

Briefing

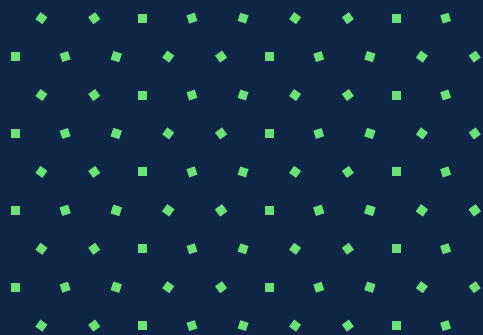
# Return to Work ICT programme

July 2021



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**Baroness Berridge,**  
minister for women



*Recorded message from  
Baroness Berridge, minister  
for women, to Socitm's Share  
National: Leadership, Diversity  
and Skills online conference,  
on 28 April 2021*

## Minister's foreword

I think we can all agree that everyone should have an equal opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of gender or background. However, gender norms and stereotypes often shape the choices and behaviours considered appropriate in any social group or society. They can also limit aspirations of both women and men, preventing them from meeting their potential. This can often result in gender imbalances for certain roles, such as those in the Stem [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] fields.

It is likely that at some point in our lifetime most of us will leave employment, either for a career break, to raise a family or to care for others. We know that unpaid care work including childcare and informal adult care is disproportionately performed by women. That is why we have funded the Return to Work ICT programme, which has supported those who may have left work due to caring responsibilities or have lost their job during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Taking time out of work does not mean you stop learning or developing your skills. A career break to care for others often provides resilience, communication and management skills which can be valuable in any workplace. Some employers have led the way in offering both flexible and remote working opportunities whilst lockdown restrictions are in place. These can be attractive for those with ongoing caring responsibilities and as we move out of lockdown, I would encourage you to continue this flexible working offer. I'd also ask that you take advantage of the evidence-based employer resources that are publicly available on Gov.uk.

We're committed to understanding how best we can support employers with recruiting and retaining returners so that you can have access to the full range of talent when supporting the UK's economic recovery.

# Introduction

I have had the privilege of overseeing the delivery of the Return to Work ICT programme from a Socitm perspective. It has been a really humbling and insightful experience, because we have clearly seen the difference that the programme has made to our returners and benefits they have realised. Socitm is absolutely passionate about investing in people, supporting them to realise their potential, seeing their personal development journeys progress and helping to create a more diverse talent pool for the sector.

The programme was complex to plan and deliver as there were a number of core components delivered for every returner. They were divided into six cohorts with customised learning journeys based on the role that they had expressed an interest in.



They accessed a total of 4,290 hours of Cloud Academy technical material over the programme's three months, which is absolutely phenomenal. We found that returners were not only accessing collateral relating to their own learner pathways, but because they had free rein to use all of the platform, they also picked up material that they found interesting or that they wanted to develop skills in. We also delivered more than 160 hours of soft skills training.

Socitm also provided the participants with insights into local government by hosting webinars and creating information resources. A key additional benefit is access to Socitm membership for the remainder of 2021, including our events, our Inform publications, Resource Hub and access to network-building relationships.

The great majority, 73 of 91, completed the programme. So far, we have six people who through the programme have found employment and we hope to increase that number. It's been hugely inspirational to see the impact and difference that our efforts have resulted in. We would want to run similar programmes in the future and want to use the opportunity to encourage the sector and its employers to support the approach of diversifying its talent pipeline through such initiatives.

These types of programmes deliver results and positive outcomes. The sector will need to adopt initiatives such as this one to help tackle the reported gaps within the profession and to create the talent pipeline which will develop the innovative, authentic and passionate leaders of the future.

