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WEST MIDLANDS LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLAN

ANNEX A: FURTHER EXPLANATORY INFORMATION ON SKILLS NEEDS



Coventry & Warwickshire
Chamber of
Commerce
The Ultimate Business Network



LSIP

Local Skills
Improvement Plan
West Midlands

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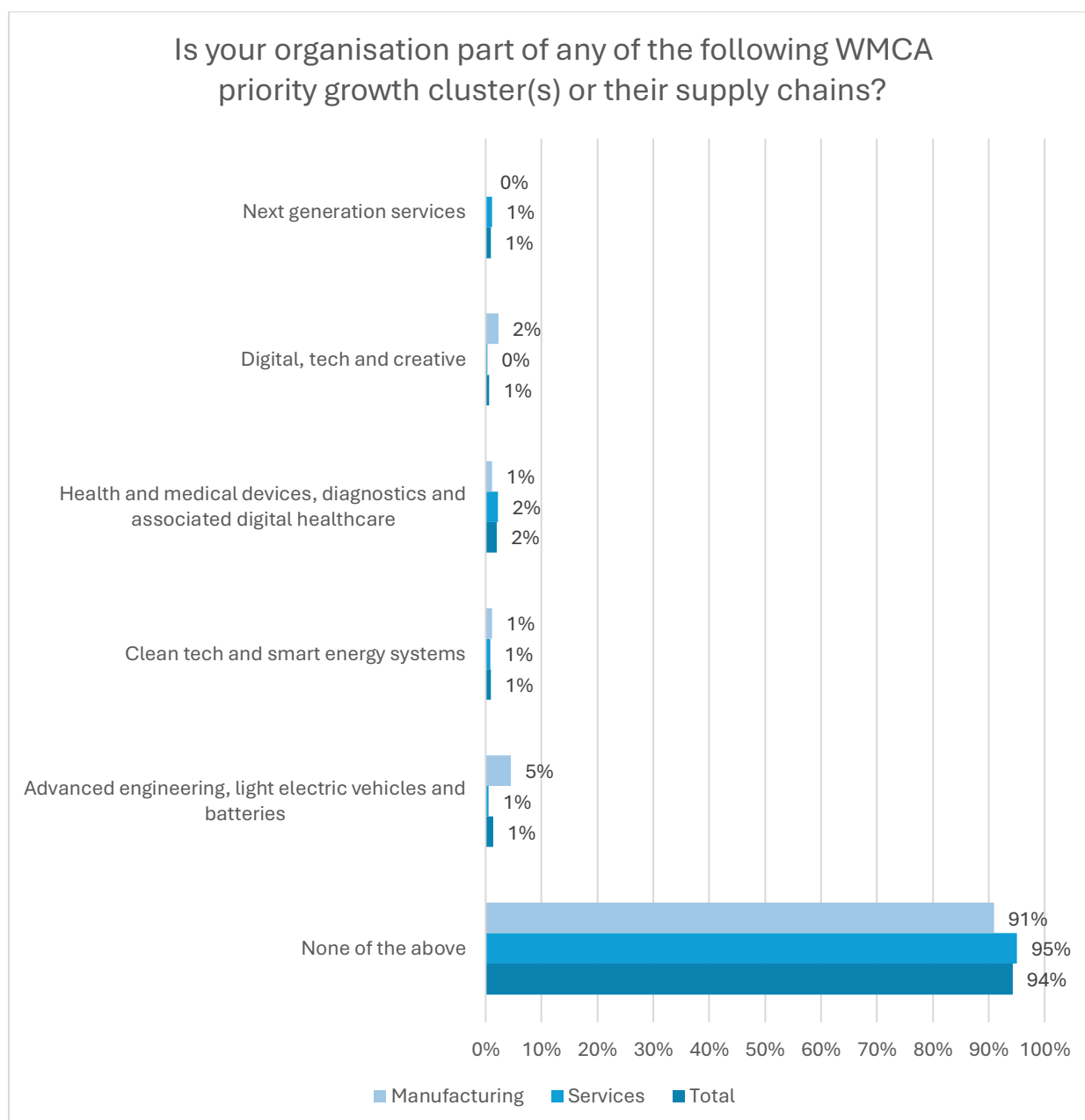
Quantitative Survey Findings

Please note, Annex C of the LSIP sets out the full methodology behind the following data, including the distribution of responses by size, industry sector (as self-reported) and, for comparison, the distribution of regional businesses by the same measures.

Unless stated otherwise, analyses of the findings from the LSIP's quantitative surveying are based on all respondents less those who chose not to answer specific questions. Where figures do not sum to 100%, it is due either to rounding and/ or participants being able to select multiple answers. The following graphs show results from the total number of participants involved. For the purpose of analysis, broad business sector (a breakdown between service firms and manufacturing firms) comparisons have also been included.

For comparative purposes, all those who identified the following as their main business activity were grouped as broad 'services' sector businesses: health, public administration, motor trades, wholesale, retail, transport & storage (inc postal), accommodation & food services, information & communication, finance & insurance, property, professional, scientific & technical, business administration and support services and education.

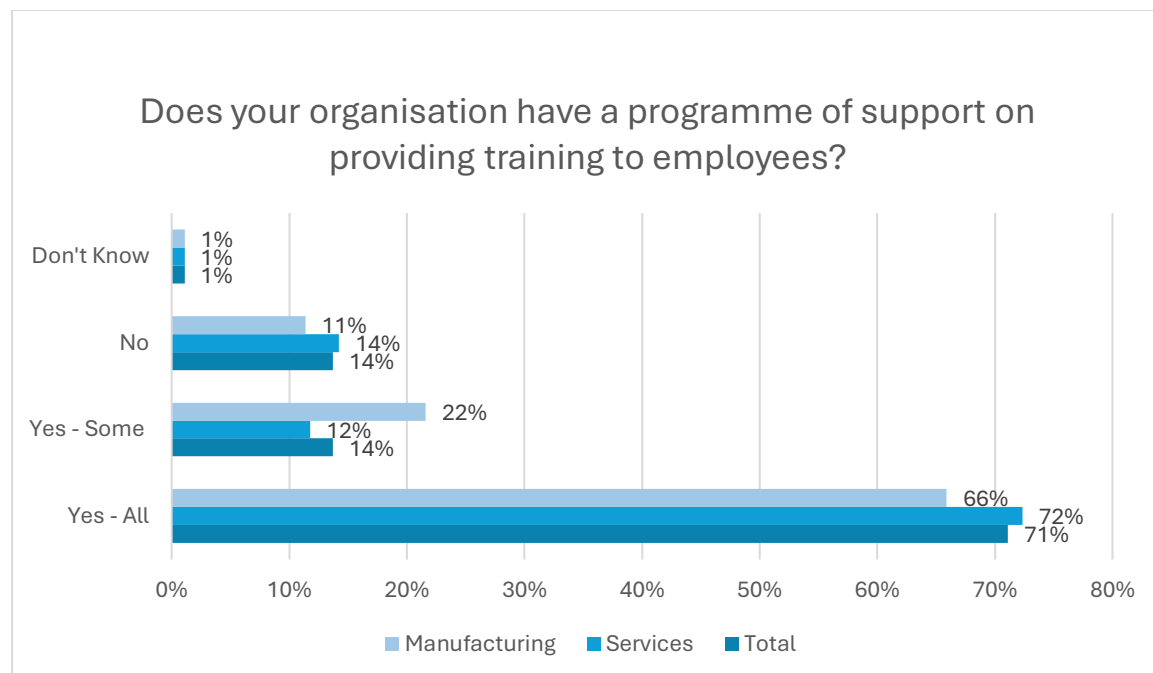
Those who identified the following as their main business activity were grouped as 'manufacturing' sector businesses: manufacturing, construction, agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining and quarrying.



Most businesses surveyed (94%) reported that they do not currently operate in, or within the supply chain of, any of the WMCA Priority Growth Clusters. Only small proportions of firms indicated involvement in the clusters listed. The most reported cluster was Health and medical devices, diagnostics and associated digital healthcare (2%). All other clusters were selected by around 1% of businesses overall, including Advanced engineering, light electric vehicles and batteries, clean tech and smart energy systems, Digital, tech and creative, and Next generation services.

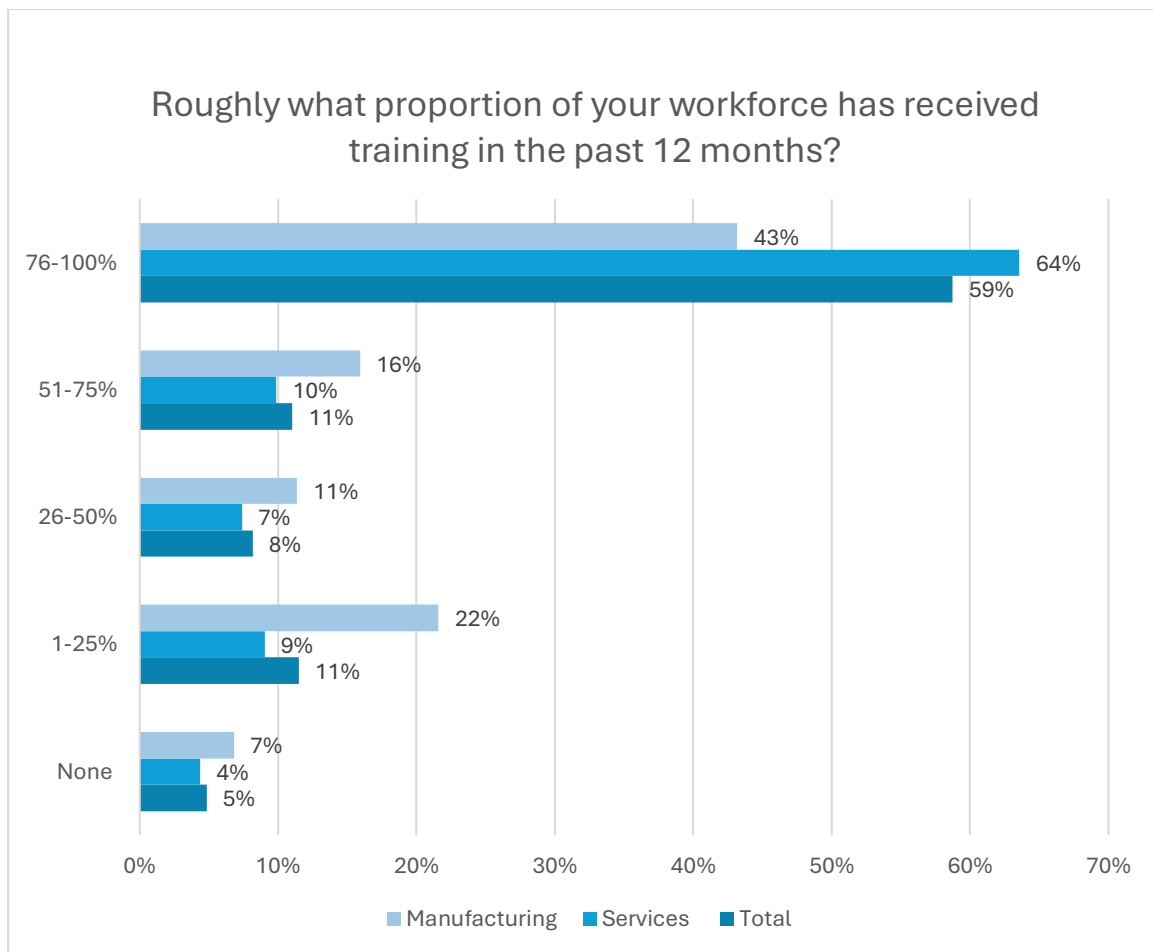
There were only small differences between services and manufacturing firms. Services sector businesses were slightly more likely to report no involvement in any cluster (95% compared to 91% of manufacturing firms). Manufacturing firms were more likely to report involvement in Advanced engineering, light electric vehicles and batteries (5% compared to 1% of services firms) and Digital, tech and creative (2% compared to 0%). Services firms were slightly more likely to report operating in Health and medical devices, diagnostics and associated digital healthcare (2% compared to 1% of manufacturing firms). Both sectors reported the same level of involvement in clean tech and smart energy systems (1%). Manufacturing firms did not report involvement in Next generation services, compared with 1% of services firms.

However, input from the WM LSIP Operational Board suggests that many employers, particularly SMEs, may not explicitly recognise or describe their activities using these cluster labels, even when operating in aligned sectors or supply chains. Analysis suggests that in 2024, 412,014 jobs, or 31% of total jobs in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) area, were engaged in these priority growth clusters.



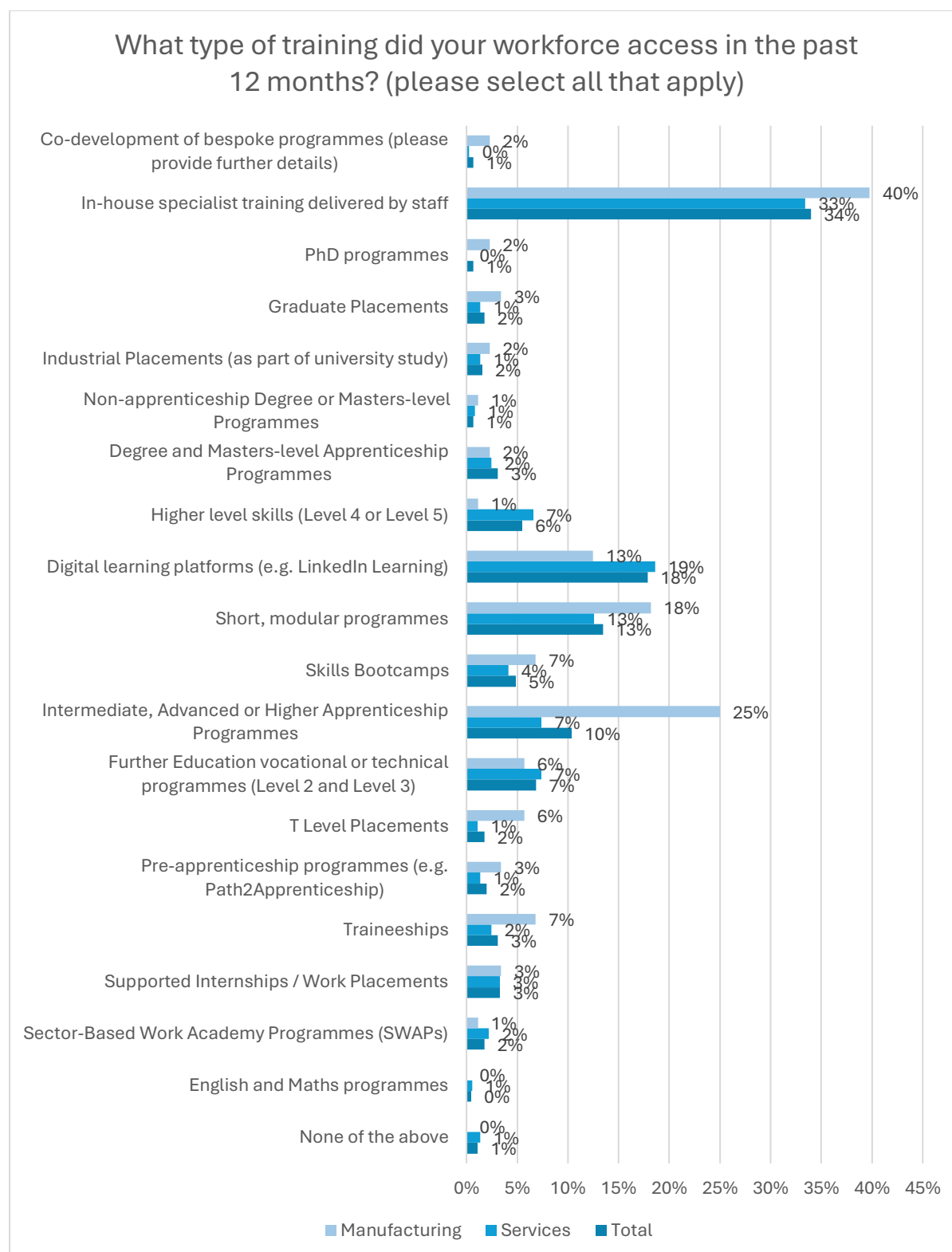
Most businesses surveyed (71%) reported that they provide training support for all employees. A further 14% indicated that they provide training support for some employees, while 14% reported that they do not have a programme of support for providing training. Only 1% of respondents said they did not know.

There were only small differences between sectors. Services firms were slightly more likely to report providing training support for all employees (72% compared to 66% of manufacturing firms). Manufacturing firms were more likely to report providing support for some employees (22% compared to 12% of services firms). A similar proportion of services and manufacturing firms reported that they do not provide training support (14% and 11% respectively), while 1% of firms in both sectors selected 'Don't know'.



Most businesses surveyed (59%) reported that between 76–100% of their workforce had received training in the past 12 months. Smaller proportions reported lower levels of training coverage, including 11% where 1–25% of employees had received training, 8% where 26–50% had received training, and 11% where 51–75% had received training. A small proportion of firms (5%) reported that none of their workforce had received training.

There were some differences between sectors. Services firms were more likely to report that 76–100% of their workforce had received training (64% compared to 43% of manufacturing firms). Manufacturing firms were more likely to report lower levels of training coverage, particularly where 1–25% of employees had received training (22% compared to 9% of services firms). Manufacturing firms were also slightly more likely to report that none of their workforce had received training (7% compared to 4% of services firms).



The most common type of training accessed by businesses in the past 12 months was in-house specialist training delivered by staff (34%), followed by digital learning platforms such as LinkedIn Learning (18%), and short, modular programmes (13%).

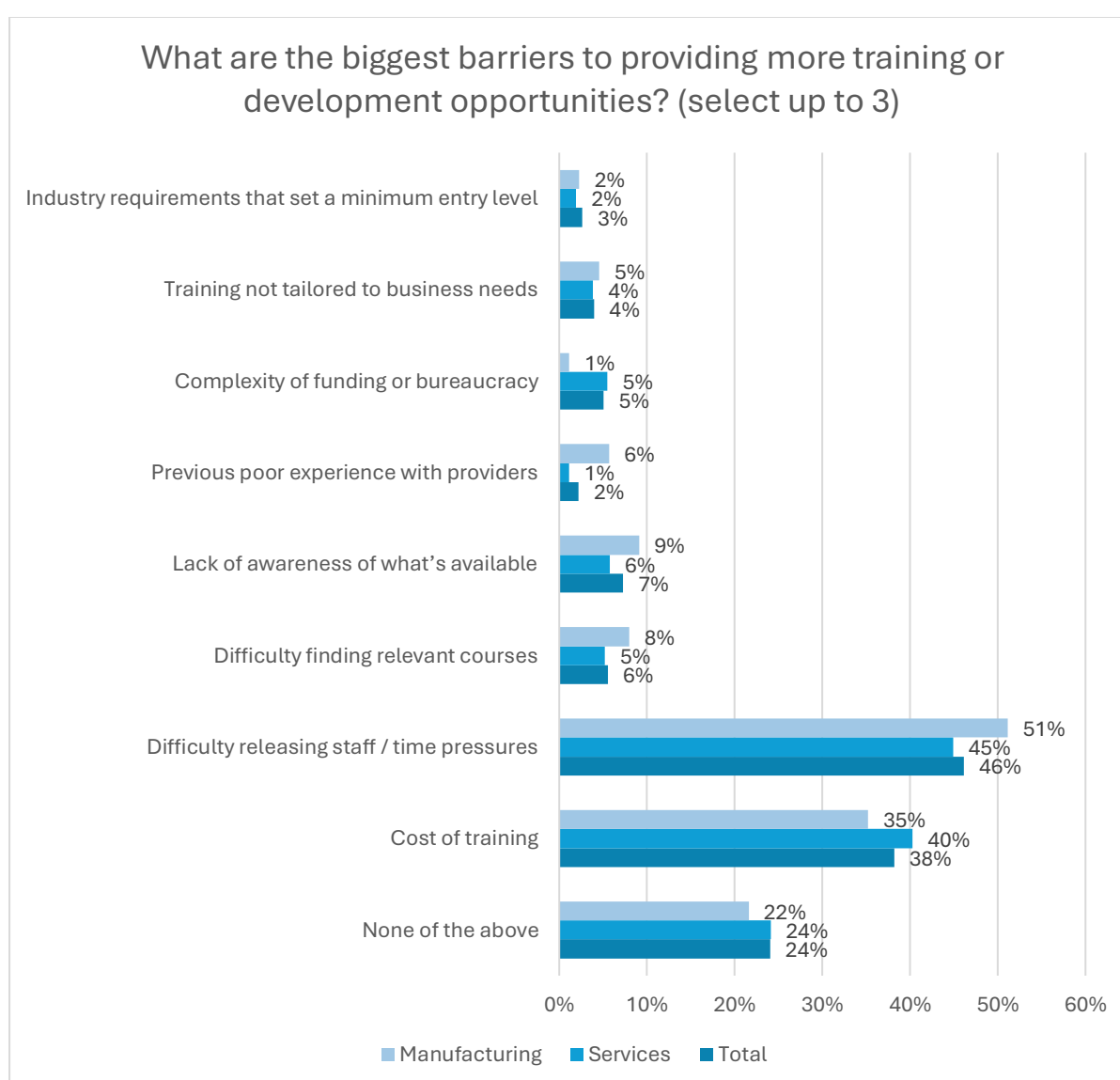
For services firms, the most frequently reported training types were in-house specialist training delivered by staff (33%), digital learning platforms (19%), and short, modular programmes (13%).

For manufacturing firms, the most common types of training were in-house specialist training delivered by staff (40%), Intermediate, Advanced, or Higher Apprenticeship Programmes (25%), and short, modular programmes (18%).

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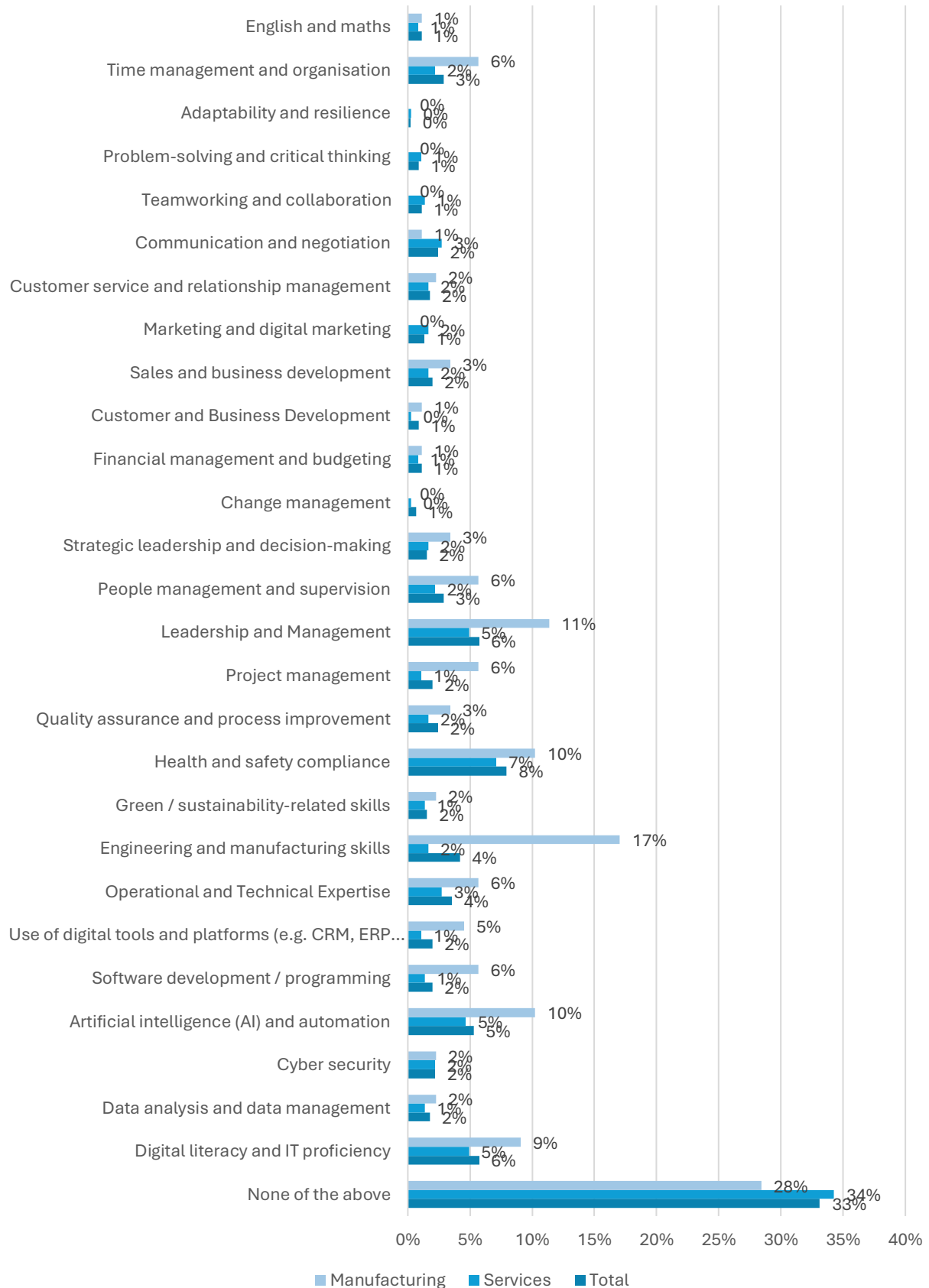


Difficulty releasing staff and/or time pressures was the most commonly identified barrier to employers providing more training or development opportunities to their workforce, reported by almost half of the firms surveyed (46%). This was the most frequent barrier amongst both services and manufacturing sector firms, cited by 45% and 51% respectively.

