

Understanding what works: lessons from JobsPlus partnerships

JobsPlus is a voluntary, community-led, hyperlocal employment support programme designed to help people in social housing communities find work. Since July 2024, JobsPlus has been piloted by nine housing associations across ten neighbourhoods in England. It aimed to bring together a range of local partners and services needed to help residents in each community to prepare and move into sustained work. By working in partnership the aim was to ensure that key partners referred people to JobsPlus, while also enabling the pilots to refer residents to partner services that best met their individual support needs.

This paper is informed by evaluation findings from July 2024 to December 2025¹ and outlines how partnership working has supported delivery. It provides reflections for those designing place-based employment support. It outlines enablers and barriers to partnership working and what types of partnerships have been the most effective and why. It also describes the types of partnerships that the pilots have not yet been able to fully develop but were working towards.

What type of partners?

The pilot sites found that developing working relationships with the following types of partners were essential for JobsPlus to be able to provide diverse, personalised support:

- **local authority support** (such as work, health and wellbeing services, children's centres and schools to connect with local parents, and community safety services)
- further **education institutions** and training providers
- **voluntary and community sector organisations** (VCSO) (such as health charities, food banks, debt advice services, family support services, youth groups, local community centres and citizens' advice)
- organisations that offered **mental health support**
- local **Jobcentre Plus**.

The pilots found that participants especially benefitted from being signposted to education and training, wellbeing support and health services:

- Developing partnerships with education providers was important, as many participants felt that not having the right skills was a barrier to them being able to find work.

- Some participants had a range of significant physical and mental health conditions which limited their engagement. To overcome health barriers, these participants needed access to NHS healthcare, but long waiting lists negatively affected this. Many sites tried hard to broker partnerships with the NHS to support access to healthcare, but capacity issues within the NHS often prevented full partnership working. Having access to wider wellbeing support from within the community was important to those participants who were a long way from being ready for work. While gaining an employment outcome was the ultimate aim, many needed help finding and accessing a range of support to make the idea of getting a job a reality.

While it could sometimes be challenging to fully engage the full range of partners, sites found that having a good network of partners helped to ensure that support offered to participants was tailored to individual needs.



Moving from operational to more strategic partnerships

In the early months of delivery, sites worked with existing partners to support rapid mobilisation of JobsPlus, with new partnerships developing organically and in response to needs identified for different participant groups.

By the end of 2025, all sites had regular partnership network meetings in place. This enabled partners to come together and reflect on how best to meet the needs of all residents. While these networks were mainly operational, some networks became more strategic. This was enabled by:

- **Partners working together** to establish clear roles and responsibilities.
- Time allowed during partnership network meetings **to reflect on how best to meet the needs of particular participant groups** and who was best placed to provide support.
- **Partners being able to feed back to JobsPlus staff** their local insights and understanding of the context of the needs of residents JobsPlus aimed to support. This enabled a clear understanding of how JobsPlus and partners could work together to provide holistic, tailored support.

Building on existing partnerships



What worked well

Sites made the fastest progress where they built on relationships already in place. This helped services join up more quickly.

- **Being visible in the community:**

Regular presence in community spaces (e.g. community centres, foodbanks, Jobcentres) helped staff get known and trusted.

- **Working from shared spaces:**

Co-location (or regular drop-ins) typically at the JobsPlus community hub made it easier to refer residents informally and solve issues quickly.

- **Strong links with Jobcentre Plus (JCP):**

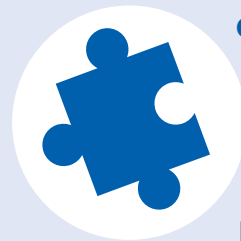
Where relationships were well established, referrals were more consistent and joint working was easier. Where sites developed these good relationships, there was contact with a designated JCP work coach who proactively identified JobsPlus eligible residents to refer to caseworkers. Work coach contacts were made either as a result of an existing relationship that caseworkers had with JCP from other programmes, or via caseworkers proactively setting up meetings with JCP to identify a work coach whose caseload included residents living in JobsPlus eligible postcodes.

