

SMART
WORKS
NORTH EAST

The Gendered Reality of Job-Seeking

The Smart Works Index 2025

NORTH EAST FOCUS



About Smart Works North East

Smart Works North East was established in 2018 with the aim to empower women into fulfilling their potential, getting the job and transforming their lives.

The charity is run by 5 members of staff, and powered by a network of over 40 volunteer stylists and coaches, who dedicate their time to supporting our clients in feeling confident in their abilities and skillset and ultimately into employment.

About the Index

The Smart Works North East Index brings together quantitative data and lived experiences of women who used the service while actively seeking employment across Newcastle and the wider North East region. Its core purpose is to explore how women in the North East are engaging with the job market, the level of effort they put in and the challenges they face. It highlights how gender, caring responsibilities, disability, age and ethnicity shape the job seeking experiences and employment outcomes in the region.

The Index draws on client data collected annually between 2022 and 2025 from women using the Smart Works North East service while engaged in the job market. This enables year-on-year comparison and alignment with the national Smart Works Index, while maintaining a clear regional focus.

Acknowledgements

Smart Works North East would like to thank every client who contributed to this research. We're especially grateful to Amila*, Miriam*, Kelly* and Chloe* who consented to us sharing their experiences.

**All case study names in this report have been changed to protect privacy.*

We'd also like to thank Samara Laboriel and Angela Rawstone for writing this report and Norton Rose Fulbright for printing this important document.

Foreword

Having worked at Smart Works North East for almost 7 years, I have seen how unemployment can significantly affect women's confidence, despite the considerable effort they put into their job search. Many of the women we serve are parents, or have other caring responsibilities, or are neurodivergent and are met with barriers such as inflexible roles and recruitment processes that are not inclusive. At Smart Works North East we provide tailored support that meets the individual needs of our clients. This report highlights why that support matters, not only for women across the region, but for the wider North East economy. Despite having one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, 63% of the women we support go on to secure employment after visiting us.

The Index shows a clear disconnect between the effort, motivations and aspirations of women in the North East and the outcomes they experience. We hope it not only encourages employers and partners to recognise the talent and determination they have, but also recognise Smart Works as a vital component of the job-search ecosystem in the North East.



Helen Boyd
Head of Smart Works North East

The release of this regional Index highlights the significant impact of the Smart Works service across the North East. With 63% of women moving into employment after visiting us, we are actively challenging one of the region's most persistent issues: long term and structural unemployment.

Our purpose is not only to support women into work but to restore the confidence that is so often eroded during the job seeking process. We see first-hand how widespread low confidence is among women, and how it is frequently reinforced by recruitment and application processes that are not inclusive.

This Index should act as a wake up call for employers. Women in the North East are committed, ambitious and highly skilled. They are putting in the effort, and employers must meet them in the middle by creating recruitment processes which recognise diverse experiences, responsibilities and needs. We cannot do this alone. Both our service and the women we support depend on strong, trusted partnerships to continue empowering women into employment.



Sophie Milliken MBE
Chair of the Board of Trustees,
Smart Works North East

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Executive Summary

The Smart Works North East Index combines client data with lived experience to understand how women in the region are navigating the job market.

Women in the North East are dedicating significant time and effort to finding work, engaging with support, and applying for roles yet their employment outcomes remain weaker than those in other regions.

This report explores:

- The scale of effort women are investing
- The impact job seeking has on confidence
- The job success landscape for women who access Smart Works services
- Why and how the Smart Works service is essential in helping to strengthen the North East economy

At a national level, the report signals how effort is rising but opportunity is not. Inequalities persist with those who are already at a disadvantage, experiencing the greatest challenges. Disabled women report the sharpest confidence declines, women from ethnic minority backgrounds apply for more roles but achieve lower success rates and parents and women aged 50+ continue to be pushed to the margins by a lack of flexibility in roles and tolerance for career breaks.

The consequence is a collapse in confidence in many women, created by the job search process. Women describe silence, unclear expectations and repeated rejection as the hallmark of job-seeking in 2025. Yet, these findings reflect only the women Smart Works can reach; many more navigate the process alone, without tailored support or human contact.

Despite these challenges, one finding is consistent: with the right support, women succeed. In 2025, 68% of Smart Works clients secured a job, outperforming national trends of falling vacancies and rising long-term unemployment. This demonstrates the impact of targeted, human-centred support.

