



Scottish Health Equity
Research Unit

Insights, analysis and action on the socio-economic factors
that shape health

Assessing Scotland's approach to employability from a health inequalities perspective

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May 2026

Summary

This report critically examines the Scottish Government's strategy for employability services, *No One Left Behind* (NOLB). This is the second report in our workstream on Strengthening Policy Implementation, which investigates how major, national strategies are impacting on the socio-economic determinants of health inequalities in Scotland.

Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of NOLB, the report takes a step back to consider its underlying purpose. What problems does NOLB set out to solve – and what are the implications of orienting the policy in this way? Asking these questions allows us to surface foundational assumptions that could otherwise be taken for granted. Ultimately, the aim is to consider what this means for the potential of NOLB to realise its stated vision of creating “an employability system that tackles inequalities in Scotland's labour market”, with a particular focus on the implications for health.(1)

Examining a set of official documents published between 2016 and 2024, we identify two key aspects of NOLB.(2–7) First, NOLB is presented as taking a “person-centred approach” to employability, in which services are tailored to the “needs” and “barriers” of each individual rather than replicating the shortcomings of one-size-fits-all approaches. Second, this approach is seen as requiring institutional coordination, including between different levels of government, between organisations at a local level, and between employability and other services, to ensure that the needs and barriers of individuals are addressed cohesively.

While a person-centred approach is preferable to inflexible, top-down programmes, we find that it also risks neglecting structural factors which do not originate at the level of the individual. This is particularly evidenced by a relative lack of engagement with issues that lie beyond the supply of labour, such as low pay and insecure work. Since these issues are strongly implicated in the occurrence of poor health outcomes, neglecting them could detract from the potential of NOLB to reduce health inequalities.(8)

The coordination agenda is prone to a similar neglect. Although coordination is likewise desirable in and of itself, it is restricted to a narrow set of institutions – namely those involved in the provision of services that affect the labour supply. Contextual factors, including policies that affect the demand for labour or the broader conditions prevailing in the labour market, are less visible in the source material despite being key determinants of work- and health-related outcomes.(9)

The report concludes by suggesting that policy could place greater weight on the structural context that creates the need for employability services in the first place. Among other steps, this could involve linking employability support more clearly with economic development plans and placing a greater emphasis on working with employers to provide high-quality jobs.

Introduction

No One Left Behind (NOLB) was introduced in Scotland in 2019 to consolidate a range of local and national employability schemes into a single, overarching framework. Under this framework, employability services are funded by the Scottish Government but delivered by local authorities. Each authority in turn coordinates a Local Employability Partnership (LEP), comprising a range of public, third sector, and private organisations that have some involvement in the local employability landscape. Although Scottish Government establishes certain strategic principles, LEPs are given the flexibility to design their own services, tailored to the specificities of their own areas. NOLB is the largest stream of funding for employability services provided by central government in Scotland, though a range of other streams still exist.⁽¹⁰⁾

The analysis in this report focuses on a collection of six official documents published between 2016 and 2024 on the subject of NOLB and its precursors (see Annex).^(2–7) These documents variously acknowledge the presence of socio-economic inequalities, the impacts of ill health on work-related outcomes, and the role of policy in addressing these issues. However, they do not explicitly recognise that health inequalities are themselves shaped by socio-economic factors, nor do they position NOLB as a mechanism for reducing them. This does not necessarily mean that NOLB is ineffective at reducing health inequalities; but it does imply that we need to take a step back and examine the purpose of the policy if this outcome is our primary concern.

Drawing on an established approach to policy analysis known as ‘What is the Problem Represented to Be?’, the report interrogates the underlying ‘problems’ that policy purports to solve.⁽¹¹⁾ By surfacing foundational assumptions that would otherwise be taken for granted, this exercise can support a richer discussion on whether the policy could be better positioned to address the socio-economic determinants of health inequalities. Specifically, we asked four questions of the source material, with a particular focus on reducing health inequalities:

1. What problems does NOLB purport to solve and how are these problems represented?
2. What assumptions underlie these representations and what is omitted?
3. What are the effects of representing the problems in these ways?
4. Can the problems be represented differently?

In answering questions, we distinguished between two central themes of NOLB: its commitment to a person-centred approach and its agenda of institutional coordination. The remainder of this report sets out our findings for each of these themes.