**Nadira Hussain**

Leadership development and research director, Socitm

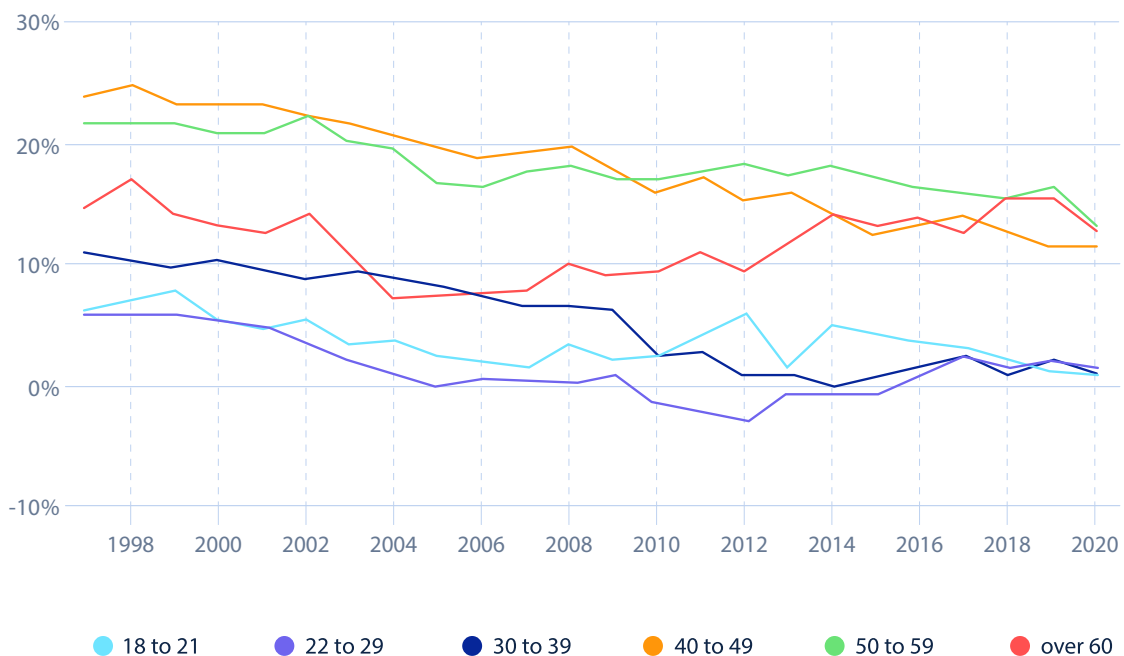
## Why is a returner's programme needed?

It has been illegal in the UK to pay men more than women for the same work since the Equal Pay Act came into force on 29 December 1975. But nearly 44 years later, women still earn less on average for each hour of work than men. The most recent research by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) covering April 2020 found that the gender pay gap for median gross hourly earnings was 15.5% for all jobs and 7.4% for full-time ones. It has been narrowing over time – in 2000 the gap was 26.7% for all jobs – but at present rates it would take another quarter-century to close completely.

The overall data hides clear differences based on age. Men and women aged under 40 earn almost the same per hour, but there is a pay gap of more than 10% for women who are older than 40. The ONS says that women are less likely than men to move into higher-paid roles in their 40s and more likely to take part-time work, with greater caring responsibilities a factor in this.

### Gender pay gap for full-time median gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime), UK, April 1997 to 2020

The gender pay gap has fallen to almost zero among full-time employees aged under 40 years



Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE)

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that women earn around 2% less for every year they spend out of paid work. Nina Lawrence, head of return to work policy at the Government Equalities Office (GEO), told a session at Socitm's Share National Leadership, Diversity and Skills on 28 April, that although some men experience problems re-joining the job market, 90% of those seeking to return to work are women.

Alongside this, women are under-represented in IT roles, with another set of ONS data showing that just one in eight programmers and software developers are female. Those who step away from a career in IT for a while can face a particularly tough struggle to return, given the speed with which technology changes.

For public sector employers, those seeking to return to work in IT represent a source of experienced employees in an industry where attracting good staff can be hard. With many being women, such schemes can also help technology departments to represent those they serve, which can help in designing services that work for everyone.