The Index shows how current hiring practices shut women out, with long-term consequences for financial security and wellbeing. The emotional and financial toll of unemployment stems from a system that demands too much, gives too little, hides human contact, rejects without explanation, penalises caring responsibilities and amplifies inequality.

These findings make it clear that current hiring systems are not yet enabling women to succeed. Meaningful change is still required.



Our Clients

Women come to Smart Works North East on a referral basis. We partner with a diverse range of local referral partners consisting of Job Centres, women's charities, refugee organisations, colleges, universities, prisons, and community groups.

Based on early 2025 labour market data, employment rates for women in the North East decreased by 1.2% compared with 2024, in contrast to a 0.7% national increase in female employment (North East Evidence Hub, 2025; Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics, Oct 2024–Sept 2025). This makes the North East the lowest regional rate for female employment in the UK. This decline not only shows the deterioration in the job market for women but also the increasing need for our service.

Our clients are made up from a wide range of identities and experiences. Young people who are beginning their careers, women balancing caring responsibilities and employment, women who have travelled to the UK for a better life, women returning after time out of employment, disabled women and older women.

All our clients are united in their commitment to find secure and sustainable work and have been met with systemic challenges which have prevented them from doing so.

Sample size

404

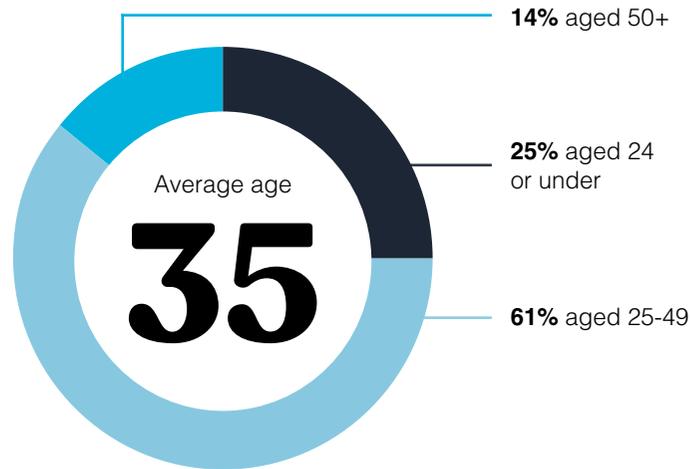
The 2025 dataset provides a robust, diverse and relevant sample



How Clients from Smart Works North East Feature in The 2025 Index

The National 2025 dataset (sample size 4651) provides a robust, diverse and nationally relevant sample. 404 clients from the North East were included in this data set and their composition is provided. The analysis is based primarily on women attending Interview Preparation (first dressing and coaching) appointments. The final dataset was restricted to cases with at most one non-response to our service feedback survey.

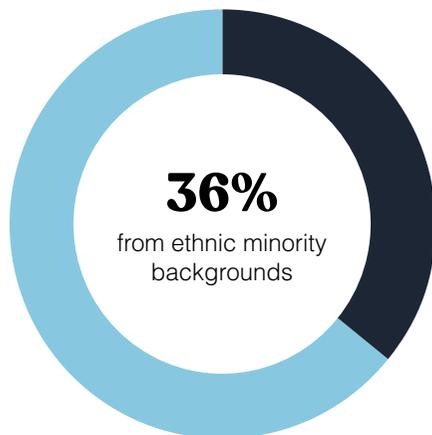
Age



Disability



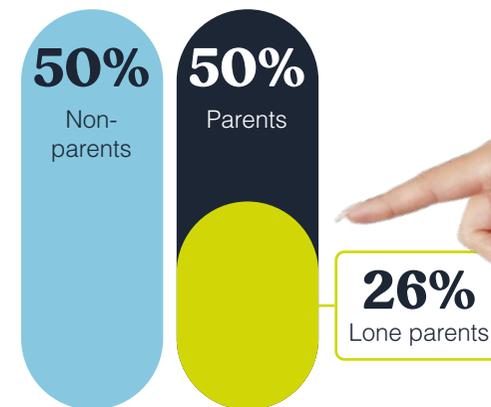
Ethnicity



What jobs our clients apply for



Parenthood



This illustrates the sectors in which our clients secured employment at a national level.

