



Qualitative Evaluation

Final Report

November 2022

Rebecca McFarlane Ltd and Janet Biggar Research

Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
1. Introduction	3
1.1. About PEC.....	3
1.2. About the qualitative evaluation.....	3
2. Key Findings: Participants	4
2.1. Participant experiences of PEC	4
2.2. Impact of PEC on participants.....	7
2.3. Participant Case Studies	12
3. Key Findings: Project Delivery	14
3.1. Key strengths of PEC	15
3.2. Areas for Improvement.....	19
3.3. Suggestions for the future	21
4. Conclusion.....	23
5. Recommendations.....	24

Executive Summary

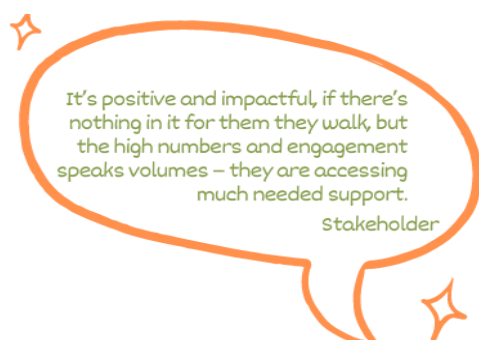
Pre-Employability Clackmannanshire (PEC) is a Community Renewal Fund project managed by the Clackmannanshire Economic Regeneration Trust (CERT); its aim is to *address the multiple barriers to employment* faced by those living in Clackmannanshire. The project ran from January to the end of December 2022. The qualitative evaluation took place between March and November 2022 and involved 21 PEC participants and 18 stakeholders.



Analysis of the interviews suggests that PEC is the start of something positive for Clackmannanshire and its communities and the project has worked well to bring partners together. Participant experiences have been largely positive, and the feedback suggests that PEC activities are successfully breaking down some of the barriers to employment and helping to move those furthest away from the labour market closer to getting employment. Not only is PEC offering participants training and volunteering, but it has also been successful at engaging those that are not currently ready for the labour market and giving them something positive to do. In brief, the evaluation found that:

- **Participant experiences of PEC** – overall experiences are positive, participants are acknowledging the many benefits of being involved in the project and that it is something new to be involved in. It is encouraging them to meet new people, build up their skills and think about the future. For many it has helped them to feel less alone.
- **PEC impact on softer outcomes** – the project has clearly had a positive impact on participants' softer outcomes, this was recognised by participants and stakeholders. Many reported an improvement in confidence, motivation and mental wellbeing and these positive impacts were also observed by stakeholders.
- **Participant experience of wider employability supports and how PEC compares and fits with these** – PEC is clearly offering something new and filling a gap in provision in Clackmannanshire.
- **The most impactful elements of PEC** – all aspects of PEC have been commended, however the community-based/grassroots approach, along with the key worker support and PEC's positive approach to communications have been particularly important to the project's success.
- **The barriers faced by participants** – many of the barriers faced by participants were those already known to the project team, however the most cited by participants were around mental health and anxiety, childcare and transport.
- **What activities/supports participants feel would be most useful for them to reach stable employment** – most participants felt more courses would be beneficial. Some talked about the need for more practical courses, others talked of a need for a clearer progression route.

Despite its success so far, there is more that could be done to improve the experiences and outcomes for local people. Partnership working, while it has developed well and is improving over time, could be better. Some internal process for communication about participants could also be improved and a more person-centred rather than provision-led approach could benefit participants further. Despite this, considering the length of time the project has been running and its capacity in terms of size of project team, its progress and achievements are certainly commendable.



1. Introduction

This report sets out the findings from the qualitative evaluation of the Pre-Employability in Clackmannanshire (PEC) project. The evaluation was undertaken by Rebecca McFarlane Ltd (RMLtd) and Janet Biggar Research (JBR), two freelance social researchers with over 30 years combined experience of qualitative evaluation. The evaluation consisted of semi-structured interviews and a focus group and took place between March and November 2022 during the delivery of the PEC project.

1.1. About PEC

PEC is a Community Renewal Fund project which has the overall aim to *address multiple barriers to employment*. The project is designed to establish a range of activities which are structured into customised programmes of support for individuals to address their barriers and to progress them to employment. The project is managed by the Clackmannanshire Economic Regeneration Trust (CERT) and it started in January 2022 with an original end date of the end of June 2022; at the end of March 22 2022, a no cost extension of the project was granted to the end of December 2022.

More detail on how the project is delivered, its targets and quantitative data on the project's achievements can be found in CERT's progress reports and the forthcoming full evaluation.

1.2. About the qualitative evaluation

CERT have been compiling data for the quantitative evaluation of the project (see previously mentioned report). RMLtd and JBR were commissioned to add value to the quantitative evaluation by facilitating and reporting on discussions with project participants. The qualitative evaluation sought to gather participants' views on:

- *the project and their experience of participating in it*
- *the influence of the project on softer measures such as confidence, motivation, and wellbeing*
- *their experience of wider employability supports and how PEC compares and fits with these*
- *which elements of PEC were seen as having the greatest impact*
- *their views on barriers they face to moving to employment*
- *what activities/supports they feel would be most useful for them to reach stable employment.*

On the recommendation of RMLtd and JBR wider stakeholders were also involved in the qualitative evaluation. Involving wider stakeholders in the evaluation enabled the team to better understand the wider context of the project and therefore add value to the findings particularly in relation to project delivery within the employability landscape in Clackmannanshire. Involving stakeholders also allowed the evaluation team to explore why those in the target groups were choosing not to engage and/or drop out of the project. To ensure the evaluation achieved its aims of gathering views on participant experiences, the interviews, where relevant, also encouraged the stakeholders to reflect on how they perceived the participants to be experiencing the PEC project.

Methods

Research tools were designed to focus on participant experiences from the perspective of the participants themselves, and to capture the reflections of the stakeholders who work closely with PEC's target groups.

They were also used to identify any additional outcomes, and as far as possible, to explore the wider impact of and reflections on the delivery of the PEC project so far.

The evaluation used semi-structured interview guides to gather the views of participants and stakeholders, using a combination of face to face and telephone interviews lasting between 15 and 90 minutes. The team also conducted a focus group with participants. Participants were offered a £10 ASDA voucher to thank them for their time and contribution. In total, feedback from 21 participants and 18 stakeholders has been included in the evaluation.