- **Flexible, informal ways of working:**

“Warm handovers” worked better than formal referrals, as they reduced barriers for residents and the receiving services were often more responsive when a warm handover was provided.

- **Using community hubs as a connector:**

Hubs already embedded in local communities provided a trusted physical base to bring partners together and strengthen existing links.



Challenges

However, even well-established partnerships faced practical barriers:

- **Limited time and capacity:**

Relationship-building took time, especially early on.

- **Staff turnover:**

When key contacts in partner organisations leave, relationships can weaken quickly.

- **Perceived competing priorities:**

Some partners were concerned that JobsPlus might duplicate existing support provision. In particular, organisations delivering employment and related services sometimes worried about how engagement with JobsPlus would affect their own performance targets and reporting requirements.

For example, there was uncertainty about whether an individual could be counted towards a partner’s KPIs if they were also receiving support from JobsPlus. To overcome this, sites worked closely with partners to clarify referral pathways and establish how JobsPlus complements, rather than duplicates support which encouraged more collaborative ways of working.

- **Data sharing (GDPR):**

Limited feedback on referrals makes it hard to track outcomes or learn what works.

Co-location supported visibility and informal collaboration, but some hubs faced constraints getting partners on site due to space constraints in community hubs, limited capacity, and the time needed to build deeper partnerships.

Key lessons for strengthening partnerships

These experiences highlight practical lessons for strengthening partnerships:

- **Invest early in face-to-face relationship-building:** Existing partnerships still need active maintenance to function well in practice. In the pre-implementation phase and in the early days of delivery, JobsPlus staff met with existing partners to talk through the model and how their existing ways of working needed to be adapted and strengthened. Staff had regular touch points with partner staff to strengthen and maintain relationships.
- **Keep processes simple and flexible:** Informal working (e.g. direct contact, warm handovers) was preferred by delivery partners as it reduced bureaucracy and was often more effective to engage directly with known contacts in other services. JobsPlus caseworkers introduced participants to staff from partner organisations, preferably face-to-face in community hubs, to help partners to quickly get to know the support needs of individuals. This also helped to increase the likelihood that the participant would stay engaged with the support that the partner offered.
- **Strengthen relationships beyond individuals:** Avoid over-reliance on single contacts to reduce the impact of staff turnover. Sites aimed to use partnership network meetings to help meet different staff from partner organisations. This helped to develop links with new contacts.
- **Use existing settings (e.g. hubs, JCP links) as a foundation:** Build consistency and visibility through regular presence. JobsPlus caseworkers established set days when they would have a physical presence at JCP, so that work coaches knew when they could signpost clients to speak to a member of the team.
- **Put light-touch systems in place to support coordination:** Simple referral tracking helps strengthen accountability without adding burden. Where partners co-located in community hubs, JobsPlus caseworkers were able to informally talk through referrals and to check in on participant engagement.



Mapping new partnerships

Sites actively mapped new partners to fill gaps in support (e.g. wellbeing, skills, youth provision). A typical approach was to:

- **Map the local landscape (directories, networks, local knowledge)**
- **Reach out and network (meetings, events, informal conversations)**
- **Use existing contacts to open doors (“snowballing” introductions)**
- **Test and build relationships over time**

What worked well



Across sites, several approaches supported effective partnership development:

- **Starting by listening:**

Understanding what partners need, not just what sites offer, built trust in partnerships. Regular contact helped JobsPlus staff to find out about partner priorities. For example, training providers were looking to expand the reach of their courses, and partnering with JobsPlus helped them reach residents that wouldn't normally engage with their services.

- **Being visible and consistent:** Regular attendance in community spaces helped build credibility within the local area. JobsPlus caseworkers established set times when they had a presence in spaces such as community centres and food banks. This helped to build familiarity with the support for both partner organisations and residents.
- **Focusing on shared goals:** Partnerships work best where aims are aligned. Sites used regular partnership network meetings to discuss goals with partners. Talking through aims in this forum also allowed partners to understand how their support could be coordinated to meet residents' needs.
- **Targeting gaps in provision:** Some sites prioritised specific groups (e.g. young people, mental health services) to strengthen their offer. To best meet the needs of local residents, JobsPlus caseworkers developed contacts with local organisations to help them support needs outside their expertise. For example, organisations that provide counselling, and youth organisations that support young people at risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.