Miriam

Age 37

“I needed a job with flexibility, it was proving too hard to find something permanent and flexible at the same time.”

📍 Throckley,
Smart Works North East Client



Miriam* was beginning to lose hope, having spent close to 2 years unemployed but diligently dedicating at least 15 hours to job searching a week. She had applied for over 100 roles and attended multiple interviews without success. Though she was exactly qualified for the roles she was applying for, the lack of permanent jobs that also met her flexible needs began to elicit rejections which began to significantly impact her confidence, making the application and interview process increasingly difficult. As a parent, the pressure to secure stable employment was heightened.

“
I needed a job with flexibility, it was proving too hard to find something permanent and flexible at the same time.

After discovering Smart Works at an outreach event, Miriam* contacted us ahead of an interview for a Project Development Officer position. Working closely with a volunteer stylist to select professional clothing that made her feel comfortable and confident as well as the work coach, who helped her refine her interview performance, clarify her strengths with clarity and confidence, making sure she was ready for the interview.

“
I really enjoyed the meeting. I was overwhelmed with happiness and left feeling confident. Felt like I was myself again. There was joy, support and friendliness.

After being offered the job, Miriam* returned to us for a second dressing. She shared, 'Every question they put to me I felt prepared for. I was nervous but was prepared. It really paid off'.

Olivia

Age 19

“A job would mean a new start and a chance to build.”

📍 South Shields,
Smart Works North East Client



At 19, Olivia* was at the beginning of her job journey, having never had an interview before. She was determined to gain independence by earning her own money. As a result, she dedicated at least 21 hours a week to her job search, with no success. This left Olivia* feeling less confident with the process of applying for jobs.

“

I'd wanted a job for a long time but struggled a lot to even get to an interview. It meant a lot to me to be able to just say, I'm employed.

In time, Olivia* was invited to an interview for a retail assistant. She shared the news with her work coach at Wallsend Job Centre, who then referred her to the service for some support to help her prepare.

Her session focused on interview etiquette and how to align her skills to the job specifications.

Olivia* didn't get the job, but still felt as though a big difference had been made in her ability to enter the job market with confidence in herself.

“

Everyone I came across was so friendly but professional. I left feeling great about myself.

Young People Across the North East

In 2024, Smart Works North East noticed the service was underused by young people. To better understand the help young people valued and needed when it came to employment support, a survey was created for clients aged 16-25. 56 clients who engaged with the service were surveyed between November 2024 and December 2025

When asked about the biggest obstacles they face when finding work, respondents most frequently cited lack of experience, difficulty writing a CV and lack of constructive feedback from submitted applications. These barriers suggest recruitment systems that are not inclusive for those at the early stages of their career, expecting familiarity with workplace norms, and offering limited guidance or feedback to first time applicants.

Confidence erosion

Confidence levels among young women are gradually decreasing. Fewer than **1 in 4** respondents described themselves as confident about finding work, with the majority reporting uncertainty or low confidence. Without proper tailored support, repeated rejection this early on creates a feeling of self doubt before their career had begun.

What young women are asking for

The survey answers show a strong need for practical, personalised support. One-to-one interview practice and tailored CV feedback were chosen as the most helpful forms of support. This aligns directly with the service we provide at Smart Works North East.

1 in 7 respondents said that confidence plays an important role in job interview success, underscoring why it is important to preserve this, especially in young women with limited experience who are at the early stages of the job market.

