# Skills and Employment Briefing
# Designing local and regional skills and employment strategies: advice for Combined and Local Authorities

**Authors: Rich Crisp, Jamie Redman, Elizabeth Sanderson and Peter Wells**

**July 2025**

## Summary

This briefing paper provides an overview of current UK skills and employment policy, considers the challenges in addressing the low skills equilibrium which many places face, reviews the evidence available to improve skills-related labour market challenges and gives a series of recommendations to local and regional policy makers.

The paper broadly welcomes the approach of the UK government and its ambition to devolve skills and employment budgets. However, it also argues that the government needs to go further to address problems within the welfare and benefits system which can trap people in low pay, low skills jobs with limited opportunities for progression.

The paper also argues that far greater support needs to be given to those facing multiple barriers to entering secure, well-paid employment with good opportunities for progression. This includes better support for those facing barriers such as disability, prior history of addiction, or experience of care. Support delivered in a coordinated, person-centred way has been shown to be particularly effective.

Finally, addressing the barriers caused by the interaction between labour market, housing market and transport systems are critical – both in the delivery of current employment and skills strategies but also in considering the location of future jobs and housing.

## Introduction

The UK government has committed to deepen and widen devolution across the country, providing more powers to local areas over transport, adult education and skills, employment support, and housing and planning. By empowering local areas, the government hopes local leaders can make decisions that benefit their communities, boost economic growth and deliver other objectives (such as climate action). Skills are seen as fundamental drivers of productivity and economic growth, and several Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) have developed skills and employment strategies to help shape policies to boost skills and support local economic growth.

This briefing reflects on work undertaken to support the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) in developing their recent Skills Strategy (published in April 2024) and to provide them with an evidence base related to the Strategy's mission areas.

The briefing provides advice to other MCAs and Local Authorities looking to design similar strategies. It starts by presenting an overview of the current policy context following the election of the Labour government. It then reflects on regional and local skills and employment challenges, exploring how the relationship between skills and productivity and growth is more complex than usually presented. It highlights issues faced in overcoming a Low Skills Equilibrium (LSeq), where demand for higher skills is low regardless of the supply of skills.

The briefing then looks at what regional and local skills strategies can feasibly achieve and concludes with some key lessons for regional and local authorities.

# A: Policy context

## Growing skills divides

The level of qualifications held by the UK population have been rising over the long term. However, progress to reduce the proportion of people with low qualifications and increase the proportion with intermediate qualifications has been slower; the UK is likely to remain behind comparator counties in terms of low and medium qualifications. This risks a worsening skills divide within the UK and with other countries (Evans and Egglestone, 2024).

The long-term trend has been for improvements in qualification levels to be lower in South Yorkshire than nationally. This is visible in the highest qualification Census data displayed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Highest level of qualification (percentage) – All usual residents aged 16-64 (Census 2011 and 2021)[1]**

| | 2011 | | | 2021 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | England | Yorkshire and The Humber | South Yorkshire | England | Yorkshire and The Humber | South Yorkshire |
| Level 4 qualifications or above | 30.8 | 26.4 | 23.8 | 37.1 | 32.1 | 29.9 |
| Level 3 qualifications | 14.9 | 15.7 | 16.2 | 19.5 | 20.5 | 20.6 |
| Level 2 qualifications | 17.7 | 18.3 | 18.5 | 14.8 | 15.5 | 15.7 |
| Level 1 and entry level qualifications | 15.6 | 16.3 | 16.9 | 9.9 | 10.6 | 11.0 |
| Other | 5.7 | 4.9 | 4.7 | 6.3 | 6.8 | 7.0 |
| No qualifications | 15.3 | 18.4 | 20.0 | 12.4 | 14.6 | 15.8 |

Source: ONS Census 2011 and 2021.

