed was **the loss of daily routine**, and both recently redundant and longer term unemployed participants shared **a feeling of being stigmatised**. “I think society treats you differently when you're out of a job,” one participant said, with another adding “I had to fill a form in, it was actually for this [the Skills Passport], and it asked you for your employment status, and it's the first time in my life, since leaving school at sixteen, that I've ever had to pick 'Unemployed'. And there was just this feeling that came over me, I thought I really don't like that.”

*“You actually miss it. I know that sounds silly, but you get up on a Monday and think, ‘Oh, it's Monday, I know I've got to go to work,’ but not having the option anymore, having that taken away from you...for us work wasn't just work, it was a social event as well, I miss the adult company.”*  
**Skills Passport participant**

## **Barriers to employment**

The most frequent barriers to finding work cited by our interview subjects were **childcare responsibilities, long-term ill health and redundancy**, which people identified, not unreasonably, as being a barrier in itself between them and their employment.

The Shaw Trust was mentioned several times as a referring agency, and one female participant had also been on a condition management programme through them, and felt it might be used more widely to help people back to work readiness.

Childcare responsibilities featured both as a barrier more generally, but also specifically within the Skills Passport Pilot.

One participant described how she was only able to take a full-time job, which were generally the only suitable posts available for her, with the support of her daughter's carers, who were also her grandparents, and another recounted how she only discovered during her interview that the opportunity could only be full-time. “I didn't say anything to them,” she said, “I didn't want it to appear that I'd just wasted their time, but I came out and it was like, even if they offered it to me I can't take it.”

Participants did not cite skills as a barrier to finding employment, although, as reported later, did discuss **personal development** as a route to advancement within the NHS, and talked extensively about the skills they had developed during the Skills Passport programme.

### **Case Study: Adam**

Adam ran his own business, a tobacconist, for seven years until it was compulsorily purchased with 60 others by his local authority, who were clearing the area as part of a business scheme two years ago. Having also worked in the past as a warehouse supervisor, Adam might have hoped to find work in that area after losing his shop, but spinal surgery made this difficult for him too. He signed up for a course with Remploy at the Source in Meadowhall in Sheffield: “They put this leaflet in front of me advertising the Skills Passport, just a small leaflet, and I gave the contact a ring and never looked back,” he said.

Adam was most attracted to the NHS by the prospect of further training, although the general working conditions, including the pension scheme, were also appealing.

With a background in the retail sector and warehousing, Adam feels he brings a useful combination of skills to the health sector. “I used to be a warehouse supervisor, before I actually bought my own business, so I'm quite clued up when it comes to warehousing...I designed my own warehouse for them, for this computer for them, and I have had my own business, so dealing with customers on a day to day basis.”

Working for a large public body contrasts sharply with the rigours of self-employment, he feels. “You know, if I’m possibly sick, which I don’t plan to be, I know that I can have that time off and my wage is still going to be paid, whereas if you work for yourself, no chance,” he said. “I mean, I punctured my lung about six years ago, and I had to discharge myself from hospital six hours after I’d punctured my lung so I could go to work the next day.”

Having recovered from spinal surgery, Adam now works within Bulk Storage at the Northern General Hospital. “We have to make the orders up in the morning,” he said, “each ward has a different trolley, so you’ve got to go and fetch the empty ones in the morning, bring them back, the orders are then made up, and then somebody actually fills all the trolleys up, and the first job the next morning is taking those and delivering them up to the wards, bringing the old ones back, and starting again!”

Adam would certainly recommend the Skills Passport to other people, if only because they can get their NOCN level 1, and will also need to get their English and Maths. “It’s going on those courses that gave me the self worth...to realise I have got something to give,” he said.

“Just because I’ve had surgery and I’ve lost my business I don’t have to sit on my backside doing nothing and feeling depressed for the rest of my life. You know, if you want something, go out there and get it. And basically, that’s what I did.”

### 3.2 Attractions of Working for the NHS

Although some participants were without question attracted to the to the Skills Passport by the prospect of **working for a caring organisation**, other features of the health service appealed too, including **stability**, **income** and the **opportunity for further development**.

Stability was seen as an important part of NHS employment in a recessionary economy. “It’s like a proper career,” one male participant with a background in construction said, “I mean, rather than coming on a day by day basis, hoping you’re going to get work...this is a secure job.” Another interviewee echoed this feeling: “But we’re in a secure job for the rest of our lives now,” she said.

A common theme of **obtaining employment** ran through a number of participants’ views of the Pilot, irrespective of the nature of the work. One male participant summarised this. “We’re all here to get a job,” he said. Even so, a strong theme of a desire for self-improvement emerged throughout the interviews. “Yes, I’d like to progress and take more exams,” one male participant said, “do some more training.”

Even so, **caring for people** is the strongest single reason participants gave for wanting to join the health service.

*“If I can put a smile on someone’s face I’ll be putting something back into the community. Most people go into hospital at some stage in their life...that’s why I want to work for the NHS, to put something back.”*  
**Skills Passport participant**

It is worth noting that one or two people we interviewed were positive about the prospect of working for a caring organisation, but had not particularly thought of their work as being that. “I hadn’t thought about that. I’ve never viewed what I was doing as being geared around a caring profession,” one interviewee said.

#### How people heard of the skills passport pilot

The majority of participants we spoke to heard of the Skills Passport pilot through their course tutors, with only a small number receiving referrals from Job Centre Plus or other agencies,

such as the Shaw Trust. The programme's leaflets did, however, seem to get through to prospective candidates.

### 3.3 Impact of the Programme

#### Encouragement for further study

One of the clearest indicators of the Skills Passport's impact on its participants was the extent to which it encouraged people to aspire to further study, some thing that had attracted many to the programme in the first place. This desire was shared evenly across both cohorts.

*"I haven't got any A-levels, I got my GCSEs but didn't do A-levels, and it was something I wanted to do. I got a conditional place at Sheffield University...so for me it's now the opportunity to go back and do those while still being able to look after the family and run a home, and go to work."*

**Skills Passport participant**

#### Preparation for interviews

The Skills Passport guarantees its participants an interview, and both preparation for interviews and the interviews themselves featured prominently in our discussions. Participants' feelings about their interviews varied slightly between the first and third cohorts.

There was some suggestion amongst members of the first cohort that the interviews could have been administered slightly better, particularly when it came to the interviewers' familiarity with the interviewees as individuals, and some feeling of being 'unprepared' for the interview itself, although the majority view was that preparation was adequate.