Person-centred approach

One of the most prominent phrases used to describe NOLB is ‘person-centred’. Before employability services had been devolved, *Creating a Fairer Scotland* (2016) listed it within the first of six principles that would shape the “Scottish Approach” to employability.(2) The principle, titled “a flexible, tailored, ‘whole person’ approach”, included aspects such as “high quality individual assessment which looks at the life circumstances of individual participants”, and “a personalised service delivered by highly skilled individuals...suited to the needs of the individual”. The principle was carried over into later documents, including the 2024 Strategic Plan, which affirms an aspiration for employability services to “[p]rovide person-centred support which develops and enhances an individual’s skills...and accounts for their personal circumstances.”(7)

The person-centred approach individualises the policy problem

The person-centred approach is framed as addressing the shortcomings of previous programmes, particularly those delivered by the UK Government. At the time that employability services were first being devolved, such programmes had been criticised for attempting to fit the individual to the service rather than the service to the individual, with the result that the most disadvantaged were being left behind and the overall effectiveness of the service was inhibited.(12) This critique has gained new impetus in a context of rising disability and ill health, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2024, the UK Government itself set out plans for a more “personalised” employability service, with the express intention of “mov[ing] away from the current one-size-fits-all approach of Jobcentre Plus”, the UK Government’s main employability agency.(13)

While a person-centred approach may be preferable to a service-centred approach, this is not the only dimension to consider. In particular, an exclusive emphasis on a person-centred solution would carry an implicit assumption that the problem is likewise person-centred.(14) Indeed, throughout the source material, the person-centred approach is presented in terms of the “needs” of individuals, which must be met, and the “barriers” faced by individuals, which must be overcome, if employment is to be secured or improved. A lack of suitable employment among certain individuals is therefore traced to personal or circumstantial characteristics that they possess *as individuals*, even though this attribution is clearly not intended as a matter of blame.

Health and other inequalities in turn come to be defined in terms of these individual-level factors. For example, the 2018 Action Plan refers to “those who require support to overcome health and disability barriers to work”, and “the needs of people who continue to be at risk of death or harm from drugs or alcohol, and for whom traditional services have not proved sufficient to address their complex set of needs”.(3) Accordingly, attending to these needs and barriers is presented as the primary mechanism for tackling inequalities: the 2024 Strategic Plan submits “an approach that respects the individual and offers support to progress into sustainable and fair work of the person’s choosing, at a pace which reflects their needs and capabilities” as the solution to “addressing the inequalities experienced by disabled people”.(7)

This potentially neglects structural factors, detracting from a preventative approach

The danger of individualising the policy problem is that factors operating beyond the level of the individual may be disregarded.(9) Even when individuals experience needs and barriers that

constrain their labour-market activity, those very needs and barriers may be produced by wider, structural factors, which in turn define patterns of inequality. After all, the labour market is governed not only by supply, as given by the workforce, but also by demand, which determines the jobs that are available. The relationship between the two, moreover, is mediated by a range of institutions – including legal frameworks, representative organisations, and market structures – and set within a wider societal context.

A person-centred approach need not preclude a recognition of these structural factors. On the contrary, the literature suggests that effective employability support requires *both* a person-centred approach to identify the specific circumstances individuals experience *and* a structural perspective that situates those circumstances within wider systemic constraints.⁽¹⁵⁾ Without the former, needs and barriers may remain invisible to policy; without the latter, policy may fail to address them effectively. Yet the source material indicates that, in guarding against the pitfalls of previous top-down approaches, the person-centred emphasis of NOLB may have inadvertently tilted the policy towards one side of this balance.

The concept of ‘distance’ from the labour market, which summarises the barriers of individuals in terms of their cumulative magnitude, is instructive.⁽¹⁶⁾ The rationale behind this concept is that “those further [or furthest] from the labour market” – a phrase which is found in five out of six of documents in the source material, with a total of nineteen appearances – require more tailored, intensive support. However, while there is clearly value in recognising that barriers are experienced unequally, a purely individualised framing is susceptible to overlooking the source of these barriers, contributing to the idea that individuals are far from the labour market rather than vice versa. This can in turn obscure the structural inequalities that are at play; indeed, the source material fails to specify which groups face the greatest distance, apparently reserving definition to the level of the individual.

The source material does acknowledge the importance of “external factors” such as “local labour market conditions”, while also alluding to “broader structural barriers to entering the labour market”. However, this is immediately followed by a reiteration of the value of a person-centred approach, which is asserted to be capable of “driv[ing] progress towards tackling labour market inequalities”.⁽⁷⁾ Substantively, structural factors are less central, as demonstrated by the relative lack of attention paid to issues low pay and insecure work: despite references to the Fair Work agenda, there is a much greater focus on whether an individual is in work than there is on the quality of that work. For example, the source material fails to recognise that poor-quality work can have actively harmful consequences for health if it is associated with insecurity, stress, and discrimination – and that this in turn will tend to exacerbate existing inequalities – even if securing a job will yield health benefits in most cases.⁽⁸⁾