The cost of training was the second most frequently identified barrier, reported by more than a third (38%) of all businesses surveyed. This was also the second most common barrier cited by both services businesses and manufacturers, at 40% and 35% respectively.

The third most common response was 'none of the above,' reported by 24% of all firms; 24% of services businesses and 22% of manufacturers. This was followed by a lack of awareness about what's available, cited by 7% of all businesses surveyed, 6% of services firms and 9% of manufacturers.

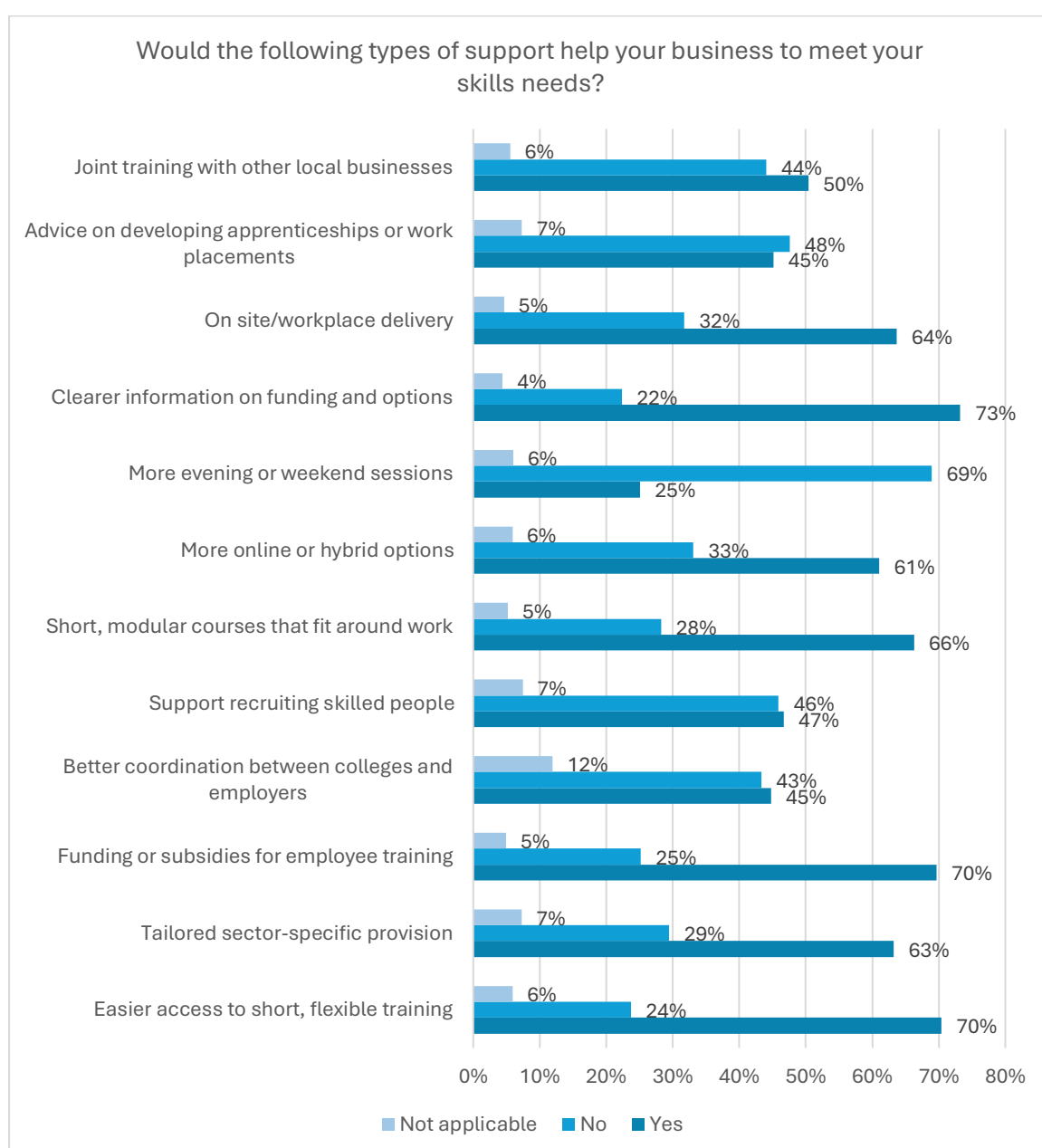
What areas are your highest skills priorities at this time, that you see as urgent or really needing some attention? (please select up to 3)

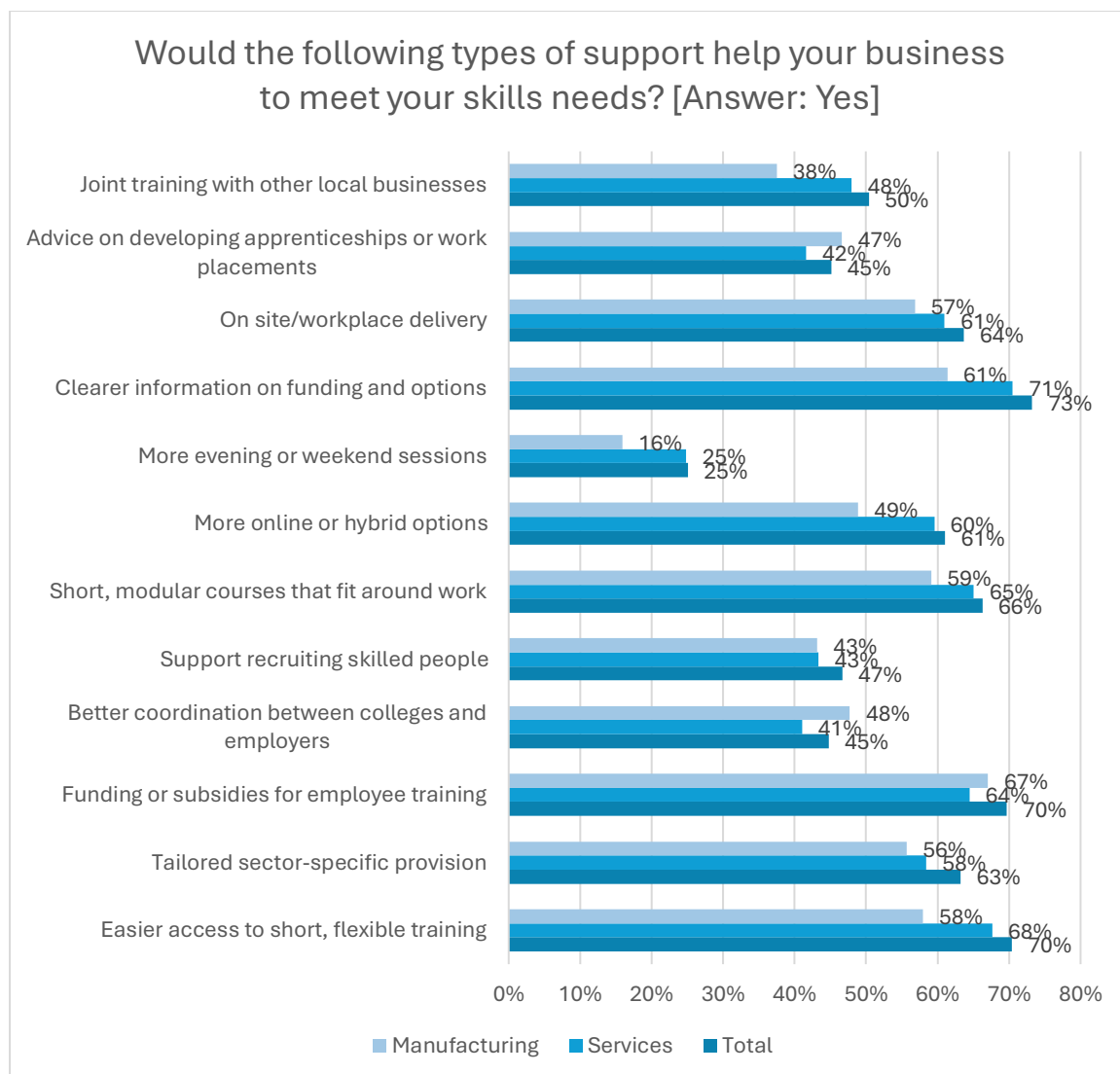


Health and safety compliance (8%), leadership and management (6%), digital literacy and IT proficiency (6%) and Artificial Intelligence and automation (5%) were the most frequently identified highest skills priorities by businesses surveyed across both sectors.

The most commonly identified priority skill areas amongst manufacturing sector firms were engineering and manufacturing skills (reported by 17%), followed by leadership and management (11%), health and safety compliance (10%) and Artificial Intelligence and automation (10%).

Each of these were reported by a significantly lower proportion of services sector firms, albeit the most commonly identified priorities were similar: health and safety compliance (7%), leadership and management (5%), digital literacy and IT proficiency (5%) and Artificial Intelligence and automation (5%), followed by communication and negotiation (3%) and operational and technical expertise (3%).

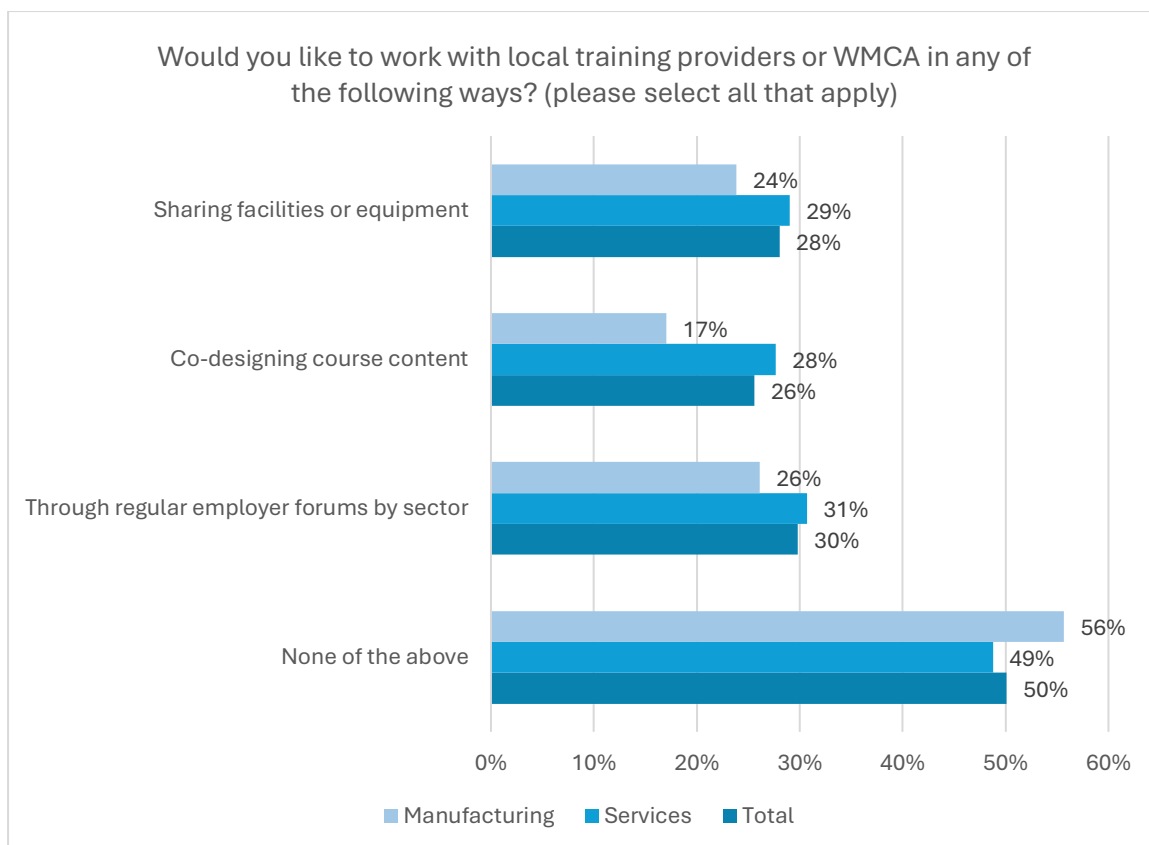




Businesses most frequently identified clearer information on funding and options (73%), funding or subsidies for employee training (70%), easier access to short, flexible training (70%), and short, modular courses that fit around work (66%) as types of support which would help them meet their skills needs.

Comparing by sector, services firms most frequently identified clearer information on funding and options (71%), easier access to short, flexible training (68%), and short, modular courses that fit around work (66%) as types of support which would help them meet their skills needs.

Manufacturing sector firms most commonly cited funding or subsidies for employee training (67%), followed by clearer information on funding and options (61%) and short, modular courses that fit around work (59%).



50% of respondents indicated that they would like to work with local training providers or the WMCA, either through regular employer forums by sector (26%), sharing facilities or equipment (28%), and/or co-designing course content (26%).

Services sector firms were slightly more likely than their manufacturing sector counterparts to express interest in working with local training providers or the Combined Authority, with 51% expressing interest in one or more of the suggested ways. 31% responded that they would like to do so through regular employer forums by sector (compared to 26% of manufacturers), 29% expressed interest in sharing facilities or equipment (compared with 24% of manufacturers) and 28% indicated interest in co-designing course content (compared with a significantly lower 17% of manufacturers).

Meaningful Engagement Findings

The below tables present a summary of employer responses received to each of the LSIP's meaningful engagement questions, along with some notable, substantive responses, which reflect the key themes of the overall research.

What are the main skills or recruitment challenges facing your organisation or the employers you work with right now? Prompts: Which roles or skill levels are hardest to fill? Are these gaps new or persistent?

Employers across a range of sectors are currently facing significant recruitment challenges, particularly in roles that require technical expertise and industry experience. Many organisations report persistent difficulties in recruiting skilled professionals in areas such as construction trades (particularly carpentry), engineering, motor vehicle technology, finance and accountancy, IT/software development, and specialist technical roles including vehicle technicians, parts advisors, and paint and body repair technicians. Further education colleges are also

struggling to recruit qualified tutors in technical subjects such as construction, engineering and finance, largely due to lower salary levels compared with industry. In addition, sectors such as catering, logistics (including Fork Lift Truck servicing and repairs), and finance functions such as credit control are experiencing shortages of skilled workers. These gaps appear to be both long-standing and ongoing, reflecting a broader shortage of experienced technical talent within the labour market.

Alongside technical skill shortages, employers highlighted concerns around the work-readiness and employability of applicants. Organisations reported receiving a high volume of applications but often finding that candidates lack essential workplace behaviours, digital competency, resilience, or professional attitudes required for the role. Employers particularly emphasised the difficulty of recruiting young people who are “work-ready,” with many organisations noting challenges in both initial recruitment and long-term retention. Smaller construction businesses also reported a need for multi-skilled workers who can adapt across different aspects of projects, yet candidates with both technical capability and adaptability remain difficult to find.

In addition to skills shortages, employers highlighted broader structural challenges affecting recruitment. Rising labour costs, increasing complexity of employment legislation, and financial pressures are making it more difficult particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises to recruit directly, often pushing them towards subcontracting arrangements. At the same time, many organisations are experiencing emerging skills gaps related to digital transformation, including the need for stronger digital skills, leadership capability, and change management. Uncertainty around the impact of artificial intelligence and evolving digital tools is also creating new skills demands, meaning employers must not only address current workforce shortages but also prepare their workforce for rapidly changing technological and operational requirements.

What are the main skills or recruitment challenges facing your organisation or the employers you work with right now? Prompts: Which roles or skill levels are hardest to fill? Are these gaps new or persistent?

Responses include:

Working in a further education college, the hardest roles that we struggle to fill are teachers of construction & motor vehicle, engineering & accountancy/finance. Attracting people into roles with lower rates of pay is also a challenge. Recruitment has not kept pace with the continued demand towards local skills needs driven by demographic changes.

Carpentry is currently the most difficult trade for us to recruit. We rarely receive enquiries from individuals with this skillset, and when we do it can be challenging to find candidates who have the practical experience and attitude needed to work effectively within a small site-based team. For smaller construction companies like ours, we particularly need multi skilled individuals who are confident working across different aspects of a project. Finding people with both the technical skills and the adaptability required for this type of environment remains difficult. The cost and complexity of recruitment is also a growing challenge. Increasing employment costs and ongoing changes in employment legislation have made it significantly more difficult for small businesses to take on new staff. While ideally, we would like to employ more people directly, these pressures are increasingly pushing smaller contractors towards subcontracting rather than direct employment.

Lack of skilled candidates available and too much competition for candidates.

Lack of employability staff. Digital incompetencies for example, everything of phone but can't use a computer. Resilience- Lack of professional ethics, for example, no values and or enable to release stuff for training catering staff and chefs

Recruiting the right skills and attitude. Current and future skills to support transformation

volume of applicants, Expectation management, Technical skills CAI, Engineering. Competing

I believe some employers are struggling with poor applications or applications that are high level but at interview employability skills are lacking

As a further educational college trying to find experts to tutor given the rates of pay

Organisations I work with have trouble recruiting “Work ready” Young people. Retention is all a problem. People leave easily if they don't like the job.

Early career roles, we are looking for people with the right attitude and willing to engage learn and grow and be curious

<i>Use of AI is a big uncertainty, It is both an opportunity and a potential threat. There are wider digital challenges and need to transform the business to work more digitally. There are ongoing skill requirements skills, leadership, and collaboration. We also need to change management.</i>
<i>We are a FLT Business - servicing and repairs of FLT, it is hard to find skilled labour to fill these positions, getting the skills roles filled is hard.</i>
<i>Definitely lack of skilled workers. Technicians (vehicle), parts advisors, paint and body repair technicians.</i>
<i>Finance and Credit Control Roles</i>
<i>The cost of Labour. Funding providers to deliver industry specific apprenticeship standards, particularly at L2 + L3</i>
<i>Digital Skills and how digital can aid efficiency, these are evolving gaps as the business adapts to different ways of working.</i>
<i>Lack of skill in the IT Software Development</i>
<i>To find the right workforce</i>
<i>Lower/entry level positions</i>

How are these skills needs currently being addressed? Prompts: Are you using in-house training, colleges, universities, commercial providers, Bootcamps, apprenticeships, or publicly funded skills training? What drives those choices?

A range of training approaches are currently being used to address workforce skills needs. Apprenticeships remain a key pathway, with many organisations working closely with colleges and training providers to combine classroom learning with practical workplace experience. In some cases, learners divide their time between college and employment on-site, allowing them to gain hands-on experience while progressing through formal qualifications. This type of flexible arrangement is particularly valuable in sectors such as construction, where practical experience is essential. Engagement with schools and colleges is also taking place to promote apprenticeships and help raise awareness of career opportunities among younger people.

In addition to formal training routes, many organisations are placing greater emphasis on internal development. In-house training, mentoring, and coaching programmes are being used to support staff progression from entry-level roles through to more senior or leadership positions. Education providers also discuss how they are introducing support structures for professionals transitioning from industry into teaching roles to help them adapt to the sector and remain within it. Skills Bootcamps, commercial training providers, and bespoke training courses are also being used in areas such as health and safety, forklift truck operation, and specialist technical skills.

Despite these efforts, several practical challenges remain. Smaller businesses often find it difficult to deliver tailored training or access suitable provision locally, which sometimes means employees must travel further for training opportunities, increasing both time and cost pressures. In some situations, recruitment agencies or temporary-to-permanent hiring models are used to fill immediate skills gaps. Overall, a mix of apprenticeships, workplace learning, and external training provision is helping to address skills needs, though there is still a clear demand for more flexible and accessible training options that better reflect the realities of different organisations.

How are these skills needs currently being addressed? Prompts: Are you using in-house training, colleges, universities, commercial providers, Bootcamps, apprenticeships, or publicly funded skills training? What drives those choices?
Responses include:
<i>We are now delivering apprenticeships (Learning & Skills apprenticeships) for non-mathematical teachers. L3/L5 programmes for staff aspiring to leadership roles, and those already in position. Delivery models are increasingly in-house. Developing support packages for new staff to retain them within the sector if they are new to teaching and brought out of industry.</i>

We are currently addressing skills needs through a combination of on-site experience and college-based learning. For example, we currently work with a full-time electrical student who attends college three days a week and works with us on site for two days. This arrangement works well as it allows him to gain valuable practical experience while progressing through his formal qualifications. He initially completed his Level 1 independently and then approached us to create this working arrangement, which shows a good level of initiative and motivation. This type of flexible approach works well for small businesses, as it allows individuals to build real site experience alongside their studies while also taking responsibility for their own progression. While apprenticeships are an important route into the industry, they can sometimes feel quite slow for individuals who are highly motivated and eager to develop quickly. For smaller companies operating on active construction sites, it is important that trainees become productive and confident in a practical environment relatively quickly. As a result, more flexible training routes that combine education with meaningful on-site experience can often work very effectively for both the learner and the employer.

Taking on apprentices

None - have to pay extortionate agency fees to attract from competitors

Mentorship, Coaching, Boot Camp courses (In person and online)

Programs from entry to level six. Traditional focus on developing these skills. Bootcamp, but too short to address the lack of employability and digital skills

As a training provider we offer bespoke training, however this Does not work for SMS that cannot offer bespoke delivery. We need to be able to provide for the masses, so need to know what this looks like and how it can be funded

Working inside a university the skills question is a bit different We are training provider. We encourage self learning a lot

Promoting opportunities to businesses

Skills Boot Camp, Apprenticeships, In House training. Or provision as usual for further education college

Recruitment to filter and also do temp to perm - we use the chamber for training, and this works well, as well as other local agencies who support with H & S and FLT training.

We often go to schools and colleges to promote the apprenticeships we have to help showcase the careers with the younger generation.

In-house training - with our specialist as part of the team. Might consider some commercial provider input

Apprenticeships but having to train further afield which is costly

What influences whether an employer engages with a particular training route or provider?

Prompts: Cost, relevance, flexibility, quality, past experience, funding availability, ease of access, bureaucracy, trust?

Several factors shape whether organisations decide to engage with a particular training route or provider. Cost is one of the most significant considerations, particularly in the current economic climate where businesses are facing rising expenses such as increased wages, National Insurance contributions, and higher operational costs. For many employers, the financial impact is not only the direct cost of the training itself but also the cost of releasing employees from work, which can reduce productivity or require temporary backfill. As a result, organisations often look closely at whether training represents good value for money and whether funding support is available to help offset these costs.

The relevance and quality of the training provision are also key influences. Businesses want to ensure that training aligns closely with real workplace requirements and industry standards. If the content does not reflect the practical skills needed in the workplace, employers may question the value of sending staff to participate. Flexibility in how training is delivered is another important factor, particularly for organisations that need programmes to fit around operational demands. Employers often prefer education providers who are willing to adapt delivery models, offer bespoke options, or schedule training in ways that minimise disruption to the business.

Trust and past experience also play an important role in decision making. Positive experiences with a training provider, strong relationships, and good customer support can encourage organisations to continue engaging with the same provider. Accessibility and ease of participation are also influential, including the location of training facilities and how straightforward the process is to access programmes. In contrast, complex administrative requirements or unclear rules around training schemes, such as some apprenticeship processes can discourage participation. Overall, organisations tend to prioritise training that is practical, high quality, accessible, and aligned with their business needs, while also being straightforward to access and financially viable.