### Women in IT: paid less and under-represented

	Women's earnings per hour	How much less women earn than men per hour	Proportion of jobs held by women
IT Specialist managers	£23.34	11.4%	25%
IT business analysts, architects and systems designers	£20.48	19.3%	17%
Programmers and software development professionals	£21.00	6.0%	12%
Web design and development professionals	£15.15	7.6%	31%
IT user support technicians	£13.70	12.3%	22%

Source: ONS data for 2020 for IT-related roles with information available on both gender pay gap and proportion of jobs held by women ([bit.ly/2SXjavU](https://bit.ly/2SXjavU))

## The government's return to work programmes

In 2017, GEO launched return to work programmes for four areas: civil servants, social workers, allied health workers and teachers. It now funds 25 programmes across England, including ones focused on the spouses of military personnel and veterans, highly-skilled migrants and homeless people, and offers advice to employers on how to set up their own similar programmes.

GEO defines a returner as "someone who has taken time out of employment for caring responsibilities and wants to return to paid work", with 1.1 million people in the UK fitting this definition. But Nina Lawrence told those attending the Socitm event on 28 April, that they face many barriers:

- › Lack of relevant or up-to-date skills
- › Low self-esteem or low confidence
- › Lack of flexible work and job opportunities
- › Lack of affordable and suitable care
- › Attitudes and discrimination

She said that Covid-19 has exacerbated some of these issues but has also opened opportunities, such as flexible working becoming widespread and a greater consideration of employees' caring responsibilities. There has also been a surge of interest in returning to NHS roles, with more than 40,000 people expressing interest in these opportunities since March 2020. "We're facing huge challenges with Covid-19 and we need to make sure we use every ounce of talent available so we have a really strong economic recovery," Lawrence added.

## Return to Work ICT programme

The Local Government Association (LGA) has been involved in the government's return to work programmes since 2017, through a pilot for social workers. In 2020, it announced it would collaborate with GEO to run programmes with local authorities in four areas – social work, planning, legal and ICT – with Socitm acting as its partner on the Return to Work ICT programme. Suzanne Hudson, the LGA's senior adviser for workforce, said the association saw potential to help local authorities in finding hard-to-find ICT professionals.