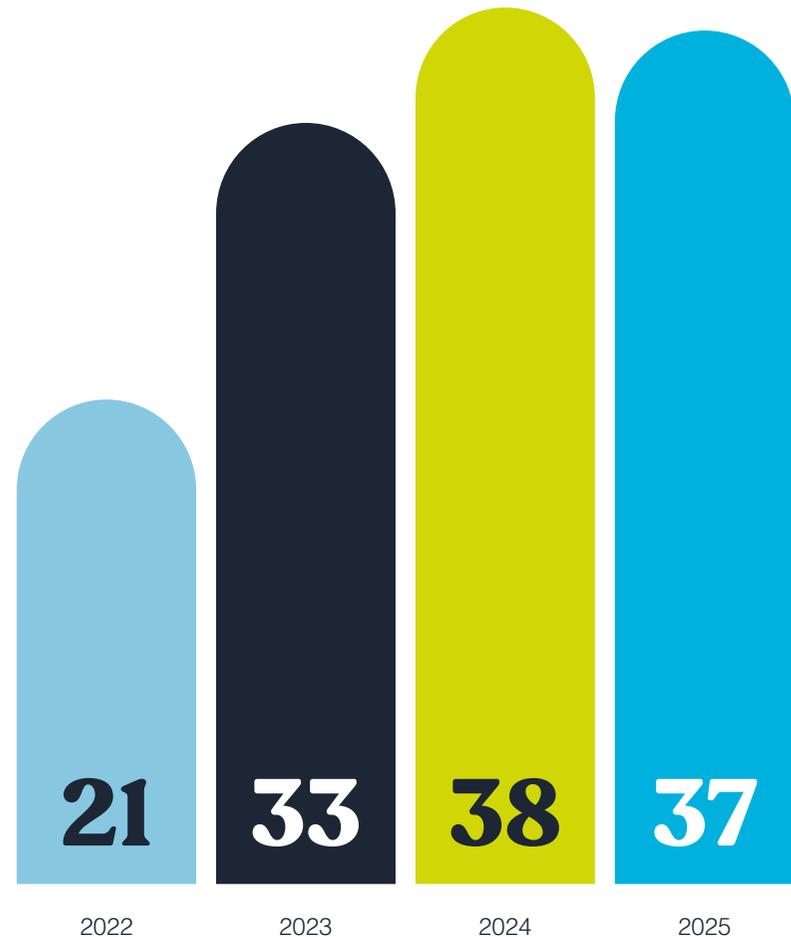
70% say confidence is very important for interview success.

Why this matters

Early intervention is key. Without tailored support, short term job search challenges can escalate into long term unemployment bringing with it the associated risk of ever declining confidence. By supporting young women early on, Smart Works North East helps prevent early setbacks from becoming long term economic inactivity.

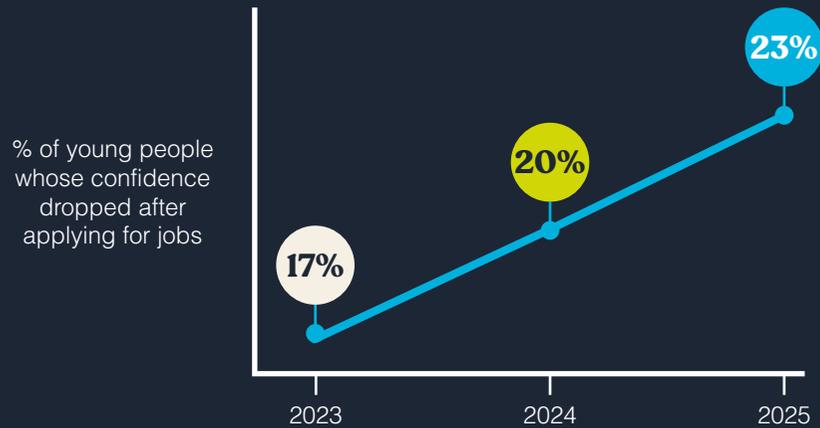
Average applications

Over the past four years, young women in the North East have **nearly doubled the number of job applications they submit**, from 21 to 37 per person.



Confidence loss

Despite this effort, confidence is falling, with almost a quarter **(23%)** feeling **much less** confident when applying for jobs in 2025.