2. Key Findings: Participants

This section draws on the data from the 39 participant and stakeholder interviews to present the findings from the qualitative evaluation. The first section will focus on the first-hand participant experiences of PEC, we then go on to feedback on the impact of the project on participants. The final section will discuss project delivery, drawing more from the perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the evaluation.

The evaluation team noticed a big difference between the feedback received from stakeholders at the early stages of the evaluation (March) to that received at the end (October). There was a sense at the beginning that the project had experienced a number of teething problems and the quick set up and start of delivery had meant that there had been some communication and organisational issues. However, the flexible and responsive approach taken by the project team meant that they were able to effectively rectify the main issues.


Whilst it is difficult to conclusively attribute the benefits and impacts outlined in this report as solely to the PEC project, many of the conversations with participants and stakeholders suggested that the benefits and impacts they are experiencing are due, at least in part to their involvement in PEC.

2.1. Participant experiences of PEC

Participant experiences of PEC were largely very positive. Most appreciated the ease of getting involved in PEC, enjoyed the variety of courses on offer, the ability to choose based on preference/need, the content of the courses and the way they were delivered. Participants also provided feedback on the wider benefits of PEC such as the opportunity to meet new people, build their local networks, gain vocational skills, and be involved in something that helps improve their mental wellbeing at the same time as encouraging them to think more about their future. This section will provide more detail on these points.

a) Engagement onto PEC

Despite the relatively short time the project has been running in Clackmannanshire, participants were finding out about and being referred onto PEC through a range of sources. Participants had been signposted from Homestart, Action for Children, ClacksWorks, the Job Centre, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Triage, and through word of mouth.

 *PEC is coming up in conversations, people are enjoying it enough to talk about it and encouraging others to get involved.”*
Participant

Participants also commented on the ease of getting involved in the project, one participant in particular expanded on this, explaining the benefit of not having to have a 'label' to be accepted onto PEC, another mentioned how this led to the project involving a very diverse group of people, which added to the richness of the experience.

” *I find, if you don't have an addiction or some other label it can be hard to find support, often there's conditions attached to support, with PEC it wasn't like that.*”
Participant

” *Some have paused work, some have never had a job – it's a hugely diverse group, but it's definitely being enjoyed and people are getting lots out of it.*”
Participant

b) The Courses

The majority of the feedback on the courses offered by PEC was positive. Courses range from those focusing on mental health and wellbeing to those designed to build vocational skills and gain certification e.g. First Aid, IT and CSCS card. Participants have appreciated the ability to choose from what's on offer and the wide variety of courses means there is something for everyone. Such an approach gives participants a taster of what is available and allows them to progress onto something else if required. One stakeholder reported how many of participants they work with are not confident with their academic skills and noted that the bite-sized courses offered by PEC are really helpful in overcoming barriers to learning and skills development. In addition, the vocational qualifications that people can access gives them something tangible to build their next steps on and develop their CV.

” *I was happy just joining all the different courses – I was happy to do whatever, they do a great range of things to choose from.*”
Participant

” *The variety of courses. Lots of little bite size courses for people who've been unemployed for a long time. That affects confidence and self-esteem and these courses have been not too much to take in and it can be a massive boost to someone just to go along for a morning.*”
Stakeholder

In addition to the variety of courses, participants also praised course delivery and management with good quality course leaders and content, particularly those that touch on more sensitive subjects. Stakeholders commented how such positive experiences help to encourage people to return and take up other courses on offer.

” *Mark manages the courses and participants really well, it's a diverse group so it could be quite a nightmare – but everyone is encouraged to respect each other and are reminded what they are there to do. For me personally, I look forward to going.*”
Participant

” *When we went on the Assist one, we said a lot of personal stuff, but it was a very safe space.*”
Participant

” *The confidence building, mindfulness, and dealing with anxiety courses are the ones people come back raving about. They say how much better they feel and how good the course has been.*” Stakeholder

” *It’s broken down really well and I’ve really enjoyed that. Mark does them really well, they’re relaxed and funny, it’s just really nice, it’s not like a classroom, we grab a coffee and chill, it’s great. Mark has a laugh, he’s genuine and easy going and very approachable.*” Participant

” *The course that I attended was the best one I’ve been on for a long time, it was nicely paced with a bit of reading and verbal and screen, I wouldn’t change anything.*” Participant

A small number of people involved in the evaluation mentioned the benefit of the food voucher which is offered as an incentive to participants to go along to the courses. Some stakeholders also mentioned the benefit of having a voucher to encourage people through the door.

c) The key worker role

For many of the participants involved in the evaluation the perceived key worker role has been very beneficial. For some of the participants the supportive aspect of the role, the focus on building a good relationship and the gentle communication, is crucial to them being able to fully participate in the project.

” *Whenever I need Louise I’ll text her, she’s been really helpful. Whenever I’m confused on bus times or when the courses are – I would just text her. Having her has helped me go to things.*” Participant

” *I deal with Louise and she’s amazing, she’s brilliant, she understands if I don’t understand, she fills out forms for me, I’m dyslexic and struggle with that, but she phones and explains to me what it is. She keeps me updated and keeps me right – I have memory loss sometimes – she’s really, really nice. She makes it a lot easier.*” Participant

” *There is someone there that can help me and if need anything I can call them. I’ve felt welcome and they’ve treated me well.*” Participant

” *They are very responsive - they respond very quickly - which is always nice. They will get back to you which is great.*” Participant

” *I now get weekly emails, but there’s no pressure to sign up, you can just go along and sign up to things when you need to.*” Participant

Stakeholders also recognised the importance of this role and how it improves the participants’ experiences of support. While the stakeholders agreed with their positive approach to working with the participants, they also appreciated PEC providing a single point of contact for all the different organisations involved rather than trying to get participants to go along to lots of different places and speak to numerous people, which can be tricky for those with social anxiety and other barriers. Again, such an approach makes it much easier for participants to access support.