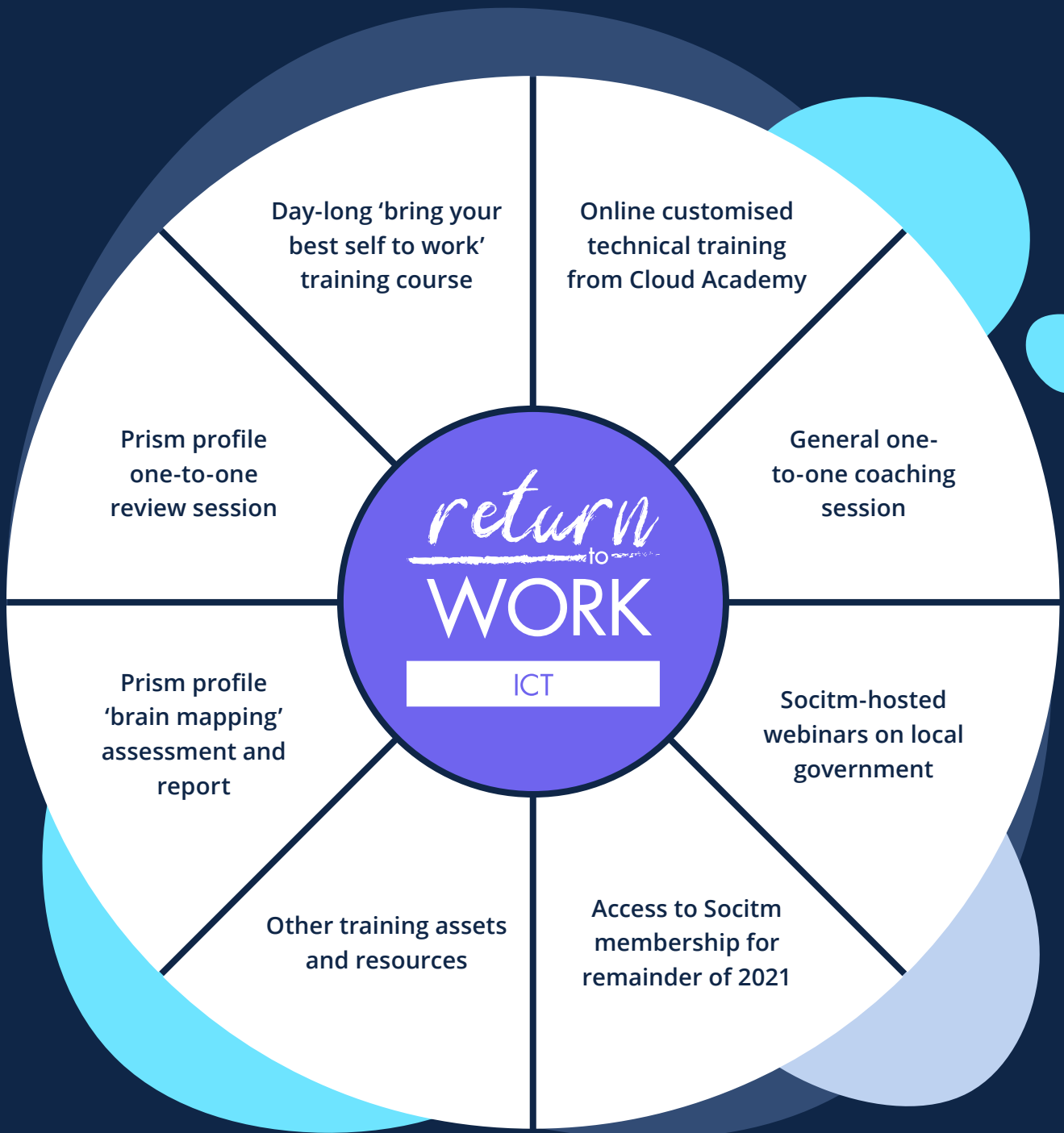
The initial programme ran from January to March 2021 after having to close entries after receiving 845 expressions of interest and 517 applications, which were also allowed from those who had lost jobs during the pandemic. More than 50 councils signed up to share job opportunities with candidates.

Of 91 who started the course 73 people completed it, with 51% having current caring responsibilities, 11% aged 60 or above, 5% having a disability and 42% from a black and minority ethnic background. "We saw so many people from so many walks of life apply to the programme. It really does help those who would otherwise suffer barriers at recruitment level from a normal recruitment process to access work," Hudson said. Project managers and IT technical support roles were the most common among those taking part.

"We have so much talent out there and we're not unlocking it enough," Hudson said. "These returner programmes help provide the key to do that."



# Core components of the programme





## What returners have said



Rayan  
Ibrahim

"The soft skills training really helped me a lot. I learned how to sell myself with the training I got from the programme, when having been interviewed I had my Prism profile right in front of me and it did indeed work."

"Excellent. Great access to training material and soft skills support. I had no expectation but was pleasantly surprised. A great concept. Do it and make the time to take full advantage of the resources offered. I have realized I still offer significant value to a potential employer."



Alasdair  
MacDonald



Leon  
Pearson

"The Prism mind mapping gave me a better understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses. The more you put into the programme, the more you get out."

"The online training is great and also the coaching. Being put in touch with other candidates has been great as we have supported each other. Don't give up on your aim of getting back to work. A returner's programme can make you more valuable to future employers.

"I have been ready to return to work for a long time. I sometimes even dream that I am back in the office. I feel like I have been on a journey and I think this programme is getting me closer to my goal."



Richard  
Thornton

## About this briefing

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