This oversight could inhibit a preventative approach to tackling health and other inequalities. For example, NOLB is presented as a key part of meeting the statutory child poverty targets;⁽¹⁷⁾ yet the significant increases in parental employment observed across the UK in recent decades, which have been attributed to shifts in the female labour supply, have not translated into child poverty reductions.⁽¹⁸⁾ The source material does mention the consequent rise in in-work poverty, but does not explain how NOLB will help to address it.⁽⁷⁾

Another group of interest from a health inequalities perspective is young men experiencing socio-economic deprivation, who face an inordinately high risk of dying from drugs, alcohol, and suicide.⁽¹⁹⁾ This group is not explicitly named at all in the source material, despite the fact

that young men have increasingly faced issues of job quality (with, for example, 18-24 year-old men experiencing an unprecedented increase in non-permanent jobs) and job quantity (with, for example, 16-19 year-old men more likely than women to not be participating in education, employment or training). This apparent blind spot, which we have also identified in other policy areas, suggests that the focus on individuals may have distracted from a recognition of patterns that vary systematically between groups.

Institutional coordination

When it comes to the interface with users of employability services, the distinguishing feature of NOLB is its aspiration to a person-centred approach. However, NOLB also distinguishes itself at the level of governance, with a focus on increasing and improving coordination. This is a broad theme, covering three facets:

- 1) Alignment between different levels of government, as codified in the partnership model of working between Scottish Government and local authorities;
- 2) Cooperation between different public, private, and third-sector organisations at a local level, notably through the creation of Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs);
- 3) Integration between employability and other public services, to achieve a joined-up and streamlined experience as part of the person-centred approach.

These facets can be understood as three layers, with the first layer embedding the second and the second layer embedding the third. While all three facets run through the source material, we can observe an evolution over time. For example, reflecting the emergence of the specific arrangements that constitute NOLB, in later documents the balance between national and local administration apparently shifts towards the latter (facet 1), as indicated by the slogan “local by default, national by agreement”; and this in turn is presented as facilitating a greater role for local-level cooperation (facet 2), particularly through the LEPs.(7)

The coordination agenda is introspective, focusing on a particular set of institutions

The coordination agenda is presented as a means of facilitating the person-centred approach. It therefore purports to solve a second-order problem, namely that the person-centred approach requires coordination in the institutional sphere. For example, the 2024 Strategic Plan introduces designated Employability Child Poverty Coordinators at a local level “to drive alignment and integration between employability support and the wrap-around services required to support parents to increase their income from employment”, in recognition of the specific needs and barriers that they experience.(7) Similarly, the 2018 Action Plan emphasises the need for integration between employability, health, and other services to address overlapping physical and mental health issues that prevent people from working.(3)

This framing can be characterised as introspective. The employability universe is conceived in terms of individuals on the one hand and institutions involved in the provision of employability services on the other, with the latter holding the potential to address the needs and barriers of the former if governed correctly. Thus, while affirming that “parents can face significant structural barriers to entering the labour market”, the Strategic Plan implies that these barriers can be addressed “through integrated and aligned working with other services.”(7) The section goes on to cite the provision of benefit calculators, signposting to available services, and a no-wrong-door approach as examples of this integration. In this context, the term ‘structural’ apparently refers to the realm of public services, rather than to any broader, contextual factors.

This narrows the purview of NOLB, limiting its preventative potential

While the coordination agenda may motivate improvements in the institutional architecture, it is liable to neglecting the gamut of factors that lie beyond its scope. This includes the labour market itself, as exemplified by the source material treating local authorities as economic geographies without questioning whether the two are truly coterminous. In reality, labour markets often cross administrative boundaries, particularly when it comes to cities that are served by commuter towns.(20) More broadly, there is no consideration of whether existing services are appropriate given the realities of the labour market, nor if they are adequately funded – the concern is only with how institutions are coordinated between themselves.

The coordination agenda also makes no reference to services that are informal and unpaid. In the person-centred approach, childcare responsibilities are classed as a need or a barrier; and in the coordination agenda, the issue is extrapolated to a lack of alignment between childcare provision and other services.(5) While the tension between paid and unpaid work is acknowledged, the latter is uncritically prioritised, with no recognition of the economic value of domestic labour in terms of social reproduction or its fiscal role in reducing the need for formal services. On the contrary, the 2024 Strategic Plan emphasises the costs of unpaid carers leaving employment in terms of the tax-benefit system and women’s wages.(7)

Crucially, the introspective nature of the coordination agenda risks leading to a lack of coordination with policy domains and other institutional actors that are capable of achieving structural change further upstream.(15) While early documents feature an emphasis on aligning employability services and economic development plans, this emphasis is later lost.(2) There is evidence, however, that this trend may be reversing: the most recent document that we studied, namely the 2024 Strategic Plan, refers to “working with employers to improve outcomes” and supporting the “just transition to net zero” as “emerging priorities”, albeit secondarily to its five core priorities.(7) The role of this kind of coordination in future strategies remains to be seen; but ultimately, if policy is designed to manage undesirable features of the labour market rather than confront them, its preventative potential may not be realised.