” *Especially Mark and the keyworker approach has been really beneficial in building relationships and supporting people.*”
Stakeholder

” *PEC comes across that the provision would be very adaptive. If a person presented with a specific need, they would go over and above to try and support that. Nothing is outwith the realms of seeing what they can do for them.... if they can't do it, they go out of their way to see who can.*”
Stakeholder

” *There is a better relationship between PEC providers, they are open and friendly people working with the clients. They call if they're not turning up to check they're OK, it's a lovely approach, not adding to pressure, stress and anxiety like the Job Centre do. They hound people if they are having a bad day and not turning up for something - PEC don't do that, just check in kindly and offer to reschedule. They want to build relationships, encouraging an element of trust, saying they're here to help, come another day.*”
Stakeholder

2.2. Impact of PEC on participants

As well as providing feedback on the way the project is being delivered, participants and stakeholders outlined the range of benefits and impacts experienced by the participants involved in PEC. This section provides more detail on these.

a) The benefits of being involved in PEC

Participants mentioned a range of benefits of being involved in PEC from gaining qualifications and certificates to helping to build up their CV, trying out new things, meeting new people and helping them to develop a routine.

Gaining qualifications and certificates

PEC enables participants to complete short courses that can help them to gain qualifications and vocational skills, some of which come with certificates. Having vocational qualifications and certificates not only helps to build an individual's confidence and sense of achievement, but it also provides participants with evidence to put on their CV and gives them a taster for learning and personal development taking them a step closer to employment.

” *One of my advisors in the job centre told me about PEC so I thought I may as well give it a shot, it'll give me more experience, skills, and certificates. I've done IT, Excel, Food Hygiene, Health and Safety, Drug Awareness, I've done lots, Mindfulness as well. Certificates are great, I need the evidence that I've done things to put on my CV.*”
Participant

” *Certificates ... some have never had anything like that before and it's something tangible they can show people.*”
Stakeholder

” *Some are reluctant to come into groups because of a lack of confidence, but when they see they are working for a qualification, they see the benefits and they start to see themselves in a workplace environment.*”
Stakeholder

” I’ve had one person say to me “oh I’ve now been trained up in cleaning, I have a new skill and a certificate which opens more doors.”
Stakeholder

” It’s giving them confidence to even come through the door. There are not huge numbers progressing onto college courses but I wouldn’t expect that. But in time it will be building understanding of what the college offers and delivers. The client group is getting through the door and engaging with us.”
Stakeholder

Trying new things and learning about yourself

For many of the participants the courses on offer have given them an opportunity to try something new as well as giving them time to think about themselves and what they might want in the future.

” It builds up as you go along, it’s like a jigsaw. It’s made me think that the world out there isn’t that bad after all. It’s been a bit like free therapy and everyone seems to enjoy themselves and get a lot out of it.”
Participant

” My time on PEC is time that’s all about me, I’m learning about things I wouldn’t sit in the house and learn about. It’s definitely given me more confidence to look for work.”
Participant

” Taking part and getting something out of it. It could be the first thing they’ve done in a long time. Building trust, confidence, ability to work with people...they are offered support at a pace that’s right for the person and adds value to provision already there”
Stakeholder

Meeting new people and developing local networks

One of the most mentioned benefits of being involved in PEC was that it helped participants to meet new local people and find out that there are others in a similar situation. This has not only enabled participants to make new friends and build their local social networks but has also encouraged them to continue to be involved in the project.

” Going and meeting new people – I was really bad at that – but because we were in small groups I was able to get along with everyone. That was a real benefit.”
Participant

” I’ve become quite close to one of the girls – I’ve got another friend and now I have another reason to leave the house, we go to Asda and get a coffee, it’s really nice.”
Participant

” it’s good to know I’m not the only one like this needing help. It’s good to see the other people in the group and what stage they are at.”
Participant

” What’s been great is knowing people are like me, there are other people like me. There are other people that feel the same and that’s made a massive difference – I’m not alone.”
Participant

” It’s made me feel different about things – now I know it’s not just me, there are other people out there that are feeling the same. You’re not the only one – you’re not on your own.”
Participant

Moving closer to the labour market

The main aim of PEC is to break down the barriers to employment and help to move those furthest away from the labour market closer to getting employment. The interviews discussed the barriers facing participants. The responses support what is already known by the project team: that key barriers include poor mental health, limited confidence and motivation, perceived lack of ability, lack of qualifications, length of unemployment, childcare and transport. Some considered transport as the biggest barrier and noted the benefit of having the transport element of PEC. Public transport costs and limited links across the county are a real barrier for people, particularly those on no or low income.

” *There are issues with attendance, but that is part and parcel of client group and barriers they face on day-to-day basis and often outwith their control – PEC are really good at trying to remove as many barriers as possible.*”
Stakeholder

” *Initially engaging people was challenging but once PEC made contact and built a relationship it got easier. It’s daunting coming into an education setting. PEC did a good job of breaking those barriers down.*”
Stakeholder

While participants stated the many benefits and positive impacts their involvement in PEC has had, a considerable number admitted they are still not in a position to find work. Despite this, they did report that they are *closer* to finding work than they had been before PEC. Stakeholders corroborated this, noting that for many, attending the courses does not necessarily make them more ready for work or further training/skills development, but does give them some structure to their day and encourages them to participate in meaningful activities, which in itself is a step forward.

” *At the moment I’m still working on me and continuing to do whatever’s coming up on PEC until I get back into a space that I’m ready to get back into employment – I’m not ready yet but I’m definitely making progress.*”
Participant

” *It’s definitely a step forward for the ones who’ve been isolated in the pandemic – baby steps, local short courses, testing the water.*”
Stakeholder

” *It’s getting you towards work, it’s a steppingstone.*”
Participant

” *I’ve been out of work for a while but have been volunteering since about June/July. I’m doing that once a week to get me some experience in a retail environment. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d not been involved in PEC, but I’ve been enjoying it. I’m not quite ready for paid work, but I’m enjoying the voluntary work, it’s given me confidence since day one.*”
Participant

” *Being in work is a different culture, for some it’s totally foreign to them, it’s so foreign that you can’t expect them to just go and find work – some just need a wee nudge and we’ve had some get jobs and go, but there are others that it takes much longer. Everyone is different and for some it might never work, but at least if you have the space to build someone’s confidence and a reason for being that will be helpful, it’s about having a purpose and being part of a community.*”
Stakeholder

” We’ve had four people who have got work since being involved with us. To me, that doesn’t just happen, so PEC must be doing something right!”
Stakeholder

” some have progressed onto flexi learning courses where they can choose a time that suits them, candidates are made aware of these as progression options and some have taken them up. Also some referred on to ClacksWorks.”
Stakeholder

b) The Impact of PEC on Participants’ Softer Outcomes

This section focuses on the impact of PEC on softer outcomes such as confidence and motivation. Many participants talked about how being involved in PEC had helped to improve their mental health and increased their confidence and self-worth, others talked about how it had motivated them to do other things and think more positively about the future. Stakeholders corroborated these findings; many had seen the positive impact on participants, particularly in relation to moving participants closer to the labour market.