What influences whether an employer engages with a particular training route or provider? Prompts: Cost, relevance, flexibility, quality, past experience, funding availability, ease of access, bureaucracy, trust?
Responses include:
<i>Cost in terms of paying for it, especially in the face of rising business costs (e.g. NI increases, wages, utilities). The cost of releasing employees (backfill / loss of productivity). Flexibility in delivery model – does the provider have the ability to work around the needs of the business in how they deliver training? Relevance – funded courses / interventions don't always meet employers' needs. Availability of flexible provision or bespoke courses would help.</i>
<i>For small construction companies a number of factors influence whether we engage with a particular training route or provider. Cost and the availability of funding are significant considerations, as the financial impact of training can be considerable for a small business. Employers need to be confident that the investment will deliver real value. The quality and relevance of the training is also extremely important. If the teaching and practical learning do not align with the standards required on site, it becomes difficult to justify sending employees to training as it does not effectively support their development or the needs of the business. Past experience also plays a role in decision making. Positive experiences with a provider build trust and encourage ongoing engagement, whereas poor outcomes can make employers hesitant to use the same provider again. Accessibility is another key factor. The location of the campus and ease of travel can have a real impact on an employee's motivation and ability to attend regularly. If training is difficult to access or located in an area where individuals may feel uncomfortable travelling, it can negatively affect both attendance and the overall learning experience. Ultimately, employers are looking for training that is practical, high quality, accessible and delivers genuine value for both the learner and the business.</i>
<i>Cost, previous relationship/past results</i>
<i>Cost, relevance, flexibility, quality, past experience, funding availability & trust.</i>
<i>Cost, Relevance, Accessibility, Choice of vendors (Real world versus usual suspect)</i>
<i>Flexibility, Quality, and past experience</i>
<i>All of the above. Relationships are key as a provider we tend to work with larger employers meaning SMS can be Neglected But our part of the supply chain</i>
<i>Relevance- Reassurance, it will be reliable</i>
<i>Cost is a major influence- Released to try</i>
<i>Customer service for employers and support</i>
<i>Cost is a major consideration as we are a not-for-profit organisation. trust and honesty are essential</i>
<i>Understanding the wider aim of the business. Trust in the ethical value of the business.</i>
<i>Quality, help to find suitable apprentices</i>
<i>No training in relevant area needed. too much focus on cyber security and not software development</i>
<i>We have tried the apprenticeship route but found this challenging as its not simple to understand the rules. we have found running normal adverts works better</i>

What stops you/employers from engaging more fully with training and upskilling support? Prompts: Awareness, time, trust, capacity, funding rules, eligibility criteria, inflexible provision, administrative burden?

A number of practical barriers limit how fully organisations engage with training and upskilling opportunities. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is a lack of awareness about the training programmes and

funding options that are available. Many smaller employers, particularly SMEs, are simply unsure what support exists, where to find it, or who to contact for guidance. In some cases, employers feel there is insufficient signposting to help them navigate the system, making it difficult to identify relevant education providers or understand which programmes would best support their workforce needs.

Time and capacity constraints also play a significant role. For many organisations, especially small businesses, staff are already focused on maintaining day-to-day operations, leaving little time to explore training opportunities or manage development programmes. Supervising new trainees or apprentices can place additional pressure on teams, particularly when productivity on site must be maintained. Limited administrative capacity further compounds this challenge, as many employers find the paperwork, eligibility requirements and funding rules associated with training schemes time-consuming and difficult to manage.

Structural issues within the training system can also discourage engagement. Inflexible forms of delivery, such as training that must be delivered off-site or at fixed times, do not always align with operational demands. Funding rules can also restrict how organisations use available support, for example where levy funding can only be used for apprenticeships rather than other forms of training. Combined with concerns about employment costs and uncertainty about how programmes operate, these factors can make employers hesitant to engage more actively with training and upskilling initiatives, even when they recognise the value of workforce development.

What stops you/employers from engaging more fully with training and upskilling support? Prompts: Awareness, time, trust, capacity, funding rules, eligibility criteria, inflexible provision, administrative burden?

Responses include:

Funding rules & funding models – inability to use levy or funding on training other than apprenticeships.

Awareness of what training and support is available remains a challenge for many small construction businesses. Through attending training boards, it has become clear that there are a number of initiatives and programmes available, however many smaller employers are simply not aware of them or do not know how to access them. Engagement with smaller employers could also be improved. It can sometimes feel as though training providers prioritise the needs of larger construction companies because they can provide higher numbers of learners in one place. While this is understandable from a delivery perspective, it can mean the needs of smaller businesses are harder to accommodate, even though collectively SMEs represent a significant part of the construction workforce. Communication with training providers can also be a barrier. From past experience it can be difficult to reach the right person within a college, and the level of communication with employers is not always consistent. For many small businesses this lack of clarity can discourage further engagement. Administrative requirements can also be off putting. Many small construction companies operate with very limited administrative capacity, so complex forms, processes, or funding rules can become a barrier to participation. Finally, time and productivity pressures play a significant role. Small businesses need to keep projects moving and generate income to remain viable. Taking time to train new entrants while maintaining productivity on site can be challenging, particularly when trainees require a significant level of supervision in the early stages.

Not understanding fully, the options that are available and who can provide the specialist support.

time, trust, capacity, funding rules, eligibility criteria

Awareness, Time, In flexible provision and the admin time

Signposting, who do they go to? Who do they trust? Who provides largely what they need? Flexible delivery at the right time

Awareness seems big. Admin burden, short termism

From my experience of working with employers so are unaware of funding and training routes available

I'd probably say time as have to do our full-time role in helping the business to then find time to grow and engage with apprentices is hard.

inflexible provision - E.g training to be off site

At the moment it's the cost of employment. Also not know where to start, mentoring is time consuming for an SME

Lack of awareness of training that is on offer as well as no time set aside to actively seek it

There is often a lot of admin that comes with the traditional funded bootcamp model. This can definitely put off a lot of potential employers as well as prospective students.

Can you share any examples of successful employer–provider collaboration you've seen or been part of?

Prompts: What made it work (e.g., co-design, flexibility, shared costs, trusted relationships)? How could it be scaled or replicated across the region?

Several examples demonstrate how effective collaboration between employers and education providers can support workforce development. In some cases, partnerships have been built around co-designing programmes that directly reflect employer needs. For example, colleges working closely with organisations such as housing associations have successfully developed apprenticeship pathways and adult training programmes tailored to sector requirements. Strong partnerships between universities and cornerstone employers in the region were also highlighted as positive examples where training programmes are designed specifically to match the skills needed within the business. These partnerships tend to work well when there is open communication, long-term relationships, and a clear understanding of employer expectations.

Flexible training arrangements were another example of successful collaboration. One approach involved an electrical student attending college for part of the week while gaining practical experience on a construction site for the remaining days. This type of arrangement allows learners to build practical skills alongside their studies while enabling employers to support workforce development in a way that fits with operational demands. Similar examples were seen in sectors such as social care, where education providers worked with employers to design safeguarding and medication training that could be delivered flexibly around staff shift patterns. In these cases, co-design, adaptability, and clear communication between education providers and employers were key factors in making the programmes effective.

Long-term relationships and structured development programmes were also seen as important contributors to successful collaboration. Some organisations highlighted the benefits of programmes delivered over an extended period, such as leadership or management development courses that allow employees to apply learning gradually within the workplace. Trusted partnerships, regular communication, and shared commitment to workforce development were repeatedly mentioned as factors that help these collaborations succeed. Participants suggested that these models could be replicated more widely across the region by encouraging co-design between employers and education providers, offering flexible delivery options, and building stronger partnerships that respond directly to the needs of different industries.

Can you share any examples of successful employer–provider collaboration you've seen or been part of? Prompts: What made it work (e.g., co-design, flexibility, shared costs, trusted relationships)? How could it be scaled or replicated across the region?

Responses include:

Working with a local housing association to meet their training needs through apprenticeships, but especially co-design of adult programmes. College co-ordination and engagement with employers on programmes has also been very successful.

One positive example we have experienced is a flexible working arrangement with a full-time electrical student. He currently attends college three days a week and works with us on site for two days. This has been a very effective arrangement as it allows him to gain practical site experience while continuing his formal studies. It also benefits us as an employer because we are able to support his development while he gradually builds the skills and confidence required to work in a live construction environment. What makes this approach successful is the flexibility of the arrangement and the initiative shown by the learner. He had already completed his Level 1 qualification independently and then approached us to ask if he could gain on site experience while continuing his studies. This type of model allows motivated individuals to progress while also giving employers

<i>the opportunity to support skills development in a way that works alongside the realities of running a small construction business.</i>
<i>Uni and [a cornerstone employer] design so exactly what the employer needs. Partnership with providers.</i>
<i>Currently working with NIS+. Both have shared values and long-term calls</i>
<i>A successful example was working with a training provider to deliver flexible, shift-friendly safeguarding and medication training tailored to domiciliary care. It worked because of co-design, open communication, and flexible delivery around contracted hours. This could be replicated regionally by offering blended learning, shared funding, and building trusted partnerships with multiple care providers.</i>
<i>Trusted relationships - good communication, regular reviews with both learner and ourselves</i>
<i>Two of our employees are currently taking part in the Management Development Programme offered by the chamber. This has worked well for us as it is spread over the course of a year (one day per month) and allows things to be implemented gradually as they are learnt.</i>
<i>I teach as part of Blackbrook Academy and regularly have some great success stories. Being able to take someone from never even making a video before, to gaining employment, creating social media content and more.</i>
<i>Our apprenticeship programme is one of the best in the country</i>
<i>We have excellent relationships with Jaguar Land Rover based on many years and multiple activities, including training</i>

What does meaningful co-design of training look like from your perspective? Prompts: How much involvement do employers want in shaping course content, delivery modes, or assessment? What would make it easier to collaborate?

Meaningful co-design of training is generally seen as a genuine partnership between employers and education providers, where employers have a clear role in shaping course content, delivery methods and, in some cases, assessment approaches. Many organisations value the opportunity to influence what is taught so that training reflects the real tools, processes and standards used in the workplace. This can include contributing to curriculum development, suggesting additional practical elements beyond standard course specifications, and helping ensure that programmes remain relevant to industry needs. Employers also expressed interest in shaping how training is delivered, for example through block learning models, one or two-day release formats, or bite-sized training that can fit around working schedules.

Several responses emphasised the importance of ensuring that learners are properly prepared for the realities of the workplace. Suggestions included introducing stronger practical foundations early in training, such as broader construction foundation courses that cover health and safety, site behaviour, communication skills and exposure to multiple trades before specialising. Employers also highlighted the value of training that focuses on realistic workplace tasks rather than unnecessary theoretical content, allowing learners to develop practical, work-ready skills. Opportunities for employers to contribute through guest sessions, site visits, project briefs or input into assessments were also seen as valuable ways to connect learning more closely with real industry practice.

Making collaboration easier would require clearer communication channels and more structured ways for employers to engage with education providers. Respondents highlighted the need for flexibility in course design, the ability to tailor training to specific business needs, and faster processes for approving or adapting curricula. Reducing bureaucracy and having dedicated contacts within education providers to manage employer relationships were also identified as practical steps that could help strengthen collaboration and make co-design more effective.

What does meaningful co-design of training look like from your perspective? Prompts: How much involvement do employers want in shaping course content, delivery modes, or assessment? What would make it easier to collaborate?
Responses include:

<i>Influencing course content (providing extra elements of delivery in addition to what is on the specification for funded courses). Shaping the delivery model e.g. block delivery or 1–2 days per week delivery.</i>
<i>From my perspective, meaningful co design of training should involve employers helping to shape the practical foundations that prepare learners for the realities of working in construction. One approach I believe would be very beneficial is the introduction of a compulsory 12 month full time foundation course in construction before learners move into a specific trade. This course could focus on work ready skills such as health and safety, asbestos awareness, the safe use of tools and plant, communication skills, and general site behaviour. It would also give students the opportunity to gain hands on experience across multiple trades so they can better understand which area of construction suits them best.</i>
<i>Representation from industry sector in the creation of the curriculum and delivery. The course to ensure fit for purpose and it is contextualise</i>
<i>Essential to design approach has proven great success. AES NHS are working together HCA Apprenticeships</i>
<i>Co design. Industry lead organisations. Education providers.</i>
<i>Better content earlier on by the time students get to it may be too late</i>
<i>Bite size training is ideal and would fit in around work</i>
<i>any potential training provider would clearly need to understand the strategic aims of the business before any meaningful co-design of training could take place</i>
<i>Get rid of the 'Padding' in training and let employers design course outcomes and what it covers. What is a realistic day</i>
<i>Employers should be able to give a list of their specific topics that they want training provided for and the provider should tailor what they offer to suit. It is not always sensible or necessary to simply choose from a pre-determined list of topics</i>
<i>Meaningful co-design means employers help shape course content, delivery, and assessment so it's practical for staff and fits around shifts. Collaboration is easier with clear communication, flexible options, and minimal bureaucracy.</i>
<i>Being able to shape programs through module combinations and delivery methods etc</i>
<i>Employers value true partnership, which typically includes: Helping shape course content, not just validating it Ensuring training reflects real tools, processes, and standards Input into assessment methods that mirror workplace tasks Flexibility to adapt modules or delivery schedules Opportunities to offer guest sessions, site visits, or project briefs What would help: Clear, structured processes for engagement Reduced bureaucracy Faster curriculum approval cycles Dedicated staff at providers to manage employer liaison</i>

In your experience, how have you used public skills investments to meet your employer needs? Prompts: What's working well? What could be improved (e.g., course offer, eligibility, pace of approval, communication)?

Public skills investments are being used by many organisations to support workforce development through a range of routes, including apprenticeships, Skills Bootcamps, short, accredited courses and sector-based training programmes. Apprenticeship levy funding remains an important mechanism for larger organisations, while Bootcamps and other short courses are often used to upskill staff or bring new entrants into the workforce in areas where skills shortages exist. In some sectors, publicly funded training has helped employees gain qualifications in specialist areas such as safeguarding, medication administration, dementia care and technical skills that would otherwise be costly for employers to provide independently. Funding schemes delivered through regional bodies, such as the WMCA, as well as industry grants like those offered by CITB, have also helped businesses access training support and workforce development initiatives.

Where these programmes work well, employers highlighted the value of accessible short courses, Bootcamps that are delivered quickly and focus on practical outcomes, and training that is closely aligned with industry needs. In particular, programmes that help prepare individuals for employment by developing practical workplace skills were seen as especially useful. Some respondents also noted that public investment can support recruitment by helping employers bring new talent into the workforce while enabling existing employees to progress into higher-skilled roles.

Despite these benefits, several areas for improvement were identified. Communication around available funding and training opportunities is not always clear, leaving some employers unsure what support exists or how to access it. The application process for funding can also be complex and administrative-heavy, with eligibility rules, documentation requirements and evidence gathering creating barriers for busy organisations. In addition, some respondents felt that programme eligibility criteria, short course durations and inflexible requirements can limit their usefulness. Simplifying access to funding, improving communication with employers and offering more flexible training options tailored to specific industry needs were all suggested as ways to make public skills investments more effective.

In your experience, how have you used public skills investments to meet your employer needs? Prompts: What's working well? What could be improved (e.g., course offer, eligibility, pace of approval, communication)?
Responses include:
<i>Clear use of skills bootcamp programmes. Apprenticeship Skills Levy.</i>
<i>What works well is when training providers are open to flexible arrangements that allow learners to develop practical skills alongside their studies. This helps learners build confidence more quickly and makes them more productive when they are on site. However, there are areas that could be improved. Communication between training providers and smaller employers can sometimes be difficult, and it is not always clear what publicly funded training options are available or how to access them. Clearer communication, simpler processes, and stronger engagement with small and medium sized construction companies would help ensure that these investments reach a wider range of employers. There is also an opportunity to focus more on preparing learners to be work ready. Courses that include practical site preparation such as health and safety awareness, asbestos awareness, safe use of tools and plant, and communication skills would make it easier for employers to integrate learners into the workplace. This would help ensure that public investment in skills translates more effectively into productive employment within the industry.</i>
<i>Apprentices, more grant/incentives like CITB but for other industries</i>
<i>Boot not reliable for us Too much ongoing on employment or promotion. Big risk for skills providers</i>
<i>West Midland combined authority funding through ASF</i>
<i>Organisations to have knowledge with access to grants to support training</i>
<i>Workshops- Short sharp interventions with businesses support Programs</i>
<i>We use all of our apprenticeship levy. The level 7 Funding changes are problematic for us</i>
<i>Not sure, biggest issue is with applying for the funding as it makes you jump through hops and creates a lot of paperwork for me as a business, plus you have to keep working on paperwork to apply for different levels of funding. I understand a certain level of security is needed but the current system is off putting</i>
<i>We've used public skills funding to provide training in areas like safeguarding, medication administration, and dementia care, helping staff gain qualifications without adding extra cost. It works well when funding is straightforward and the courses are relevant.</i>
<i>£500 back from council CITB funding Not met eligibility and communication for available funding</i>
<i>started some funded courses but some needs for evidence external reading and what counts as external self training were inflexible and not suitable to the business.</i>
<i>Employers have used public funding to: Upskill staff through Bootcamps, SWAPs, and short accredited programmes Bring in new talent via apprenticeships Support workforce progression through adult education courses Access specialist technical training that would otherwise be unaffordable What's working: Speed and employer-focus of Bootcamps Accessibility of short courses Strong outcomes for entry-level recruitment What could improve: Simplifying access and eligibility Clearer communication of what's available Shorter lead times on programme approvals Greater flexibility to tailor training to specific roles or sectors</i>
<i>Bootcamps have worked well where there is no other funded routes, eg HGV. Generally, the short duration of funded routes and eligibility criteria are the biggest barriers</i>

How could skills funding be used more flexibly or efficiently to respond to emerging skills gaps? Prompts: Shorter courses, modular delivery, shared funding models, pooled employer consortia, fast-response pilots?

Greater flexibility in how skills funding is structured was seen as an important step in helping employers respond more effectively to emerging skills gaps. A common suggestion was the introduction of shorter, modular training options that allow individuals to build qualifications gradually while remaining active in the workplace. This approach would enable employers to support staff development in stages rather than committing to long, qualification-led programmes that can require significant time away from work. Modular delivery was viewed as particularly valuable for higher-level skills development, such as Level 4 and Level 5 training, where learners could complete relevant modules based on their role rather than undertaking an entire programme.

Shorter and more targeted courses were also highlighted as a practical way to respond quickly to changing industry needs. Employers expressed interest in concise, industry-specific training or micro-credentials that focus on particular technical or professional skills. These types of programmes can help address immediate workforce needs while keeping employees engaged and motivated to continue learning. Fast-response pilot programmes developed in partnership with employers were also suggested as a useful approach for testing new training models when new sector requirements or emerging technologies create skills gaps.

Several respondents also emphasised the potential benefits of collaborative funding models. For smaller businesses, training demand may be too small to justify running programmes individually. However, pooling demand through employer groups, industry networks or consortia could help create viable training cohorts while ensuring that SMEs are still able to participate. Combined with more flexible funding rules and clearer access to available support, these approaches could help ensure that skills funding is used more efficiently and is better aligned with the needs of employers across different sectors.

How could skills funding be used more flexibly or efficiently to respond to emerging skills gaps? Prompts: Shorter courses, modular delivery, shared funding models, pooled employer consortia, fast-response pilots?

Responses include:

Funding available for modular delivery of L4/5. Could this be achieved within the new apprenticeship & skills levy? i.e. not a loan that individuals have to take.

A modular approach would allow learners to build qualifications step by step while remaining active in the workplace. This would also allow employers to support training in a way that fits around the realities of running a construction business, rather than requiring long periods away from site. There is also an opportunity for funding models that encourage collaboration between groups of small employers. Many SMEs may only need one or two trainees at a time, but if training providers worked with employer groups or industry bodies to pool demand, this could help create viable training cohorts while still meeting the needs of smaller businesses.

pooled employer groups

Apprenticeship levy. More flexibility. Less strict criteria for grants available for learning and development. Training isn't all the way to Develop skills

Modular delivery- Short and sharp. Delivery that engages the participants and makes them want to attend the next course

Probably shorter courses with more of a look into what works with the students and the employer

Shorter industry specific courses, skilled trainers

Fast response pilots would be appealing (potentially)

Skills funding should be easily accessible and advertised more readily so that employers can make use of it. Modular delivery is good as not all modules are necessary for everyone to complete

Skills funding could be more flexible by offering shorter, modular courses, fast-response pilot programmes, and pooled funding across employer consortia to quickly address emerging skills gaps.

Skills funding could be used more flexibly by shifting from longer, qualification-led models to shorter, modular and employer-responsive solutions. Greater impact could be achieved through: Short, intensive courses or micro-credentials targeting specific technical or commercial skills gaps (e.g. cost modelling, leadership in manufacturing, digital procurement tools). Modular delivery that allows employers to upskill staff in stages rather than committing to full programmes upfront. Fast-response pilot programmes developed quickly in partnership with employers where new sector needs emerge

What needs to happen to scale up the most effective training models region-wide? Prompts: What support, coordination, or incentives would make that possible? Which stakeholders should lead?

Scaling the most effective training models across the region will require stronger coordination between employers, education providers and regional stakeholders. Regular engagement between industry and education providers was highlighted as an important starting point, allowing employers to share insights on emerging skills gaps and help shape the design and delivery of training programmes. Existing forums, such as regional meetings between organisations like the WMCA and further education colleges, were seen as useful platforms for building this collaboration. Many responses also emphasised the need for clearer communication and better signposting so that employers are aware of the training opportunities and education providers available to them.

Greater collaboration across the education and training landscape was also seen as essential. Closer partnerships between colleges, universities, leadership and development providers, and industry organisations could help reduce duplication and ensure that training pathways are aligned with employer needs. Respondents suggested that industry bodies, sector groups and organisations such as Chambers of Commerce could play an important role in sharing information, promoting effective training programmes and connecting employers with suitable education providers. Encouraging greater participation from SMEs was also highlighted as a priority, ensuring that smaller businesses are able to contribute to shaping regional training provision.

Several structural issues also need to be addressed to support wider adoption of successful training models. Incentives and funding support could help encourage greater employer engagement, particularly if delivered quickly and with clear outcomes. At the same time, respondents pointed to the ongoing challenge of recruiting skilled lecturers and trainers, particularly in technical sectors where experienced professionals can earn more in industry. Improving incentives for teaching roles and developing more flexible pathways that allow industry experts to contribute to training could help address this issue. Overall, stronger coordination, clearer communication, and greater collaboration between employers, education providers and regional bodies will be key to scaling effective training models across the region.

What needs to happen to scale up the most effective training models region-wide? Prompts: What support, coordination, or incentives would make that possible? Which stakeholders should lead?

Responses include:

WMCA & Colleges West Midlands meetings could be a good starting point.

To scale up the most effective training models across the region, stronger engagement between industry and training providers is essential. Employers need to have regular opportunities to share their experiences, highlight emerging skills gaps, and contribute to shaping how training is delivered. At the same time, there also needs to be greater encouragement for SMEs to actively engage with training providers and industry forums so their voices are heard. One of the biggest challenges facing construction training is the recruitment of skilled lecturers. Many highly experienced tradespeople are unlikely to move into teaching because the pay and incentives do not compete with what they can earn working within the industry. Improving salaries, offering better incentives, and creating more flexible pathways that allow experienced tradespeople to combine teaching with running their own businesses could help attract the right people into these roles. Stronger coordination between colleges, industry bodies, and employers would also help scale successful training models.

incentives and speed of incentives delivered

Collaboration across colleges to reduce duplicate pathways

we use clickHSC and ADDP. We need government agencies to signpost

Employer- Provider- Commissioners. Engagement- Regular conversations for co design

Better connections. Maybe Platform to do this?

Collaboration between the whole education sector rather than creating

<i>More collaboration between further education providers, organisations and leadership and development providers</i>
<i>Training providers need to work with SMEs to find requirements</i>
<i>Chambers can help to spread the word to members about the most effective training modules</i>
<i>To scale effective training region-wide, local authorities or sector bodies should coordinate and recommend trusted providers, offer funding incentives, and support flexible, practical courses. Clear communication and collaboration between providers and employers would make it easier to deliver high-quality training and avoid time-wasting or scam companies.</i>
<i>To expand successful training models, employers say the region needs: Stronger coordination between providers, combined authorities, and employer groups Consistent communication so employers know what's available Shared standards and frameworks that reduce duplication Funding to support innovation and employer engagement activity Sector-led leadership, particularly in digital, manufacturing, health, and logistics Simplified performance measures focusing on job outcomes and progression</i>
<i>Awareness, incentives to sign up</i>

If you could change one thing about how the regional skills system operates, what would it be? Prompts: What would make the biggest difference for employers and learners in the West Midlands? What do you think should be a high priority?