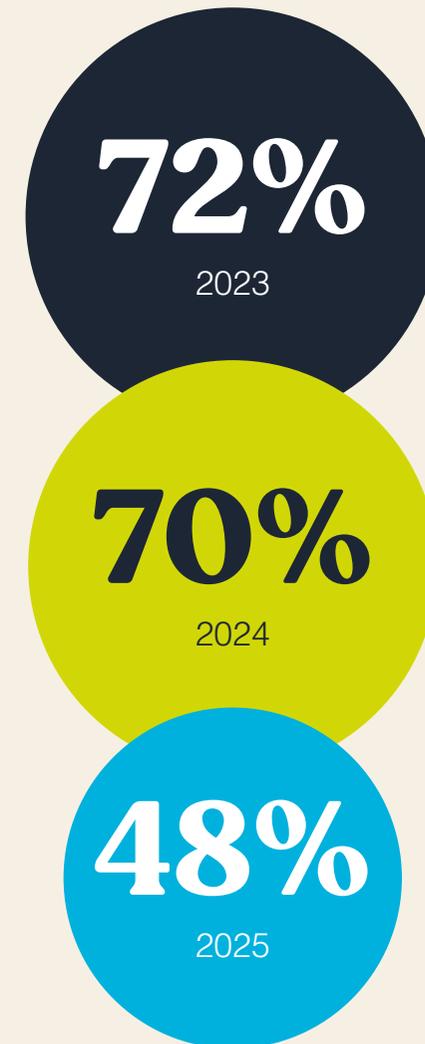
Biggest challenges faced when looking for a job

Survey respondents reported:

- Lack of experience: **60%**
- Lack of confidence, interview anxiety: **57%**
- Difficulty writing CV and cover letter: **51%**
- Lack of constructive feedback: **40%**

Job success rate

Job success rates have dropped dramatically — from **72%** in 2023 to **48%** in 2025 showing the rising challenges of securing employment.



The Reality of Being a Woman in the North East

Women in the North East are disproportionately affected by entrenched employment inequalities, high levels of benefit dependency and child poverty compared to the national average. Such conditions create an increasingly difficult environment for women to find work.

National figures from Woman of the North: Inequality, Health and Work (Health Equity North, 2024) show that the North East of England had the second-highest overall poverty rate in England at **25.4%**. In the same report all Local Authorities in the region record child poverty rates higher than the English average. Families are more likely to rely on Universal Credit, with the North East having the highest proportion of women claiming UC outside London as well as the highest sanction rate in the UK (**9.2%**).

Women in the North East are **30%** more likely to be sanctioned than those living in the South West. These pressures lead to increased stress and poor mental health, delaying any readiness to work.

Over 50% of our clients are parents

Both parents and lone parents consistently experience weaker employment outcomes, despite high levels of effort. This aligns with wider evidence showing the cost of living crisis impacts parents and carers the hardest. When employment opportunities fail to accommodate caring responsibilities this can increase the risk of long term unemployment and, in turn, child poverty.

Caring, Age and Confidence

The most recent Woman of the North: Inequality, Health and Work report (Health Equity North, 2024) found that **1 in 5** women aged 55-59 in the North East provide unpaid care to a family member. Women aged 50 and over supported by Smart Works North East experienced the sharpest decline in confidence while applying. This is not in isolation: the report also showed that women in the North East dedicate 20-50 hours per week to caring for family members.

Women in the North East contribute to an estimated £10 billion of unpaid care annually. Yet this contribution is not acknowledged in recruitment with client experiences suggesting that employment breaks due to caring responsibilities are often a barrier to employment. This gap in employment can contribute to a loss of confidence in women, whilst employers often interpret it as a lack of commitment or capability.

63%

of Smart Works North East clients secure employment

58%

of clients feel less confident applying for jobs because of the job search process

41%

have been out of work for over a year



Smart Works North East clients spend an average of 23 hours per week searching for work, equivalent to a part-time job.

Despite this:

1. Women in the North East dedicate the same amount of time job searching as the Smart Works national average (23 hours), yet employment outcomes are weaker.
2. On average ethnic minority clients submit 1.5 times more applications than white clients yet experience the same outcomes. Average applications: ethnic minority clients (47), white clients (31). For regional success rates the results show: ethnic minority clients (63%), white clients (63%), lone parents (74%).
3. Young women in the North East aged 16-25 dedicate an average of 22 hours a week to their job search but experience the weakest job success outcomes, leaving over half feeling less confident in their job search.
4. Women 50 or over and disabled women experience the steepest loss of confidence while applying for jobs.

According to the most recent Women of the North, Health Equity Report, employed women in the North East have the highest number of entry-level roles (**10.9%**) compared to their counterparts in the North West and Yorkshire. These are roles that have little progression, are often repetitive and are considered low pay.

North East (10.9%)

Yorkshire and Humber (10.6%)

North West (9.5%)

The Gendered Reality of Job-Seeking in the UK

Across the UK, women are working intensely to secure employment, yet the recruitment practices they encounter are often not designed with their realities in mind.