” Everything they’re doing for people like me is having a massive impact on their lives – keep up the good work.”
Participant

” I really see that it benefits a lot of people, I’ve seen a difference in the people, you really see them change. They are there because they want to get a job, but for a lot of reasons due to mental health they can’t, others have got medical issues, some just can’t speak at these things - if they got asked their name they look like they are going to cry. But I’ve seen people really open up, it’s made such a difference.”
Participant

Reduced anxiety and improved mental wellbeing

Many of the participants involved in the evaluation spoke of poor mental health, their issues with anxiety and their struggles to leave the house. Such poor mental health can be a huge barrier to engaging in training and finding employment. They then went on to talk about how being involved in PEC had had a positive impact on their mental health, and they had noticed an improvement in how they were feeling and their ability to engage in activities and with others, including family members.

” It’s really helped my mental wellbeing, I look forward to going to the sessions, getting out the house, meeting people and learning from others.”
Participant

” This is the first time I’ve done anything like this before, it’s a new thing for me. Finding myself in these circumstances and in a mental health crisis it’s helped me climb out of it.”
Participant

” I have bad anxiety, before PEC I was barely leaving the house, even just getting to the courses was hard and I wouldn’t speak to anyone. I’ve noticed a really big difference [...] Learning about positive affirmations has also had a positive impact on my relationships 110%, my son has noticed a difference, I’m more patient with him, when I’m happier I’m going to be a better mum. It’s also helped my family dynamics – especially with my partner too.”
Participant

” *It’s had a positive impact, I’ve learned stuff and it’s helped me out mentally too; mixing with groups of people, sharing experiences, and talking to others, it’s been pretty good.*” Participant

Improved confidence

For many, a lack of confidence is a real barrier to engagement in activities and subsequently finding employment. Participants reported an improvement in their confidence as a result of being involved in PEC. An increase in confidence not only improves self-worth but also means they are more encouraged to engage in future activities.

” *I like the courses that I did – all of them were really confidence focussed which is what I was really bad at – they’ve had a positive impact on my confidence and my anxiety.*” Participant

” *PEC’s been great for my confidence, I wouldn’t have spoken to you before I’d done PEC, I would never have answered the phone to a stranger.*” Participant

” *My daughter’s more confident and she’s not sitting in her room as much, she’s not as withdrawn as she was. PEC’s given us something else to chat about, particularly about her mental health and how she’s feeling because she’s always struggled with her emotions.*” Participant

” *The shorter sessions tend to be a similar group of people, I see the difference in the confidence in a couple of people. It’s about being part of a group, when I’m there I feel like I’m really part of a group – I missed one session and someone said they’d missed me – that was lovely.*” Participant

” *I still feel anxious going on courses but once I’m there it’s fine. Once you’ve finished a course you feel more confidence you’ve done it.*” Participant

” *A lot of the provision was offering support with soft skills, not the typical standard confidence building that people might have done before. Over the week, people that came back have progressed and by the end felt more confident.*” Stakeholder

” *It’s just getting people to try something who have written themselves off – realising they can do something and building confidence. It lets people see they can work.*” Stakeholder

Improved aspirations and motivation

Much like low confidence, low aspirations and a lack of motivation can also be a real barrier for people in relation to gaining skills and employment; stakeholders report it being a particular issue for people in Clackmannanshire.

” *I used to live in Clacks and have seen the devastation of the major industries that have been pulled out and the big void that’s left. The amount of people that are living on benefits or fixed incomes, they might have aspirations and ambitious but don’t have the financial wherewithal to do the basics. There’s real lack of direction.*” Stakeholder

For some participants, being involved in PEC has helped them to think more about their future, it's given them ideas for what they might like to do for a job or career and has motivated them to study more and try new things to help them achieve their goals. For others, motivation is merely about getting out of the house and having something meaningful to do with their day, and this is also something that PEC has offered its participants.

” *I had I thought I might go towards counselling, it's made me think that it's the direction I should be going in, it's helped a lot with that. It's made me realise I want to help people more because my mental health is better. I'm looking forward to going out and seeing people.*”
Participant

” *There are lots of people on the course that have since been going to interviews and really quite looking forward to the future and that wasn't the case in April.*”
Participant

” *I feel much more confident, but for me it's not really about getting a job from an employer, I'm starting my own pet care business. I texted Louise about the idea and she's going to sign me up to the PEC enterprise course which teaches you about running a business and then you get a grant. It has helped me to think about that.*”
Participant

” *I didn't want to get a job beforehand, but now I'm much more motivated and I'd love to get a job in the future. I feel happier, it's good to get out and meet people.*”
Participant

” *I've not been involved in anything like this before, it gives me a lot of different opportunities. As a single Mum I'm struggling with my mental health, coming here is nerve wracking but I do it because it's benefiting me and is good for my future.*”
Participant

” *One of my other clients she's done her food hygiene and now has a cleaning job a few hours a week, having food hygiene will help her and she's motivated now to work more.*”
Stakeholder

2.3. Participant Case Studies

The following section provides some short case studies of participants to demonstrate some of the wider impacts of PEC. For two individuals they talked about how their involvement in the project had improved their mental health to the point they feel it has prevented them from going to the doctors and be on medication. Another talked about how it has helped to improve their relationship with their daughter as well as identify her own mental health issues, while the final story talks about how being involved in the project has helped to diagnose a participant's dyslexia and subsequently helped her find work. While these are stories from individuals rather than groups of people, they can be very powerful in showing how much a project like PEC can offer those most in need. All names have been changed to protect the participants' identities.