*"You know, towards our interviews, we were training to prepare for the interview, so we didn't walk in totally intimidated. I think we were prepared. I think we were trained really well."*

**Skills Passport participant**

One participant felt that her **childcare constraints** had not been responded to properly, and recalled how she had sent an e-mail explaining that she could not attend, which had received no response. One tutor explained that: "The initial plan was that the interview would take place this week, and they've been brought forward, which has caused some [complication]."

It seems that by the time the third cohort had reached the interview stage of their programme, these difficulties had receded, and all participants felt relaxed about the interview process.

*"I had one interview, only one, and it was amazing, I felt really comfortable, it didn't feel like an interview, actually. They were really, really friendly, smiling,"*

**Skills Passport participant**

#### Perceptions of the National Health Service as an employer

In general, the Skills Passport's participants expressed **positive impressions** of the **NHS** as an employer or potential employer, and mostly agreed that they would prefer employment in the NHS to a higher-paid alternative outside it. The stability of working for the health service featured prominently as a reason for this.

Where dissenting views were held, they tended to reflect the fact that some participants had been recently made redundant, and had **financial liabilities** that reflected higher paid employment in the past. One female participant summed this up: "I want to work for them more than ever now, but it's financial for me, to be totally honest, if a much better paid job were to come up I would probably have to go for it, purely because, you know, next month I could lose my house," she said.

Participants believed their experiences on the Skills Passport pilot had been so good that **their time had been well-spent** even if no job materialised at the end. "...for me even if I didn't end up with a job at the end of it, I'd be disappointed, but it would still be a positive

experience because I've learned things that I would never have learned before," one female participant said, "I've had the opportunity to go into the NHS and see what's available, and think 'You know what, actually, no, it's not for me.' There's nothing wrong with saying 'No' at the end of it."

Participants focused on the **friendliness** of the NHS as a working environment: "Throughout the NHS everyone's friendly and open, aren't they?" one male participant said. A female participant agreed. "I've found that, I've found that," she said, "And when I was sat on that chair outside room waiting for [my interview] and people were passing me I noticed that if I smiled at them they'd smile at me. If I smiled at them, nine out of ten would smile back."

### Anticipation of employment

Most members of the Group had recent experience of employment or other day-time activity, such as education, and perhaps because of this participants did not express any major concerns about the prospects of starting a job. Some did discuss the fact that the hospital was larger and more complex than other workplaces they were used to, and that it could take a little time to get used to.

There was, however, some feeling that the **sense of community** that had developed during the pilot would be missed, a feeling that came out most strongly amongst those members of the group who had worked for the same employer before being made redundant at the end of 2008.

Some participants were concerned, although not seriously, that their **Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)** check might uncover adolescent misbehaviour. Participants reported, though, that this process had been explained to them carefully.

### Case Study: Jane

Jane came to the Skills Passport programme after 16 years' employment with the same private sector employer, where she worked her way up from telesales to management. Despite this experience, Jane does not have the paper qualifications to prove her competencies. "All I've got really is experience from over twenty five years of working," she said. "It wasn't that I wasn't trying hard at school, it's just that when I was put in an environment of exams, I went to pot."

Finding that her experience had little impact compared to formal qualifications, Jane has thrown herself into training and development. "I've attended college, I've recently got my level two in English, and my level one in Maths," she said, "I've also an NCFE level two in Psychology, a level two in Dementia, and also a level three in Criminology. So I've got a lot of things on the go at the moment!"

Although the NHS does not really pay her enough to meet her family's financial needs, she feels that the programme saved her. "On the Friday the nineteenth of December, that was the day I left my job after nearly sixteen years, and then three days after, three working days, on the Wednesday, which was Christmas Eve, the day I got married, so obviously it ruined what should have been the happiest day of my life," she recalled.

Jane is enjoying her present job, but needs to be able to progress within the service. "At the moment, we've just started in Ophthalmology, which is a good role," she said, "it's like organised chaos, I'm enjoying that, but financially it's not something that I can continue to do, as I'm the main breadwinner, so I've started doing my studying.

"I've also got an interview with St Luke's as a bereavement counsellor, on a voluntary basis, so hopefully, I want to progress within the NHS...looking forward to some form of counselling, or in that direction, maybe dementia."

Jane has always wanted to move into some form of counselling, but before losing her job never had the incentive to give it a real try. "Because I was in a job that I thought I would be in

until the day I retired...I never bothered," she said, "I suspect losing my job has pushed me into all the avenues that I've thought of doing but never ventured into."  
Does Jane think she'll stay with the NHS? "Will I stay? It depends how long it takes to progress to a better paid role, because financially I can't afford to live on the salary that we're being paid. I would like to stay, like I said, for the stability and for the experience and to move round, but I need to move up. I need to be able to move up to stay there."

### Financial challenges of starting work

Participants were aware of the fact that their journey in the NHS would be starting at a comparatively low salary, something that emerged as a theme more clearly with the first cohort than the third. "The money in the NHS is just not great," one woman in the first cohort said, "and to be there for three years and get to the top of our band, which is still not great, you can understand why people will come out of the NHS and go for a better paid role."

Another member of the first cohort admitted that she "did sneak on the internet last night and have a look for some more jobs," adding, though, that "I would get into a better position, coming on the course."

There was clear evidence these participants' views about the salary levels within the NHS were the product of their own employment history, and their consequent financial commitments and expectations.

*"I'm fortunate in the sense that I went back to work part-time [after maternity leave], so I'm used to a lot less wage than I ever were before I had the kids, and now for three months I've been on Job Seeker's Allowance, and we are surviving. So I know anything above fifty pounds a week I get I can live on...so I think it just depends what your expectations are."*

**Skills Passport participant**

## 3.4 The Skills Passport Initiative Itself

### Interviews

The experience of having **interviews in practice** was useful to participants, some of whom had not had an interview for years, if at all.

Others felt that the interviews **taught them things** about the NHS that they did not know, something reported by one woman who had been for an interview in Catering. "I never knew it was such a big industrial, it's industrial catering," she said.

*"I've never had an interview in my life, I've never had a CV, I've never had anything, so me going for a job...the experience of going and having an interview, it was worth going for that job just for the interview, to get the experience."*

**Skills Passport participant**

### Job opportunities

Participants complained that **competition for jobs was stiff**. "There was a lot of competition going on, I thought that was unfair," one man in the first cohort said. "Get more jobs available," another, female, participant said.