Employer investment in training has also been in steady decline over the past decade, with training expenditure at its lowest since this was measured by the Employer Skills Survey in 2011, and investment per employee down by 19 per cent in real terms over this period (DfE, 2024). More widely, there has been a drop in adult participation in nearly every mode of learning over the past decade, with workplace training, apprenticeships, part-time higher education, further education, and community learning all falling (Pullen, 2024). Employers have also reported increasing problems filling vacancies due to skills shortages. The proportion of employers in England reporting at least one skill-shortage vacancy rose to one-in-ten in 2022, up from just three per cent in 2011[2] although there are a range of factors which

[1] 2021 results are broadly comparable with 2011 figures. The categories for this variable are the same as the ones in the 2011 Census. However, in Census 2021 the question was revised and split up to group together different qualifications. This means that the way people answered the question in Census 2021 cannot be fully compared with the answers from the 2011 Census. For example, some people who hold an older or non-UK qualification when answering the question in Census 2021 may have chosen a higher qualification level than they did in the 2011 Census, although they hold the same qualifications.
[2] Source: Employer Skills Survey, 2011-2022

may lie behind this, including the UK's departure from the European Union. The extent to which these reported shortages reflect a genuine gap is explored in Section B.

Investment in skills and training is also uneven. Smaller businesses and employers in lower wage, lower productivity sectors (including retail and hospitality) are less likely to provide training (Clayton and Evans, 2021). Between 2011 and 2018 the rate of decline in the amount of training received by workers with lower-level qualifications (below GCSE/Level 2) was 20 per cent, double the rate of decline experienced by the workforce as a whole (Green and Henseke, 2019). Spatial inequalities also exist. There are higher levels of participation in training in work in the South East, South West and North East. These variations likely reflect differences in industrial structure, i.e. a large public sector in the North East relative to other regions (Clayton and Evans, 2021). Inequalities also persist in attainment. Across Combined Authority areas the proportion of the working-age population with RQF Level 4+ qualifications ranges from 37.5 per cent in Tees Valley to 53.3 per cent in the West of England.[3]

There has also been renewed political focus on economic inactivity with the publication of the Get Britain Working White Paper and, locally, the Pathways to Work Commission report in 2024. Although not a new phenomenon, official statistics pointed to an increase in inactivity following the onset of the pandemic, particularly among older and younger groups and due to long-term sickness. Issues with the Labour Force Survey which underpin these statistics have, however, led the Resolution Foundation to argue there has been an overrepresentation of the scale of the inactivity challenge (Corlett and Slaughter, 2024). Yet, the Learning and Work Institute (LWI) emphasise most data sources point to the UK being the only G7 country where employment is not higher than before the pandemic, and administrative data on benefit claimants also point to substantial issues with economic inactivity. These data also highlight wide variation in inactivity rates across the country suggesting the need for different policy responses between regions (LWI, 2024a).

## A fragmented and complex system

Compounding these issues with skills divides, is the fragmentation of the existing learning, skills and employment support system. The Local Government Association has identified 49 different national employment and skills related schemes or services, managed by at least nine Whitehall departments and agencies (LGA, 2021). There are also geographical differences. While adult skills funding outside apprenticeships is controlled by some MCA areas, elsewhere the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA, an executive agency of the DfE) is responsible. Similarly, Skills Bootcamps are commissioned both by some MCAs and by the DfE. Devolution deals also vary across England, with responsibilities for learning, skills and employment support more extensive and embedded in some areas than others. Some employment support, for example, has been devolved away from centrally commissioned schemes to local design and management, such as the Work and Health Programme in Greater Manchester.

Yet, skills policy remains highly centralised, chiefly focused on industry-specific and place-neutral support for higher education and vocational training (Corradini et al., 2023). The last two decades have seen a shift away from public funding of basic skills courses to employer-based and led learning, first through Train to Gain and then through apprenticeships (Tahir, 2023). The Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in 2017, remains the government's central mechanism for incentivising employer investment in training.

[3] Source: ONS Annual Population Survey, Jan 2023-Dec 2023

## UK government skills policy

In response to fragmentation in the skills system, and a wider commitment to drive economic growth, the government has created a new body, Skills England. Skills England, an executive agency of the DfE, will:

- Work to form a coherent national picture of where skills gaps exist and how they can be addressed, working closely with the Industrial Strategy Council and the Migration Advisory Committee.
- Unify the skills landscape to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the skills needed to power economic growth, by bringing together Mayoral Combined Authorities and other key local partners, large and small businesses, training providers and unions.
- Shape technical education to respond to skills needs, including identifying the training accessible via the Growth and Skills Levy.
- Advise on the highly trained workforce needed to deliver a clear, long-term plan for the future economy.