Three key trends emerge from the national-level Index 2025 data, representing the average experience of Smart Works clients across the UK.

The Mechanics of Job-Seeking Exclude Women:

- Women apply for an average of **42** jobs before seeking support; **1 in 3** apply for **50+**.
- Automated screening, inflated criteria and inconsistent processes mean many are rejected before a human ever sees their application.

Solutions:

These simple, scalable adjustments would help employers find talent more effectively, and prevent capable women from being filtered out before their potential is recognised:

- Make applications simpler and clearer so candidates aren't exhausted by unnecessary steps.
- Add meaningful human connection at key moments to build confidence and reduce drop-off.
- Use automation carefully to support, not replace, fair judgement, especially for those with non-linear careers.

Identity Predicts Outcome:

- **Women with disabilities: 72%** say applications damage their confidence — the highest of any group.
- **Parents: 50%** unemployed for over a year; **27%** for more than three years.
- **Women from ethnic minorities:** apply for more roles: **43** (vs **41** for other clients) but have lower job success: **66%** (vs **70%** for other clients).
- **Older women: 70%** feel less confident after applying.

These patterns reflect structural disadvantage, not individual shortcomings.

Solutions:

These simple actions help ensure talent is recognised fairly and consistently across all groups:

- Build flexibility into roles and interviews so parents, carers and women with disabilities are not excluded before they even apply.
- Prioritise skills over linear career paths, giving candidates space to demonstrate transferable strengths rather than being screened out for gaps.
- Sense-check shortlisting patterns to spot where strong candidates may be unintentionally overlooked.

The Human Cost is Overlooked:

- **63%** of women say job searching reduces their confidence - of these, **30%** feel much less confident.
- Financial strain forces many to cut essentials, use savings, take on debt or struggle to afford childcare, transport or broadband.
- Many apply for roles below their skill level - **16%** feel overqualified for the role they have applied to.
- **41%** of Smart Works clients have been out of work for over a year, describing shrinking routines and a sense of becoming invisible.

Solutions:

These simple actions reduce the hidden cost of job seeking, support wellbeing and confidence, and strengthen the overall candidate experience:

- Keep assessments focused and proportionate so candidates aren't spending hours on unpaid tasks that don't reflect the needs of the role.
- Minimise financial barriers by avoiding unnecessary costs and offering virtual or supported interview options where possible.
- Acknowledge the emotional impact of long-term job searching through human-centred communication and brief, constructive feedback.

What happens when women get the right support

- In 2025, nationally **68%** of Smart Works clients secured a job.
- Their success shows women are ready to work, and that when recruitment systems are fair, human-centred and accessible, talent rises.

The question is no longer whether women are trying hard enough, but whether the systems they face are designed to recognise their potential.

Effort vs Outcome

Confidence is declining, despite increased effort

Confidence among our clients has fallen by **8%** since 2023, suggesting that the emotional labour of prolonged job searching is rising. Increased application activity combined with lowering success rates appears to be having a detrimental effect on confidence rather than building it. This points to a labour market where persistence is no longer enough to secure employment.

Skills alignment is improving, but outcomes are not.

Fewer women report feeling overqualified, with a **7%** decrease since 2023. This indicates that women are applying more tactically, targeting roles better aligned with their experience. However, this does not translate to higher success rates, raising questions about what barriers remain.

Clear disconnect between fit and hiring outcomes

Women are applying for roles they are better suited to, but this does not lead to better success outcomes. Instead, success has declined, dropping from **67%** in 2024 to **63%** in 2025. This suggests that structural factors outside of individual skillsets, such as employer expectations, higher competition, lack of flexibility, or bias is shaping outcomes.

These findings show the importance in offering tailored, confidence building support. Not only to ensure women's skills and experience is recognised but also so their needs can be met when it comes to finding a role that is right for them.

Solutions:

Designing flexible roles by default

Roles should be modelled as flexible first rather than being the exception, especially for carers and parents.

Valuing transferable skills

Unpaid caring, volunteering and community work need to be recognised as valuable skills.

Reducing unnecessary barriers

Eradicate the use of rigid CV screening and processes that disadvantage those with limited access to devices, and time.

Challenge age and disability bias

Ensure older women and disabled candidates are not overlooked due to assumptions about capability or commitment.