The people we interviewed also felt that the **range of jobs offered might have been wider**. The interviews and jobs offered through the Skills Passport are centred, as had always been the programme's intention, on the Northern General Hospital, but some participants did discuss opportunities at the Royal Hallamshire. There was a suggestion that participants would like to see other sites included. Jessops Wing (which is in fact part of the Royal Hallamshire), Western Park and the Charles Clifford Dental Hospital were all mentioned.

Others discussed the possibility of using the **internet** to source more opportunities. All, however, were positive about the way in which a guaranteed interview was built into the Skills Passport pilot.

*"I think out of all these ten a penny courses, this one will actually give you a chance. If you want a job, you're serious about a job, this one will give you that chance. But you've got to make the job. You've got to make the grade."*

**Skills Passport participant**

## **Flexibility**

Participants also felt there was the potential to develop more **part-time opportunities** for successful Skills Passport graduates, particularly for those with childcare responsibilities, disabilities or long term health issues, referring to one former group member who had Crohn's Disease but was unable to find a suitable appointment. "She ended up coming out of here with nothing," one of them said.

## **Accreditation**

Not all the interviewees we spoke with were familiar with the accreditation of the Skills Passport or with the National Open College Network (NOCN). Overall awareness of the reasons for, and usefulness of, accreditation were low, although there was an understanding that the qualification would be useful in terms of gaining employment.

During the course of the evaluation, we gathered the impression that the second five week block of training leading to NOCN level 2 had a **less clear purpose** for participants than the first, and that some found it tiresome, being centred, as it was, on gathering evidence.

The course tutor felt this was part of the discovery of the Pilot, and certainly students on the third cohort were more positive, although it should be reported that they had only completed two days of the second part when we interviewed them. "The second bit is covering just some of the subjects so that they've got evidence, because you've got three units at level two to cover in the second five weeks, and get the mandatory training," the course tutor explained, "so there's a heck of a lot to cover."

One or two participants with extensive work experience but few or no formal qualifications favoured some form of accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL).

*"Twenty four years worth of experience and rise from nothing to management, has got to stand for something. So I just don't understand how somebody can say 'Unless you've got two A-levels you're not competent enough to be in charge of appointments.' It's rubbish."*

**Skills Passport participant**

## **Case Study: Sean**

Sean had experienced lengthy periods of unemployment following a debilitating industrial injury before his girlfriend's mother introduced him to the Skills Passport programme. "She works at the University, and all she said is 'Have you had a look at this leaflet?' I said, 'Why, does it matter?' and she says 'Have a look at it.'

"I look at the leaflet, and it's like ten a penny, I've been on them before and didn't think much of it, so made the initial call, went for an interview at the College. It was such a laugh, really, it was a really good laugh."

Although Sean wanted a job in Bulk Stores, there were no interviews available. After an interview with Catering, he was interviewed by Domestic. "I went for the interview for it, and they said I've got the job if I want it," he said. "You can't imagine the euphoria. It was utter euphoria."

The Skills Passport had developed the skills Sean needed to get his appointment, some of which he felt were already there, but he needed help to recognise them as such. "I've got interactive skills, customer service skills. I've got quite a few others, really.

"It's like knowledge that you'd already had but they've just developed it into something that you now know rather than being unseen," he said.

For someone like Sean, who had always felt the NHS would be too specialist for him, the Skills Passport programme has been a revelation. "I would never have chosen the NHS as a course because I thought, like many people do, you come into the NHS, you need three years' medical experience," he said, "You don't think about the jobs that are on offer that don't need medical experience. When you get to talk to the course it shows you, why do you need to be a medical expert to be a porter, or to work in the Laundry, or work in Domestics, or to work in Catering?"

"You don't realise that these jobs are available in the NHS...you don't expect it to be an amazing career opportunity, as it is."

Sean has little doubt he will stay with the health service. "They've given me a chance, so why shouldn't I spend the rest of my life giving it back?" he said.

### **Barriers to entry on the course**

As part of this evaluation we wanted to ask the people we were interviewing how easy it was to **apply for their place** on the Skills Passport, and which lessons the programme's organising team can learn from this. But we also wanted to explore whether prospective candidates for the Skills Passport felt there were barriers between themselves and even applying for a place on the scheme.

The only substantial barriers that impacted personally on the participants we spoke with were the **English** and **Maths** entry requirements. There was genuine confusion amongst participants in the first cohort over whether the English and Maths requirements had been advertised or not, with some people feeling they had discovered about them comparatively late in the application process.

Other participants complained that they did not know enough about the programme's work areas before they started, and suggested that some form of **open day system** might be an advantage, something that the programme team has now implemented.

Beyond entry qualifications and open days, the barriers participants discussed were those that faced harder to reach groups, such as the long term unemployed and people with learning difficulties.

*"You've got to get to them, because there's a lot of long term unemployed. There's a lot of people with depression, there's a lot of people with learning difficulties, some people can't even spell their own name never mind fill a form in, you've got to get out to those people with learning problems."*

**Skills Passport participant**

Members of the third cohort also felt the programme could be **advertised more widely**. "It needs to be more advertised," one female participant said.

A male participant in the same group felt more could be done to recruit not from hard to reach groups, but from the **mainstream labour market**. "It should be advertised, there's things like the *Metro* paper you get on buses," he said, "because I've spoken to a lot of people who have just got part time jobs, and I tell them about this course, they say they'd love to do it."

Participants also felt more could be done to advertise the programme through **Job Centre Plus**. "Well the Job Centre should have it," one woman said, "there should be more leaflets around the Job Centre because they've got notice boards now, haven't they."

"They haven't got any posters up or anything like that," another member of the group agreed.

## Entry requirements – commitment

From many points of view, the participants we spoke with felt that **qualifications were a poor indicator** of someone's suitability to enter the programme, and that commitment was a much fairer indicator, albeit difficult to measure.

*"It seems a bit unfair if you've got somebody who's not committed to it who takes up a place that somebody else could use."*  
**Skills Passport participant**

But how could this commitment be measured? "By arriving on time. Doing the homework," one participant suggested.

People's concerns about commitment seemed to be driven by the possibility of **uncommitted candidates filling places** that more committed applicants might have taken up. Some participants did suggest that a form of referencing might be used to identify suitable candidates for the programme. A reference system would not necessarily only be available to people with a recent employment history. "If it's people coming out of school or college, perhaps a reference from their school or tutor, or evidence from their attendance records," one woman said, "and if people have perhaps been out of work for a period of time, just a personal reference from somebody who could vouch for them."

"It seems so unfair that people who are committed might not get a chance to do it," another participant said.