Skills England has begun assessing future skills needs (see DfE, 2024), while the government more broadly develops a new post-16 skills strategy. The new body will also work closely with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on the introduction of the new Industrial Strategy (UK Government, 2025). The government has also committed to devolve more adult skills funding to Combined Authorities and equivalent authorities. As part of this commitment, Skills England will support the creation of a set of new, specialist Technical Excellence Colleges to 'deliver the highly trained workforces that local economies need' (DfE, 2024: 20).

The Learning and Work Institute (2024b) note previous attempts to do similar things to Skills England, including the Manpower Services Commission (1974-1991), Training and Enterprise Councils (1990-2001), Sector Skills Development Agency (2002-2008), Learning and Skills Council (2001-2010), UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2008-2017), and Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE, the functions of which will be transferred to Skills England) (2017-). Noting lessons from these approaches and those taken by other countries, the Learning and Work Institute (2024b) argue Skills England must have real power to guide the system, with an effective, joined-up skills system only coming as part of an overall lifelong learning strategy and integration with other public policy objectives. Skills England will also need to balance national priorities with local and sectoral differences.

Central to the UK government's goal to boost skills is reform of the Apprenticeship Levy to become a new Growth and Skills Levy. The new Levy is intended to increase flexibility, allowing businesses to spend some of their Levy contributions on non-apprenticeship training. The transformation of the Levy is also referenced in the government's newly published Get Britain Working White Paper, launched in response to the renewed focus on economic inactivity.

The White Paper also includes plans to transform Jobcentres and a commitment for every young person to have access to an apprenticeship, quality training and education opportunities. It commits to invest £125 million in eight trailblazer areas, to mobilise local work, health and skills support. This includes NHS accelerators in three areas in the North East, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire aimed at stopping people falling out of work completely due to ill health. A further eight youth trailblazer areas, including in Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley and the East Midlands will be established to identify those most at risk of falling out of education or employment and match them to opportunities for education, training or work. All 16 trailblazers will be within mayoral authorities, Wales and London. The government will also provide £115 million to enable local areas across England and Wales to deliver a new supported employment programme called the Connect to Work scheme. The scheme will provide voluntary employment offers to people with disabilities, health conditions or complex barriers to work and aims to support up to 100,000 people a year.

## B: Regional and local skills and employment challenges

The development of skills and more broadly human capital has long been seen as a key part of national and regional economic development strategies. Locations with greater concentrations of higher-level skills are seen to be more competitive than lower skilled areas and that this brings benefits such as higher wages. The problem with this simple understanding is that it assumes a linear causal relationship: places with highly skilled people attract new capital development, whether through inward investment or local business growth.

This position is countered by the arguments embedded in the notion of the low skilled equilibrium (LSeq): a range of capital, labour and place factors combine to trap some locations in lower wage, lower profitability economic activity marked by both a low supply of, and demand for, skills. This becomes self-reinforcing as a low skilled labour force limits firm-level capacity to expand or develop new markets to drive up productivity, which in turn depresses the demand for training and skills and perpetuates the low skilled labour force (Green, 2016) Across the northern regions of England there are likely to be pockets of high skilled/high wage economic activity (both in public and private sectors) but also areas where conditions of LSeq are pernicious and hard to change. The rationale of approaches such as agglomeration economics may exacerbate LSeq effects as it argued that scarce public and private resources should be concentrated where returns are likely to be greatest. This tension reflects the status quo position of many existing local skills and employment strategies.

There are also some further traps in thinking that focusing on skills will solve a wider range of economic problems. Research by Keep and Mayhew (2010) highlighted that the nature of the relationship between skills and productivity and growth is contested. Skills are seen as fundamental drivers of productivity and economic growth, but the relationship is complex, conditional and patchy.