Challenges

However, sites encountered several common barriers:

- **Trust takes time:** Some organisations (especially in the voluntary sector) saw JobsPlus as competition and perceived the support as a risk for diluting their own funding streams.
- **Resident distrust of support services:** As well as building organisational trust, successful partnership working relied on resident trust in the support.
- **Slow early returns:** New partnerships did not always immediately lead to referrals.
- **Finding the right contact:** It can take time to connect with the right person in an organisation.
- **Limited capacity:** Staff time can restrict how many relationships can be built and maintained.



Key lessons

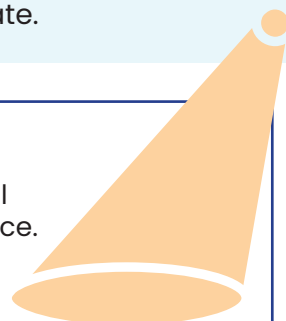


Taken together, these experiences point to a clear set of practical lessons for building new partnerships:

- **Start with gaps, not organisations:** Clarify what is missing before reaching out. As sites became more aware of residents' needs, they identified which groups they would struggle most to engage—for example, young parents and those with overlapping physical and mental health issues.
- **Invest early in trust-building:** Expect partnerships to take time to develop, especially where there are concerns about overlap or competition. Taking the time to identify the key contacts in the local area will lead to stronger, more holistic support. JobsPlus staff built trust over time by meeting informally with those who provided support in the local community before proposing partnership working. This was especially important to make connections with VCSOs.
- **Leverage community champions to connect with local networks:** Connecting partners with community champions (residents who support JobsPlus with engagement and promotion within the neighbourhood) has helped to share messages about the wider support partners can offer via local community networks. Developing these informal relationships with residents mirrors the ethos of JobsPlus support. To help make these connections, community champions have accompanied caseworkers to meetings with partners and also helped to organise events alongside partner organisations.
- **Build new partnerships through existing relationships:** Build on current relationships to “snowball” new connections. Sites reported that keeping interactions informal helped with this. For example, having a regular presence in local community centres helped some sites to have conversations with other users of the space.
- **Test and refine partnerships over time:** Not all relationships will translate into delivery – focus on those that add value. JobsPlus staff have reflected on partnerships over time to ensure they remain relevant to residents' needs.
- **Align the offer with partner priorities:** Partnerships are most effective where common ground is found and clear mutual benefit is established. This means that partnerships complement rather than duplicate the support JobsPlus offers. Caseworkers were able to build up knowledge about these priorities in several ways – for example, via initial informal conversations, from partnership network meetings and by having a presence in community spaces where the partners operate.

Spotlight on multi-agency working

- One site partnered with several local services dedicated to family support, such as social workers, family support workers, and the Housing Association's own housing advice service.
- This network collaborated to share insights about the families living in JobsPlus eligible homes to identify issues and provide comprehensive wraparound support.



Organisations in the network attended meetings to discuss cases and how they could best provide support.

- The site also strengthened an existing partnership with an organisation that supports residents from birth to employment.

Outcomes

- JobsPlus complemented the work that organisations do with local families by addressing employment barriers and helping residents secure stable jobs. This strengthened family income and reduced stressors that directly affect children's ability to thrive in education.
- This way of working avoided duplication and created a seamless support system.
- JobsPlus and partners worked together to tackle challenges to create a holistic solution that aimed to empower communities and drive long-term social change.

Spotlight on types of partners who meet the needs of particular resident groups

Many sites are working collaboratively with key partners and organisations that have specialist expertise to support particular resident groups.

Developing these partnerships has helped sites to strengthen the support offered to existing participants, and also helped to engage new residents with the support.

Young people



- One site has partnered with a community youth group that operates a youth bus that has a regular presence on the estate and at a local secondary school one evening a week. The bus is equipped with a DJ booth, games consoles, sports training equipment and hot food.