Participant 1 and 2: attending PEC meant they avoided going to the doctors.

Pauline's Story: There are no courses available for mental health and when I had my crisis I got referred for counselling, I got one session and then it got really difficult to see anyone or do anything. It was just a bit of a lightbulb moment finding these PEC courses were available without a 6-month waiting list – it's fantastic – the fact that it's aimed at pre-employment is even better, it's not for those with long term mental health problems, it's for those that are withdrawn. I've come a long way since the first one, now I'm not going to fall off my chair if I'm asked a question. I think that focusing on pre-employability from a mental health perspective is fantastic. I believe it would ultimately save a lot of money too. The group sessions help you to see you are going through the same things as others, before you didn't realise others were thinking about these things too. You would save a fortune for the NHS, having 20 people on a course rather than providing medical treatment or medication to all those individuals. It's so cathartic and has helped me rather than going to the doctors. It's a by-product but a really good one! I think not only is it getting me into the workplace eventually, it is also saving the NHS too.

Joanne's Story: I've never been offered anything like it before, I've finally found my community. I find that if you don't have an addiction or some other label it can be hard to find support, often there's conditions attached to support. But I think the support offered by PEC is preventing you from getting to that point. It's preventative support. The fact there's no conditions attached to it is great – something like this is hard to find. I've tried to get previous support, but I don't seem to meet the criteria, this PEC doesn't seem to have this barrier and I really liked that about it, I didn't have to explain myself either, you don't have to give someone your life story, you just get the support you need. Attending PEC has definitely stopped me going to the doctors or getting medication, it's helped in so many ways.

Participant 3: while participating in the courses as support for her daughter who has autism, she realised that she had been suffering from poor mental health. Being on the courses not only helped develop her relationship with her daughter, but it also helped to improve her own mental health.

Susan's Story: I've got a 16-year-old daughter who's autistic. I signed her up to PEC for something for me and her to do to help fill the week because she was at college for 3 days, she can't go anywhere herself, so I'm supporting her to do it. To start with it was really just for her, but I've benefitted from doing it too. I thought my mental health was ok but actually it's not been great, so I've been doing the well-being courses and have done them even without her, so it's helped me as well. It's like therapy and counselling, I lost my Dad last year so it's actually really helped me come to terms with that. I've done the wellbeing ones, the mindfulness, boost confidence and self-esteem, there's been loads of them – mostly the well-being ones that we've been on. I've never come across stuff like this being offered before. At the beginning I was more interested in what opportunities there were for Abi. She's really benefitted too, and it's also given us a bit a time together, I have two other kids in the house so it was really good for us to get some time together on our own. Abi has really

benefited from going into an environment where she doesn't know anyone, asking questions, and being part of the group and that's been really good for her, it's been really good for both of us.

Participant 4: told from the perspective of the literacy support coach who helped a participant deal with her undiagnosed dyslexia and subsequently finding employment.

Jane's Story: I have seen some real progress with some clients. Jane has severe dyslexia, she's 27 and lives at home with dad and mum. She has a twin brother with severe disabilities who needs 24-hour care, I suspect this is why her issues had not previously been picked up by anyone through school. She was getting hassled by the Job Centre but she wasn't managing to do the online applications expected by them and it was stressful for her. She was previously undiagnosed, but I knew instantly that she had dyslexia. She'd been encouraged to go to college but couldn't manage which was hard for her, but she was keen and wanted to get work. I've been working with her since April and we've done lots of intensive work and she's been a massive success story. She's now got a job for 10 hours a week in a shop in Tilly, it's the first job she's had. She was utterly shocked that she got it, but she's on the shop floor so is not having to do reading or writing. It's a great start and she hopes to get a permanent post after 3 months. She was so excited; she wants to work in retail so she's thrilled.

3. Key Findings: Project Delivery

This section draws mainly on the perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the evaluation, with supporting quotes from participants where relevant. While the stakeholders were asked to provide feedback on their perceptions of participant experience, the interviews also provided them with the opportunity to provide feedback on project delivery as well as suggestions for how it could be improved to help improve participant experiences. This section outlines their feedback in relation to the factors that have helped contribute to the project's success as well as the main areas for improvement.

Non-engagement/drop out

The evaluation team did not speak to those who had dropped out of or not engaging in PEC; the nature of this target group meant that engagement in the evaluation would have been challenging. Instead, the local stakeholders working closely with the target groups were asked for their opinions on why people were not engaging in the project. Stakeholders suggested that the reason behind the lack of engagement was not so much to do with the project itself but more to do with the people and their personal circumstances, much of which is beyond the control of PEC. Some are not good at engaging with services in general, this may be to do with a lack of trust of organisations and services and other social issues or more extreme barriers than the ones mentioned in previous sections of this report. One stakeholder suggested that some engage briefly as a result of threats of sanctions from DWP, however their intentions are not to continue.

” *There are a couple of examples where a participant couldn't attend the full duration of the accredited course, but this is more to do with family circumstances than anything else (e.g. a sick child), so not in PEC's or the client's control.*”
Stakeholder

” *I believe they have signed up because DWP are threatening them with sanctions, they have to be seen to be doing something, but they have no intention of engaging – some just don't respond at all.*”
Stakeholder

3.1. Key strengths of PEC

In addition to the positive elements discussed with participants, such as the variety of courses and the key worker role, there were a number of additional elements of the PEC project that evaluation participants believe have contributed to its success. This section provides an overview of these elements of the project.

a) Filling a gap in provision

It was clear from participant and stakeholder feedback that there is a need for a project like PEC in Clackmannanshire. Clackmannanshire has some deep-rooted social and economic issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Poor mental health is often the source, with most participants reporting high anxiety, low self-esteem and lethargy, lack of direction, routine or positive habits, some are struggling to get through the door (of the courses). Participants and stakeholders reported that PEC fills a gap in provision in Clackmannanshire, particularly in relation to provision based within a community setting. The majority of participants stated that they had not been involved in anything like PEC before. Participants and stakeholders commented on the courses offering something different to what is already available in Clackmannanshire. The following quotes are separated into those provided by stakeholders and those provided by participants, the quotes give a clear idea of what PEC is bringing to the employability landscape in Clackmannanshire.