## Application process

All participants on both groups we spoke with agreed the **application process was easy**. "We got an appointment to see her on the Monday," one female participant remembered, "She said 'Can you bring your things in with you, like the copies of your certificates if you've got them?' We took all sorts, we took our national insurance numbers, driving licence...we just took everything with us. She said, 'Right, great, OK, you start next Tuesday.' That was it."

### Case Study: Tom

Tom left home two years ago, but shortly after was forced by circumstances to move back, which he would like to change. "I want to move back out again, to, you know, your own personal space," he said.

As Tom became increasingly despondent about finding a job, his English tutor at college put him forward to the Skills Passport programme. "And then somebody got in contact with me, and I started doing a five week course."

The stability of the NHS was attractive to Tom, particularly in a recessionary economy. "It's a career, really. Originally I wanted to do portering, but didn't get it because somebody else got it," he said, "but then there was another opportunity in laundry, and I took that opportunity and got that job instead."

"But I think it's a good step in the NHS, because, particularly in this kind of economic situation, it's a good thing to get involved with."

Tom would like to improve his grades, and perhaps study to be a counsellor. He feels that the Skills Passport has helped him move in this direction. "It's definitely helped me with my confidence and stuff," he said, "because I had a few self-confidence issues, because I've been in and out of jobs all the time, and I'm just sick of messing around now."

"I'm twenty three years old, and I think I need to get out of the routine of going out and getting drunk or whatever, and having fun. I need to get my head down."

## Job Centre Plus

Most of the people we spoke with had strong feelings about Job centre Plus, some positive, others less so. People who went through the first cohort of the Skills Passport were generally speaking unhappier with the role that Job Centre Plus played in their journey to the programme than those in the third cohort. There was some evidence that the problems experienced by the earlier group had been mostly ironed out by the time the third cohort were recruited.

The greatest cause for concern was **a lack of awareness** amongst JCP's staff about the programme, or the fact that entry to it did not mean participants would have to lose benefits. "When I went to the Job Centre to sign on they said 'What are you doing?'" one woman told us, "and I told them I was looking at this course. They didn't know anything about it."<sup>11</sup>

The majority of the participants we spoke to from the first cohort had **negative experiences** of Job Centre Plus, with only a minority of recently redundant individuals feeling that JCP had been supportive and helpful. The exceptions tended to be people who had recently been made redundant, where there was almost a suggestion of a two-tier system operating. One participant described how she had been referred to the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) even though claimants are supposed to be unemployed for thirteen weeks or more before this happens. "What they're trying to do is get the people that have come out of employment quite recently due to the credit crunch, get them back into work as soon as possible," she said.

## Areas of the Skills Passport pilot that participants felt didn't work so well

Participants felt that overall most areas of the programme had worked well, and that there was **little room for improvement**. There were, however, some minor criticisms of specific areas. These were, in no particular order: lack of advance information for interviews, lack of part-time or flexible or part-time options for people with childcare responsibilities, and travel expenses.

Criticism about **advance details for interviews** was confined to the experiences of one or two individuals, and seemed to be particularly related to Catering. According to these participants, nobody from Catering came in to talk to students before the interviews, and as neither of the interviewees in question had a catering background, they felt out of their depth when questioned during their interviews. "We were walking in blind," one of them told us, "and were getting asked questions about what temperature you should store certain things in...we were just flabbergasted."

In a similar vein, other participants complained that they did not get sufficient notice that some posts could only be full-time, and therefore would be **unsuitable for people with childcare responsibilities**.

*"I built myself up for a position that I wanted to apply for, to find out the day before the interview that they wouldn't consider part-time."  
Skills Passport participant*

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<sup>11</sup> The programme organisers report that a system has since been introduced to ensure that participants' entry to the Skills Passport is now automatically reported back to their JCP advisors, and appropriate advice given about issues such as participation's implications for benefits entitlements.

The greatest single complaint from the first cohort was that **travel expenses** were not being paid, even though they had been assured they would be. “We were told we were going to get bus fares,” one woman said, “and in fact we haven’t got anything.”

One member of the group felt bus fares could cost participants as much as £4 daily, which is a considerable cost for somebody reliant on benefits. Others recalled similar programmes elsewhere where travel costs had been reimbursed promptly. Equally, people who drove to these other schemes were able to claim their petrol costs back, a facility that participants felt did not exist with the Skills Passport.

Administrative difficulties between the Skills Passport and Sheffield City College were cited by interviewees as the cause of the hold on the reimbursement of bus fares. The programme team has reported that these difficulties have now been resolved.

### **Case Study: Jonathan**

Jonathan worked in factories immediately after leaving school, before moving on to construction work, where he did a lot of labouring and semi-skilled work such as bricklaying and ground works for ten years. He found the working conditions unforgiving: “I’ve spent a full summer and winter working on the railways in York...the Railway Museum, well, I spent a full summer working on the railway there, and working in the summer it was way too hot, and in the winter it was terrible,” he said.

One aspect of these working conditions was a tendency to suffer accidents. “I’d be carrying, lifting, fetching stuff, but I was starting to get a lot of injuries, broken fingers, my last one was a compound fracture of my little finger,” he said, “I was off work for two months without pay because I was self-employed, I still have trouble with my finger, and I’ve had other broken bones in the past two or three years.”

Part of the appeal of the Skills Passport was, perhaps predictably, the prospect of a more clement working environment. “It’s a nice, clean environment, it’s safe, you get holiday pay, plus there’s lots of prospects in training, there’s as much training as we want.”

Jonathan found out about the Skills Passport through Job Centre Plus. “I was given a leaflet when I went to the Job centre,” he said, “I had been looking for construction and factory work, and they gave me a leaflet that said ‘Would you consider going into a another trade?’

“Because I’d been out of work for so long I said ‘Yes.’ I phoned it up and it was all under way, within a couple of weeks I’d started.”

The skills Jonathan picked up from the programme were particularly helpful with his interview. “A lot of the customer based skills, learning how to talk to people and confidence with your interview,” he said, “I was really confident in the interview whereas before I wouldn’t have been very confident.”

Jonathan has successfully been employed in Bulk Stores, a role he said he “didn’t even know existed, the job, but I’ve had a look at it and it looks OK.”

The thing that most surprised Jonathan when he began the Skills Passport was the sheer size of the health service. “I didn’t realise how big it was,” he said, “I mean, I was always told there were about thirteen thousand people working for the NHS in Sheffield. Now, if they’d asked me to guess, I probably would have said about half that number.”

### **Areas of the Skills Passport pilot that participants felt worked well**

There is no question that the participants we spoke to from both the first and third cohorts felt there were more areas of the programme that worked well than ones that did not work well.

