

1. Background

The Scottish Government committed in the Programme for Government 2018 -19 to support up to 2000 women who have had career breaks to return to the workplace.

Evidence suggests that many women struggle to return to work after a career break due to factors such as a lack of access to flexible working to support care commitments, lack of confidence due to lack of up-to-date work experience and lack relevant skills especially in sectors where technology has moved on at a rapid pace. As a result they can find their job choices limited to lower paid, part time work and can experience pay inequality, underemployment, job insecurity, and a lack of opportunities for development and career progression.

This 2020 fund builds on our 2017 pilot returners programme when we awarded funding of up to £235,000 to seven projects to support women to re-enter the workplace by offering advice, guidance and access to paid work placements across a variety of industrial sectors where occupational segregation and the lack of women in senior positions was a concern.

For further information on the 2017 programme go to –

<http://www.employabilityinscotland.com/participants-and-barriers/women-and-work/women-returners/>

2. Current position in light of COVID 19.

Preparations for delivery of the 2019 programme was put on hold in late 2019 due to the uncertain impact of BREXIT on SG finances and then the further financial challenges brought on from April 2020 by COVID 19. The commitment for 2020/21 fiscal year is £500,000.

COVID 19 has placed unprecedented challenges on employers and workers. Emerging evidence suggests¹ that COVID-19 has in some cases exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and exposed the vulnerability of some population groups (e.g. lower earners) to adverse shocks which could continue and be compounded by any further disruption following the end of the Brexit transition period. This programme is more important now than ever due to the disproportionate economic impact COVID-19 has had on women.

Activity under the original returners programme included offering women 12 week work experience placements at the rate of the real living wage. This may not be realistic for employers in the current environment as staff are furloughed, working from home or subject to social distancing in workplaces. Women returning to the labour market also may face more competition from a recently unemployed workforce who will have more updated experience and skills.

¹ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/covid-19-and-inequalities/>

The programme criteria has been adapted to acknowledge the challenges employers and women returners face in the covid 19 working environment.

It is imperative that work to promote and embed workplace equality continues in this financial year (2020-2021) so that women are not further disadvantaged in the labour market as a result of the effects of COVID-19.

3. Programme Purpose

The aim of the fund is to contribute to reducing the gender pay gap in Scotland, improve women's economic position in the labour market and deliver fair and inclusive economic growth.

The programme aims to support women returners across Scotland who have had a career break due to childcare, other care or health commitments and have a particular focus on supporting women who experience multiple barriers to employment, e.g. older women, disabled women, lone parents, minority ethnic women, women affected by domestic abuse, women from rural or SIMD areas, female veterans/spouses of veterans and also focus on sectors where women are significantly underrepresented in the workforce and at senior levels.

It will address the 'motherhood penalty', a key driver of the gender pay gap and will respond to EHRC research findings on pregnancy and maternity discrimination which revealed that 77% of women reported a negative or discriminatory pregnancy/maternity experience.

The gap increases as a women ages, from a woman's child-bearing and child-rearing years, right up to women aged over 50 who often experience disadvantage and discrimination when transitioning through menopause.

The programme aims to support women to return to work at levels commensurate with their abilities, skills and experience. Women would generally have had work experience and a good level of qualifications before taking a break. The programme should support them to gain up to date work experience to fill that gap in their CV, which would allow them to apply for jobs at a level commensurate with their qualifications and past experience.

Encourage women into industrial sectors where women continue to face barriers in re-entering the workplace after a career break and tap into growth sectors.

The fund will also seek to encourage collaborative projects between applicants and their business partners with innovative projects to embed fair work dimensions in the workplace by:

- promoting progressive workplace policies which improve productivity and innovation;
- promoting greater workplace democracy, employee voice and commitment;
- encouraging opportunities for employee development, skills development and lifelong learning; and
- developing best practice in industrial relations to encourage constructive dialogue in a range of different sectors and workplaces.

The Fund will continue to support the delivery of the Scottish Government's [Programme for Government](#), [Gender Pay Gap Action Plan](#), [Fair Work Framework](#), [Race Equality Framework](#), [Disability Delivery Action Plan](#), [Scotland's Labour Market Strategy](#) and [Fairer Scotland Action Plan](#). In addition, the fund also supports the Scottish Government's [Child Poverty Action Plan](#), [A Fairer Scotland for Older People – A Framework for Action](#), [Disability Employment Action Plan](#), [Fair Work Action Plan](#) the [Equally Safe strategy](#) and [delivery plan](#), Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls, and our [Strategy for tackling social isolation](#).

4. Programme Applicant Criteria

(a) Project Applicant Eligibility:

- We welcome proposals from public, private and third sector organisations or partnerships of these.

(b) Applicant organisations should ideally be able to demonstrate: This is not an exhaustive list.

- experience of delivering employability and work experience type activity to women,
- knowledge of current employability provision available to unemployed women in Scotland,
- Knowledge of equality and intersectional issues relating to gender,
- knowledge of the barriers faced by women returners and support required,
- good links/access to employers who can provide suitable work experience placements,
- understanding of the benefits of adopting fair work practices and the principles within the Fair Work Framework.
- An understanding of the disproportionate impact the pandemic has on women at an intersectional basis.