Filling a gap: From the stakeholder perspective:

” *It has complemented the provision that was there already. ClacksWorks anecdotally felt initially there might be a clash but as an external partner I see they have complemented each other. ClacksWorks are about getting people back into employment. PEC is a step before that.*”
Stakeholder

” *I can't compare PEC with anything that's here already. There is nothing to compare it to. It absolutely plugs that gap but goes beyond that too.*”
Stakeholder

” *It's not replacing anything existing. It very much complements and is just getting people engaged in the process to move forward - filling a gap for those furthest removed from employment.*”
Stakeholder

” *The project overall is plugging gaps that are there, I don't think there's any duplication of initiatives.*”
Stakeholder

” *Mental health and wellbeing courses – nothing else like it on offer.*”
Stakeholder

” *It’s positive and impactful, if there’s nothing in it for them they walk, but the high numbers and engagement speaks volumes – they are accessing much needed support.”* Stakeholder

” *PEC is different from a work programme. It’s about engagement. Previously people were told to do a course by the Job Centre. People who come along to PEC are there because they want to be there.”* Stakeholder

” *Between PEC and CTSI we’ve got quite a good selection of places we can send them to now.”* Stakeholder

” *Before there was the job club, CAB, but all they offered was job search support. But PEC is looking at the process of being unemployed more holistically and helping with the softer skills. Even if there’s no job, the opportunity to learn something new and do something they’ve not done before can really help with confidence.”* Stakeholder

” *It allows my advisors to have another bit of provision to offer through their coaching approach, and working with young people on their career management skills. It lets them offer a bespoke, tailor-made approach to moving them forward.”* Stakeholder

Filling a gap: From the participant perspective:

” *They are helping people that aren’t getting the support they need from the Job Centre, PEC like to help you get things that will help you to get into work.”* Participant

” *There’s nothing else like PEC available, PEC has been the only thing that’s helped me. Having Louise is a big help, and also having access to travel.”* Participant

” *The project is fab and is well needed, there’s not been anything like it ever and that’s all I can say – it can’t go anywhere, it needs to stay. I’ve told others about it; we need it here!”* Participant

” *There’s been nothing like PEC before, I done two years of Triage and that got me nowhere. PEC is better, it gives you a variety of things to choose from, what’s the benefit of that? Well, it can tell you you can do it. I’ve done so many PEC courses, and now know a lot more than what I would’ve done if I hadn’t done PEC.”* Participant

b) Focus on Pre-employability

Linked to the project filling a gap in provision in Clackmannanshire as outlined above, participants and stakeholders also commented on the importance of having a project that focuses on the pre-employability element of a participant’s journey into employment. Recognising the importance of the step before someone is ready to write their CV or attend an interview.

” *With employability traditionally there is a focus on cv writing and interview skills – this can set people back, particularly for those who some days can’t get their head off the pillow. Pre employment skills and softer skills are so important.*”
Stakeholder

” *It’s set up as pre-employability, it’s really helping. [...] There are always those that won’t want to get a job – but going along to the course is still making a difference.*”
Participant

” *I’ve done the traditional courses, all around CV and interview skills etc. the practical things [...] PEC have a different angle, I wasn’t sure if it was going to be the right thing for me, but it’s been great and I really see that it benefits.*”
Participant

c) Location of delivery

PEC has used a variety of locations across Clackmannanshire to deliver its project, ranging from local community centres, the local college, charities across the county, and its own offices. The approach taken to offer courses in diverse locations has been commended by those involved – participants and stakeholders recognised the benefits of this form of delivery, particularly in relation to breaking down some of the biggest barriers of participation such as transport and the anxiety many face around entering premises that are not previously known to participants.

” *The concept of taking things to the community and getting into the grassroots is an excellent idea*”
Stakeholder

” *The range of courses and being on most client’s doorsteps is a huge advantage. Even getting to Stirling can be a lot for people.*”
Stakeholder

” *There is a lack of local opportunity so linking in local opportunities along with qualifications, experience and taster sessions is great.*”
Stakeholder

d) Partnership working

PEC have worked hard to encourage partnership working across the various stakeholders involved in the project, recognising its importance to the project’s success. Anecdotally, Clackmannanshire has not been known for its effective partnership working, however, feedback suggests that PEC is having a positive impact and stakeholders report how working relationships are ultimately improving and this in turn is improving the experience for the participant.

” *I’ve been confident referring people to PEC and consider them a partner. It’s good to have a single point of contact for all those organisations... in Clackmannanshire it happens a lot that people are working in silos, so it has been really good... It’s made it easier for people to access employment or pre-employment support.*”
Stakeholder

” *PEC has brought people together, different organisations now have better relationships and different providers now have better relationships.*” Stakeholder

” *It’s unique and really good that all the charities are working together – it maximises what’s going on.*” Stakeholder

One stakeholder also highlighted how it has encouraged new partnerships and ultimately other projects or courses to help support the community.

” *It’s really helped to develop new partnerships between organisations in the community, I’m now developing a project with CERT that would never have happened without PEC.*” Stakeholder

” *On the back of PEC Forth Valley college have run an evening digital computing classes, because the PEC resource is there we can divert some of the resource to the evening classes, we probably wouldn’t have been able to do it without PEC, so it’s widening support out even more to people.*” Stakeholder

Another stakeholder commented on how PEC is starting to impact on the long-term strategic thinking about employability in Clackmannanshire through the Local Employability Partnership (LEP).

” *It’s not just a course, it’s looking further down the line and the LEP is now looking at provision across region and working together more.*” Stakeholder

e) Approach to Communications

Linked to good partnership working is good communications and feedback from stakeholders and participants has been largely positive in relation to how the project communicates to its clients and its partners and wider stakeholders.

The project team, especially the Project Manager (Mark), have made themselves visible to other organisations and participants and have encouraged an openness to working together by communicating well. Earlier in the report we outlined the positive feedback in relation to how the project communicates directly with its participants; this section outlines the positive feedback received on how PEC communicates with its partners in relation to face to face contact and visibility, its approach to social media and digital communications, and its internal processes and procedures.