- Youth workers on the bus facilitate structured sessions using these facilities, with some young JobsPlus participants co-facilitating the sessions under the leadership of a young community champion.
- Many of the young people attending were close to leaving education. Hence, exposure to the JobsPlus support enabled them to have informal conversations with the community champion and JobsPlus staff about options for further education, apprenticeships and work.

Outcomes

- Delivery staff perceived that the support offered helped to reduce anti-social behaviour on the estate, build confidence in those taking part, and strengthened relationships between young people. From their interactions with residents, they acknowledged that it has also helped build trust in the support among those young people who are reluctant to engage with it.
- Using this partner to share messages about the support with young people raised awareness of the support among a group who may not have taken the step to engage with JobsPlus.

Parents



- Several sites identified that parents, particularly mothers, were a group that could benefit from JobsPlus but faced barriers to participating. Sites developed partnerships with local education providers to raise awareness of JobsPlus.

Example one:

JobsPlus staff co-located at a local children's centre to deliver a weekly wellbeing workshop.

Outcomes

- Caseworkers were able to start to build relationships with parents who had no prior engagement with JobsPlus.
- Trust in the support was built with residents as they were able to hear about JobsPlus in a familiar and trusted community space.

Example two:

One site developed a partnership with a local primary school. The school circulated flyers about the support via their newsletter, and JobsPlus staff have been able to attend a parents' evening to enable parents to talk about the support informally.

Outcomes

- New JobsPlus sign-ups from eligible parents with children at the school.

Implications for policymakers



- It is clear that developing partnerships has taken time, so funding models should allow time for collaboration and networking. This should extend to funding for a pre-implementation mobilisation phase to establish partnerships before delivery begins, so they are in place from the first day of delivery.
- GDPR has been a barrier to partnership working. Clear guidance needs to be provided so that partners can effectively share data to fully support participants. Delivery leads should ensure that they have the capacity and capability to adhere to GDPR requirements
- There is evidence that joined-up working is having a positive impact on the lives of participants with sites working towards developing whole system approaches. Policy should encourage integrated, multi-agency approaches. For JobsPlus, using partnership meetings to discuss the needs of individual residents was effective in taking this whole system approach. This also helped partners to identify where additional expertise was needed to support particular resident groups.

Implications for practitioners



- JobsPlus delivery has highlighted the importance of taking time to network with partner organisations. Regular presence in community spaces helps build trust among both partners and participants.
 - Flexible ways of working between partners have been effective. Practitioners should prioritise warm handovers and informal conversations with other organisations providing support in the local community. For JobsPlus, making use of the community hub and other community spaces to have these interactions has helped to build partner confidence in the support.
 - JobsPlus has shown that informal engagement with both participants and partners can be effective. This is a preferred approach for many sites, and practitioners should consider which approach suits their needs and allows them to be agile in providing support.
- For many JobsPlus sites, embedding this informal way of working was achieved by taking time to build relationships, allowing partners to share expertise and knowledge of residents' needs.
- As well as taking time to set up effective partnerships, maintaining those relationships requires time too. Practitioners should make sure that there is regular communication between partners, including partnership meetings where key knowledge can be shared. JobsPlus staff have set up regular meetings with partners to help build momentum. This also helped to develop clear roles and responsibilities for both JobsPlus staff and partners.
 - When staff leave, maintaining continuity between partners and JobsPlus staff has sometimes been challenging. Practitioners should aim to build multiple contacts within partner organisations.
 - The needs of JobsPlus participants varied depending on the resident group. Practitioners could 'snowball' new connections to help develop their networks.

¹There were two strands of evaluation activity, an implementation and process evaluation (IPE) and impact evaluation. The IPE took a mixed methods approach and combined desk-based research, management information data collection, participant surveys, qualitative interviews and observations at the pilot sites. The impact evaluation used a difference-in-differences approach to assess whether the programme improved employment and earnings outcomes for residents in the pilot areas. <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/evaluation-of-the-jobsplus-pilot/>