(c) Exclusions: The following types of proposals are **NOT ELIGIBLE** to apply to the Returners Fund;

- Applications from Individuals.
- Proposals which are already being funded through other SG programmes.
- Proposals which relate solely to capital projects.
- Proposals that solely pay for one person's wage.
- Applications that duplicate statutory or other provision already available.

(d) Client eligibility

- Women of any age who seek a return to the labour market **following a career break** due to childcare or other caring commitments or health issues (including menopause).
- A career break should normally be **of more than 6 months duration**.
- Women should be resident in Scotland.
- Women who experience multiple barriers to employment, for example older women, disabled women, lone parents, minority ethnic women, women affected by domestic abuse, women from rural or SIMD areas, female veterans/spouses of veterans are especially encouraged.

5. Programme Activity: (This is not an exhaustive list).

Project Applicants should justify the types of activity and support offered to clients and employers that they believe is required to achieve the aims of the project based on their knowledge of the policy area and their past experience. Activity should also acknowledge the challenges employers and women returners face in the Covid 19 working environment.

(a) Client support activities

- one to one guidance/counselling,
- careers information and guidance,
- access to training opportunities including content that reflects client training needs e.g. confidence building, IT, and in a format suitable for client circumstances e.g. on site/online/in education
- up-skilling in new technology, systems or legislation in their relevant field or sector,
- an employer placement,
- additional support needs if they have a disability/ long term health issue e.g. different formats, additional time in an interview, interpreter/ BSL support etc.
- language support,
- support for caring commitments,
- networking opportunities,
- access to a mentor,
- post placement support,
- future job search support e.g. cv's, interview training.
- Informing them of flexible working options.
- referral to other relevant support organisations.

(b) Employer Activities: This is not an exhaustive list.

- Work with employers in sectors/organisations with a gender imbalance either due to a lack of women in the industry e.g. STEM, IT, construction or a lack of women at senior levels. E.g. finance, law.
- Identify and support employers to participate including sme's, large companies and start-ups.
- Identify and support employer participation in growth sectors such as green jobs.
- Recruit and support employers to provide a work experience placement taking account of current constraints due to Covid-19
 - Assisting them to build an environment conducive to supporting and where possible retaining women returners e.g. providing flexible working options, homeworking,
 - Improving their understanding of the individual needs and lived experience of women returners in order to support women with additional barriers such as a disability, caring commitments, health issues, English language needs and other commitments and to ensure a successful experience for all.
 - Improve their understanding of Positive Action initiatives.
 - Assisting them in preparing staff and line managers to support a returner.
 - Encouraging employers to adopt or change policies and practices that encourage recruitment of women returners.
- Recruit and support employers to offer a minimum of 4 weeks paid work placement at a rate no lower than the Real living wage.
 - Funding employer incentives will be considered with full justification.
- Ensuring chosen employers adopt or currently conform to fair work practices against the elements of the fair work framework.

6. Monitoring and reporting

- Projects should hold and maintain records on clients recruited including recording characteristics such as; age, ethnicity, postcode, disability, caring responsibilities, priority family groups as stated in the child poverty action plan and other characteristics, as para 4 (d).
- collect data from employers on size of organisation and sector to evidence they are reaching target industrial sectors, as para 5 (b).

7. Outputs from the Fund

- Support participants to build their skills and confidence.
- Support participants to be better prepared for re-entering and progressing in employment.
- Open up work opportunities for participants to advance their career in sectors in which they are under-represented.
- Businesses/Employers/line managers improve their knowledge and skills around Positive Action and equality in the workplace.
- Businesses/employers/line managers understand the employment challenges faced by women returning to the workplace and are able to offer better support to them.
- Employers create more inclusive working environments, for example by reducing unconscious bias and/or encourage flexible working practices in the workplace.
- Employers adopt or change policies and practices that encourage recruitment of women returners and benefit lasting change.

8. Fund Value - How much can be applied for?

The total fund value is up to £500,000 to be utilised within the current financial year and up to 31st March 2021.

Projects have up to three months to deliver activity between 1 January 2021 – 31 March 2021

Given the limited timescale for delivery project costs are not expected to exceed £35,000.

Project Applicants should justify the level of funding requested based on the number of clients benefiting from the project and the cost of delivery vs outcomes achieved. Clearly explaining the value added.

If the proposal receives match funding from other sources we would like full details of the funding bodies/sources and how this fits with and adds value to the project proposal.

We are keen for the fund to allow a variety of projects to be funded across different client groups, geographic areas and industrial sectors where we know that there are issues around occupational segregation and pay gaps. These sectors include the arts, culture, law, leisure, tourism, finance, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, transport and communication and STEM. (This is not an exhaustive list).

Projects should also utilise funding to target employers operating in sectors expected to sustain or grow jobs following the Covid-19 pandemic.

- END -