” *Mark and team do a good job at communicating what’s available and when and we cascade that down through our case workers.*” Stakeholder

” *I’ve been at meetings that Mark’s been at for him to share opportunities so the schools know, partners know, etc . There is high visibility.*” Stakeholder

” *Mark took time to come to the organisations and explain. That was impressive. Usually from other organisations you’ll just get a leaflet.*” Stakeholder

” *It is very visible, social media presence is good, I get contacted every week about what’s happening. The good communications keeps you reminded that they’re there. Mark has been very good at keeping us informed, his communication skills are really good.*” Stakeholder

” *We had a safeguarding issue but PEC were great and they kept us informed and had a process in place to make sure that person was as safe as they could be. That is key to a good partnership and it was really well done by Mark, I got feedback and was rest-assured that that person was in safe place. That was really good.*” Stakeholder

f) Additional Impacts for stakeholders

A small number of stakeholders mentioned some unexpected impacts resulting from their involvement in PEC, these ranged from job creation and visibility to an increase in an organisation’s rental revenue.

For example, Dial a Journey created a couple of extra part time jobs for drivers, and its profile has been raised in the county, at a crucial time following a reduction in the service’s use after COVID.

” *The Dial a Journey service had taken a severe knock because of COVID, our conventional service still hasn’t picked up as much but the spin off from PEC is that the vehicles are seen and they’re more involved in the community, so awareness is getting raised about what we do.*” Stakeholder

Another organisation commented on how their involvement in PEC had improved their own business, for example one community centre commented on the increase in bookings in its venue.

” *it’s great that PEC use our venue, we have classes here and have held events for them too, so it has brought in revenue and then other bookings off the back of those.*” Stakeholder

3.2. Areas for Improvement

While PEC largely received positive feedback, some stakeholders highlighted a number of areas for improvement relating to project delivery. These were to do with the appropriateness of some of the courses and referrals, the tendency for some participants to have their expectations raised beyond their capabilities, and the need for better communications in relation to participants. These points will be expanded on below.

a) Appropriateness of courses/referrals to activities

Some stakeholders questioned whether some of the participants are being sent on the most appropriate courses for them. Sometimes a referral may be beyond the capability of an individual, or may not match an individual’s interests or aspirations.

” *If anything, it might be that some referrals aren’t appropriate – e.g. expecting young people to do things on their own, or check their emails. They might not be ready for that yet.*” Stakeholder

One stakeholder mentioned how a participant had been sent on a work placement that they were not physically able to participate in. Another talked about how the content of a course did not meet the

expectation of its participants, this was highlighted as a particular issue for the construction/trade based courses.

” *A lot of the young guys who are just looking for a job and want a CSCS card or basic Health and Safety cards, they don't want to engage with anything else. A lot of the young lads are just wanting the practical and just wanting a job in construction, it didn't really achieve that for them.*” Stakeholder

b) Raising unrealistic expectations

Another stakeholder gave examples of participants who are being encouraged to do activities that are beyond their capabilities; they recognised the importance of encouraging participants to do things they are interested in, but if a course is beyond the capability of an individual then PEC is risking harming someone's mental health and confidence at a time when it needs to be boosted.

” *I've told PEC that the person can't do the CSCS card, he doesn't have the IT or reading skills to do it so it's setting him up to fail. He's done his CSCS card test and failed 3 times. I've encouraged him to think about doing something else more realistic, continuously failing is not good for their mental health, it's demoralising when they keep failing – so why are they being sent on these courses?*” Stakeholder

c) Sustainability of the key worker role

While the role of the key worker is an important element of PEC from the perspective of the participants, and the stakeholders who appreciate the single point of contact for the project, there is a concern that it is not sustainable when considering the high numbers of participants involved in the project, particularly those who need an intense level of support.

” *From my point of view the difficulty has been the amount of people that we have on our books for just two people working on the project, it's hard to key work 150 active clients and many of them need a lot of support, particularly those who are furthest away from employment. But we have a process now and we're siphoning out the ones who aren't engaging.*” Project Team

” *Clients are needing support just to get involved. You can't just hand them a form and send them an email and stand back, some need hand-holding.*” Stakeholder

d) Communications about participants between support agencies

Linked to the sustainability of the key worker role is the need to improve the communication between agencies in relation to individual participants, this was primarily in the context of ensuring the partners / stakeholders can provide the best service for the participants, but also to ensure the participant can get the best experience out of the project.

” We ask for details to understand the needs of the participants, we have forms for all our volunteers to complete, whether PEC or not, this gives us a heads up on issues e.g. physical ability etc. so we can think and know ahead of time of any issues, also mental health side of things. We got the information but it was very last minute, so it was hard in terms of planning tasks – we could’ve done with that level of detail in advance. [...] on the first week we had an hour filling in forms before we could start, the participants were anxious about filling in forms, one guy nearly left, that could’ve been smoother and a support worker with them would have been good. Some of the people who are being sent to us are really challenging and they may need that extra bit of support that isn’t currently there.” Stakeholder

” There could be better communication – I don’t get anything from PEC to know what others are doing with the participants so I have to find out from them which can be tricky. More comms would be helpful across the services so for example, if I know someone is volunteering at the Japanese Gardens I can tailor what I do with them to help with that, what I do could complement and supplement other support so we’re all working towards the same goal and moving that person on quicker. I feel it needs to be a bit more coordinated across the different services and the opportunities that are being offered to people.” Stakeholder

” It’s important to be aware of how much it takes to run a project like this successfully for PEC to achieve what it’s out to achieve; the resources and time involved are critical. The communication is critical with the support workers and keeping everyone on the same page.” Stakeholder

e) Progression from PEC

There were a small number of stakeholders who commented on the position of PEC within the employability landscape and where people go once they have completed the courses on offer. While it is good that participants can ‘dip in and out’, particularly if they are finding the courses beneficial, but such an approach means there is not always clarity about where they sit within the ‘employability pipeline’ leading to a lack of a sense of progression.