A key priority identified by respondents is the need for a skills system that is simpler, better coordinated and more responsive to employer needs. Many employers feel that the current system can be difficult to navigate, with multiple education providers, funding streams and organisations involved. This can create confusion for employers trying to identify appropriate training opportunities. Clearer information, improved signposting and the development of a central hub listing available training across the region were suggested as ways to make the system easier to access. Reducing administrative complexity and eligibility barriers would also help employers engage more easily with skills provision.

Several responses also highlighted the importance of strengthening the connection between education providers and employers, particularly small and medium-sized businesses. SMEs make up a large part of sectors such as construction but often feel that the system is designed primarily around the needs of larger organisations. Greater engagement with industry in the design of courses could help ensure that training reflects real workplace requirements rather than being overly academic or theoretical. Respondents emphasised that training should focus not only on technical skills but also on work readiness, including health and safety awareness, communication skills and a clear understanding of workplace environments.

Improving awareness of career pathways and strengthening links between education and industry were also seen as important priorities. Many respondents felt that learners need better exposure to the range of career opportunities available to them, particularly at an earlier stage in their education. At the same time, greater stability and consistency within the regional skills system would help employers understand where to go for support and reduce the time spent navigating changing structures. Overall, a more accessible, coordinated and employer-informed system would make the biggest difference for both businesses and learners across the West Midlands.

If you could change one thing about how the regional skills system operates, what would it be? Prompts: What would make the biggest difference for employers and learners in the West Midlands? What do you think should be a high priority?

Responses include:

If I could change one thing about how the regional skills system operates, it would be to create a stronger and more consistent connection between training providers and the small and medium sized construction businesses that make up a large part of the industry. SMEs often feel that the system is designed around larger employers who can provide higher numbers of learners at once. While this is understandable from a delivery perspective, it means the needs of smaller businesses are sometimes overlooked even though collectively they represent a significant proportion of the construction workforce. For learners, the biggest improvement would

<i>be ensuring that training better prepares them for the realities of working on site. This means focusing not only on technical skills but also on work readiness, including health and safety awareness, communication skills, and understanding how construction sites operate.</i>
<i>Clear informative, Easy to navigate and produce admin time</i>
<i>Engagement from industry to design courses So they are fit for purpose</i>
<i>Better alignment between local needs and HE Particularly provision</i>
<i>Need to be more “real world”, not just academic</i>
<i>Threshold levels and red tape from local authorities</i>
<i>Stability! Keeping things as stable as possible in terms of which organisations Business needs to talk with and what support is available. Saves business time and trying to find out what is going on.</i>
<i>Accessibility and ease being the main factors</i>
<i>Getting more careers out to students to show case the different career opportunities to them</i>
<i>Making young people aware of opportunities which are out there</i>
<i>It doesn't feel well coordinated. Too many disparity other and difficult to distinguish one training provider from another.</i>
<i>Co-Design courses and make them more relevant rather than theory</i>
<i>Accessibility + Funding - Employers are generally happy to help if it doesn't impede operations</i>
<i>There should be a central hub listing training on offer across the region that can be quickly and easily consulted to find the training required</i>
<i>If I could change one thing, it would be better support for training providers. Currently, a lot of investment goes into upskilling a single employee, but if they leave shortly after, that cost is lost. Supporting providers to deliver high-quality, flexible, and practical training while improving staff retention would make the biggest difference for both employers and learners.</i>
<i>If employers could change one thing, it would often be: A simpler, more flexible, and more employer-responsive skills system. Specifically: Easier access to information about available training Fewer restrictions on funding and eligibility Faster curriculum development aligned with real labour market needs Greater flexibility in delivery (evenings, modular, on-site, hybrid) More consistent employer-provider collaboration supported by the region</i>

Solutions Workshop Findings and Potential Solutions

Codesigned Solutions: Leadership and Management Development

In developing the LSIP proposals, we have deliberately sought to codesign solutions with employers, education providers and wider stakeholders because regional skills challenges, including, in this case, the challenges around leadership and management cannot be solved by any single part of the system acting alone. Codesign, in this context, means bringing together those who deliver training and those who use it to shape interventions that are practical, relevant and grounded in real operational realities, from the needs of SMEs and the pressures facing managers, to the constraints and opportunities within education provider delivery models. This approach builds on the strong practice that already exists across the region, where many employers and education providers are collaborating effectively to tailor learning, pilot new approaches and refine what works. By drawing these examples together, the report aims both to surface and celebrate the good practice already happening and to ensure that future solutions are informed directly by the people who will use, deliver and benefit from them.

Summarising the feedback captured during this first solutions workshop, delegates pointed to a fragmented support ecosystem that is difficult for SMEs to navigate. Employers voiced a strong demand for modular, blended and work-integrated provision with protected learning time, alongside the central importance of peer learning and mentoring, the need for flexible and stable funding and policy arrangements (including reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy), and an outcomes framework that focuses on measurable improvements in retention, service quality and business performance.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Modular, bite-sized learning that solves immediate business problems

Employers repeatedly pointed to short, targeted modules as the most workable and effective format, particularly where content can be selected and combined to address a specific operational issue rather than following a fixed syllabus. This was framed as “small building blocks” that can be assembled into a pathway tailored to the business need; accreditation was often seen as optional where relevance and speed are high. Examples included targeted short courses (e.g., conflict management) and focused modules in areas such as ethical decision-making and quality related decision-making. The consistent feature was practical, problem-led learning that can be applied immediately and does not require a large continuous time commitment.

2) Peer learning, action learning sets, and cohort-based models

A strong thread across sectors was that businesses learn best from other businesses. Employers described peer-to-peer learning as effective and credible, and structured “Leadership Circle” style initiatives were referenced as an example of best practice. Employers also valued cross-pollination between sectors (where relevant), citing that it can provide exposure to allied disciplines and new approaches supporting innovation. In health and social care specifically, existing “community of practice” forums were cited as working well, even if attendance is not universal. The underlying success factor was the combination of trusted peer exchange, real case discussion, and the development of ongoing relationships, rather than one-off training events.

3) Mentoring and coaching - especially when matched for credibility and fit

Mentoring was repeatedly cited as a high-value intervention, particularly for aspiring leaders at team leader levels, where managers need ongoing support rather than episodic training. Employers emphasised that mentoring and/or coaching works best when the mentor/coach is credible in the real world and when the individual or business has choice in who supports them (rather than being allocated someone). Discussions also highlighted the perceived value of “alumni-to-cohort” mentoring models, which strengthen trust and practicality. Where organisations embedded training with external coaching and mentoring, they reported it as “very effective,” particularly for closing functional gaps (e.g., finance and project management).

4) Diagnostics and tailored development plans (assessment-led provision)

Employers gave positive feedback on approaches that start with a diagnostic - for example, business assessment tools to identify leadership/management gaps and then prescribe targeted training, or individual “gap analyses” and customised development plans (including personality profiling). These approaches were seen to work because they create a clear line of sight between (a) the organisation’s needs and (b) what development activity is undertaken, improving perceived relevance and helping to justify time and spend.

5) On-demand digital learning platforms - when time is protected

Some employers reported good experiences with readily available digital learning with some citing, LinkedIn Learning as an example, especially where the employer funded access. However, they highlighted that utilisation drops when employees “don’t have time.” What works, therefore, is not just access to online content but pairing it with protected learning time, or blended support so learning actually happens.

6) Internal provision and leadership infrastructure inside organisations

A number of organisations reported that internal mechanisms can work well when they are resourced and intentional. Examples include internal courses delivered by the company; internal experts running “drop-in” sessions (including around AI); governance and culture interventions (e.g., antiracism training leading to culture shift); and leadership structures such as associate boards or development boards chaired internally. Several also referenced organisational changes that enabled better leadership outcomes, such as introducing middle management to free up senior leaders to take on more strategic decision-making roles and bringing in Non-Executive Directors to strengthen capability and challenge. These approaches work where internal leadership is committed, and where learning is embedded into day-to-day practices rather than treated as an external add-on.

7) Sector and industry body provision for technical and leadership communities

Employers reported relying heavily on industry bodies for technical training and, in health and social care, on sector forums that create communities of practice. While this feedback was not primarily about formal qualifications, it was clear that industry bodies provide trusted, relevant, and often standard aligned learning, as well as peer networks.

8) Workplace wellbeing and “space to lead” as enablers of better management

Some employers described structural wellbeing initiatives (e.g. protected time every Friday) and explicitly “creating space for me as a leader” as positive practices linked to improved leadership effectiveness and reduced attrition. While not “training provision” in the traditional sense, these were cited as practices that enable leaders to learn, reflect, and implement changes - often prerequisites for development to stick.

Challenges

1) Fragmented ecosystem and disproportionate SME barriers

Delegates described an abundance of often high-quality leadership and management offers that are uncoordinated and difficult to compare. There are multiple remarks that provision exists but is hard to navigate: ‘there’s not a lack of provision... there may be too much choice’ (health & social care), and ‘there are so many training offers already available that employers don’t know about.’ Understanding of what is available to businesses is low, funding application windows are often short, and evidencing funding requirements can be onerous. Time and capacity constraints for businesses make it particularly hard for SMEs to release staff to participate, even where suitable provision exists. Several SMEs reported uncertainty about paying into programmes without a clear line of sight to immediate business priorities and return on investment, e.g. how the knowledge, skills or behaviours of the programme will help the business.

2) A need for flexible, modular and work-integrated learning enabled through protected time and backfill

Delegates wanted greater options particularly short, bite-sized modules that can be sequenced to meet live business needs, rather than long, fully accredited programmes as the default option. The lack of a diverse offer limited flexibility for managers to invest in staff development. Blended delivery (e.g. live online classes with recordings, on-the-job application, and time to reflect on learning) was preferable in most cases. Some suggested evening learning options as a way to reduce barriers, however others stated that out-of-hours learning can be perceived as more as a burden on delegates. Whilst virtual learning was often perceived to be more accessible, several delegates raised concerns about relatively low participation in online-only and on-demand learning, and highlighted needs for discussion and practical implementation which can be difficult to replicate virtually. Crucially, delegates acknowledged that managers undertaking training need protected time and access to backfill support to engage consistently in programme development, without which participation is sporadic and inequitable, especially for those with caring responsibilities or in service-critical roles.

3) Sector specific realities - particularly in health and social care

Health and social care providers highlighted tight pay differentials between frontline workers and leaders, limited ability to release staff during working hours, and multiple mandated training requirements. Priorities include retention, improving Care Quality Commission (CQC) related competencies, proactive service management and leading across organisational boundaries with National Health Service/Integrated Care Board partners. Team-based, bite-sized and in-work learning formats were favoured.

4) Funding and policy architecture needs flexibility and stability

Delegates called for greater flexibility in the Apprenticeship Levy (including modular use of standards), simpler procurement and evidence processes, and longer term, cross-party stability in skills funding. Sustainable support for diagnostics and navigation was seen as critical, alongside ideas such as tax-style incentives for skills investment specifically, this was framed as something which could work similarly to the R&D tax credit model.

5) A broad range of success factors should be measured, beyond simply promotions

Promotion is a long-term aspiration but not a near-term metric for most programmes. Suggested measures include reduced churn and attrition, lateral progression, succession readiness, improvements in business performance and service quality, and project-based case studies that demonstrate return on time and money invested. Sector specific indicators (e.g., CQC-related measures for those in health and social care) should be incorporated where relevant.

Potential Solutions

A) Establish a clear, coordinated system to improve access and navigation

A key priority identified through the workshop is the need to simplify how employers and learners access skills provision. Employers consistently highlighted that the current system is fragmented and difficult to navigate, with limited awareness of available training, funding and engagement opportunities. Delegates noted that many businesses, particularly SMEs, “do not know where to start” when looking for support. To address this, there is a need to develop a more coordinated and accessible approach, such as a centralised platform or brokerage system that connects employers, learners and education providers. This could include a single digital platform where employers can submit project briefs, outline skills needs and access relevant training opportunities, alongside clearer signposting to courses, funding and support services. Employers also highlighted the importance of being able to engage more easily with colleges and universities. Improving coordination in this way would reduce barriers to engagement and ensure that both employers and learners can access the right support more efficiently.

B) Provide backfill and protected time through SME learning sprints

Pilot a regional backfill fund and/or shared bench of interim professionals, paired with micro grants that underwrite protected learning time (paying for the staff release). Structure programmes around “learn–apply–reflect” sprints tied to practical projects, with short impact notes to build evolving evidence base for return on investment.

C) Co-design a Health & Social Care leadership pathway

Work with education providers to develop a pathway that targets retention, mandated returns, CQC-related competencies and proactive service management, and strengthens cross-boundary leadership with NHS/ICB partners. Deliver in bite-sized, team-based formats in work time wherever feasible, supported by coaching and mentoring.

D) Pursue enabling policy reforms and sustainable infrastructure

Advocate pilots that enable modular use of the Apprenticeship Levy for L&M, streamline procurement and evidence requirements, and commit to longer-term cross-party stability in skills funding. Fund recurring organisational and individual diagnostics with clear next steps into the proposed Advisory Hub. Strengthen employer-education links to seed people-leadership basics earlier. Adopt a balanced measurement framework that tracks retention, progression (including lateral), succession readiness, project benefits, and sector-specific quality indicators.

Codesigned Solutions: Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech and Defence

In developing the LSIP proposals, we have deliberately sought to codesign solutions with employers, education providers and wider stakeholders because regional skills challenges, including, in this case, the challenges around Skills Provision for Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech and Defence cannot be solved by any single part of the system acting alone. Codesign, in this context, means bringing together those who deliver training and those who use it to shape interventions that are practical, relevant and grounded in real operational realities, from the needs of SMEs and the pressures facing managers, to the constraints and opportunities within education provider delivery models. This approach builds on the strong practice that already exists

across the region, where many employers and education providers are collaborating effectively to tailor learning, pilot new approaches and refine what works. By drawing these examples together, the report aims both to surface and celebrate the good practice already happening and to ensure that future solutions are informed directly by the people who will use, deliver and benefit from them.

Summarising the feedback captured during this solutions workshop, delegates consistently highlighted the value of flexible, employer-informed provision and of practical, work-based learning models that make upskilling feasible for SMEs. Where partnership arrangements are simple, featuring clear points of contact, education provider networks that signpost effectively, and mechanisms to pool learner demand employers reported better engagement and outcomes. However, the system is experienced as fragmented and often difficult to navigate, with significant constraints created by time poverty in SMEs, an underfunded and capacity-constrained FE workforce, and funding and compliance rules that are not sufficiently agile for fast-moving technologies or niche occupational needs. Recommendations therefore prioritise the need for a clearer ‘front door’ to provision; expanding modular, off-cycle and on-site delivery; strengthening incentives and longer-term funding certainty; and improving careers exposure, progression pathways and leadership capability across the workforce.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Flexible, bespoke and modular provision that is designed around employer need

Delegates repeatedly emphasised that flexibility is a key enabler of engagement, particularly for SMEs and for in-work learners. Provision that can be tailored to the operational reality of the employer (rather than fixed academic timetables) was viewed positively, including the use of bite-sized and stackable learning that is meaningful for both the individual and the business.

Examples cited included modular approaches to funding and delivery, off cycle starts (rather than only September intakes), and models in which specific course units are delivered on-site by employers. These approaches were valued for their ability to reduce time away from the workplace and allow learning to be contextualised to real processes, equipment and standards.

2) Education provider networks and collaborative signposting that simplify the system for employers

Delegates welcomed collaborative networks that direct employers to the most appropriate education provider and reduce duplication or competition between institutions, such as Skills West Midlands and Warwickshire. Where such networks operate effectively, they were said to help employers navigate a crowded training market and find the right course or qualification more quickly.

The success factors discussed included a clear ‘single front door’ experience, shared intelligence across education providers (including Institutes of Technology and other collaborative groupings), and transparent communication about what each education provider can deliver. This was seen as particularly important where employers struggle to identify the most suitable apprenticeship standard or where provision options appear high in volume but variable in quality.

3) Continuous professional development (CPD) culture and recognition of the importance of sustainable and retrofit skills

Across themes related to green and sustainable skills, there was strong support for CPD and an ongoing learning culture. Delegates noted that retrofit skills and low-carbon construction-related capabilities are increasingly recognised and that continuous learning is essential as standards, technologies and regulatory expectations evolve.

In addition, delegates viewed positively the growing awareness of sustainability across full processes and materials (including an understanding of material origins and the wider consequences of energy usage). This provides a base on which more structured, measurable programmes can be built.

4) Work-based learning models and inclusive pathways that reduce risk and cost for employers

Delegates highlighted several work-based models that were seen to work well because they create a practical bridge into employment and reduce cost or risk to employers. Examples included SWAP-style programmes in which employers' benefit from an apprentice or trainee without directly employing them during the initial period, as well as targeted programmes supporting care leavers where the employer faced no direct cost and the participant retained state benefits while gaining experience.

Other examples focused on learning 'on the job', including peer-training approaches and blended models such as a 70/20/10 split (on-the-job learning, coaching and classroom learning). These approaches were valued for their practicality, for supporting under-represented groups to gain qualifications while working, and for enabling employers to free up critical staff time more efficiently.

5) Clear emphasis on core transferable skills, soft skills and leadership capability as foundations for progression and innovation

Delegates gave positive feedback on the emphasis placed on soft skills and transferable 'power skills', including communication, organisation and entrepreneurship alongside technical competence. Delegates noted that these capabilities are generally strong and valued, and that they underpin productivity, teamwork and the ability to adapt to new technologies.

There was also a strong shared understanding that leadership and management capability is central to retention, progression and innovation. Delegates described the value of programmes that develop middle managers and future leaders, including training that is pitched 'at the right level,' jargon-free and linked to practical tools such as mentoring, coaching, storytelling and difficult conversations.

6) Practical engagement methods that build awareness of roles and pathways

Delegates supported engagement approaches that are hands-on, creative and sustained 'little and often', particularly for young people. Proposals viewed positively included increasing industry presence in schools, using demonstrations and practical exposure, and creating safe environments that reduce legislative or compliance burdens for employers hosting learners.

Delegates also noted that clearer career pathway narratives are helpful, especially when they go beyond job titles to explain component skills within roles and highlight transferable skills that allow movement across clusters. Mentoring and shadowing were discussed as effective mechanisms for making progression routes tangible and for helping individuals recognise their own skills.

7) Regional coordination roles that build confidence and accelerate digital adoption

In discussions about digital adoption, delegates valued coordinated regional leadership that can clarify what AI is, what it is for, and what 'good' looks like in implementation. There was support for a 'myth-busting' role, helping SMEs understand realistic deliverables, practical applications and expected returns.

Delegates also endorsed the principle of having two clear routes: one focused on business application (why AI is needed and how it improves operations) and a separate route that fits within qualification frameworks for individuals. This distinction was viewed as a pragmatic way to align provision to different audiences and objectives.

Challenges

1) A fragmented skills landscape with no clear 'single front door'

A recurring theme was that the skills and training market feels crowded and difficult to navigate. Delegates described a landscape with many offers, where it is hard to judge quality and to identify the most appropriate course or qualification, especially for apprenticeships.

This fragmentation is compounded by limited transparency and inconsistent signposting. Without a recognised hub or front-door route, employers, particularly SMEs reported facing unnecessary administrative costs in

searching for provision, understanding eligibility rules, and interpreting complex language used across education providers and programmes.

2) Time poverty in SMEs and limited capacity to engage with education providers

SME capacity constraints were described as a core barrier. Delegates noted that employers often struggle to release staff for training, attend meetings with education providers, or participate in curriculum design despite recognising the value of collaboration.

These constraints interact with business pressures such as rising employment costs, which reduce the ability to invest time and money in training. Delegates also observed that effective collaboration often requires 'the right person' within an organisation to champion upskilling; without dedicated resource, engagement becomes ad hoc and fragile.

3) Funding constraints, short-termism and uneven resourcing across FE and the wider system

Delegates expressed strong concerns about the funding environment. FE was described as severely underfunded, with uneven spending patterns and insufficient support to sustain the workforce and facilities needed for engineering and related provision.

Delegates also highlighted the challenges created by short funding cycles and models perceived as outdated for modern skills needs. Where funding rules are rigid, it becomes harder to respond quickly to emerging technologies, niche occupations or changing demand across clusters.

4) Recruitment and retention pressures in FE and skills delivery roles

Attracting and retaining teaching staff, particularly in engineering was raised as a significant challenge, with pay disparities between FE, schools and industry reducing the pool of available talent. Delegates noted that colleges can end up competing against each other for scarce staff.

While there was interest in bringing retiring professionals into teaching, delegates cautioned that rapid technological change could make it difficult for some returners to remain current without structured support and upskilling.

5) Apprenticeship affordability, red tape and insufficient incentives for SMEs

Apprenticeships were discussed as valuable but often difficult for SMEs to sustain. Delegates cited affordability issues, particularly for multi-year programmes alongside perceived bureaucracy and administrative burden that can make apprenticeships feel 'not worthwhile'.

The group also noted that while levy aggregation can work well when applied effectively, many SMEs struggle to create sufficient demand for cohorts, and there is limited flexibility in how funding can be used to support the infrastructure and staff time required for high-quality delivery.

6) Barriers specific to defence and regulated environments

Defence-related employers described challenges linked to security clearance and access to facilities. Where information about clearance requirements is unclear, hiring becomes harder and time-to-fill vacancies increases, creating delay in project delivery for the employer. Delegates also noted that bureaucracy can slow organisational agility, even where there is demand for young engineers because of processing time.

Comparable access barriers were referenced in aerospace contexts, where workplace entry can depend on passports or other security requirements. These constraints can complicate placements, partnership delivery and on-site learning, even when employers have suitable equipment and facilities.

7) Weak careers advice, limited exposure to vocational routes and perception issues

Delegates identified careers advice as a persistent weakness, alongside structural issues affecting early vocational exposure. Delegates noted that current metrics and incentives do not always support young people

to pursue technical routes, and that perceptions of manufacturing can deter engagement by presenting the sector as lacking long-term prospects.

Practical barriers for employers, such as insurance, compliance and legislative constraints (e.g. around age) also limit the availability of work experience and placements. Family and social influences were discussed as shaping choices, including patterns where young people follow parental careers, which can reinforce social mobility challenges.

8) Gaps in green skills frameworks and SME capability for net zero delivery

While there is strong buy-in for sustainability, delegates highlighted barriers including limited time to engage, gaps in knowledge about waste materials and the circular economy, and constraints in SME technical capacity. Delegates also described the absence of a clear framework or roadmap for achieving net zero as a practical barrier. Specific challenges included energy mapping, embedding ISO 14001 practices, and translating sustainability ambitions into structured projects with measurable goals.

9) Digital adoption constraints: readiness, infrastructure, practical understanding and alignment to SME needs

Delegates identified uncertainty about AI and limited practical understanding as material barriers, alongside concerns about whether regional infrastructure and SME readiness are sufficient. Time poverty and long lead times for implementation were cited as compounding factors.

A further challenge identified is the perceived gap between education provision and SME needs, including the need for clearer progression models and funding approaches that support AI adoption at different levels of maturity. Delegates stressed the importance of tracking real costs and returns to build confidence.

10) Lead times, procurement cycles and partnership fragility

Several delegates pointed to the length of time required to set up partnerships and new delivery, contrasted with how quickly engagement can be lost. Delegates described procurement and planning cycles that do not align well with when employers need training, with long lead-in times and budget windows that can hinder responsiveness.

More generally, the system was described as one in which large employer needs can overwhelm SME needs, and where the absence of coordinated convening limits the ability to pool demand and sustain collaboration across supply chains.

Potential Solutions

A) Create a clearer “front door” to skills support with simple, high-trust signposting

Delegates’ feedback indicates a need for an accessible, recognisable entry point that helps employers and individuals navigate provision. A practical model would combine: (i) triage and signposting to the right provider, (ii) transparent information about delivery modes, funding eligibility and quality, and (iii) plain-language translation of standards and qualifications.

This function could be delivered through the West Midlands Growth Company, or other, strengthened education provider networks and regional partners.

B) Scale flexible, modular and off-cycle delivery

To address time poverty, delegates’ comments support expanding modular, bite-sized and stackable learning with flexible start dates, including off-cycle provision and shorter blocks of delivery. Funding mechanisms should support these models rather than default to long, continuous programmes that SMEs cannot accommodate.

Region-wide action could include piloting modular funding that enables employers to release staff for shorter periods, supporting on-site delivery of specific units, and promoting blended models that combine on-the-job learning, coaching and classroom learning (for example, structured 70/20/10 approaches).

C) Pool SME demand into cohorts through coordinated convening and supply-chain grouping

Delegates suggested that SMEs often cannot generate sufficient learner numbers alone, but that pooling demand could unlock viable cohorts for colleges and education providers. Central coordination is needed to organise at scale and convene both employers and providers comprehensively.