Participants identified the **Friday sessions**, which covered stress management, equality and diversity, confidentiality, communication and customer service as being especially exciting.

**Interview Skills training** was particularly helpful to the people we spoke with, and prepared them to mention all the issues that would gain them points in the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals scoring system.

*“She went ‘Have you had a few interviews?’ and I went ‘No, this is my first one.’ ‘I don’t believe you,’ she said.”*

**Skills Passport participant**

Participants felt that the amount of training they received was about right, and that they could not have covered more than they did. “It would be scary, if they included more training,” one woman felt, “you’d probably be a little bit overwhelmed.”

The **group work** in the Skills Passport received particular praise. People felt it ‘took them out of their comfort zone’, which was a good thing. “It was fun,” one woman said. Both the first and third cohorts had a mixed age range, which group members also felt worked well, and added to the powerful sense of team spirit that existed in both cohorts.

*“We’re not all young, we’re not all old, we’re not all middle aged. We’re all different.”*

**Skills Passport participant**

Participants also felt that the **group sizes** worked well, although feelings varied over whether a smaller group might have improved group sessions even further. Some people felt that, as students had dropped off the scheme, the group dynamic had not improved at all, although others did feel that smaller groups were more personal. The group size was initially set at 20.

Members of the cohorts we spoke with were positive about the **levels of support** they received from their course tutors and the programme’s administrators during the Skills Passport. Indeed, many of the difficulties experienced by some individuals with Job Centre Plus were resolved through the intervention of the administrator, and participants spoke highly of the flexibility and attentiveness of the programme’s staff at all times.

Participants were complimentary about both of their course tutors, and felt their skills sets were well balanced.

#### **Case Study: Edjna**

For Edjna, who hadn’t worked since arriving in the UK from her native Brazil, the concept of training to seek work was alien. “I didn’t know what to do. I was completely lost, so just some people gave me some advice,” she remembered, “like my GP, told me, actually, he lead me, you know, what I could do, for my future, first of all, to work in this country you need to have certificate.”

Following her GP’s advice, Edjna signed up as a full-time student at Castle College in Sheffield, and it was there that she was given a leaflet about the Skills Passport programme.

Edjna found unemployment difficult to cope with. “I needed a job,” she said, “and I wanted to work because I’m used to work since I’m fifteen years old. And for me, staying all this time without a job was just killing me.”

Like some of her co-participants, Edjna feels the Skills Passport has made her appreciate the skills she already possesses. “I didn’t know I had these already, they’d show me,” she said, “they just told me I had these skills, and I was surprised because I didn’t know much people here, how come I have these skills, team work skills, communication, how to express myself?”

Edjna would like to work towards forensic science as a way of supporting herself and her son. “I want to build a career in the Trust, that’s my main point, and hopefully I will be successful.”

She already has a place on a Science Access course, and wants to study forensic science at Sheffield Hallam University.

The Skills Passport team made learning a pleasure for Edjna. "Since the first lesson, the first day, I just want to carry on, carry on, carry on, you know, more and more, just like that. It's very exciting."

### Things that might have been left out of the course

In all the group and individual interviews we conducted throughout this evaluation we could not identify any part of the Skills Passport programme that its participants would have preferred left out. This surprised us, in that it might be reasonably expected that a pilot programme by its very nature will include some curriculum elements that are not the right ones, even if, as in this case, the initiative overall has been a success.

There was perhaps a feeling of frustration about the paperwork involved in the **NOCN evidence requirements** during the second five-week phase of the programme, something that was particularly evident with the first cohort we worked with. It seemed to us that the third cohort had a clearer understanding of the vocational importance of the programme's accreditation, which reflected both the efforts of the course tutors and the socio-economic profiles of the two groups. Putting the issue of accreditation to one side, there was a clearly-stated understanding amongst students in both groups of the relevance of the programme's content to their future careers in the NHS.

### Case Study: Kay

Kay had recently been made redundant before starting on the Skills Passport, an experience she found traumatic. "I started off in telesales, and I worked my way up to being office supervisor. I did that for eight years, then I had a baby, went off on maternity leave, came back to the same role, luckily, and I just cut my hours to thirty hours.

"Then I got made redundant, which was a real blow. I never want to be in that position again."

Most of the available admin roles for Kay were full-time, which might have conflicted with her childcare responsibilities. However, her daughter's grandparents, who look after her during the day, persuaded Kay to go for a full-time post anyway. "I went for it, and got the job," she said, "so the only downfall for me is obviously I'm leaving my daughter more, which I didn't particularly want to do, but I'm going to stick the six months period out, initially, see how I go with it, and hopefully with a view that my supervisor will then drop my hours again."

Kay had wanted to work in a hospital since leaving school, so feels that in some ways her redundancy has forced her to follow a career path she had always wanted. "I would have been there until I retired," she said of her former job, "so it has given me the push, by being made redundant, to do something that I've always wanted to do."

Although she sees herself as a fairly confident person, Kay hopes that her new job will make her more confident still. "I don't think I'm as confident as I'd like to be," she said, "because obviously you're dealing with a wider range of people...so hopefully it will bring out more confidence in me."

Kay is determined to stay within the NHS. "Obviously, if I didn't, after six months, like it then I wouldn't just leave. I'd explore other avenues within the NHS, because, like I say, I do want the stability."

## Things that might have been included in the programme, but weren't

There was a similar feeling amongst participants when it came to discussing areas of the course that might have included additional or expanded elements. In both cohorts this reflected a powerful understanding of the programme as a 'necessary step' on their journey to a job in the NHS. So long as the programme was leading them successfully towards that goal, which for the majority of participants it was, then in their view it was working properly, and should not be changed.

There was a feeling that some participants would have preferred to explore the **core modules** of the programme in more detail, to 'delve a little more...instead of just going around the outskirts of things,' as one participant put it. However, this was balanced against a feeling that ten weeks was really a short time for a programme to prepare its participants for working in the NHS, and that that was an attractive aspect of the Skills Passport.

*"I don't think that ten weeks of training to get a job in the NHS is bad, I think that is bloody good, to be honest with you, it's bloody good."*  
**Skills Passport participant**

One area that people did feel might be looked at was a greater element of what might be described as greater **pastoral guidance**, particularly around advice on the sources of financial support that might be available.

Some participants felt that they had not received the guidance that they should have received from Job Centre Plus, citing in particular a discretionary fund of up to £300 per person that can be used to purchase new clothes and pay travel expenses for interviews. Although some people had found out about this from their benefits advisors, there was still a feeling that the Skills Passport might have been able to signpost them more than it did.