This reflects the argument that, to some extent, skills policy has tended not to focus on stimulating the demand for skills and utilisation of existing skills in the workplace (Keep, 2016). Earlier work by Grugulis and Vincent also highlights that it is often the mix of skills (soft skills such as communication alongside harder technical or formal skills) that matter (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). As such skills are not a lever of growth but must be seen as part of a package of interventions: for instance investment in new productive capacity should work alongside skills investment (and not be seen as part of substitution between labour and capital investment) (Kollydas, 2024).

A starting point for skills strategies is therefore to focus on why employers may fail to see the value of, invest in, or lack capacity to utilise new and higher-level skills in the workforce (Green et al., 2022; Keep, 2022). Arguably further devolution allows localities to move beyond past approaches which have focused heavily on the supply side (Corradini et al., 2023) and combine efforts on the demand and supply sides of the economy.

David Finegold's work first developed the notion of LSeq and then the idea that this problem could be solved through a skills ecosystem approach (Finegold, 1999) which brings together skills providers, employers, workers and learners, and policy makers. Although the approach has much merit, it is one which has proved incredibly hard to do as research by the LGA (2021) has shown. For instance, attempts to date such as the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), have been 'weak' investments in the ecosystem approach – they work at the edges of provision without any longer term or deeper structural change such as through significantly increasing the level of funding for vocational education and training[4]. As the LGA has argued, reorganising the £20 billion spent annually (LGA, 2021) on employment support and skills in England around the ecosystem approach could be transformative; except that key levers and

[4] The Association of Colleges has looked at the tensions and opportunities in the LSIP model: academic.oup.com/oxrep/article-pdf/15/1/60/9915938/60.pdf

incentives on employers, such as the use of the apprenticeship levy, need to be aligned to this mission.

The following three factors also present risks for the success of local skills strategies:

- Firstly, the organisation and nature of work may be part of the problem. High levels of 'poor work' and the persistence of a LSeq in some areas limits the potential effectiveness of skills interventions. This is at the heart of agendas such as inclusive economy/growth and specific interventions to improve the productivity and purpose of business. The long decline in employer investment in skills shows that this is a significant problem to overcome. Some of this has been reviewed from a human resource development perspective around how employers can improve performance through better practices (Scully-Ross and Torraco, 2020).
- Secondly, it follows that care should be taken in assuming that skills shortages reported by employers reflect a genuine mismatch that could potentially be addressed through boosting the supply of skills. Drawing on a body of work from numerous countries, Keep (2016) suggests that what is sometimes labelled as 'skill shortages' in particular local and occupational labour markets can be symptoms of wider problems with the attractiveness of the employer and/or occupation. In other words, it an issue of labour demand and job quality (Alfes et al., 2022; Findlay et al., 2017).
- Thirdly, what is often neglected is the adverse role the benefits system can play. A raft of independent research suggests that stricter benefit regimes can create additional barriers, pushing people further away from the labour market. Much research has found that conditionality and sanctions increase poverty; exacerbate ill health; and lead some to engage in 'survival crime' or to disengage from the social security system altogether, entering 'unknown destinations' (Batty et al., 2015; Welfare Conditionality, 2018; Williams, 2021). Skills, employment, benefits and investment policies should and could be designed in tandem.

The orthodox solution to LSeq has seemingly been a greater focus on the supply side and the need for individuals to address perceived deficits in skill levels or educational attainment. An alternative viewpoint is to rethink how employment and skills systems can deliver an array of outcomes – both for businesses and individuals (Corradini et al., 2023). At present many skills strategies persist without an emphasis on the role of employers and the conditions that lead to an underutilisation of skills.

## C: So what can regional and local skills strategies achieve?

In April 2024, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) launched their Skills Strategy, outlining three core mission areas:

- Mission 1: Move those far from the labour market into work or ready for work
- Mission 2: Raise attainment of core knowledge and skills (Level 1 and 2 qualifications)
- Mission 3: Increase the supply of a high-skilled workforce (Level 3+ qualifications)

Researchers at Sheffield Hallam University were tasked with building an evidence base around each of the core mission areas. To do this, we carried out two discrete exercises. First, we conducted a review of evidence on the barriers to work and attainment, identifying a framework suitable for understanding the full range of barriers experienced by both jobseekers and learners. Second, we conducted a review of evidence around good practice germane to each of the three mission areas. Together, these exercises helped SYMCA to better understand the key challenges facing regional skills strategies, as well as the most effective interventions available to mitigating these challenges.