Conclusion

At one level, it seems uncontroversial to maintain that employability services should be person-centred or that they should be coordinated. The intention of this report is not to claim that they should not be. Rather, the analysis has attempted to uncover ‘the policy problem’ underlying NOLB and to subject it to critical inquiry. This is an exercise in constructive questioning, not in arguing against the policy or in favour of specific alternatives.

The main question that arises from this exercise is whether structural factors are adequately recognised. Such a recognition is crucial from a health equity perspective. In the final analysis, patterns of inequality cannot be reduced to the unique circumstances of each individual or to the interactions between individuals and public services; rather they reflect systemic features that have differential impacts across socio-economic groups. Indeed, these features, which include the nature of work itself, can be said to *produce* the personal circumstances and institutional interactions that NOLB primarily seeks to address.

Designing policy to address labour-market issues at source could significantly strengthen its preventative potential. While we cannot expect employability policy to achieve systems change on its own, this only heightens the need for join-up across strategic areas. Similarly, although certain powers such as employment law remain reserved, there is ample scope for devolved levers to address the socio-economic drivers of health inequalities, alongside constructive engagement with the UK Government. This would serve a range of priorities, including fair work, tackling child poverty, economic growth, and securing the sustainability of public services.

The experiences of young adult men and of families with children – two groups on which our research focuses, owing to the significant and persistent health inequalities that they experience – are a case in point. We have discussed the individualised and institutionally introspective ways that “structural barriers” are conceived in relation to parents, as well as the absence of young men from the policy discourse. Along with action across housing, social security, and other domains, employability policies have the potential to improve the devastating health outcomes seen among young men facing socio-economic deprivation, who are too often supported only at the point of crisis.⁽¹⁹⁾ Similarly, taking a preventative approach to child poverty could shift the focus onto root causes.⁽²¹⁾

While the analysis presented in this report has engaged with NOLB at a largely theoretical level, the examples above show that it can have real-world implications for policy and the people it affects. This work also complements our wider programme of quantitative and qualitative analysis on NOLB, including the programme of action learning sets that we have undertaken with practitioners at a local level. Going forward, we will be following up with interviews at both local and national levels to develop a deeper understanding of how NOLB is being implemented and experienced in practice, while also taking forward participatory research with men in the 18-44 age group.

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Annex

Table 1: Documents in scope

Year	Document title	Description
2016	<i>Creating a Fairer Scotland: A New Future for Employability Support in Scotland</i>	A vision for the Scottish approach to employability services, ahead of devolution of UK Government programmes
2018	<i>No One Left Behind: Next Steps for Employability Support</i>	An action plan building on <i>Creating a Fairer Scotland</i> , with a focus on integrating employability with other services
2020	<i>No One Left Behind: Delivery Plan</i>	An action plan for employability services in the context of the pandemic, following the establishment of NOLB
2022	<i>Employability Shared Measurement Framework</i>	A common reporting framework so that consistent data on NOLB is available across local authorities
2024	<i>No One Left Behind National Discussion Events</i>	Summary of outcomes from six stakeholder discussion events held in 2023 to discuss the future of NOLB
2024	<i>No One Left Behind: Employability Strategic Plan 2024-2027</i>	High-level priorities for NOLB over the life of the plan, positioning NOLB within the wider policy landscape

Who we are

The Scottish Health Equity Research Unit (SHERU) was set up in 2024 to provide insights and analysis on the socio-economic factors that shape health. The unit brings together expertise on public health and socioeconomic analysis in a joint collaboration between the University of Strathclyde's Centre for Health Policy and Fraser of Allander Institute, supported by the Health Foundation.

Our aim is to offer an independent voice and robust scrutiny to Scottish policy debates. We will work with people from the public, private and third sectors and the wider public to drive the practical action needed to improve health and reduce inequalities in Scotland.

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Please use the following citation for referencing this report:



Scottish Health Equity Research Unit

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that shape health

The Scottish Health Equity Research Unit is supported by the Health Foundation, an independent charitable organisation working to build a healthier UK, as part of its Driving improving health and reducing health inequalities in Scotland programme.

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