## Expectations

We had asked participants whether they had received enough literature and information about the Skills Passport before they started, but we also wanted to ask them whether the Passport had in practice lived up to their expectations.

What quickly became clear was that few of the participants we spoke to had really known what to expect before they began, other than it was for the NHS, and that an interview was guaranteed.

Some people's only real experience of education lay in their distant pasts, at school, and they understandably highlighted the differences between the Skills Passport and secondary education.

*"I wasn't expecting to do...equality and diversity and stress management, all these things that I've never even touched on before."*  
**Skills Passport participant**

For others, their expectation had been for something more 'hands on,' perhaps directly focused on the areas of work they were likely to do for the NHS at the end of the Skills passport.

### Case Study: Rachel

Rachel worked in a range of dead-end jobs before discovering the Skills Passport, including hairdressing, factories, B&Q, petrol stations and nursing homes. As a single mother of four children, she wants a better life, both for her kids and for herself. "There's a lot of career moves in the NHS," she said, "Obviously you can really move up and do support work."

She found out about the Skills Passport scheme through a friend, who brought her a leaflet. Having worked in nursing homes in the past, Rachel was attracted to the caring aspect of the work, and realised that training is essential these days. "Obviously, now you've got to have training to do care work. When I was sixteen you didn't really have to, you could leave one job and get into another, and there weren't all those background checks."

Through the Skills Passport, Rachel has secured a job in Domestics. "It's just Domestics, cleaning and orderly, like serving patients cups of tea and things like that...it's not the best of jobs, but it's a start," she said.

Rachel enjoys meeting people, something that also attracted her to the health service. "The main job I did enjoy was the B&Q, because I enjoy meeting people as well. And obviously, in the NHS you're going to meet all different people, all kinds."

Although working in Domestics is a start, Rachel has ambitious career plans. "I hope to be, in five years, a support worker...in ten years to work in the Mortuary, and do something along those lines," she said, "I might sound a bit freaky, but it's just amazing how they find things out."

Rachel knows she will have to study Forensic Science to make this a reality, but the Skills Passport has made her appreciate the value of qualifications. "You can use your Certificate for other things as well, you know, obviously to say that we've done this course, because it does do a lot of things, like team building, communications, customer service skills."

Progression within the NHS will bring material improvement to Rachel as well. "I want to buy a house, I want to do all of that, prove to my kids there's more to life than what I've done for the last thirteen years. Because I've just brought kids up, basically. And that's it."

But the main reward for Rachel is to help people. "I enjoy looking after people, I get satisfaction at the end of the day, to know that I've helped somebody...and I enjoy care work, and I enjoy helping people really," she said, "It's something I intend to do until I retire."

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Development

### 4.1 What Makes the Skills Passport Work?

#### Responding to the needs of local communities

It is clear that the Skills passport pilot programme at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust was a response to the problems of long-term unemployment and economic deprivation in Sheffield, and as such it has been driven by the Trust's **Corporate Social Responsibility** agenda as much as by the material advantages of the Passport programme as an effective recruitment mechanism. This becomes even more pronounced if the Skills Passport's early origins are considered, which were centred on the Burngreave and Fir Vale areas of North and East Sheffield in the 'walk to work catchment of the Northern General Hospital, something that encompasses both economic regeneration and environmental responsibility.

The sense of social responsibility that runs through the Skills Passport pilot also manifests itself through the programme's participants, who frequently talked about advertising the initiative more widely, particularly with respect to hard-to-reach groups such as people with learning difficulties or the long-term unemployed. Although this does not undermine in any sense the role of the Skills passport as a recruitment mechanism for the NHS Foundation Trust that can be justified in 'conventional' terms (such as recruitment and training costs, quality of recruits and length of retention), it is a fact that there is a powerful commonality and sense of community that runs through the pilot as a whole, with many references to 'team spirit' and a close and appreciative relationship between participants and course tutors and administrators.

The Skills Passport pilot has also shown itself to be sufficiently flexible to respond to **changing economic factors**. Although the pilot never solely targeted the long-term unemployed, the challenges of working towards employability with people who have experienced the economic and health and wellbeing impacts of deprivation lie at its very heart. Even so, as Sheffield's economy suffered in line with other major conurbations through the recession of 2009, the Skills Passport pilot showed itself to be as relevant for people with good employment histories as it is for others with longer histories of economic inactivity.

#### Relationships with local communities

Community partnerships have clearly been central to much of the early development of the Skills Passport pilot, which was the subject of discussions between the Trust and Burngreave New Deal for Communities before the development of the pilot itself.

Much of Burngreave falls within the Northern General's walk to work catchment, and as an area with high levels of economic deprivation and in many cases two or even three generations of worklessness, it formed an ideal target for the Skills Passport as part of the Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust's Corporate Social Responsibility agenda.

Although the demands of the Skills Passport in terms of recruits outstripped its supply from Burngreave, and the decision was taken to broaden the catchment to include most of northern Sheffield, the relationship between the programme and its local communities remains an important one. This now expresses itself through a 'health compact' which covers much of northern Sheffield, including new areas such as Southey, Owlerton and others as well as Burngreave.

#### Integrating jobs and training

There is considerable evidence running through this evaluation that one of the main attractions of the Skills Passport is the way it builds work experience and a real chance of a job into its curriculum. From some points of view, the main beneficiary from this is the Trust itself, which gains through reduced recruitment and training costs, and through increased retention rates. The most pronounced impact, however, is on the participants themselves,

who expressed a feeling of 'belonging' and community, a by-product of the reality of the programme's offering. In fact, anticipation of and preparation for their interviews and work were the strongest features that emerged from the participants' feelings about the pilot overall. Equally, the greatest enthusiasm they expressed for the NOCN units was for those elements, such as interview skills and CVs, that most directly prepared them for their job applications. Participants felt that the inclusion of a guaranteed interview, which they saw as a real chance of getting a job, set the Skills Passport apart from other similar employment programmes.

### **Partnership working**

Successful partnership working forms a cornerstone for the Skills Passport pilot: partnerships between the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and the City Council; partnership with the Work and Skills Board and City Strategy Pathfinder; and lastly and most crucially, partnership with Sheffield City College. The pilot's organisers have brokered other partnerships too, which have been equally critical, including the partnerships developed with the Trust's separate employment providing services, such as the Laundry, Catering and Portering.

There was some suggestion that emerged from the evaluation that partnership working with Job Centre Plus might perhaps be stronger, with a consistent theme that JCP's employment advisors were not as familiar with the programme as they might have been.