A pragmatic approach might be to group SMEs by supply chain connections or shared occupational needs, with Tier 1 businesses encouraged to support supply chain development where growth constraints are linked to capability gaps in smaller firms.

D) Strengthen incentives and reduce bureaucracy for apprenticeships and work-based pathways

Feedback points to the need for stronger incentives, particularly for SMEs and for simplification of apprenticeship processes. Actions could include targeted incentives to offset the affordability challenges of multi-year apprenticeships and streamlining administrative requirements that currently deter participation.

Delegates also highlighted the value of pre-employment and SWAP-style pathways that reduce employer risk, as well as inclusive programmes (for example, care leaver routes) that support progression without immediate cost to employers. Scaling such models may widen participation while improving employer engagement.

E) Increase FE system capacity through longer-term funding certainty and workforce measures

Delegates' feedback supports a stronger and more stable funding pipeline for FE and skills delivery, including longer funding periods that enable planning, investment and responsiveness. This should be accompanied by measures to improve the competitiveness of FE pay and to expand the pool of assessors and technical teachers.

Where system-wide intervention is not possible, practical alternatives discussed included employers releasing staff time (for example, one day per week) to teach or support delivery, and employers contributing equipment so that learners are trained on current technologies used in industry. Such approaches can help address capacity constraints while strengthening employer and education provider alignment.

F) Embed progression-focused leadership and management development, supported by training needs analysis

Delegates identified leadership, management and middle management capability as critical for retention, progression and innovation. A region-wide programme offer should therefore include accessible, jargon-free development for current and future leaders, linked to practical workplace application.

To maximise impact, employers and education providers should collaborate on structured training needs analysis and cultural assessment (top-down and bottom-up) so that leadership development responds to real organisational challenges and enables individuals to understand their transferable skills and progression routes.

G) Improve careers education and employer engagement with schools through practical exposure and supported work experience

Delegates' comments support intensifying practical, hands-on engagement with young people, alongside reform to careers advice quality. Regional action should look to increase industry presence in schools, provide demonstrations and taster experiences, and create low burden 'safe' mechanisms for employers to host learners. To meaningfully shift the dial, this must address associated administrative burdens and barriers and could include provision to cover employer costs for engagement.

To broaden awareness of SME opportunities, delegates proposed funding open days and taster visits within supply chain businesses, enabling young people to see the role of smaller firms in, for example, producing

components for well-known manufacturers. Engagement should be designed to be ‘little and often’ to sustain interest and normalise technical careers.

H) Provide clearer frameworks and support for green skills implementation in SMEs

Delegates highlighted the need for more practical guidance to translate sustainability ambitions into action, particularly for SMEs with limited technical capacity. Priorities include improving energy management skills, data collection and use of data for energy mapping, and building understanding of circular economy practices. It was suggested that a regionally consistent net-zero roadmap supported by practical projects and curriculum goals would help employers and education providers align provision to measurable outcomes, including support for implementing recognised environmental management approaches and embedding sustainability across organisational processes.

I) Clarify digital and AI routes, emphasising practical application and return on investment

Delegates supported creating two clear routes for AI: one focused on business adoption (practical use cases, implementation steps and expected value), and one embedded within qualifications for individuals. Both routes should address uncertainty about AI through accessible explanations, demonstrations and shared examples.

To build confidence and accelerate adoption, provision should support SMEs to assess readiness and infrastructure needs, track return on investment, and progress from basic use to more advanced implementation. A coordinated regional approach can reduce duplication and help align education provision more closely to SME demand.

J) Address sector-specific compliance and access barriers through clearer guidance and partnership planning

In defence and other regulated environments, delegates indicated that uncertainty and bureaucracy around clearance and access can delay hiring and training. Clearer information on requirements, lead times and pathways (including for young engineers) would support workforce planning and reduce avoidable delays. More broadly, partnership design should account for access constraints (including security and facilities) early in planning, ensuring that placements, on-site units and collaborative delivery models are feasible within regulatory requirements.

Codesigned Solutions: Professional and Business Services

In developing the LSIP proposals, a co-design approach has been central to shaping solutions for Professional & Business Services (PBS) across the West Midlands. This reflects the recognition that sector challenges particularly those relating to digital transformation, AI adoption, workforce readiness, skills shortages and SME capacity cannot be addressed by any single part of the system acting alone.

Co-design in this context has brought together employers, education providers, professional bodies and wider stakeholders to ensure that solutions are grounded in real operational realities. This includes the fast-paced nature of PBS environments, the pressures of client-facing delivery, and the need for flexible, relevant and immediately applicable training. Employers highlighted that the sector is evolving rapidly, with automation and AI already reshaping roles and expectations, meaning that traditional training approaches are no longer sufficient.

This approach builds on strong existing practice across the region, where employers are already engaging with apprenticeships, internal development programmes and continuous professional development (CPD). However, workshop discussions highlighted that while provision exists, its effectiveness is often constrained by fragmentation, lack of flexibility and misalignment with business needs.

Summarising feedback from the Professional & Business Services Solutions Workshop and break-out discussions, employers consistently emphasised the need for more practical, modular, digitally integrated and work-aligned training, alongside stronger employer-provider collaboration and clearer progression routes.

There was also a strong emphasis on preparing individuals for the realities of the workplace, with employers noting that technical ability alone is not sufficient without strong communication, adaptability and commercial awareness.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Apprenticeships and structured professional routes

Apprenticeships and professional qualifications were identified as key mechanisms for developing talent within PBS, particularly in areas such as accounting, finance and business services. Employers highlighted that structured pathways combining learning with practical experience support progression and help build long-term capability. There was recognition that these routes are particularly valuable where they align with professional standards and career progression frameworks. However, their effectiveness is strongest where they are flexible, relevant to business needs and supported by employers through mentoring and workplace exposure.

2) Internal training and “grow your own” talent approaches

Many organisations, particularly SMEs, rely heavily on internal development to build capability. Employers highlighted approaches such as mentoring, shadowing, peer learning and on-the-job training as effective ways to develop staff. The concept of “growing your own talent” was strongly emphasised, with employers noting that this supports retention, builds organisational knowledge and allows individuals to develop within the specific context of the business. In some cases, internal specialists deliver training in areas such as digital tools or operational systems. These approaches are most effective where development is embedded into everyday work rather than treated as a separate activity.

3) Practical, applied and experience-based learning

Employers strongly favoured learning that is directly linked to real work. There was a clear preference for “learning by doing”, with training that includes real tasks, live projects and problem-solving activities. Workshop discussions highlighted that theoretical learning alone is often ineffective in PBS environments. Instead, approaches aligned with experience, coaching and application were seen as more impactful, particularly where learning can be immediately applied in client-facing or operational contexts.

4) Modular and targeted learning approaches

Employers consistently emphasised the need for short, focused and targeted training rather than long, fixed programmes. The idea of “bite-sized” or “pick and mix” learning was strongly supported, allowing organisations to address specific skill gaps such as communication, client handling or digital tools. This approach was seen as particularly important for SMEs, where time and resource constraints make it difficult to commit to longer programmes. Modular learning enables flexibility, relevance and incremental development.

5) Flexible and blended delivery models

Flexibility in delivery was identified as essential. Employers highlighted the need for a mix of face-to-face, online and hybrid formats, with shorter sessions that minimise disruption to business operations. Shorter formats such as half-day or session-based learning were preferred, allowing delegates to engage with training while maintaining productivity. Employers also noted that fully online delivery can reduce engagement if not interactive, highlighting the importance of blended approaches.

6) Employer-provider collaboration and co-design

Examples of effective collaboration between employers and education providers were highlighted as a key strength. Employers value opportunities to influence training content, ensuring it reflects real business needs. Workshop discussions emphasised that co-designed provision leads to more relevant and practical outcomes, particularly in areas such as digital skills and emerging technologies. Ongoing engagement between education providers and employers was also seen as critical to ensuring training remains current.

7) Focus on workplace behaviours and culture

Employers emphasised that success in PBS is not only about technical skills, but also about behaviours, mindset and professionalism in an industry where competitive advantage is highly prized since people are its business asset. There was a strong focus on communication, adaptability, resilience and work ethic, particularly for entry-level roles because these give confidence to clients/customers and in turn reinforce confidence in the employer or its reputation and brand. Training that supports these behaviours was seen as essential for improving performance, client interaction and overall workplace culture.

Challenges

1) Work readiness and employability gaps

A consistent theme across employer discussions was that many individuals entering the Professional & Business Services (PBS) sector are perceived as “not work-ready”, despite holding relevant qualifications. Employers highlighted that candidates often lack the behaviours and practical understanding required to operate in professional environments, particularly in client-facing roles. This includes communication skills, confidence in professional interactions, accountability and an understanding of workplace expectations. In practice, this results in increased onboarding time, greater supervision and slower early-stage productivity, with some employers noting that new starters require significant support before they can contribute effectively. Given the nature of PBS roles, where employees are often expected to engage with clients and represent the organisation, these gaps create operational pressures and additional internal training demands.

2) Digital, data and AI capability gaps

Employers consistently highlighted a growing gap in digital, data and AI-related skills, particularly in terms of practical application within business settings. While many candidates have a general awareness of digital tools, they often lack experience in using systems such as CRM platforms, data tools or automation processes as part of day-to-day workflows. Employers noted that this creates a disconnect between the rapid pace of technological change within the sector and the capabilities of the workforce. AI was frequently discussed as both an opportunity and a challenge, with employers expressing uncertainty about how to integrate it effectively into operations. As a result, many businesses particularly SMEs are required to upskill staff internally, placing additional strain on time and resources.

3) Time, cost and capacity constraints (particularly for SMEs)

Operational pressures were identified as a major barrier to engaging with training, particularly for SMEs. Employers highlighted that staff often perform multiple roles and releasing them for training can directly impact service delivery and client commitments. Even short periods away from the workplace can be difficult to manage, particularly in fast-paced, client-facing environments. Cost was also identified as a significant constraint, with professional qualifications and external training seen as expensive, especially for smaller organisations with limited budgets. In practice, this leads many employers to rely on internal or informal training approaches, which, while useful, may not always provide the depth or consistency required for long-term workforce development.

4) Fragmented system and lack of awareness

Despite the availability of a wide range of training provision, employers reported that the system is difficult to navigate and poorly understood. There is limited awareness of what training is available, how to access it and which options are most relevant to specific business needs. Employers described the system as both overwhelming and inaccessible, particularly for SMEs without dedicated HR or training functions. Confusion around funding mechanisms, eligibility and education provider roles further compounds this issue. In practice, this means that businesses often do not engage with available provision, even where it could support their workforce development, due to the time and effort required to identify appropriate options.

5) Inflexible and overly generic provision

A strong and consistent message from employers was that existing training provision is often “too generic” and not aligned to the realities of PBS roles. Employers highlighted that programmes frequently combine multiple

topics such as leadership, finance and digital skills without clear focus, making them difficult to apply in practice. Long, fixed-duration courses were also seen as impractical, with employers noting that they cannot commit staff to extended programmes without disrupting operations. In contrast, there is a clear preference for targeted, role-specific and flexible training that reflects real business challenges. Without this level of relevance, training is often perceived as low value and difficult to justify.

6) Talent attraction and retention pressures

Employers highlighted ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining skilled professionals within the sector. Competition for talent particularly in digital, finance and specialist roles was identified as a key issue, alongside changing workforce expectations around flexibility and work-life balance. The shift towards hybrid working has increased competition across regions, making it easier for employees to move between organisations. In addition, limited progression opportunities within some businesses can contribute to retention challenges. These factors place additional pressure on employers to invest in development and create more attractive career pathways.

Potential Solutions

A) Develop a clear and coordinated “front door” for PBS skills support

There is a clear need to establish a single, visible and trusted entry point for PBS skills support, enabling employers to navigate training provision, funding and available resources more effectively. Employers highlighted that the current system is fragmented and time-consuming to navigate, particularly for SMEs. A coordinated “front door” should function as both an information hub and an active brokerage service, helping businesses identify relevant training options based on their needs. This could include simple diagnostic tools, clear mapping of available provision and guidance on funding routes. In practice, this would reduce the time required to access support, improve awareness and increase employer engagement with training.

B) Expand modular, flexible and sector-relevant provision

Employers consistently emphasised the need for “bite-sized”, “pick and mix” learning, enabling them to select targeted modules that address specific skills gaps. Developing a suite of modular, stackable training options aligned to PBS roles would allow businesses to access relevant training without committing to long programmes. These modules should be designed to build towards recognised qualifications over time, ensuring both flexibility and progression. Delivery should also reflect business needs, including hybrid and short-session formats. This approach directly responds to employer demand for training that is practical, accessible and aligned with operational realities.

C) Strengthen work-based and applied learning approaches

Training provision should prioritise “learning by doing”, embedding practical, work-integrated approaches across all programmes. Employers highlighted that theoretical learning alone is often ineffective, with a strong preference for training that is directly linked to real business challenges. This includes incorporating live projects, problem-solving activities and opportunities to apply learning within the workplace. Ongoing support such as coaching, mentoring and follow-up engagement from education providers should also be included to ensure that learning is embedded over time. This approach will help translate training into behavioural change, improved performance and measurable business outcomes.

D) Enhance digital, data and AI capability across provision

Given the pace of transformation within the sector, it is essential to embed digital, data and AI capability across all training provision. This should focus on practical application, enabling employees to understand how tools and technologies are used within real business processes. Employers highlighted the need for support in understanding how to adopt AI effectively and responsibly, rather than purely theoretical knowledge. Training should be regularly updated to reflect emerging technologies and co-designed with employers to ensure relevance. This will support businesses in adapting to change and maintaining competitiveness.

E) Strengthen employer-provider collaboration and co-design

There is a need to strengthen collaboration between employers and education providers to ensure that training reflects real business needs. Employers highlighted that provision is most effective where it is co-designed, with opportunities to shape content, delivery and outcomes. This includes incorporating real-world case studies, sector-specific challenges and ongoing feedback mechanisms. Strengthening these partnerships will ensure that training remains relevant, practical and responsive to changes within the sector.

F) Prioritise work readiness and employability development

Improving work readiness should be a core focus across all training and education pathways. Employers emphasised that technical skills must be complemented by strong behavioural capabilities, including communication, professionalism, adaptability and resilience. Embedding these skills within training will help ensure that individuals are better prepared for the workplace, reducing onboarding time and improving early productivity. This is particularly important in PBS, where client interaction and professional conduct are central to role performance.

G) Improve flexibility in funding and support for SMEs

Funding mechanisms should be more flexible and aligned with employer needs, particularly for SMEs. Employers highlighted the need for support that enables access to shorter, modular courses and reduces administrative complexity. Consideration should also be given to supporting protected learning time, enabling businesses to release staff for training without impacting operations. Improving funding flexibility will be critical in increasing participation and ensuring that smaller businesses can invest in workforce development.

H) Strengthen measurement and demonstrate impact

Employers emphasised the importance of understanding the return on investment (ROI) from training. There is a need to develop clearer frameworks for measuring impact, including outcomes such as productivity, retention, employee engagement and progression. Training programmes should define expected outcomes from the outset and include mechanisms for tracking progress over time. Capturing and sharing case studies will also be important in demonstrating value and building employer confidence, encouraging continued investment in workforce development.

Codesigned Solutions: Health and Med Tech

In developing the LSIP proposals for the Health & Med Tech sector, a co-design approach has been central to shaping practical and scalable solutions. This reflects the recognition that workforce challenges across health, social care and MedTech including digital transformation, workforce shortages, progression barriers and system complexity cannot be addressed by any single part of the system acting alone.

Co-design in this context has brought together NHS organisations, social care providers, SMEs, colleges, universities, innovation bodies and wider stakeholders to ensure that solutions are grounded in operational realities. These include the pressures of service delivery, the complexity of navigating NHS systems, the growing demand for digital and AI capability, and the need to support both new entrants and an increasingly diverse workforce, including career changers and returners.

This approach builds on strong practice already evident across the West Midlands, including employer-provider collaboration, job rotation pilots, modular learning models and innovation programmes. However, workshop feedback highlighted that while effective practice exists, its impact is often constrained by fragmentation, lack of system coordination, unclear progression pathways and limited alignment between skills provision and real workforce needs. By drawing together detailed employer insights, the co-design process has enabled a clearer understanding of both what works and where systemic barriers remain, ensuring that future solutions are practical, scalable and directly informed by those who will use and deliver them.

Summarising feedback from the Health & Med Tech Solutions Workshop, employers consistently highlighted the need for a simpler, more navigable system, stronger alignment between skills and workforce demand, and

more flexible, work-integrated training approaches. There was also a strong emphasis on embedding digital, sustainability and leadership capabilities across all roles, rather than treating them as standalone specialisms.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Modular, flexible and stackable learning approaches

Employers across the Health & Med Tech sector consistently highlighted modular and flexible learning as one of the most effective approaches to workforce development. There was strong support for short, targeted modules that allow individuals to build skills incrementally, starting from their current level of capability and progressing over time. In particular, modular delivery models with flexible credit sizes (for example, 5, 10, 15, 20 or 30 credits) were seen as highly practical, enabling learners to engage with training in a way that fits around work commitments. This “pick and mix” approach allows employers to select specific modules aligned to immediate business needs, rather than committing to full qualifications. Employers emphasised that this works best where modules are clearly linked to progression pathways and aligned to future skills requirements. As noted during the workshop, there is a need for “short, modular upskilling from where the learner is now, with clear routeways that simplify the system.” Examples discussed included modularised training offers co-designed with employers and education providers, which allow for greater responsiveness and relevance. However, delegates also highlighted that for this model to be fully effective, there needs to be clearer accountability over who delivers what and how modules connect into recognised qualifications.

2) Job rotation and workforce development models

Workforce development models that integrate learning with practical experience were widely recognised as effective, particularly job rotation approaches. Employers highlighted successful examples of job rotation pilots, including those delivered through WMCA in Coventry and Birmingham, which enable individuals to move across roles and gain broader exposure to different functions within organisations. These models are particularly valuable in complex systems such as health and social care, where understanding different parts of the system is critical to effective working. Larger organisations have also adopted rotation-based apprenticeships and workforce development programmes, allowing staff to build skills progressively while remaining in employment. This layered approach, which combines entry-level recruitment with ongoing upskilling, was seen as key to supporting progression and retention. As highlighted in the workshop, “job rotation pilots... were very successful and are being rolled out further,” demonstrating their value as a scalable model for workforce development.

3) Strong employer-provider collaboration and co-delivery

Effective collaboration between employers and education providers emerged as a key strength across the region, particularly where provision is co-designed and co-delivered. Employers emphasised that training is most effective when it reflects real workplace needs and is shaped through ongoing dialogue between education providers and industry. Examples discussed included employer-led masterclasses that demonstrate “the applied reality of how skills look in the workplace,” as well as partnerships where education providers adapt course content based on direct employer feedback. Practical examples of good practice included Dudley College inviting employers to co-create courses, ensuring alignment with sector needs, and collaborative networks such as Skills for Care WhatsApp groups, which allow employers to share training opportunities and insights in real time. Employers noted that these approaches build trust, improve relevance and ensure that training remains responsive to evolving workforce demands.

4) Applied, work-integrated and experiential learning

There was strong consensus that learning approaches embedded within the workplace are significantly more effective than purely theoretical models. Employers consistently emphasised the importance of applied, work-integrated and experiential learning, where individuals develop skills through real tasks, projects and problem-solving activities. This includes approaches aligned to practical delivery methods, rather than purely knowledge-based learning. Examples discussed included workplace-based projects, industrial placements and innovation-led programmes linked to real organisational challenges. Initiatives such as the TRIBE project in Shropshire were highlighted as effective models, supporting individuals to develop core skills within social care through practical application. Employers also reinforced that “applied delivery methods, not just knowledge-based learning” are essential to ensure that learning translates into improved performance and outcomes. This

approach is particularly important in a sector where skills must be directly applicable to patient care, service delivery and innovation.

5) Sector-specific frameworks and innovation-led approaches

The sector benefits from emerging examples of structured frameworks and innovation-led approaches to skills development. Employers highlighted the development of digital skills frameworks for social care as an important step in defining baseline capability and supporting workforce development. In addition, innovation programmes such as no-code accelerators and short-term innovation initiatives were identified as effective in building practical skills quickly and supporting adoption of new technologies. There was also recognition of the role of higher education and regional initiatives in supporting innovation pipelines, including support for spinouts and outreach activities. For example, initiatives such as the Festival of Tomorrow were highlighted as a way to engage young people and raise awareness of career opportunities in the sector. These approaches demonstrate how skills development can be aligned with innovation and future workforce needs.

6) Procurement as a lever for skills development

Employers identified procurement as a powerful but underutilised mechanism for driving skills development across the sector. There was strong support for embedding training requirements within procurement processes, particularly for digital and technology implementation. For example, requiring technology providers to “train the trainers” was highlighted as a practical way to ensure that organisations can build internal capability alongside adopting new systems. This approach enables skills development to occur at scale and ensures that training is directly linked to implementation. Employers noted that using procurement in this way can accelerate digital adoption, improve workforce capability and create more sustainable learning models.

7) Emphasis on transferable skills and workforce adaptability

Employers consistently emphasised the importance of transferable skills in supporting workforce adaptability within a rapidly evolving sector. Skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and adaptability were seen as essential across all roles, particularly as digital technologies and new ways of working continue to reshape the sector. There was recognition that individuals often possess these skills but require support to articulate them effectively, particularly when progressing into new roles. Employers also highlighted that career pathways are becoming increasingly non-linear, with more individuals entering the sector through alternative routes or transitioning from other industries. As noted in the workshop, “skills in analysing, understanding and presenting information are critical,” particularly in roles that involve data, digital systems and decision-making. Supporting the development and recognition of these transferable skills is therefore essential to building a flexible and resilient workforce.

Challenges

1) Fragmented ecosystem and complex system navigation

Despite a wide range of provision across the Health & Med Tech sector, employers consistently reported that the system is highly fragmented and difficult to navigate. This fragmentation exists across education providers, funding streams, progression routes and support mechanisms, making it challenging for employers particularly SMEs to identify appropriate training and access support efficiently. Employers described a lack of clarity around who delivers what, how different programmes connect, and where to go for guidance, leading to both confusion and disengagement. This challenge is further compounded by the absence of a centralised entry point, with one participant explicitly questioning, “how do employers go to a central place?” As a result, employers often rely on informal networks or existing relationships rather than engaging with the wider system, limiting access to potentially valuable provision. The tension between fragmentation and standardisation also creates inconsistency, where similar training is delivered differently across education providers without clear alignment, making it difficult for employers to compare options or understand progression pathways.

2) Progression barriers and limited pathway clarity

A significant structural challenge identified during the workshop is the lack of clear and accessible progression pathways, particularly beyond Level 3. Employers highlighted a clear “roadblock” at this level, with learners often unsure about how to progress, what options are available, and which organisations deliver the next stage

of training. As noted in discussions, learners frequently ask “can I go further? and who is delivering the offer,” reflecting a lack of transparency and coordination within the system. This is further exacerbated by limited credit transfer between programmes, meaning that prior learning is not always recognised or built upon, effectively blocking progression. In addition, funding structures can create unintended disincentives; for example, progression from Level 3 to Level 4 can negatively impact benefits, discouraging individuals from continuing their development. Employers also highlighted inconsistencies between qualification routes, such as challenges in progressing from T Levels into higher education due to differences in curriculum content. These issues collectively create a system where progression is not only unclear but, in some cases, actively discouraged.

3) Misalignment between skills provision and workforce needs

Employers consistently emphasised that current provision does not always align with real workforce requirements, particularly in a rapidly evolving sector such as Health & Med Tech. This misalignment occurs because workforce planning is often reactive, focusing on immediate gaps rather than anticipating future skills needs. As discussed in the workshop, there is a need to move beyond addressing the “problem today vs problem tomorrow,” with greater emphasis on forward-looking planning. Education providers also highlighted a lack of clear direction from the sector, noting that there is “no clear direction... to respond to,” particularly in relation to digital and AI capability. This creates a disconnect where training provision may exist but does not fully reflect the skills required in practice. The complexity of the sector, involving multiple organisations and stakeholders, further contributes to this challenge, resulting in what was described as a “fractured picture” of skills demand, especially within the care and digital domains.