### Understanding barriers to employment and attainment

Our evidence review on barriers to employment and attainment found that challenges facing both learners and jobseekers could be conceptualised according to the following four-type framework (Kenyon et al., 2022):

- *Situational barriers* arising from personal and family circumstances.
- *Dispositional barriers* arising from the attitudes, perceptions and expectations that people themselves bring to education, training or job opportunities.
- *Institutional barriers* arising from incompetence and/or poor practice present within current structures or systems of support.
- *Financial barriers* arising from insufficient disposable income, which may limit access to opportunity.

Table 2 below provides a summary of all key barriers identified in our evidence review, and how these barriers align with the three missions in the Skills Strategy. Note that each barrier is coloured coded (grey, blue or red) and situated under the relevant mission areas so as to map out which were present in the evidence across one (grey), two (blue) or all three (red) missions.

### Table 2: Barriers to employment and attainment and the Skills Strategy Missions

| | Mission 1 | Mission 2 | Mission 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Situational*** *Personal + family circumstances* | Disability/long-term sickness | | |
| | Caring responsibilities | | |
| | Severe or multiple needs (e.g. care experience, trauma, drug or alcohol use, homelessness, offending) | | |
| | | Difficult to fit learning around existing work commitments | |
| **Dispositional** *Attitudes, perceptions and expectations of jobseeker/ learner* | Cultural attitudes towards some paid work | Poor initial experiences of compulsory education | |
| | Inability or unwillingness to meet required competencies | Lack of interest in learning | |
| | Lack of interest in 'poor' jobs e.g. low wage, low status and/or precarious | Concerns around competence to learn ('too old' or 'too stupid') | Decline in 'optimism' among young people |
| | | Poor parental experiences of learning | |
| **Institutional** *Incompetence and/or malfeasance present within current systems of support* | Exclusion from formal pathways into employment or education (e.g. due to race, class, disability) | | Racial or sexual harassment |
| | Labour market discrimination | Lack of information about opportunities | |
| | Lack of wraparound support (e.g.housing) | Employer reluctance (cost or unwillingness) | |
| | Ineligibility for employment support | Ineffective teaching styles | Low status of tech'l education |
| | | Inflexible provision | Requirement for L2 quals |
| | | | Administrative burdens associated with disability |
| **Financial** *Monetary barriers* | Lack of access to suitable childcare | | |
| | Travel costs | | |
| | Insufficient income to meet basic needs | Cost of learning materials | |
| | Other poverty/unemployment traps | Rising cost of living | |
| | | | Low apprenticeship wages |

As can be seen, common to all three mission areas are pervasive issues (highlighted in red) such as disability/long-term sickness, caring responsibilities/lack of access to suitable childcare, and travel costs. Conversely, many other sector-specific issues such as learners' concerns around their learning abilities were exclusively present in the evidence base surrounding one mission area (highlighted in grey).

## Evidence on best practice in addressing barriers to employment and attainment

Following this, we conducted a review of evidence around good practice in addressing barriers germane to each mission area. In doing so, we differentiated between practice with strong supporting evidence and practice with weaker available evidence.

### *Mission 1: Moving people into work*

We found good evidence that interventions are effective in overcoming barriers faced by people distant from the labour market when they are:

- Personalised to the needs of people (Crisp and Powell, 2010).
- Integrated and address multiple challenges (notably around health) (Burrowes and Holtom, 2018).
- Provided by key workers with dedicated caseloads.
- And accessible (i.e., geographically, digitally, culturally) (Burrowes, 2023).

There was some, albeit less consistent, evidence around the following types of intervention:

- In-work support (Newton et al., 2020).

- Intermediate and temporary wage subsidy approaches.
- Work experience and volunteering (Russell and Thompson, 2022).
- And participant engagement (Ecorys, 2019).