Partnerships have been formalised at a senior level in all the organisations involved in making the Skills Passport pilot a success. In the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, that is at Chief Executive Officer level.

### **Impact of the Skills Passport pilot on the HR policies of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust**

The programme's organisers reported that the Skills Passport has resulted in the Trust's HR Department changing its practices as a result of the Pilot, particularly in terms of greater outreach involvement through open days and other promotional activity. This, they felt, made the Trust more accessible for the people of Sheffield. They also reported working closely with HR to match specific job requirements and competencies to the Knowledge and Skills Framework, and to job and person specifications, allowing them to say with a degree of accuracy what the skills requirements are for a job at any given level.

### **Impact on participants' perceptions of the NHS**

The participants we spoke to were, of course, members of Sheffield's public as well as beneficiaries of an innovative employability pilot. From this perspective the way that their experiences on the pilot shaped their views of the NHS is interesting.

The biggest surprise for participants was the sheer size of the NHS in Sheffield. People expressed a variety of responses to this, including an element of initially being bewildered, and of amazement at the range of job types and activities that are available.

Although working for a caring organisation was a powerful attractant for many people, some had not really thought of the scheme as leading to this until they had actually started on it.

Equally, another theme that emerged clearly was people's surprise at the further development opportunities that working for the NHS will bring, with many participants having already formulated plans for further learning and career progression. The stability of working for the NHS also appealed.

Participants are aware that entry level employment in the NHS is comparatively low-paid, something that is not a deterrent, and for most is countered by the opportunities for further study and career progression. There will always be a chance of losing a small number of participants to more highly paid jobs outside the scheme, something particularly likely where individuals have been accustomed to higher levels of income in the recent past.

## **Publicity for the programme**

Any need for wider level of publicity for the Skills Passport pilot must be balanced against the currently high level of management of the quality of entrants onto the scheme. However, people are currently recruited primarily through their course tutors at Sheffield City College, with only a small number of applicants discovering the Skills Passport through other means, such as Job Centre Plus, the Shaw Trust or generally distributed leaflets. Consideration might be given to using newspaper or other local media advertising (one participant suggested the *Metro*). Wider publicity for the pilot might also, of course, benefit the Trust and disseminate the Skills Passport's successes more widely too.

## **The entry gateway for the Skills Passport**

It is impossible to separate the success of the Skills Passport entirely from the high quality of its entrants, as one of its features has been the skilful way in which the programme's organisers have maintained a consistency in the standards of entry qualification required. In part this is a natural outcome of the English and Maths requirements, which were discussed at length by the participants themselves. It also, however, reflects a personalised approach by the programme's administrator, who put considerable effort into following up enquiries on an individual basis, and into working with applicants to ensure their suitability as well as practical issues, such as intervention with Job Centre Plus.

One of the features of this high level of management of entry onto the pilot is the equally high level of commitment felt by participants to their place, and to the opportunities it will bring them.

## **Developing social networks through the Skills Passport**

Another feature of the Skill Passport is the powerful interaction between participants, and the sense of 'team' that has developed within the separate cohorts. People discussed frankly the fact that they would miss these social networks once they started work, and spoke particularly highly of the group sessions for precisely this reason, making the point themselves that smaller groups maintained greater intimacy, which they saw as important.

## **The training itself**

Participants were consistently complimentary about both the quality and quantity of training they received through their two five-week blocks, complaining if anything that there might have been more of it, and perhaps that it might have explored some subject areas in greater depth.

The units that most impressed were those that focused clearly on the process of interview and application, perhaps reflecting the fact that the main attractant for most was the prospect of getting a job. Interview skills and CVs are mentioned repeatedly from this perspective.

People were impressed and even surprised by the range of skills that were needed for them to be prepared for employment at the Trust, citing equality and diversity and customer service as examples. We detected at least some frustration with the evidence requirements for the NOCN Certificate during the second five weeks of the pilot, and perhaps some confusion over exactly why the qualification was important to them, although everyone we spoke to was clear that both the Trust and other potential employers would want evidence of qualification, even if it was not clear why.

Participants did not want to see any substantial changes in the Skills Passport itself, other than perhaps some form of more general guidance in terms of the resources available to support them through the processes of completing the course and successfully taking an interview. This was more a reflection of the fact that some participants felt their advisors at Job Centre Plus were not doing this particularly effectively, either in terms of signposting them

to financial resources, nor in terms of understanding how their subscription to the programme might affect their benefits' entitlement.

The high quality of the courses tutors came through as an important feature of the training, both from the perspective of the learning itself, and additionally as catalysts for the development of the team and group spirit that participants talked about so highly.

### **Employment through the Skills Passport**

Participants did feel that more advance information about specific job opportunities would be helpful, especially details of any restrictions on part time or flexible working, something particularly important for people with childcare or other caring responsibilities. The CRB checks necessary for some areas of working did not cause any serious concerns.

## **4.2 Recommendations for Future Development**

*Although this evaluation has explored the Skills Passport pilot from a number of perspectives, including those of some of its key stakeholders, we are only offering recommendations for future development from the perspective specifically of the participants themselves.*

1. There was a clear feeling that, although some advisors at Job Centre Plus had served their clients' needs very well indeed, others were unfamiliar with the Skills Passport initiative, and were not particularly encouraging to people hoping to gain a place on it. Whilst the strategic agreements with Job Centre Plus are clearly strong, we would nonetheless recommend greater publicity for the Skills Passport amongst JCP's advisers. This could also provide an opportunity to raise also awareness of the financial and other resources available to people who enrol.<sup>12</sup>
2. Greater publicity for the Skills Passport pilot is certainly possible. Participants are discovering about it through word of mouth, or through their course tutors. More general advertising for the course would broaden the range of future applicants, and also disseminate some of its best practice. It might also counter some of the familiarisation issues that emerged around Job Centre Plus.
3. There is a need for clearer advance publicity for the Skills Passport, as few people knew exactly what it was like before enrolling, nor which services within the Trust it would be targeting. Equally, it might be clearer about the fact that it is targeting unemployed people, as a number of participants were under the impression it was a more general recruitment mechanism.
4. Some participants felt they might have known more about employment areas within the Trust before they applied for jobs in them. Although this criticism was aimed specifically at Catering, there was also a more general feeling that there might be Open Days or other activities through which more hands-on understanding of the different opportunities coming up would be beneficial.
5. On a similar note, there was a fairly strong feeling that the service conditions of specific employment opportunities needed to be made clearer in advance. This was particularly the case with part-time options, where participants with childcare responsibilities that made fulltime working difficult felt they discovered that part-time appointments were not possible to specific posts too late in the application process, and we would recommend that this is made clearer from the earliest stage in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> As noted on page 15, the programme organisers report that a system has since been introduced to ensure that participants' entry to the Skills Passport is now automatically reported back to their JCP advisers, and appropriate advice given about issues such as participation's implications for benefits entitlements.