4) Digital exclusion and inconsistent digital capability

While digital skills are recognised as essential across the sector, significant barriers remain in both access and capability. Employers highlighted digital poverty as a key issue, with lack of access to devices and reliable broadband limiting participation in training and skills development. As noted in discussions, “digital poverty... limits entry into skills provision,” particularly for individuals in lower-paid roles or disadvantaged groups. In addition, there is considerable variability in digital capability across the workforce, with older workers often facing greater challenges in adapting to new technologies. At the same time, there is a lack of clarity around what constitutes baseline digital skills for the sector, making it difficult to design consistent training pathways. Employers also highlighted the complexity of understanding digital and AI requirements, noting that “it is even worse to understand AI and digital needs in the care sector,” given the number of organisations and stakeholders involved. This combination of access issues, capability gaps and lack of standardisation creates a significant barrier to digital adoption and transformation.

5) Barriers to work experience and entry pathways

Employers identified substantial challenges in providing and accessing work experience and entry-level opportunities, which are critical for building the future workforce. One of the main barriers is the administrative and regulatory burden associated with placements, particularly insurance requirements. For example, delegates highlighted cases where students were refused work experience placements due to insurance constraints, raising concerns about accessibility. In addition, there is often a mismatch between employer expectations and learner experience, with SMEs in particular expecting high levels of responsibility from individuals who are still developing their skills. As noted, “SMEs want experience but often expect high responsibility,” which can discourage both employers and learners from engaging. Employers also highlighted the lack of incentives to support placements, alongside practical challenges such as supervision capacity and operational pressures. These issues are further compounded by broader systemic factors, including a disproportionate number of learners compared to available roles, creating a situation where there is both unmet demand for skills and limited opportunities for entry into the sector.

6) Funding complexity and policy misalignment

Funding mechanisms were widely identified as a significant barrier to consistent investment in skills development. Employers reported a lack of clarity around available funding options, including HTQs, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and other schemes, making it difficult to plan and invest in training. There is also a perceived misalignment between employment policy and skills policy, particularly where policies prioritise

rapid entry into employment over longer-term progression and upskilling. For example, tensions were noted between initiatives aimed at moving individuals into work quickly and the need to support ongoing development within the sector. In addition, funding structures are often seen as inflexible, particularly in relation to modular and short-course provision, limiting the ability of employers to adopt more responsive training approaches. As highlighted in the workshop, there is a need for “greater flexibility in the Growth and Skills Levy” and clearer incentives to support progression and workforce development.

7) Regulatory, system and organisational complexity

The Health & Med Tech sector operates within a highly complex and regulated environment, which creates additional challenges for skills development and workforce planning. Employers highlighted the multi-layered nature of the NHS, social care and innovation systems, which can be difficult to navigate, particularly for SMEs and new entrants. This complexity affects not only training but also innovation, procurement and workforce development. For example, understanding NHS pathways and engaging with procurement processes was described as challenging, requiring specialised knowledge and support. In addition, regulatory requirements, while necessary, can slow down innovation and create additional barriers to entry. Employers also highlighted broader organisational challenges, including the need for greater coordination between FE, HE, NHS and other stakeholders, as well as difficulties in identifying the right contacts within large systems. These factors contribute to a lack of cohesion and make it more difficult to align skills development with system needs.

Potential Solutions

A) Establish a clear, coordinated “front door” and brokerage function

A consistent message from employers was the need for a simpler and more navigable system. To address this, a coordinated “front door” should be established that acts as both an access point and an active brokerage service. Rather than functioning purely as an information portal, this should provide tailored guidance to employers, helping them identify appropriate training, understand progression routes and navigate funding options. This could include a structured route-mapping tool that sets out available pathways across entry-level, progression and specialist roles, alongside clear information on delivery formats, duration and outcomes. Importantly, this function should also proactively engage employers particularly SMEs who may not have the time or capacity to explore the system independently and connect them with relevant education providers, testbeds and support programmes. By simplifying access and reducing fragmentation, this approach would increase employer confidence and enable quicker, more informed decision-making.

B) Develop modular, stackable and progression-linked learning pathways

To better align provision with workforce realities, there is a need to expand modular and stackable learning pathways that support progression across different levels. These pathways should be designed so that individuals can build skills incrementally, combining shorter units of learning that accumulate into recognised qualifications over time. Crucially, they should be clearly mapped to job roles within the sector, ensuring that learners and employers can see how training translates into progression. This includes strengthening pathways beyond Level 3, where progression is currently unclear, and ensuring that prior learning can be recognised and built upon. By creating flexible yet structured routes, this approach would enable both new entrants and existing staff including career changers to progress in a way that is achievable alongside work commitments. The approach taken for the MedTech HTQ, which was co-designed with sector employers as a flexible, modular option at Levels 4 and 5, should be taken forward and expanded to other health and life sciences sub-sectors.

C) Strengthen work-based learning, placements and job rotation models

Work-based learning should be expanded and embedded more consistently across the sector, recognising its importance in developing practical skills and supporting progression. This includes scaling successful approaches such as job rotation models, which allow individuals to gain experience across different roles and build a broader understanding of the system. At the same time, barriers to work experience and placements need to be addressed through more standardised processes and clearer guidance. This could involve developing shared frameworks for placements, including expectations, supervision models and risk management approaches, as well as providing incentives or support for employers to participate. By making

placements easier to access and more structured, this approach would strengthen entry pathways and ensure that learners gain meaningful, relevant experience that supports transition into employment.

D) Embed digital, AI and data capability across the workforce

Given the increasing importance of digital transformation within the sector, there is a need to embed digital, AI and data skills across all roles rather than treating them as specialist capabilities. This should begin with defining a clear baseline of digital competence for the sector, ensuring consistency across education providers and organisations. Training should then build progressively from foundational skills such as digital literacy and effective use of tools, through to more advanced capabilities including data analysis, interpretation and responsible use of AI. A leadership-led approach is critical here, ensuring that digital adoption is driven strategically rather than reactively. In addition, practical support should be provided to help organisations implement new technologies, including guidance on ethical use and critical evaluation. Addressing digital exclusion through improved access to devices and connectivity will also be essential to ensure that all parts of the workforce can participate.

E) Strengthen employer-provider co-design and collaborative delivery models

To ensure that training remains relevant and responsive, stronger and more formalised mechanisms for co-design between employers and education providers should be established. This involves moving beyond one-off consultations to ongoing collaboration, where employers actively shape curriculum content, delivery methods and outcomes. Education providers should work closely with employers to incorporate real-world challenges into training, ensuring that learning reflects operational realities. Collaborative delivery models, such as employer-led sessions, masterclasses and shared training initiatives, can further strengthen this approach. There is also an opportunity to build networks or sector groups that enable employers to share experiences, identify common needs and collectively influence provision. By embedding co-design into the system, training can remain aligned to evolving workforce requirements and deliver greater impact.

F) Improve funding flexibility and alignment with workforce needs

Funding models need to be more flexible and better aligned with the way employers engage with training. This includes enabling shorter, modular courses to be funded, supporting incremental learning rather than requiring commitment to full programmes. Greater clarity is also needed around existing funding options, including how employers can access and combine different sources of support. In addition, funding structures should avoid creating barriers to progression, ensuring that individuals are not discouraged from advancing due to financial implications. There is also scope to explore mechanisms that support employers in releasing staff for training, such as flexible funding arrangements or support for backfill. By aligning funding more closely with employer needs and delivery models, this approach would increase participation and enable more consistent investment in skills.

G) Strengthen system coordination and forward-looking workforce planning

To address the current disconnect between skills provision and workforce demand, there is a need for a more coordinated and strategic approach to workforce planning. This should involve closer alignment between employers, providers, NHS organisations and other stakeholders, supported by improved labour market intelligence and clearer communication of skills needs. Establishing structures such as sector-specific skills groups or integrated planning boards could help ensure that provision is informed by real demand and aligned to future requirements. This approach should also focus on anticipating emerging skills needs particularly in areas such as digital, AI and innovation rather than responding reactively. By improving coordination and planning, the system can become more proactive, reducing gaps and ensuring that skills development supports long-term sector growth.

Codesigned Solutions: Creative and Digital

In developing the LSIP proposals, a co-design approach has been central to shaping solutions for Creative & Digital (C&D) skills development across the West Midlands. This reflects the recognition that challenges within the sector, particularly those relating to rapid technological change, AI adoption, SME and freelancer

engagement, and inconsistent work-readiness cannot be addressed by any single part of the system acting alone. Co-design in this context has brought together employers, representative education providers, sector or cluster bodies and wider stakeholders to ensure that solutions reflect the realities of a fast-evolving, project-based and innovation-driven sector.

This approach has been particularly important given the structure of the Creative & Digital sector in the West Midlands, which is characterised by a high proportion of SMEs, micro-businesses and freelancers, alongside larger organisations operating in areas such as digital technologies, content creation, marketing, gaming and design. Employers consistently highlighted that traditional models of skills provision do not always align with how the sector operates, including short project cycles, flexible working patterns and portfolio-based recruitment. As a result, co-design has focused on developing solutions that are flexible, modular and closely aligned to real industry practice and its common ways of working.

The approach also builds on existing good practice across the region, where employers are already engaging with initiatives such as live briefs, project-based learning, innovation programmes and apprenticeship partnerships. However, workshop feedback highlighted that while these examples exist, they are often inconsistent and not scaled effectively across the region. By bringing together employer insights and practical experience, the co-design process has enabled a clearer understanding of both what works well and where systemic barriers exist, ensuring that future solutions are practical, scalable and directly informed by those who will use and deliver them.

Summarising feedback from the Creative & Digital Skills Solutions Workshop, employers consistently emphasised the need for stronger alignment between education and industry, greater access to real-world experience (emphasising applied skills alongside knowledge), and more flexible and modular training pathways to reflect portfolio working. There was also a strong focus on embedding digital literacy, AI capability and employability skills across all levels of provision, especially at levels 3, 4, 5, and 6, alongside improving navigation for self-employed workers or employers who rely on freelance contracting as its business model to engage with the skills system. Importantly, employers highlighted that skills development in this sector must go beyond technical capability, incorporating creativity, problem-solving, commercial awareness and professional behaviours linked to hiring practices and word-of-mouth recommendations.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Live projects, portfolio-based learning and industry briefs

Employers consistently highlighted that portfolio-based learning is one of the most effective ways to develop talent within the Creative & Digital sector. Unlike many other sectors, recruitment is often based on demonstrable work rather than qualifications alone, meaning learners must be able to showcase real outputs that reflect their skills and capabilities. As a result, access to live projects and industry-relevant work is critical. Examples discussed during the workshop included initiatives such as “Future Flames” at Walsall College, where students work on live industry briefs, enabling them to apply their skills to real-world challenges and present outcomes directly to employers. Similarly, activities such as game development projects, digital content creation and interactive design tasks were identified as highly effective in engaging learners while developing both technical and creative skills. Employers emphasised that these approaches are most impactful when projects are based on real business needs, delivered through collaborative team-based learning, and culminate in outputs presented to employers or external audiences. This model not only strengthens technical capability but also builds communication, presentation and problem-solving skills, which are essential for employability within the sector.

2) Employer engagement in curriculum and training delivery

Strong examples of employer-provider collaboration were identified as effective practice, particularly where employers are actively involved in shaping and delivering training. This includes providing live briefs and project work, contributing to course design and evaluation, and engaging with students through guest lectures, mentoring and feedback sessions. Employers noted that early and sustained engagement with education providers enables them to identify talent at an earlier stage while ensuring that training provision reflects real business needs. For example, partnerships between universities, colleges and industry to support student

commissions, competitive projects and innovation-led activities, such as virtual reality (VR) programmes involving PhD students, were highlighted as particularly valuable. These approaches enhance both learner engagement and skill development. This model works most effectively where employers are treated as active partners in the training process, rather than passive recipients of graduates, ensuring provision remains relevant, responsive and aligned with industry requirements.

3) Work-integrated learning and practical experience

Employers strongly emphasised the importance of integrating practical experience within education and training. Approaches such as work experience placements, micro-placements and short project-based opportunities were seen as essential for preparing learners for the realities of the workplace. In addition, embedding employer-led projects within courses allows learners to gain direct exposure to industry expectations. Delegates highlighted that “learning by doing” is fundamental in Creative & Digital roles, where practical application and real-world problem-solving are often more valuable than theoretical knowledge alone. However, despite its importance, access to work experience remains inconsistent, and employers noted that coordinating placements can be challenging, particularly for SMEs. Where effectively delivered, work-integrated learning significantly enhances employability by bridging the gap between education and industry.

4) Flexible and alternative learning pathways

There was strong support for alternative pathways beyond traditional academic routes, reflecting the diverse and non-linear nature of careers within the Creative & Digital sector. Employers highlighted the value of post-degree bootcamps and intensive training programmes, modular learning aligned to specific skills, and portfolio-based or project-based approaches.

Given the prevalence of freelance, entrepreneurial and project-based careers within the sector, training models that support flexibility, adaptability and independent working were seen as particularly effective. Employers emphasised that learners benefit from opportunities to build skills incrementally and apply them in practical contexts, rather than following rigid, linear pathways. These approaches better reflect how careers develop within the sector and help individuals respond to rapidly changing industry demands.

5) Innovation-led approaches and employer challenges

Innovation-led learning approaches, including hackathons, employer-led challenge hubs and collaborative projects, were identified as highly effective in developing skills and engaging learners. These activities provide opportunities for individuals to work on real-world challenges, often within time-bound and team-based environments, encouraging creativity, experimentation and problem-solving. Employers highlighted that these approaches not only support skill development but also allow organisations to identify emerging talent and test new ideas. By working directly with learners on innovation challenges, businesses can engage with potential future employees while contributing to skills development. This creates a mutually beneficial model that strengthens links between education and industry while fostering innovation across the sector.

6) “Grow your own” and grassroots talent development

Employers, particularly SMEs and organisations within the creative industries, highlighted the importance of grassroots and early-stage talent development. Initiatives such as youth theatre, community-based creative programmes and early engagement activities were identified as effective ways to identify and nurture talent from a young age. These approaches help build confidence, creativity and foundational skills, while also creating pathways into the sector for individuals who may not follow traditional academic routes. Employers noted that supporting talent development at an early stage can improve long-term outcomes, strengthen diversity within the workforce and contribute to a more sustainable talent pipeline for the Creative & Digital sector.

Challenges

1) Fragmented system and lack of clear navigation

Despite the availability of a wide range of provision, employers consistently highlighted that the skills system feels fragmented and difficult to navigate. Delegates noted that there is limited clarity on what training exists,

how to access it, and which education providers are most relevant to their needs. This creates both confusion and disengagement, particularly for SMEs and freelancers who do not have dedicated HR or training functions. Employers described the system as “hard to navigate” and emphasised the need for a clearer, more coordinated approach that simplifies access and reduces the time required to identify appropriate support.

2) Limited work experience and employer engagement infrastructure

While employers strongly value work experience and real-world exposure, delegates highlighted that opportunities remain inconsistent and difficult to organise. A key issue raised was the misalignment between academic timetables and business cycles, with employers noting that “timing doesn’t always work for us” when it comes to hosting placements. SMEs in particular reported limited capacity to support work experience due to resource and time constraints. In addition, there is no consistent brokerage system to connect employers with learners, resulting in missed opportunities for both parties. As a result, many learners enter the workforce without sufficient practical experience or understanding of workplace expectations.

3) Skills gaps in work-readiness and employability

Employers consistently highlighted gaps in core employability skills, including communication, teamwork, professional behaviour, confidence and resilience. Delegates noted that some learners struggle with basic workplace expectations, such as collaboration, time management and professional communication. There was also concern that increasing reliance on AI tools to complete coursework may reduce opportunities for learners to develop genuine skills. Employers observed that “students can produce work using AI but may not understand how to apply it in practice,” leading to reduced readiness for real working environments and increased onboarding requirements.

4) Misalignment between training and industry needs

Training provision was frequently described as not keeping pace with the rapidly evolving nature of the Creative & Digital sector. Employers highlighted that courses are often too generic, outdated or disconnected from real business processes. Delegates noted that areas such as digital marketing technologies, data analytics and AI are evolving quickly, but training does not always reflect current tools or industry practice. This creates a gap where “graduates understand theory but not how businesses actually operate,” requiring employers to invest additional time and resources in upskilling new recruits.

5) Barriers for SMEs, freelancers and micro-businesses

The structure of the sector presents significant challenges for accessing training. Employers highlighted that many Creative & Digital businesses operate as SMEs, micro-enterprises or freelancers, with limited capacity to engage in formal training. Delegates noted that traditional training models, including long courses or rigid programmes, do not align with project-based and flexible working patterns. Freelancers in particular face barriers, with one key theme being that “there’s no clear route to support unless you already know where to look.” This creates an inequitable system where access to training is often dependent on networks rather than structured provision.

6) AI adoption, trust and capability gaps

AI was identified as both a major opportunity and a source of uncertainty within the sector. Employers highlighted a lack of understanding of how AI can be applied effectively in business contexts, alongside concerns about data privacy, intellectual property and ethical use. Delegates also noted a level of fear among the workforce, particularly around job displacement and the impact on creative roles. There was a strong sense that organisations need support to “understand where AI fits” and how it can be used as a tool to enhance productivity rather than replace human creativity.

7) Unclear career pathways and progression routes

Employers and stakeholders highlighted that many individuals lack awareness of career pathways within the Creative & Digital sector. Delegates noted that “people don’t always know how to get in or what the next step looks like,” particularly in a sector characterised by non-linear and project-based careers. This lack of clarity

affects young people, career changers and those outside traditional education routes, making it difficult to plan progression or identify relevant training opportunities.

8) Rapid pace of technological change

The fast-moving nature of the sector was identified as a key challenge for both employers and education providers. Delegates noted that technologies, tools and industry practices evolve quickly, meaning that skills can become outdated in a short period of time. Employers highlighted that “what is taught today may not be relevant in a few years,” creating ongoing pressure to continuously update skills and adapt training provision. This reinforces the need for flexible, modular and lifelong learning approaches that can respond to change more effectively.

Potential Solutions

A) Establish a clear, coordinated system to improve access and navigation

A key priority identified through the workshop is the need to simplify how employers and learners access skills provision. Employers consistently highlighted that the current system is fragmented and difficult to navigate, with limited awareness of available training, funding and engagement opportunities. Delegates noted that many businesses, particularly SMEs, “do not know where to start” when looking for support. To address this, there is a need to develop a more coordinated and accessible approach, such as a centralised platform or brokerage system that connects employers to local diverse talent, learners to employers with vacancy demand and education providers with available provision to employer demand. This could include a single digital platform where employers can submit project briefs, outline skills needs and access relevant training opportunities, alongside clearer signposting to courses, funding and support services. Employers also highlighted the importance of being able to engage more easily with colleges and universities. Improving coordination in this way would reduce barriers to engagement and ensure that both employers and learners can access the right support more efficiently.

B) Expand flexible, modular and portfolio-based learning pathways

Employers emphasised the need for more flexible and accessible training pathways that reflect the structure of the Creative & Digital sector. Traditional, long-form qualifications were often seen as difficult to engage with, particularly for SMEs and individuals working in freelance or project-based roles. Instead, there was strong support for modular, bite-sized learning that can be accessed flexibly and built up over time. Delegates highlighted the importance of portfolio-based learning, where individuals develop real outputs through project work rather than relying solely on formal assessment. This approach aligns with recruitment practices within the sector, where employers prioritise demonstrable work. There was also support for alternative pathways such as bootcamps and intensive training programmes that enable individuals to develop practical skills quickly. Overall, training provision should be adaptable, relevant and directly linked to real-world application.

C) Strengthen work-integrated learning and employer engagement

Expanding access to work-integrated learning was identified as a critical priority. Employers consistently highlighted that practical experience is essential, yet access to work experience and placements remains inconsistent. Delegates noted that timing and capacity constraints often make it difficult for businesses, particularly SMEs, to engage with traditional placement models. To address this, there is a need for more structured approaches to connecting employers and learners. This could include brokerage systems to facilitate placements and project opportunities, alongside increased use of live industry briefs within education programmes. Employers also highlighted the value of shorter, more flexible models such as micro-placements and project-based experiences, which better align with business needs. Strengthening employer engagement in this way will help ensure learners gain meaningful exposure to real working environments.

D) Embed digital, AI and employability skills across provision

Employers highlighted the importance of embedding digital capability, AI understanding and employability skills across all education and training provision. While many learners are familiar with digital tools, there is a clear gap in deeper understanding, particularly in relation to critical thinking, ethical AI use and practical

application. Delegates also emphasised the need to address how AI is being used within education, noting concerns that it may be reducing genuine skill development. There is therefore a need to embed training on the ethical and effective use of AI, alongside broader digital and data skills. At the same time, employability skills such as communication, teamwork, confidence and resilience must be integrated throughout provision, ensuring that learners are prepared for workplace expectations.

E) Support SMEs, freelancers and diverse talent pathways

Given the structure of the sector, there is a need to develop more inclusive and accessible approaches to skills development that support SMEs, freelancers and individuals following non-traditional career pathways. Employers highlighted that many existing programmes are not designed for freelance or micro-business contexts, where time, capacity and funding are limited. There is an opportunity to provide more flexible access to training, alongside mentoring, networking and peer learning opportunities. Delegates also highlighted the importance of engaging underrepresented groups, including those not in education, employment or training, and individuals returning to the workforce. Improving access to opportunities and reducing reliance on informal networks will help create a more equitable and inclusive skills system.

F) Strengthen employer-provider collaboration and co-design

Employers consistently emphasised the importance of stronger collaboration between industry and education providers. There is a need to build on existing partnerships and create more structured opportunities for co-design, ensuring that provision reflects real business needs and adapts to industry change. This includes greater employer involvement in curriculum design, delivery and evaluation, as well as opportunities to contribute live projects, case studies and practical challenges. Employers also highlighted the importance of ongoing engagement rather than one-off interactions, ensuring that provision remains responsive over time. Strengthening these relationships will help align training more closely with industry requirements.

G) Expand innovation-led learning and collaborative approaches

Innovation-led approaches such as hackathons, challenge-based learning and collaborative projects were identified as highly effective in developing skills and engaging learners. These approaches enable individuals to work on real-world challenges while developing creativity, problem-solving and teamwork. There is an opportunity to expand these models across the region, creating more opportunities for learners to engage with employers through innovation activities. Employers also noted that these approaches help identify emerging talent and support business innovation. Embedding innovation within skills provision will strengthen both workforce development and sector growth.

H) Improve career awareness and pathway visibility

Improving awareness of career opportunities and progression routes within the Creative & Digital sector is a key priority. Employers highlighted that many individuals lack a clear understanding of how to enter the sector or progress within it, particularly given its non-linear and project-based nature. There is a need to provide clearer information on career pathways, including entry points, required skills and progression opportunities. This should be supported by earlier engagement with young people and better integration of career guidance within education and training. Improving pathway visibility will help individuals make informed decisions and support the development of a stronger talent pipeline.

I) Address data, intellectual property and legal considerations

Employers highlighted the need for clearer guidance around data management, privacy and intellectual property, particularly in the context of AI and collaborative projects. Concerns were raised about ownership of work produced by learners, as well as the legal implications of using AI-generated content. There is a need to establish clear frameworks and guidance to support collaboration between employers and education providers, including clarity on intellectual property ownership and data protection responsibilities. Providing this clarity will help reduce risk, increase employer confidence and support greater engagement in training and innovation activities.

J) Upskill educators and strengthen system capability

Delegates highlighted that education providers need ongoing support to keep pace with technological change, particularly in areas such as AI and digital tools. Without this, there is a risk that provision becomes outdated or disconnected from industry practice. There is a need to invest in upskilling educators, ensuring they are equipped to teach both the technical and ethical aspects of digital and AI skills. Strengthening educator capability will be critical to ensuring that learners receive relevant and up-to-date training.

K) Strengthen networks and collaboration across the ecosystem

Finally, there is a need to strengthen networks and collaboration across the Creative & Digital ecosystem.

Employers highlighted the importance of connecting businesses, learners and education providers through networking opportunities, collaboration events and shared platforms.

Developing stronger regional networks will help facilitate knowledge sharing, support partnership development and improve access to opportunities. This will be particularly important for SMEs and freelancers, who may otherwise be disconnected from formal support systems.

Codesigned Solutions: The Everyday Economy

In developing the LSIP proposals, a co-design approach has been central to shaping solutions for the Everyday Economy in the West Midlands. This reflects the recognition that challenges within the Everyday Economy, particularly those relating to workforce readiness, foundational skills (basic skills and employability skills and behaviours), retention, progression and employer engagement cannot be addressed by any single part of the system acting alone. Co-design in this context has brought together employers, representative education providers, community organisations and public sector partners to ensure that solutions are grounded in real operational realities, including the pressures faced by SMEs, the needs of entry-level workers, and the requirement for flexible, accessible pathways that align with shift-based and time-pressured environments.