If the North East is to thrive economically, businesses must remove the barriers that prevent women from contributing their skills, experience and commitment to the workforce.



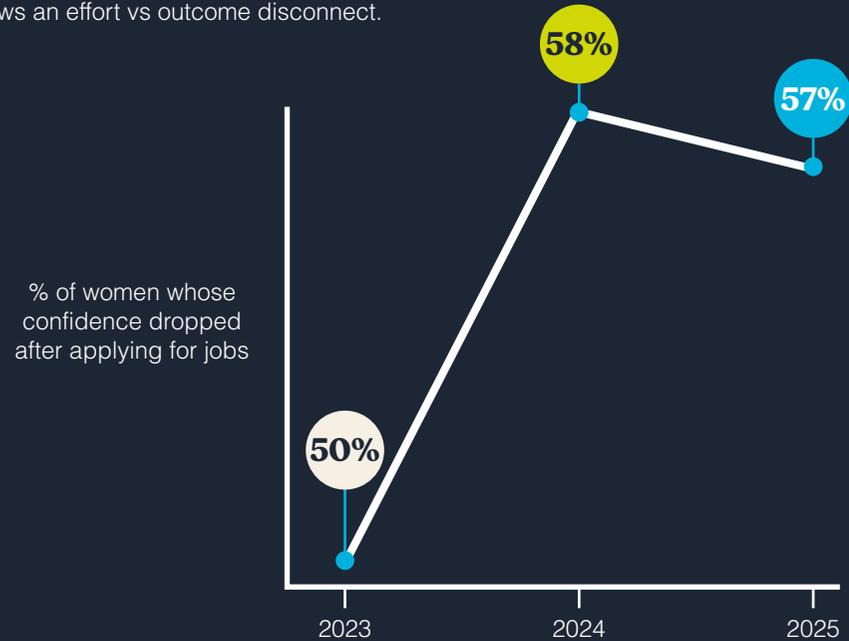
Average increasing

Women are applying for more roles, yet confidence has fallen.



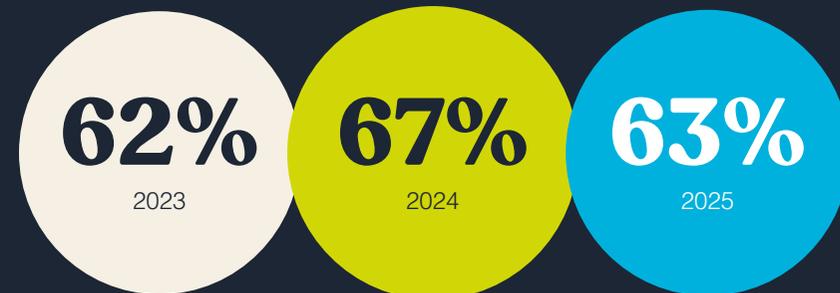
Confidence decline

Lower confidence, despite increased effort, shows an effort vs outcome disconnect.



Job success rate

In the last year, job success rates for Smart Works clients in the North East have dropped, a reflection of an increasingly challenging labour market in the region.



Amila

Age 26

“Everything was just perfect and so thoughtful. Enough for me to feel great and ready for the interview.”

📍 Gosforth,
Smart Works North East Client



After almost six months unemployed, Amila had applied for nearly 100 roles and attended five interviews without success. Repeated rejection and limited feedback began to affect her confidence, while the demands of applications and interviews were both time-consuming and stressful. Securing work was critical, as it would help fund her PhD studies and support her long-term career ambitions.

“

I needed a job to pay for my PhD tuition fees. I was certain having a job would change my life and my future.

After discovering Smart Works at a jobs fair, Amila contacted us ahead of an interview for a Trading Assistant role. She worked with a volunteer coach on mock interviews and preparing clear, confident answers.

“

The session really helped me work on my answers and feel confident. I was also over the moon with the clothes – the stylists had such great taste.

Since visiting Smart Works North East, Amila has secured a permanent teaching assistant role at a local university alongside her studies.

Kelly

Age 50

“Getting the job felt like I was finally succeeding and a huge weight off my shoulders.”