These interventions may be more important for particular out-of-work groups and at particular points in the economic cycle. For example, there is a strong case for subsidised employment when unemployment is rising rapidly, especially for young people (due to the risk of long-term wage and health scarring effects). Participant engagement and co-production are crucial when engaging minoritised groups – for instance where mainstream providers lack cultural competence and understanding in how to engage some population groups.

### *Mission 2: Core knowledge and skills*

There is at least consistent evidence that the following types of support can engage people to build core knowledge and skills (Level 1 and 2 qualifications):

- Subsidising costs (such as childcare and travel) to support training and education uptake (DfE, 2018).
- Integrated, wrap-around support (such as housing support or debt counselling) (Burrowes and Holtom, 2018).
- Flexible and first steps support alongside keyworker/coaching support (DfE, 2018).
- High quality information, advice and guidance (DfE, 2021).

In addition to interventions targeted at individual learners, our review also uncovered a consistent (albeit international) evidence base on key systems interventions for raising attainment, particularly among those already in work:

- Social partnerships, especially with trade unions, but also community partners supported through trade union and community delivered learning (Dromey, 2020).
- Employer engagement with training schemes, both in terms of encouraging staff participation as well as involvement in design and delivery (DfE, 2023).

### *Mission 3: High-skilled workforce*

We generally found less clear evidence around supporting people to attain high-level qualifications (from Level 3 and above). The evidence that does exist suggests the design of interventions around four main areas:

- High quality information, advice and guidance which signals the benefits of different employment pathways (for instance through apprenticeships) (Kashefpakdel and Huddleston, 2021).
- Improving access through subsidy of key courses and development of systems.
- Promoting learning pathways suited to the needs and aspirations of individual learners (LWI, 2021).
- Shaping employer behaviours and practices (i.e., through sector and cluster level support on skills utilisation) (HVM Catapult, 2020).

## D: Key lessons for regional and local authorities

Many existing local skills and employment strategies start from the position that scarce public and private resources should be concentrated where returns are likely to be greatest, i.e. within pockets of high skilled/high wage economic activity. Where demand for skills is low, regardless of the supply of skills (LSeq), the solution has been for individuals to address perceived deficits in skill levels or educational attainment. However, relationships between skills, productivity and living standards are not linear and are increasingly complex. Simply increasing the supply of human capital and skills is no longer feeding into rises in productivity.

These challenges should be borne in mind when developing skills strategies. In particular:

1. **Skills demand is a key consideration:** it is necessary to focus on the demand for skills and the effective utilisation of workers' existing skills by employers in addition to their supply. Better use of skills can enhance innovation, profitability and productivity as well as employee job satisfaction, engagement and retention (Warhurst and Luchinskaya, 2018). **The role of employers is vital:** there is a need to understand why employers may fail to see the value of, invest in, or lack capacity to utilise new and higher-level skills in the workforce.
2. **Collective employee representation mechanisms can play a key role in shaping derived demand for skills:** staff councils, forums or formal support from trade unions such as union learning representatives can help workers identify training needs and organise learning within their companies (CIPD, 2022; OECD, 2019).
3. **Skills need to sit within a wider package of interventions:** on their own skills are an insufficient lever for growth, for instance, investment is required in productive capacity such as fixed capital. It also requires effective and affordable supporting infrastructure such as transport and childcare to enable workers to access employment commensurate with skills, as recognised in the Get Britain Working White Paper.
4. **Further devolution** should allow localities to move beyond past approaches which have focused heavily on the supply side. The Get Britain Working White Paper provides an opportunity for local stakeholders to consider how the work, health and skills systems can be aligned to shape and stimulate both the supply of, *and* demand for skills, and the institutional arrangements that need to underpin this.

Examples of good practice exist which can be drawn on, but there is little evidence of ecosystem reform creating better skills equilibriums. A key message from the evidence base related to SYMCA's Skills Strategy is that the design of interventions and especially their co-design with delivery organisations, businesses and especially with those impacted directly by support, need to go further than approaches such as Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). This is true for South Yorkshire and for many other parts of the UK.

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