This approach builds on existing practice across the region, including employer-led initiatives, community-based interventions, apprenticeship delivery and employment support programmes. However, workshop feedback highlighted that while activity exists, its impact is often constrained by fragmentation, inconsistent engagement and limited alignment with employer needs. By bringing together detailed employer insights, the co-design process has enabled a clearer understanding of both effective practice and systemic barriers, ensuring that future solutions are practical, scalable and directly informed by those who will use and deliver them.

Summarising the feedback from the Everyday Economy Solutions Workshop, employers consistently highlighted the need for stronger foundational skills, clearer entry and progression pathways linked to their everyday sectors, more flexible and work-integrated training models due to shift working, and earlier engagement with young people to meet vacancy demand. There was also a strong emphasis on improving perceptions of Everyday Economy roles, embedding digital and employability skills into all pathways, and creating more coordinated, locally accessible support systems that work for both employers and individuals.

What Works (existing strengths and effective practice)

1) Work-based learning, employability programmes and employer engagement

Employers highlighted that practical, work-based learning approaches are among the most effective ways to develop employability skills and confidence. Initiatives such as weekly practice interviews, recording interviews and providing feedback, and guidance on professional presentation (e.g. appropriate dress and communication) were identified as simple but impactful interventions that improve job readiness. For example, programmes delivered through organisations such as DWP and Compass groups provide structured employability support, while initiatives like Building Jobs (3.7–15) focus on developing social and workplace skills. Employers also emphasised the value of direct engagement, such as delivering presentations or workshops in schools and community settings to raise awareness of career opportunities. The JJ Skills Academy at Millennium Point was highlighted as a strong example of employer-led engagement, with potential to expand collaboration with organisations such as Right Track Sports. These approaches work best where they

provide real exposure to the workplace, build confidence and create clear links between training and employment outcomes.

2) Use of digital tools and innovative approaches to build confidence

Employers identified emerging examples of using digital tools, such as chatbots, to support communication skills development. These tools allow individuals, particularly young people to practise conversations, develop structured responses and build confidence before engaging in real-world interactions. For example, chatbots can simulate customer interactions or interview scenarios, helping individuals overcome anxiety and improve their ability to communicate effectively. This approach was seen as particularly valuable in addressing the gap between digital familiarity and real-world communication skills, especially among younger cohorts who may prefer messaging but lack confidence in face-to-face or telephone interactions. When combined with practical application, these tools can act as a bridge between digital and interpersonal skill development.

3) Apprenticeships and structured progression models

Apprenticeships were recognised as an important route for developing skills and supporting progression within the Everyday Economy. Employers highlighted the need to introduce apprenticeships earlier in career pathways and to promote them more effectively as a viable and valuable option. Structured progression models, such as the McDonald's "climbing the ladder" approach, were cited as strong examples of how clear pathways can support employee development and retention. These models are most effective where they provide visible progression opportunities, align with operational roles and demonstrate how individuals can move from entry-level positions into higher-responsibility roles over time. However, employers noted that apprenticeships require clearer frameworks and reduced bureaucracy to maximise their impact.

4) In-house training, mentoring and early intervention

Many employers and organisations are already delivering in-house training and mentoring to build foundational skills and work readiness. Examples include encouraging young people to take on roles such as classroom assistants to gain early exposure to workplace expectations, as well as mentoring programmes starting as early as Year 8 or Year 9 to build motivation and direction before individuals enter the labour market. Employers also highlighted the importance of equipping young people with financial and money management skills, helping them understand real-life responsibilities and the consequences of employment decisions. These approaches are particularly effective where they start early, are embedded within education and community settings, and are linked to real-world experiences.

5) Flexible, blended and work-integrated training models

Employers consistently identified the need for flexible and blended training approaches that reflect the realities of Everyday Economy roles. Effective models include a mix of on-the-job learning, face-to-face training and online provision, allowing individuals to learn in ways that fit around work and personal commitments. For example, hybrid models work well in sectors such as retail, while on-the-job training is particularly effective in care settings. Shorter, bite-sized learning formats, evening provision and workplace-based training were all highlighted as important enablers. Employers also emphasised that training should allow individuals to learn in a "safe space," where they can make mistakes and build confidence. These approaches are most successful where learning is directly linked to workplace practice and supported by employers.

6) Community-based and wraparound support models

Community interventions were identified as a key strength in engaging individuals who may otherwise be disconnected from employment. Approaches such as sports-based programmes and community projects help build confidence, motivation and social skills in a supportive environment. Employers highlighted that providing wraparound support including mentoring, guidance and ongoing engagement is critical to helping individuals remain engaged and progress into work. These models are particularly effective for individuals facing barriers such as low confidence or lack of experience, as they provide a more accessible and less formal route into employment pathways.

Challenges

1) Foundational skills and work readiness gaps

Employers consistently reported significant gaps in foundational skills, including communication, confidence, teamwork and basic workplace behaviours such as timekeeping and attendance. These gaps result in increased onboarding time, reduced productivity and higher levels of supervision. As one discussion highlighted, “simple workplace behaviours... are important foundational skills,” yet many individuals enter employment without them. There are also gaps in English, maths and digital skills, which contribute to economic inactivity and limit access to employment opportunities. Employers emphasised that while skills can be taught, attitude and willingness to learn are critical factors that influence outcomes.

2) Fragmentation and lack of system coordination

A recurring theme was the fragmented nature of the skills and employment system, with multiple organisations (e.g. DWP, Jobcentres, education providers) operating without sufficient coordination. Employers described the system as difficult to navigate, with limited awareness of available support and challenges in accessing funding. This fragmentation reduces engagement and creates inefficiencies, with one discussion describing current approaches as a “sticky plaster on a broken system,” highlighting the need for more joined-up and simplified structures.

3) Misalignment between training and business needs

Employers expressed concerns that training provision does not always reflect real job roles or operational requirements. Training is often seen as too generic, with variability in quality across education providers and limited flexibility to tailor content to specific business needs. This misalignment results in employers needing to provide additional internal training, reducing the perceived value of external provision and limiting its effectiveness.

4) Structural and economic pressures on employers

Employers highlighted a range of structural challenges, including rising employment costs (e.g. National Minimum Wage increases), reduced government incentives and ongoing funding pressures. These factors limit the ability of businesses, particularly SMEs to invest in training and workforce development. Additionally, low pay in some Everyday Economy roles discourages individuals from entering or remaining in these sectors, while some employers reported that individuals may choose benefits over work due to cost-of-living pressures.

5) Barriers to participation and access

Individuals face a range of practical barriers to entering and progressing in Everyday Economy roles, including lack of transport, appropriate clothing, job experience and confidence. Digital poverty and limited access to technology also act as barriers, alongside health conditions and caring responsibilities. Employers also highlighted that traditional engagement methods (e.g. expecting individuals to attend Jobcentres or colleges) are not always effective, and that education providers need to “engage with people where they are” to improve participation.

6) Perception and progression challenges

Everyday Economy roles are often perceived as temporary or low value, particularly in sectors such as hospitality and customer service. This perception limits aspiration and reduces long-term engagement with these careers. Employers also highlighted a lack of clear progression pathways, with limited visibility of how individuals can move from entry-level roles into higher-responsibility positions. This contributes to high turnover and reduced motivation among employees.

Potential Solutions

A) Strengthen early engagement and work readiness pathways

Develop structured, early engagement programmes that connect employers with schools and communities from Year 9 onwards, helping young people understand workplace expectations and career opportunities. This should include practical interventions such as mock interviews, workplace visits, employer-led workshops and

mentoring programmes. Embedding work readiness into education through real-world experiences such as classroom assistant roles, community projects and sports-based interventions will help build confidence, motivation and foundational skills before individuals enter the labour market.

B) Expand flexible, work-integrated and modular training provision

Develop flexible, bite-sized and modular training models that can be delivered in the workplace or through blended formats, allowing individuals to learn around shift patterns and personal commitments. This should include micro-placements, job shadowing, on-the-job training and short courses aligned to specific skills needs. Training should be designed to be immediately applicable, enabling individuals to “learn and do” rather than relying on theoretical approaches. Evening provision and hybrid delivery should also be expanded to support wider participation.

C) Improve system coordination and simplify access to support

Create a more joined-up and accessible skills system, with a clear “front door” that helps employers and individuals navigate provision, funding and support. This should include stronger coordination between DWP, education providers, local authorities and employers, alongside simplified funding processes. Developing local, community-based hubs and brokerage systems can help connect employers with talent, while also making it easier for individuals to access opportunities and support.

D) Strengthen employer-provider collaboration and co-design

Encourage closer collaboration between employers and education providers to co-design training that reflects real business needs. Employers should play an active role in shaping content, delivery and outcomes, ensuring that provision is relevant and practical. This should include developing shared platforms or systems to coordinate work experience opportunities, enabling employers to offer placements more easily and helping education providers align learning with real-world requirements.

E) Embed foundational, digital and employability skills across all pathways

Ensure that all training and employment pathways include a strong focus on core skills, including communication, teamwork, customer service, digital capability and basic English and maths. Digital skills should go beyond basic use of smartphones to include practical workplace applications such as email communication, data handling and use of digital systems. Emerging tools such as AI and digital assistants should be integrated into training to support both individuals and businesses in adapting to technological change.

F) Support employers through incentives and practical tools

Provide financial incentives, business support and practical tools to encourage employers, particularly SMEs to invest in training and workforce development. This could include business rate incentives, simplified funding access and support for organising work placements. Employers should also be supported with guidance, toolkits and shared best practice to help them deliver training and support workforce development more effectively.

G) Improve progression pathways and perception of Everyday Economy roles

Develop clearer progression frameworks that show how individuals can move from entry-level roles into higher-responsibility positions over time. This should include structured pathways, apprenticeships and internal progression models. At the same time, efforts should be made to improve the perception of Everyday Economy roles, highlighting them as viable and valuable career options rather than temporary jobs. This will help raise aspirations, improve retention and support long-term workforce development.

Codesigned Solutions: Apprenticeships and Workforce Development in Coventry

The apprenticeship engagement workshop discussions highlighted the importance of employers, providers and local stakeholders working collaboratively to strengthen apprenticeship pathways across Coventry. Several employers noted that apprenticeships are most successful when businesses receive practical support and when expectations are clearly understood by both employers and learners.

Employers attending the workshop discussed the need for a simpler and more accessible apprenticeship system, particularly for SMEs with limited internal capacity. A few delegates highlighted the importance of reducing administrative complexity and improving access to practical guidance around funding, recruitment and programme delivery.

Several attendees also reflected on the value of stronger employer-provider relationships, particularly where providers take an active role in supporting recruitment, programme management and candidate preparation.

What Works (Existing Strengths and Effective Practice)

1) Long-Term Talent Development and Progression Pathways

Several employers shared positive examples of apprentices progressing into long-term and senior positions within their organisations. One employer reflected that an apprentice had progressed into a head accountant role over time, demonstrating the long-term value apprenticeships can bring when businesses invest in workforce development and progression opportunities. Employers discussed how apprenticeships can support succession planning by helping organisations develop talent internally rather than relying solely on external recruitment. Several attendees noted that apprentices who grow within a business often develop a stronger understanding of company culture, operational processes and long-term business goals, contributing to improved retention and workforce stability.

2) Return on Investment Through Structured Development

A few employers noted that apprenticeships can deliver strong long-term value when learners are properly supported and gradually integrated into operational roles. Employers highlighted that apprentices often begin contributing more significantly after the first year, particularly where businesses provide structured mentoring, training and clear responsibilities. Several delegates reflected that while apprenticeships require an initial investment of time and supervision, the long-term benefits can include increased productivity, reduced recruitment costs and the development of a skilled and loyal workforce. Employers also noted that apprenticeships can help businesses build capability in specialist areas where experienced talent may be difficult to recruit externally.

3) Work Experience as a Pathway to Apprenticeships

Several attendees highlighted work experience placements as an effective way of improving candidate suitability and reducing recruitment risk. Employers felt that pre-employment placements allow both employers and learners to better understand workplace expectations, helping to improve confidence, engagement and long-term retention outcomes. A few employers discussed how work experience opportunities can help young people develop communication skills, workplace awareness and confidence before formally entering employment. Delegates also noted that short placements can help employers assess attitude, motivation and suitability before committing to a longer-term apprenticeship programme.

4) Employer-Provider Collaboration and Support Structures

Employers reflected positively on providers who offer practical support throughout the apprenticeship process, including recruitment guidance, funding information and ongoing communication. Several delegates noted that a more “hands-on” approach from providers helps improve employer confidence, particularly for SMEs engaging with apprenticeships for the first time. A few attendees highlighted the importance of providers maintaining regular communication with employers and responding quickly to challenges during the apprenticeship journey. Employers felt that strong partnerships with providers can help improve learner support, reduce administrative burden and create programmes that are more closely aligned with operational business needs.

5) Apprenticeships as a Route to Innovation and Fresh Thinking

A few employers discussed the value apprentices can bring through new ideas, digital awareness and fresh perspectives within organisations. Employers also reflected on the benefits of introducing younger talent into businesses, helping organisations adapt to changing technologies and evolving workplace practices. Several attendees noted that apprentices can contribute positively to team culture by bringing enthusiasm, adaptability and a willingness to learn. Employers also discussed how younger employees can help businesses stay connected with changing trends, particularly in digital practices, communication methods and customer engagement.

Challenges

1) Complexity of the System and Lack of Clear Navigation

Several employers described the apprenticeship system as difficult to navigate, particularly for SMEs and first-time users. Delegates discussed confusion around funding processes, provider selection and understanding employer responsibilities, with some attendees noting that clearer guidance and a more accessible structure would improve engagement. A few employers reflected that the system can feel fragmented, with businesses often unsure where to go for advice or how to access available support. Delegates felt that simplifying information and creating clearer entry points into the apprenticeship system would help encourage wider employer participation.

2) Financial Risk and Cost Pressures for Employers

A few employers highlighted concerns around the wider costs of apprenticeships, including wages, supervision and time investment required to support learners. SMEs in particular discussed the challenge of balancing workforce development alongside operational and financial pressures within smaller organisations. Several delegates noted that while training costs may be supported through funding, employers still carry responsibility for salaries, mentoring and productivity impacts during the early stages of training. Some employers felt that uncertainty around retention and long-term return on investment can discourage smaller businesses from engaging with apprenticeship programmes.

3) Work Readiness and Employability Gaps

Several attendees noted that some young people entering apprenticeships require additional support with communication, confidence, adaptability and workplace behaviour. Employers felt that stronger employability preparation and exposure to workplace environments before recruitment would help improve integration and retention. A few employers discussed concerns around punctuality, professional communication and understanding workplace expectations. Delegates felt that greater emphasis on employability and soft skills within schools and pre-employment programmes could help young people transition more effectively into work environments.

4) Candidate Suitability and Retention Challenges

Employers discussed difficulties in identifying candidates who are genuinely suited to apprenticeship roles and sectors. Several delegates also highlighted concerns around early leavers, mismatched expectations and the impact this can have on business resources and long-term confidence in apprenticeship programmes. A few employers reflected that some applicants may not fully understand the realities of the role or long-term commitment involved in apprenticeships. Employers noted that clearer communication and better preparation before recruitment could help improve retention and reduce mismatched expectations.

5) Lack of Awareness and Promotion of Apprenticeships

A few employers reflected that apprenticeships are not always promoted clearly enough within schools and communities. Delegates felt that many young people still have limited understanding of apprenticeship opportunities, progression pathways and the long-term career benefits apprenticeships can provide. Several attendees discussed the need to present apprenticeships as a high-quality and credible route into skilled employment rather than an alternative option to academic pathways. Employers felt that stronger engagement with schools and parents could help improve perceptions and awareness.

6) Weak Links Between Education, Employers and Providers

Several attendees discussed the need for stronger collaboration between schools, employers and providers to create clearer pathways into apprenticeships. Employers highlighted the importance of earlier engagement with young people to improve awareness, work readiness and understanding of different career opportunities. A few delegates noted that employers often have limited opportunities to engage directly with schools or influence career discussions. Employers felt that more coordinated partnerships could help create smoother transitions between education and employment.

7) HR Capacity and Operational Constraints, Particularly for SMEs

SMEs attending the workshop highlighted that managing apprenticeships can be resource-intensive, particularly for businesses without dedicated HR or training teams. Employers discussed challenges relating to recruitment, supervision, mentoring and balancing apprenticeship support alongside day-to-day operational demands. Several attendees reflected that smaller businesses may struggle to allocate sufficient time and internal resources to support apprentices effectively. Employers felt that additional practical guidance and external support could help reduce administrative pressures and improve confidence in managing apprenticeship programmes.

8) Misalignment of Expectations and Progression Pathways

A few employers noted that clearer communication is needed around job expectations, salary progression and long-term career pathways. Delegates felt that setting realistic expectations early in the process could help improve motivation, engagement and apprentice retention. Several employers discussed the importance of providing apprentices with visibility around future opportunities within the organisation. Employers felt that clearer progression routes and regular development conversations could encourage long-term commitment and career growth.

Potential Solutions

A) Simplify the Apprenticeship System and Improve Navigation

Develop clearer and more accessible guidance for employers around apprenticeship funding, recruitment processes and available support mechanisms. Several employers felt that a simpler and more coordinated approach, particularly for SMEs and first-time users, would improve confidence and encourage wider participation. Delegates highlighted the importance of creating clearer entry points into the apprenticeship system, where businesses can easily access information, advice and practical support. Employers also felt that reducing complexity around funding and administration could help remove barriers to engagement.

B) Strengthen Pre-Apprenticeship Pathways and Work Readiness

Increase opportunities for work experience, placements and employability support to help young people better prepare for the workplace before entering apprenticeships. Employers felt that stronger pre-employment pathways would improve candidate confidence, workplace understanding and long-term retention. Several attendees discussed the importance of helping young people develop communication skills, professionalism and workplace awareness before recruitment. Employers also highlighted the value of short-term placements in helping businesses assess suitability and motivation.

C) Enhance Employer-Provider Collaboration and Support

Encourage stronger partnership working between employers and training providers, particularly around recruitment, programme delivery and ongoing communication. Several delegates highlighted the importance of providers taking a more practical and supportive role throughout the apprenticeship journey. Employers felt that regular communication, quicker issue resolution and stronger alignment between training delivery and operational business needs would improve apprenticeship outcomes. SMEs in particular highlighted the value of hands-on guidance from providers.

D) Reduce Financial Risk and Improve Incentives for SMEs

Provide clearer information around apprenticeship funding and incentives while exploring additional support mechanisms for SMEs managing apprenticeship programmes. Employers felt that reducing uncertainty around costs and improving awareness of available support could encourage more businesses to engage. Several attendees discussed the need for more practical financial guidance, particularly around understanding the wider costs associated with apprenticeships. Employers also highlighted the importance of showcasing successful apprenticeship case studies to demonstrate long-term return on investment.

E) Improve Promotion and Awareness of Apprenticeships

Increase engagement with schools, communities and young people to improve understanding of apprenticeship pathways and long-term career opportunities. Delegates highlighted the importance of promoting apprenticeships as a valuable and credible route into skilled employment and progression. A few employers discussed the need for stronger employer involvement in careers education and school engagement activities. Delegates felt that sharing real examples of successful apprenticeships could help improve perceptions and encourage greater participation.

F) Strengthen Progression Pathways and Retention Strategies

Encourage employers and providers to communicate clearer progression opportunities, development pathways and long-term career prospects to apprentices. Employers felt that improved visibility around progression and salary development could help improve motivation and retention outcomes. Several delegates highlighted the importance of regular reviews, mentoring and career conversations to help apprentices remain engaged and understand future opportunities within the business.

G) Support SMEs with HR Capacity and Workforce Planning

Provide additional support and guidance to SMEs around recruitment, onboarding, workforce planning and apprentice management. Several employers highlighted the need for practical support to help smaller organisations manage apprenticeships more effectively alongside operational responsibilities. Employers discussed the importance of reducing administrative pressures and providing access to simple guidance, templates and advisory support. Delegates felt that this could help improve confidence and make apprenticeships more manageable for smaller businesses.

H) Improve Candidate Matching and Filtering Processes

Strengthen candidate preparation and matching processes to improve alignment between apprentices, employers and workplace expectations. Employers felt that better filtering, pre-employment engagement and clearer communication could help improve recruitment quality and reduce early-stage retention issues. Several attendees noted that improved collaboration between schools, providers and employers could help ensure candidates have a better understanding of roles, responsibilities and workplace expectations before starting apprenticeships.

Supplementary Higher Level Skills Needs Research

Higher Level Skills Needs Survey Findings

What methods are you currently using to source talent with higher-level skills? (by higher level skills, we mean degree-level, L4+ NVQ vocational qualifications, technical qualifications, or specialized expertise required for roles in management, professional, and technical sectors)

Responses to the survey suggest that employers are using a range of approaches to source higher-level skills, combining both external recruitment methods and internal talent development strategies. Several respondents highlighted the use of apprenticeships (including higher and degree-level programmes), student placements, and engagement with universities to support early talent pipelines. A small number of employers also described “grow your own” approaches, including leadership development programmes and use of apprenticeship levy funding to build internal capability.

In terms of external recruitment, respondents mentioned recruitment agencies, specialist providers, and online platforms such as LinkedIn and Indeed, alongside professional networks and direct university engagement. Informal methods such as word-of-mouth were also referenced by at least one employer.

However, some respondents indicated challenges with these approaches. For example, one employer noted difficulties with generic recruitment platforms due to high volumes of unsuitable applications, while another highlighted limited internal capacity to manage recruitment processes. In addition, one response raised concerns about changes to Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships and their potential impact on workforce development. Overall, the findings suggest a varied and evolving approach, with some emerging challenges in sourcing suitable candidates.

What methods are you currently using to source talent with higher-level skills? (by higher level skills, we mean degree-level, L4+ NVQ vocational qualifications, technical qualifications, or specialized expertise required for roles in management, professional, and technical sectors)
Responses
We offer apprenticeship for the SW degree & OT. Practice educator programme and also support students
Using apprenticeships; explicitly advertising high level vacancies; supporting student placements to raise awareness of sector; practice educator programme
Recruitment Agents
Direct contact with Universities (University of Warwick Employer Connect https://warwick.ac.uk/services/careers/employers/). Recruitment agencies. Specialist Apprenticeship providers LinkedIn and personal networks
We often grow our own talent, utilising the Leadership Academy and apprenticeship levy to support leadership development. However, recent changes to level 6 and 7 apprenticeships in management and leadership will add significant risk to workforce development in this space. Specialist clinical skills are mainly developed via level 7 MSc and PG Certs, either as standalone modules or as part of an advanced/enhanced practice programme.
Our recruitment team use our intranet jobs portal to advise opportunities as well as posting vacancies on LinkedIn and Indeed.
A variety, depending on the role - so it can be professional journals recruitment websites, local authority recruitment websites, or generic recruitment websites but the latter are proving increasingly unhelpful with thousands of on line applicants to trawl through. As SMEs we lack the capacity.
word of mouth

To what extent do universities currently support you to meet your higher-level skills needs, from 0 (not at all) to 100 (to great extent)?

Average score: 39.75

Responses indicate a wide variation in employer experiences regarding university support for higher-level skills needs. While a small number of respondents reported relatively high levels of support (reflected in higher scores such as 75 and 100), others indicated more moderate levels of engagement, with several responses falling within the mid-range. At the same time, a few respondents reported very low levels of support, suggesting that for some employers, engagement with universities is limited or not meeting their needs.

Can you share any examples of where collaboration with a university which has successfully supported your business, e.g. with higher-level workforce development or innovation?

Responses provide a small number of examples of successful collaboration between employers and universities, although experiences appear mixed. Several respondents highlighted positive examples linked to work-based learning, including apprenticeships, internships, and practice educator programmes. In some cases, internships were reported to have led directly to recruitment outcomes.

One respondent also referenced participation in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP), which supported innovation and workforce development. In the health and care sector, one employer described a close partnership with a university involving clinical placements and the development of upskilling programmes linked to postgraduate qualifications.

However, several respondents indicated that they had little or no experience of successful collaboration, and one noted that engagement with universities had been largely employer-led rather than institution-driven. These responses suggest that while effective models of collaboration exist, they are not yet consistently experienced across all employers.