📍 Walker,
Smart Works North East Client

Kelly had experienced 3 years of unemployment, having taken some time off to care for her parent. Despite applying for roles in healthcare, retail, and administration, she considered herself exactly qualified for these roles. However, the lack of responses to her applications began to make her feel less confident. The time out of work and caring responsibilities had affected her self-belief, leaving her unsure how to present her skills.

“

I had spent a long time out of work caring for a family member. So my confidence was low when it came to applying. So I began applying for anything, but not hearing back made me feel I was getting nowhere.

Eventually, Kelly* was invited to an interview to be a Health Care Assistant. She liaised with her work coach at Reed in Partnership, who referred her for some support ahead of the interview. Kelly's* session focused on rebuilding her confidence and communicating her transferable skills, as well as finding her an outfit that she felt completely comfortable in. Choosing an outfit with guidance helped her feel she

was 'choosing the right outfit for me' while the coaching helped her feel like a 'better version of myself'.



Kelly* got the job, so she came back to us for her second dressing. She noted that 'having a job now means I get independence, a purpose and being able to contribute to society again'.

The Smart Works Effect in the North East



Over
3500
women supported
since opening in 2018

98%

of our clients say they feel more confident in their ability to be successful in interviews after their visit

63%

of our clients secure a job after visiting

This report shows that with the right support, women can overcome the barriers the system puts in their way.

Why the Smart Works model works

Where the system is automated, Smart Works is human.

Where the process is rigid, Smart Works is tailored.

Where confidence collapses, Smart Works rebuilds it.

Our quantitative and qualitative data show that clients struggle most when recruitment is, impersonal, automated, inconsistent and confidence damaging. These are characteristics of a hiring process that lead to a decline in confidence. The Smart Works model directly addresses the consequences of such hiring practices.

1. Human contact

Real conversation, empathy and guidance, everything the online process removes.

2. Tailored support

Coaching that reflects each woman's strengths, circumstances and goals.

3. Confidence building

Evidence from our clients shows the transformative impact of being seen and believed in.

4. Skills translation

Helping women articulate transferable skills in a way which means they are not overlooked by automated systems.

5. Interview preparation

Mock interviews, personalised feedback and practical guidance that the system does not provide.

6. Visible empowerment

Professional clothing that reflects competence, credibility and self-belief.

7. Emotional resilience

Support that helps women absorb rejection, regain motivation and keep going.

8. Professional presentation

Equipping women with the tools, verbal, non-verbal and visual to present their best selves at interview.



Why Smart Works North East Needs Support Now

Since our inception, data shows that the labour market is getting increasingly competitive, less inclusive and simultaneously, women's confidence in the North East of all ages is on the decline.

Women of all ages are showing up, applying for job roles and engaging with support, yet still continue to struggle for successful outcomes.

Despite this, 63% of Smart Works North East clients get a job after their visit. In 2025 alone, Smart Works North East supported over 700 women, delivering 491 interview preparation appointments, 275 career coaching sessions and 158 second dressings for women who had secured the job.

These appointments are offered both in person and virtually, to ensure we can provide the service to clients in the best way that suits them.

For us to continue meeting the growing demand for our support, we must:

- ✓ Delve deeper into communities and reach more women
- ✓ Continue to onboard a diverse range of volunteers
- ✓ Invest in our wardrobe and centres
- ✓ Expand our centres, so distance is never a barrier
- ✓ Continue to partner with local organisations who share the same objective as us: empowering women in the North East to fulfil their potential, get a job and transform their lives.

Partner with us. Donate. Help us empower women.



Smart Works
exists because
fairness does not.

With your partnership,
we can help build a
future where it does.

Support our mission



There is a wide variety of reasons that many women in the North East may be facing barriers to get into work. The most common we see, is the amount of time spent out of work. The lack of familiarity with how to complete an application online, or where and how to do a proper job search - that's where Smart Works is a really useful tool.

The clothing is a bonus; it's the confidence coaching that I have seen be so impactful. As work coaches, we don't always have the time we would like to coach our participants, so Smart Works comes in and does the 'heavy lifting' for us.

That one minute it takes to make a referral is incomparable to the impact it can have on someone's life.

Sophie

Work Coach at Newcastle City Job Centre
& active referral partner





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www.newcastle.smartworks.org.uk | [@smartworksnortheast](https://twitter.com/smartworksnortheast)

Charity No: 1176547