6. There has been some suggestion from the people we've spoken to that the employment opportunities offered through the Skills Passport have been unduly competitive, and that in some cases the comparatively limited scope of the opportunities on offer has proven frustrating. We would recommend that the programme organisers' existing commitment to exploring cross-referring the Skills Passport to parallel programmes in social care and the independent sector be explored fully.

## Appendix 1: Target outcomes and course structure

### The Skills Passport's outcome targets

- Development of a pre employment NHS routeway
- Implementation of a NHS sector Skills Passport in conjunction with the Sheffield College
- A minimum of 20 individuals to have completed the pre employment programme and achieved a skills passport
- A minimum of 20 individuals to have a guaranteed interview
- A minimum of 15 individuals to sustain employment. *Sustained paid employment is classified as being above 16 hours per week and lasting for longer than 26 weeks*
- Tailored support around the key stages when the risk of leaving work is greatest
- Evaluation and lessons learnt of the programme.

### The Skills Passport curriculum

#### Phase one

<p><b>Week 1 – INDUCTION WEEK</b>  Welcome  Housekeeping / Introductions  Ice Breaker  Course Outline/Explanation of course  Hopes and Fears/ Ground rules  Aims and Objectives  Expectations of the Programme  College induction  About the Trust  Jobs in the Trust  Equal opportunities  Key skills  <b>Introduction</b> to Domestic Services</p>	<p><b>Week 2 – DEVELOPING CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS</b>  Communication  Body Language  Telephone Skills  Equal opportunities  Prep for Work  CVs  E-learning Customer Service  Workbook on customer service  How to complete application forms  Job Descriptions  Person specifications  Key skills  <b>Introduction</b> to ophthalmology</p>
<p><b>Week 3 – DEVELOPING GROUP AND TEAMWORK COMMUNICATION SKILLS</b>  Team building – communicating in teams  Time management  Patient experience  Including confidentiality  Key skills</p>	<p><b>Week 4 - PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>  Personal development  Portfolio  Putting portfolio together for NOCN  Work ethics  Key skills</p>
<p><b>Week 5 – PREPARATION FOR WORK</b>  Mock interviews  Presentations  Key skills</p>	

#### Phase two

<p><b>Week 1</b>  Human resources re badges  Site orientation  Working safely  Site orientation  Data protection  Confidentiality  Patient journey  Work area</p>	<p><b>Week 2</b>  Security  Fire lecture  Infection control  Team building  Work area</p>
<p><b>Week 3</b>  Violence and aggression  Moving and handling  Work area</p>	<p><b>Week 4</b>  Portfolio development  Waste management  Put together own portfolio  Work area</p>
<p><b>Week 5</b>  Complete workbook on Customer Service  Student reviews  Work area</p>	

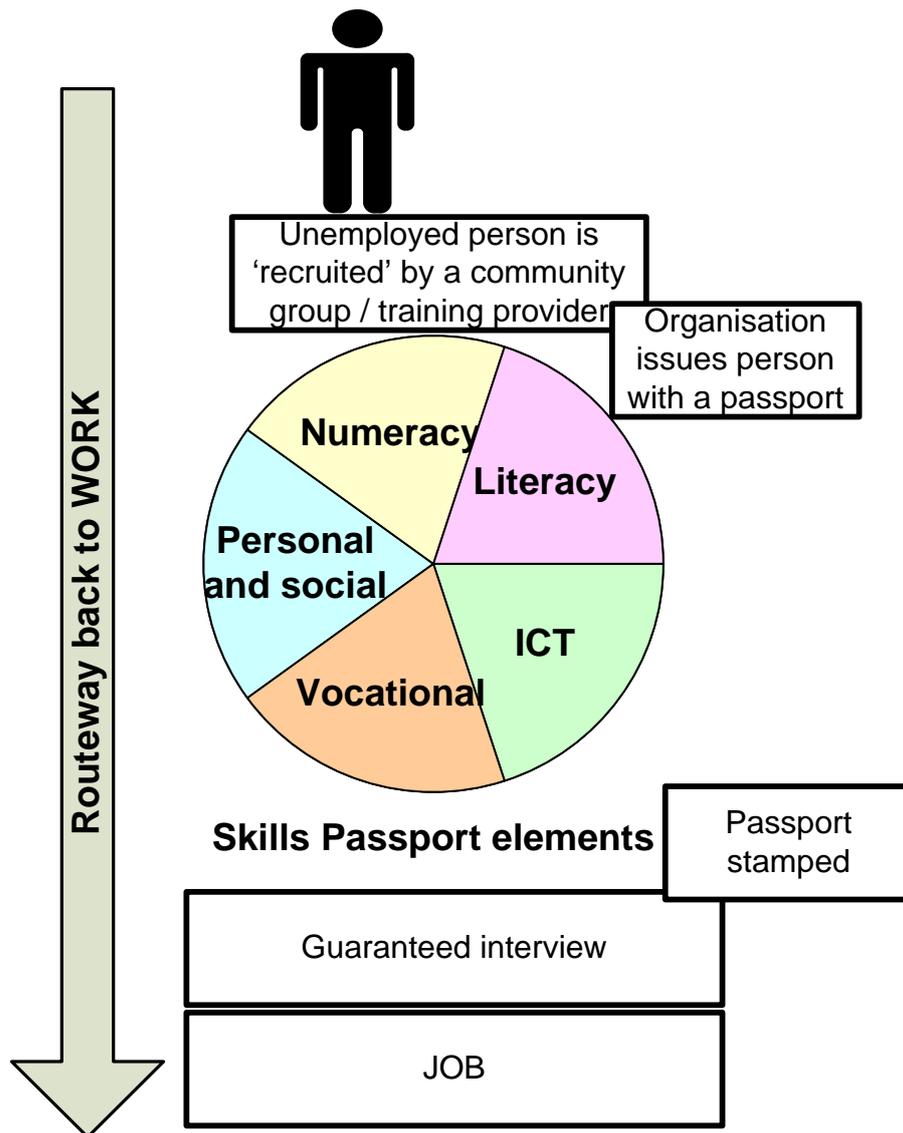


Figure 1. The Skills Passport model.