Can you share any examples of where collaboration with a university which has successfully supported your business, e.g. with higher-level workforce development or innovation?
Responses
Practice Educator programme and SW apprenticeship
We have proactively supported University awareness raising sessions regarding social care - but at our instigation, not University
we have no experience of this
Internships - students have worked on specific client problems and then been recruited as a result. KTP - business has engaged in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership and the Academic lead has identified a suitable Development worker.
We rely on clinical educators to support learners and new members of staff. They work clinically alongside people to enhance their knowledge and application of knowledge and skills. We have been working with Coventry University Health and Care to develop an upskilling programme for these clinical educators, which will be part of a PGCert. We have a close working relationship with CUHC as we provide clinical placements for their level 6 and 7 undergraduate healthcare learners and work in partnership to provide jobs on completion of their programmes.
I don't have any examples as recruitment is managed by our HR team in Argentina and Spain. I have worked with Coventry university to get a 3-month business internship placement which didn't lead to a job offer.
No
none

What do you consider to be the most significant higher-level skills challenges facing your organisation/sector over the next 3–5 years?

Responses suggest a range of anticipated challenges in relation to higher-level skills over the next three to five years. Several respondents highlighted difficulties in finding candidates with the right combination of qualifications and practical experience, with one employer specifically noting the need for broader placement opportunities to better prepare individuals for the workplace.

A small number of responses also pointed to wider workforce pressures, including the cost of recruitment, changing employee expectations, and the importance of leadership and people management skills. One employer raised concerns about changes to Level 6 and 7 apprenticeship funding, while another highlighted challenges linked to an ageing workforce and a limited talent pipeline.

In addition, some respondents emphasised the growing importance of advanced skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital capabilities, including AI and coding. Overall, the responses suggest a combination of structural, technical, and workforce-related challenges, although these are based on a limited sample size.

What do you consider to be the most significant higher-level skills challenges facing your organisation/sector over the next 3–5 years?
Responses
Extension required to the contrasting element of placements to have more wide range of experiences.

Social care awareness for Occupational Therapists in training to give insight into career potential; legislation awareness/training relevant to social care
finding the right combination of skills with relevant experience
Cost of recruitment Expectations of the job holder (salary, WFH, benefits) People management skills of the employer (ability to connect with the employee and manage those expectations)
We often grow our own talent, utilising the apprenticeship levy to support leadership development. However, recent changes to level 6 and 7 apprenticeships in management and leadership will add significant risk to workforce development in this space.
Critical thinking and problem solving skills. We use AI in our predictive traffic management systems so the candidate would have to have a certain level of proficiency in this area as well as coding skills.
The cessation of Band 7 apprenticeships funding, an ageing workforce and less than robust pipeline.
Leadership DFMA

If you could change one thing to improve the region's skills and talent system to improve your ability to source higher-level skills, what would it be?

Responses highlight several suggestions for improving the region's skills and talent system, with a common theme being the need to strengthen links between education and employment. Several respondents emphasised the importance of expanding and diversifying placement opportunities to provide more practical experience.

A small number of employers also highlighted the need to improve awareness of career pathways, particularly in sectors such as social care. One respondent suggested a more flexible system that allows employers to recruit based on potential and provide training aligned to business needs.

Other suggestions included the development of tools or platforms to better match individuals to careers, such as talent pools or digital matching systems, as well as opportunities for trial or short-term work experiences. One respondent also proposed greater coordination across the skills system, including clearer visibility of training providers and funding opportunities.

Overall, the responses suggest a desire for a more connected and flexible system, although the insights are again based on a small sample size.

If you could change one thing to improve the region's skills and talent system to improve your ability to source higher-level skills, what would it be?
Responses
Extension of placements with a variety of placement settings
Raising awareness of social care as a valuable career opportunity for Occupational Therapist with OTs in training/part of syllabus
I'd like to be able to recruit people with the right attitude and ability and then have training schemes available to train for the skills the business needs.
An algorithm that would offer possible matches for skills and passion to sectors and roles. A user would input what they are passionate about, what grades they might expect to achieve, and other relevant information, maybe even a short form personality profile, what they don't like, and the software would offer then a range of career options and some advice as to what they could have access to if they had additional skills, or were able to secure slightly better grades. The software would link to a short video clip describing a day in the life of ...
Connecting people who have successfully completed higher-level qualifications with employment opportunities: e.g. a talent pool which people sign up to be in and through which employers can advertise for talent with higher-level skills
Offer more opportunities to do a trial period without a commitment but to gain valuable employability skills including soft skills like communication, customer relations and conflict resolution.

To create a coordinating entity that understands the sector, has the expertise and capacity to collate all funding streams, all career pathways and funding to enable it to happen.
clarity of the provider network that is not university based

Higher Level Skills Needs Solutions Workshop Findings and Recommendations

In developing the LSIP proposals, a co-design approach has been central to shaping solutions for higher-level skills provision across the West Midlands. This reflects the recognition that challenges relating to leadership, digital transformation, AI adoption, work-readiness, Level 4–5 pathways and sector-specific technical capability cannot be addressed by any single part of the system acting alone.

Co-design has brought together employers, higher education providers, colleges, training providers and regional stakeholders to ensure that proposed solutions reflect the realities of the labour market and the operational pressures faced by businesses.

This approach has been particularly important because higher-level skills needs cut across multiple sectors. Employers from construction, engineering, logistics, advanced manufacturing, health and social care, ICT, professional services and education identified different technical priorities, but many shared common concerns around leadership, digital adoption, progression, flexible learning and the need for greater responsiveness.

Workshop feedback highlighted that while examples of good practice already exist, they are often inconsistent, fragmented or not scaled effectively across the region. The co-design process has therefore focused on identifying what works, where barriers remain and how practical solutions can be developed at regional level.

Summarising feedback from the Higher-Level Skills Solutions Workshop, employers consistently emphasised the need for stronger alignment between education and industry, more flexible and modular training pathways, and better support for people progressing from technical or frontline roles into higher-level positions. Delegates also highlighted the importance of embedding digital, AI and employability skills across provision, while improving navigation through a complex and fragmented skills system.

What Works: Existing Strengths and Effective Practice

1) Employer-provider collaboration

Delegates identified strong employer-provider collaboration as one of the most effective ways to improve higher-level skills provision. Where universities, colleges and employers work together regularly, provision is more likely to reflect real workplace needs and emerging industry priorities.

Examples of best practice discussed included collaboration between universities and the NHS, where academics gain practical exposure to healthcare environments and NHS professionals contribute applied knowledge back into education. Delegates suggested that a lighter version of this model could be adapted for other sectors, helping providers stay connected to industry practice while supporting employers to shape provision.

This approach works best where employers are engaged as active partners in curriculum design, delivery and evaluation, rather than being consulted only at the end of the process.

2) Mentoring and workplace-based support

Mentoring was highlighted as a valuable way to support higher-level learning and progression. Employers noted that workplace mentors can help learners apply knowledge in context, build confidence and develop professional behaviours.

In adult social care, delegates referenced models such as nursing preceptorships, where experienced staff support learners or newly qualified professionals in the workplace. There was support for adapting similar models across wider roles and sectors, particularly where staff are progressing into higher-level or regulated positions.

Mentoring was also seen as a way to reduce reliance on classroom-based learning and make higher-level training more practical, applied and sustainable.

3) Applied and work-integrated learning

Employers strongly emphasised the value of learning that is embedded in real work environments. Delegates noted that people become work-ready by gaining practical experience, applying knowledge, solving real problems and engaging with workplace expectations.

Work-integrated models may include:

- Live employer briefs
- Applied projects
- On-site learning
- Workplace assessment
- Mentoring and coaching
- Hybrid delivery linked to workplace tasks

This approach was seen as particularly important for higher-level learners who are already employed and cannot easily step away from their role for extended periods.

4) Modular and bite-sized learning

Delegates strongly supported modular and bite-sized learning, particularly in fast-moving areas such as AI, digital skills, leadership, data analytics and sector-specific technical capability.

The workshop highlighted that long qualifications are not always suitable for employers or employees who need targeted upskilling. Modular provision allows learners to build skills incrementally, while giving employers more flexibility to address specific capability gaps.

There was particular interest in micro-credentials, short courses and stackable modules at Levels 4–7.

5) Industry exposure for educators

Employers suggested that lecturers and educators would benefit from regular exposure to industry, particularly in sectors where technology and practice are changing rapidly.

This could include:

- Industry placements for educators
- Employer-led CPD sessions
- Guest lecturers from industry
- Joint curriculum reviews
- Short secondments between providers and employers

This would help ensure that teaching remains current, applied and aligned with employer needs.

6) Regional coordination and specialisation

Delegates highlighted the value of collaboration between institutions, particularly where providers specialise in different areas and support each other rather than duplicating provision. Examples were discussed where universities coordinate specialisms and share expertise, helping to create a clearer and higher-quality regional offer.

This approach could reduce fragmentation, improve navigation for employers and strengthen the overall regional skills ecosystem.

Challenges

1) Leadership and management gaps

A key challenge identified across multiple sectors was the shortage of leadership and management capability. Employers noted that many staff move into management roles because they are technically competent, but they may not have the people skills, commercial awareness or strategic thinking required to lead effectively.

This was particularly evident in sectors such as adult social care, construction, universities and professional services. Delegates highlighted the need for leadership training that reflects different levels of responsibility, from individual and team leadership through to organisational and strategic leadership.

2) Work-readiness and professional behaviours

Employers consistently raised concerns about work-readiness, particularly among graduates and early-career professionals. Gaps included communication, accountability, resilience, critical thinking, initiative and the ability to apply knowledge in real workplace situations.

Delegates noted that these skills are often described as “soft skills”, but they are difficult to develop and essential for workplace success.

3) Digital and AI capability gaps

Digital and AI skills were identified as a major area of concern. Employers noted that learners and staff may be familiar with digital tools but often lack the deeper capability to use technology critically, confidently and responsibly.

AI was seen as both an opportunity and a source of uncertainty. Employers and providers need support to understand how AI can be applied in business, how it affects job roles, and how ethical, legal and professional risks should be managed.

4) Slow curriculum responsiveness

Employers reported that education and training provision can take too long to respond to emerging skills needs. In fast-moving areas such as AI, software, automation, electrification and battery technology, provision may be outdated by the time it is delivered.

Delegates highlighted that traditional course development cycles of 18–24 months are not suitable for rapidly changing sectors.

5) Lack of flexible Level 4–5 pathways

There was strong agreement that the skills system has a gap between Level 3 and degree-level provision. Delegates referred to this as a “missing middle”, with insufficient recognition, funding and visibility for Level 4 and 5 pathways.

This was said to limit opportunities for progression, particularly for those who do not want or need a full degree but require applied higher-level technical skills.

6) Time, cost and backfill barriers

Employers repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of releasing staff for training. This was particularly challenging for sectors operating under continuous service pressures, such as adult social care and healthcare.

For SMEs, the combined cost of training, staff absence and backfill can make higher-level learning difficult to access.

7) Fragmented and difficult-to-navigate system

Delegates described the skills system as complex and fragmented. Employers are not always aware of available provision, funding or provider specialisms. This is particularly challenging for SMEs without dedicated HR or learning and development capacity.

There was a clear call for a simpler and more coordinated regional approach.

8) Small cohort and specialist provision challenges

Some sectors identified highly specific skills needs that are difficult to meet through traditional provision because cohorts are small or demand is highly specialised. Examples included niche clinical training, advanced ICT specialisms and emerging technical areas.

This creates a challenge for universities and colleges, where courses must be financially viable.

Potential Solutions

A) Expand flexible and modular higher-level provision

The LSIP should support the development of flexible, modular and stackable provision at Levels 4–8. This should include short courses, micro-credentials and bite-sized modules that allow learners to build capability over time.

Provision should be designed around employer needs and be flexible enough to support working professionals, SMEs and individuals progressing through non-linear career routes.

B) Strengthen Level 4 and 5 progression routes

There is a need to address the “missing middle” between Level 3 and full degree-level provision. The LSIP should support stronger Level 4 and 5 pathways, including higher technical qualifications, foundation degrees and applied professional routes.

These pathways should be clearly promoted to employers, learners and providers as valuable progression options.

C) Embed leadership and management development across sectors

Leadership and management should be treated as a cross-cutting regional priority. Provision should support people at different stages of leadership development, including new supervisors, team leaders, middle managers and strategic leaders.

Training should focus on practical leadership, people management, decision-making, communication, resilience and organisational change.

D) Embed digital, AI and data capability across provision

Digital and AI skills should be embedded across higher-level provision, not limited to specialist digital courses. This should include practical digital literacy, data skills, AI application, ethical use, cyber awareness and critical evaluation of digital tools.

Provision should support both technical specialists and non-technical professionals who increasingly need to use digital systems and AI in their roles.

E) Expand workplace-integrated learning models

The LSIP should support more learning that takes place in or around the workplace. This includes mentoring, coaching, applied projects, workplace assessment, live briefs and hybrid learning linked to real tasks.

This would help learners develop practical experience while reducing the need for extended time away from work.

F) Improve employer-provider collaboration and co-design

Employers should be involved earlier and more consistently in shaping higher-level provision. This includes curriculum design, guest teaching, industry projects, placements, assessment and ongoing feedback.

Collaboration should be structured and sustained, rather than relying on one-off consultation.

G) Support educator industry exposure and upskilling

Educators and training providers need ongoing access to industry knowledge, particularly in fast-changing fields. The LSIP should support models that allow lecturers and tutors to engage with employers, update their technical knowledge and embed current practice into teaching.

This could include industry placements, employer-led CPD and short secondments.

H) Address time, cost and backfill barriers

Discussions highlighted a need for funding models that recognise the real cost of upskilling, including staff release and backfill. This is particularly important for SMEs and sectors with continuous service delivery requirements.

Without addressing these barriers, many employers will continue to struggle to engage with higher-level training.

I) Create a clearer regional skills navigation system

Employers need a simpler way to understand what training is available, who provides it and how to access funding or support. A regional brokerage or “front door” model could help connect employers with the right providers and programmes.

This would improve access, reduce duplication and support stronger engagement from SMEs.

J) Improve careers information and progression visibility

Higher-level progression routes should be more visible to learners, employees and employers. This includes clearer information on Level 4–8 pathways, sector-specific progression routes and alternative routes into professional and technical careers.

Early engagement with young people was also highlighted as important, particularly for sectors struggling to attract talent.

K) Promote regional collaboration over competition

Delegates highlighted the importance of reducing duplication and encouraging providers to collaborate around areas of specialism. Regional coordination could help create a stronger, clearer and more efficient higher-level skills offer.

This could include shared curriculum development, joint employer engagement and collaborative delivery models.

Key Industry and Occupation Codes

The following table defines the key occupations and industries focused on in the WM LSIP and maps them to the most relevant Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes.

LSIP Occupation name	Definition within the LSIP report	Relevant SOC Code(s)	LSIP sector name	Relevant SIC Code(s)	Mapping Limitations / Further Information
Welding	Evidence from employers indicates a need for specialist and technical support in high demand/acute skill shortage areas such as engineering and advance manufacturing, in higher level skills programmes from level 3, 4 and 5 through to level 6 and above e.g. welding and software engineering.	5213	Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech & Defence	27.9	Welding spans multiple specialisms across manufacturing, fabrication and construction.
Software engineering	Evidence from employers indicates a need for specialist and technical support in high demand/acute skill shortage areas such as engineering and advance manufacturing, in higher level skills programmes from level 3, 4 and 5 through to level 6 and above e.g. welding and software engineering.	2134	Creative & Digital	62.02	Software engineering roles evolve rapidly across sectors including AI, cyber security and systems development.
Engineering pathways	Gaps in basic numeracy, literacy and technical comprehension that hinder progression into and through engineering pathways.	5242	Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech & Defence	71.12	Engineering pathways represent a broad progression route rather than a single occupation. Multiple engineering disciplines and qualification levels are involved.
Automation and smart systems	A need for digital readiness to support automation, smart systems and advanced manufacturing processes.	5223	Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech & Defence	29.1	Automation and smart systems cover cross-sector technologies including robotics, IoT and AI-enabled manufacturing. Existing classifications may not fully reflect Industry 4.0 functions.
Predictive maintenance	Gaps in understanding practical digital applications on the factory floor (e.g. machine interfaces, data capture, predictive maintenance).	3116	Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech & Defence	96.03	Predictive maintenance is an emerging technical specialism combining engineering, data analytics and digital monitoring systems. Limited direct SIC/SOC alignment exists.

Sustainable materials and retrofit	need for retrofit, energy efficiency and safe use of sustainable materials.	2129	Construction & Built Environment	20.59	Sustainable materials and retrofit activities span construction, energy efficiency and environmental services. Rapid policy and technology changes may outpace current coding structures.
Construction site preparation	Courses that include practical site preparation such as health and safety awareness, asbestos awareness, safe use of tools and plant, and communication skills would make it easier for employers to integrate learners into the workplace.	5330	Construction & Built Environment	43.12	Construction site preparation includes a mix of employability, compliance and practical site-readiness skills which are not fully represented through occupational coding.
Leadership and management	Leadership and management capability remains a fundamental constraint on productivity, retention, digital adoption and organisational resilience.	1121	Cross-cutting – Leadership & Management	36	Leadership and management skills apply across all sectors and occupations, making direct SIC/SOC mapping broad and non-specific.
First line supervisors and team leaders	Several employers described a ‘missing middle’ with first line supervisors and aspiring team leaders lacking the confidence, capability or tools needed to manage people and embrace or lead through change.	8149	Cross-cutting – Leadership & Management	30.11	First line supervision and team leadership responsibilities exist across sectors and organisational structures, limiting precise classification.
Conflict management and performance management	They valued diagnostic-led approaches, coaching, mentoring, action learning sets and practical modules addressing issues such as conflict management, decision-making, performance management and project delivery.	2482	Cross-cutting – Leadership & Management	71.12	Conflict management and performance management are transferable management competencies rather than standalone occupations.
Project delivery	They valued diagnostic-led approaches, coaching, mentoring, action learning sets and practical modules addressing issues such as conflict management, decision-making, performance management and project delivery.	2440	Business, Professional & Financial Services	49.42	Project delivery applies across multiple industries and professional disciplines. Mapping may vary depending on sector-specific context.
Client handling and communication	The need for team leadership skills including improving the quality of client handling, communication, and effective decision-making pace.	5242	Business, Professional & Financial Services	61.1	Client handling and communication are cross-cutting employability and professional skills that are difficult to classify under a single occupational code.

Data analysis and data management	Employers also highlighted data analysis and data management as critical gaps.	3544	Creative & Digital / Business, Professional & Financial Services	62.01	Data analysis and data management functions exist across nearly all sectors. Emerging data-focused roles may overlap with digital, finance and operational occupations.
Digital literacy and IT proficiency	Employers highlighted digital literacy & IT proficiency (6%) and AI & automation (5%) among the most frequently identified skills priorities.	2137	Cross-cutting – Digital, Data & AI	26.2	Digital literacy and IT proficiency are foundational skills relevant to all occupations and industries rather than a single coded role.
AI and automation	Employers highlighted digital literacy & IT proficiency (6%) and AI & automation (5%) among the most frequently identified skills priorities.	2133	Cross-cutting – Digital, Data & AI	29.1	AI and automation are rapidly evolving areas with limited representation in traditional SIC/SOC frameworks. Roles often overlap with software, engineering and operational functions.
AI adoption and readiness assessment	Business adoption of AI: why it matters, practical use cases, readiness assessment, mechanisms to determine ROI.	3574	Cross-cutting – Digital, Data & AI	88.99	AI adoption and readiness assessment relates to organisational capability and consultancy functions rather than a defined occupation.
Coding and systems integration	Employers highlighted increasing demand for advanced skills such as data analytics, AI application, coding, systems integration and critical evaluation of digital tools.	2122	Creative & Digital	71.2	Coding and systems integration cover multiple technical disciplines including software engineering, network systems and automation technologies.
Digital marketing platforms and AI-assisted production	Highly flexible, short modules aligned to fastmoving tools (editing software, digital marketing platforms, AI-assisted production).	3554	Creative & Digital	26.2	Digital marketing and AI-assisted creative production tools evolve rapidly, meaning existing classifications may not capture emerging platform-based roles.
Digital production and creative workflows	A growing need for leaders who understand AI driven workflows and digital production.	2141	Creative & Digital	26.2	Digital production and creative workflows combine technical, creative and managerial capabilities across media and digital sectors.

Portfolio-based learning and live briefs	Portfolio building modules that link directly to live briefs or project-based work.	3574	Creative & Digital	14.12	Portfolio-based learning and live briefs describe educational delivery approaches rather than occupations or sectors directly captured by SIC/SOC codes.
Customer service and teamwork	Short, practical modules that build foundational skills like communication, teamwork, customer service, digital literacy and basic maths/English.	4143	Everyday Economy	68.2	Customer service and teamwork are transferable employability skills relevant across the Everyday Economy and wider service sectors.
Logistics and delivery scheduling	Widespread gaps in basic digital skills required for routine tasks (e.g. digital payments, booking systems, delivery scheduling, online customer service).	4131	Everyday Economy	49.42	Logistics and delivery scheduling activities overlap between transport, warehousing, retail and digital platform operations.
Hospitality and shift-based work	Employers most strongly called for modularisation due to shift patterns that make long courses inaccessible.	9264	Everyday Economy / Hospitality	56.21	Hospitality and shift-based work represent broad employment patterns rather than a single occupation. Modular training needs vary significantly across employers.
Care workers	Foundational skills, including communication, empathy, teamwork and reliability as critical to service quality and regulatory compliance.	6135	Health & Social Care	88.99	Care worker roles span multiple care settings and qualification levels. Soft skills such as empathy and reliability are not reflected in coding frameworks.
Care settings and safeguarding	Support for managing compliance, safeguarding, service quality and operational resilience.	6135	Health & Social Care	43.99	Care settings and safeguarding relate primarily to operational and regulatory competencies rather than discrete occupations.
Healthcare technologies and clinical technologies	medical technologies, healthcare technologies and clinical technologies	2113	Health & MedTech	86.9	Healthcare and clinical technologies are rapidly developing fields involving overlap between healthcare, engineering and digital occupations.

Patient safety and digital care tools	Significant variation in digital capability across the workforce, particularly among older staff. and Barriers to adoption of digital care tools, electronic records and basic data processes.	4131	Health & MedTech / Health & Social Care	47.52	Digital care tools and patient safety responsibilities cut across healthcare occupations and are influenced by ongoing digital transformation in the sector.
Sustainability awareness and environmental management	Employers across sectors expressed a need for basic sustainability awareness.	2152	Cross-cutting – Green Skills & Sustainability	71.12	Sustainability awareness and environmental management are cross-cutting competencies relevant to all sectors and occupations.
Sustainability reporting and carbon reduction planning	understanding sustainability data and reporting and energy mapping and carbon reduction planning	2152	Cross-cutting – Green Skills & Sustainability	20.13	Sustainability reporting and carbon reduction planning are emerging business functions that may sit across compliance, consultancy and operational roles.
Circular economy and resource efficiency	waste reduction strategies, circular economy principles and resource efficiency	2433	Cross-cutting – Green Skills & Sustainability	70.22	Circular economy and resource efficiency activities span manufacturing, waste management, environmental services and sustainability functions.
Machine interfaces and data capture	Gaps in understanding practical digital applications on the factory floor (e.g. machine interfaces, data capture, predictive maintenance).	4152	Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Tech & Defence	26.2	Technical manufacturing and automation activity area referenced broadly within the LSIP.
CRM/ERP and workflow automation	Growing gaps in data analysis, CRM/ERP use, workflow automation and AI enhanced business tools.	4159	Business, Professional & Financial Services	29.1	Digital business operations area spanning multiple occupational roles.
Electronic records and digital care tools	Barriers to adoption of digital care tools, electronic records and basic data processes.	6135	Health & Social Care	26.51	Digital healthcare capability area applicable across healthcare and care settings.
Safe use of tools and plant	Courses that include practical site preparation such as health and safety awareness, asbestos awareness, safe use of tools and plant, and communication skills would make it easier for employers to integrate learners into the workplace.	5223	Construction & Built Environment	25.73	Broad construction and site-readiness activity area linked to entry-level workforce preparations.

Communication and professional behaviours	Many highlighted that young people lack the confidence to speak to colleagues or customers, the communication skills to ask questions, query where they lack understanding or ask for support when they need it, and the understanding of real working environments.	2124	Cross-cutting – Work Readiness & Foundational Skills	46.52	Foundational employability and workplace readiness capability area rather than a single occupation.
Digital payments and booking systems	Widespread gaps in basic digital skills required for routine tasks (e.g. digital payments, booking systems, delivery scheduling, online customer service).	4129	Everyday Economy	47.61	Operational digital capability area spanning retail, hospitality and logistics activities.
Mentoring and coaching	Across sectors, mentoring was cited as ‘particularly effective,’ especially when mentors understand the operational reality of participants’ roles.	3229	Cross-cutting – Leadership & Management	29.1	Leadership and workforce development activity applicable across multiple sectors.

SKILLS SHAPED BY BUSINESS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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