” But how far along does PEC go on the participant’s journey? Do organisations know their roles along the journey? We should all know our role in the journey of the individuals, what’s the pipeline of the individual, what’s their journey? When my job is done with these clients – ok, so what happens to them? Who is taking them on, there still seems to be a lack of continuity and progression, a clear pathway for people. That needs to happen but people aren’t working well enough together just yet.” Stakeholder

3.3. Suggestions for the future

Interviewees were given the opportunity to make suggestions on the future delivery of PEC. This brief section provides an overview of their responses.

a) Additional courses

Participants and stakeholders were asked to consider what additional activities or support might be useful for PEC. While most participants did not provide suggestions and were happy with what was currently on offer, some provided ideas around longer courses, more practical courses (particularly in relation to construction), English courses, and the timings of courses to fit more around childcare responsibilities e.g. within school times.

” *I just think some of the little courses could be enlarged – a lot are an hour and a half – they are fantastic but some of them could be longer sessions going into more depth in some of the subjects, that would be really useful.*”
Participant

” *Other things on offer? I think something with the English – some English courses available – I don’t think there are any available. I learnt when I talk to people in the shop.*”
Participant

” *I have also got 3 children so can only do stuff between 9am and 3pm. I’ve found that quite a few courses e.g. the IT courses are 9am to 4.30pm. They maybe need to think about the timings of the courses so that the mums can do something. The IT is very good but we can’t go to college because it doesn’t fit.*”
Participant

One stakeholder suggested that PEC run courses that are informed by the identified needs of participants on other courses/activities e.g. time management, therefore adding value to the project as a whole.

” *Having a time management course would really add value to what we’re doing. I could go to Mark and say that this particular person could really do with a course on time management, and they could then do a course on that which would be another new skill to help them move closer to work and would add value to the course I’m providing.*”
Stakeholder

One stakeholder highlighted the need to consider what activities might be needed to support refugees coming to Clackmannanshire. As more refugees are encouraged to settle in the area there may be opportunities to support them to apply the skills and experience they bring from their home countries.

b) Taking a more strategic approach

Analysis of the stakeholder feedback suggests that there may be room for PEC, along with its key partners, to take a more strategic, person-centred approach to project design and delivery. The project currently feels like it has been delivered based on what training provision is available rather than what might create opportunities for local people. This might be because of the quick start up nature of the project, but for it to be a success long-term, a more strategic approach might be beneficial; including some labour market analysis, identifying the skills gaps and developing a programme and training that can help fill those gaps. This also lends itself well to volunteering, particularly in industries where there is a lack of staff, for example offering volunteer placements in a local care home or with a care provider, supporting a participant to gain much-needed local skills and experience whilst doing something meaningful. This could be done alongside a mapping exercise to help develop a better understanding of what the various agencies are doing to support PEC’s target groups along their journey / pathway to positive destinations and employment.

The evaluation team suggests the key stakeholders, partners and providers may benefit from having a strategy workshop to take stock of where the PEC project is and how the local employability landscape is working for local people.

” *Providing the target numbers are hit it really needs to continue if there’s that much interest. [...] if it’s known that the infrastructure could run for another year, then I think it could get more established and offer people longer term activities. [...] The preparatory work’s already been done, we know what works and what doesn’t work, there wouldn’t be so much time needed to kickstart it.”* Stakeholder

” *Since being involved in PEC I’ve learned so much about how things work and there are lots of different pieces of the jigsaw, there are so many things that go on, charities and other organisations – let’s pull it all together and all link in and make it even better for the individual. Our focus should be the individual and their journey. it can be very frustrating when people don’t look at it that way”* Stakeholder

4. Conclusion

The evaluation team get the sense that PEC is the start of something positive for Clackmannanshire and its communities and in the main the partners are working well together so far. Participant experiences have been largely positive and the feedback suggests that PEC activities are successfully breaking down some of the barriers to employment and helping to move those furthest away from the labour market closer to getting employment. Not only is PEC offering participants training and volunteering, but it has also been successful at engaging those that are not currently ready for the labour market and giving them something positive to do.

In brief, the evaluation sought to gather participants’ views on:

- **the project and their experience of participating in it** – overall experiences are positive, participants are acknowledging the many benefits of being involved in the project and that it is something new to be involved in. It is encouraging them to meet new people, build up their skills and think about the future. For many it has helped them to feel less alone.
- **the influence of the project on softer measures such as confidence, motivation, and wellbeing** – the project has clearly had a positive impact on participants’ softer outcomes, this was recognised by participants and stakeholders. Many reported an improvement in confidence, motivation and mental wellbeing and these positive impacts were also observed by stakeholders.
- **their experience of wider employability supports and how PEC compares and fits with these** – PEC is clearly offering something new and filling a gap in provision in Clackmannanshire.
- **which elements of PEC were seen as having the greatest impact** – all aspects of PEC have been commended, however the community-based/grassroots approach, along with the key worker support and PEC’s positive approach to communications have been particularly important to the project’s success.
- **their views on barriers they face to moving to employment** – many of the barriers faced by participants were those already known to the project team, however the most cited by participants were around mental health and anxiety, childcare and transport.

- ***what activities/supports they feel would be most useful for them to reach stable employment*** – most participants felt more courses would be beneficial. Some talked about the need for more practical courses others talked of a need for a clearer progression route.

Despite its success so far, there is more that could be done to improve the experiences and outcomes for local people. Partnership working, while it has developed well and is improving over time, could be better. Some internal process for communication about participants could also be improved and a more person-centred rather than provision-led approach could benefit participants further. Despite this, considering the length of time the project has been running and its capacity in terms of size of project team, its progress and achievements are certainly commendable.

5. Recommendations

Drawing on and considering the findings presented in this report, the qualitative evaluation team recommend that, if the project continues, it could be improved through:

- Improving information sharing between providers and working closer with partners to align with other provision; leading to a more seamless experience for the participants and ensuring provision is more person-led than service-led.
- Broadening course provision and making adjustments where necessary, e.g. timings to suit childcare, having a more practical focus where appropriate.
- Clarifying the key worker role (internally and externally), what it is there to do, and the level of engagement expected with the participants and other providers.

In addition, the future research could include:

- Identifying the skills gaps in Clackmannanshire and the barriers faced by employers to filling those gaps. How is local training provision helping to fill those gaps?
- Research into the experience of the employability landscape in Clackmannanshire from the perspective of the individual – understanding the ‘pathway’ of participants. What is the journey to employment like for the participant? How could it be improved? How might the barriers be reduced?