



# CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE AND LOCAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT PLANS

**Bridging The Skills Gap**

**A new dynamic for business, education and skills**

**Linking local action with national strategy**

**FEBRUARY 2024**

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# 1. FOREWORD

**Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) have spearheaded one of the biggest shake ups around skills and business needs in recent times.**

Diverse businesses and employers across England, many of whom had never engaged in conversation with training providers before, have spoken loudly and clearly.

In thirty-two out of the thirty-eight LSIP areas, as the designated Employer Representative Bodies, Chambers of Commerce have led the way.



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### 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This report has found that Chambers of Commerce have the significant and inherent strengths needed to be effective leaders in LSIPs for years to come.**

Business-led LSIPs are working and beginning to make positive differences for local employers. However, transformation takes time, and this report has also identified a need for continued, long-term investment.

The 'problem' that LSIPs have been tasked to solve is to make education and training provision more responsive to employers' needs. Deeply integrated into the local business community, Chambers possess first-hand insights into industry needs and dynamics, ensuring a direct and practical understanding of the skills required by businesses of all sizes, across all sectors. Their status, as politically neutral entities, fosters credibility, making them trustworthy intermediaries - capable of accelerating collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

The LSIP process is encouraging more employers to collaborate and engage positively with the skills system and changing attitudes and behaviour regarding their role in addressing skills shortages. There is evidence of Chambers engaging employers who had not previously spoken to education and training providers. They also directly influenced employers to become actively involved in skills solutions. Examples include Berkshire, where local SMEs were working with the local college to design the curriculum and advise on capital investment for training, and in Norfolk and Suffolk, where a leading employer had co-created a soft skills framework to be used by both its workforce and young people in a local college.

With extensive networks spanning various industries, businesses, and educational institutions, Chambers can facilitate efficient communication, coordination, and build relationships between diverse organisations and institutions. Specifically, Chambers have reported success in bringing business and education together in meaningful discussion, finding common ground on which to build purposeful action.

The research also found that LSIPs have posed challenges for Chambers of Commerce, grappling with the complexity of the landscape and its numerous, interested stakeholders. However, there was an identified trend of increasing capacity among Chambers to lead LSIPs, and significant evidence of the added-value approach of an employer-led Plan.

Barriers were sometimes reported due to bureaucratic complexities and overlapping jurisdictions with other agencies and institutions. Differing priorities among Chambers, local

authorities, and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) sometimes resulted in varied approaches to skills development, hindering cohesive planning.

Concerns were also expressed about limited employer influence on skills spending priorities, both nationally and locally. Many LSIPs had identified the need for flexible, bespoke training and there was frustration that funding was mostly linked to larger, nationally accredited qualifications. The research also found some frustrations with the limited scope of the Plans themselves. As the Plans were intended by the Department of Education to focus on specific technical skills, at a local level, many Chambers found themselves in receipt of employer feedback that they could not act upon. For example, many employers engaged in LSIPs were eager to suggest improvements or changes to national policy. Whilst these changes were not within the gift of each LSIP, Chambers have recognised the value of this feedback from all regions of England. In part, this report has been commissioned to try to capture some of these rich insights.

The focus of LSIPs was intended by the Department for Education to be specific technical skills, but many LSIPs reflected that employers, time and time again, cited the importance of cross-sectoral 'soft' skills such as communication and team working. In response, many LSIPs have promoted innovative collaborations with employers to help encourage and promote these skills.

Whilst the Local Skills Improvement Fund was welcomed, its limited scale, in terms of duration and funding, was recognised. Participants across Chambers, industries, and local agencies expressed worry that short-term funding and policies, particularly related to business engagement, hampered efforts to improve local skills. Chambers feared that employers might become disillusioned with further changes in the engagement system, and the study highlights the need for more time to facilitate significant changes in culture and collaboration between education and employers.

An important, recurring theme was that overcoming these barriers requires active engagement, open communication, and the advocacy of Chambers to smooth over the bumps in the LSIP process. The importance of partnerships was emphasised by all Chamber representatives, highlighting the need for collaboration between employers and the education sector in guiding LSIPs. LSIPs offer a possibility for greater coherence and a sense of purpose. Plans, led by employers and ERBs with a partnership approach, built on consultation and consent, can develop meaningful, cohesive local skills systems.

The research identified many perceived strengths of a local approach to skills which allows for finely tuned LSIPs, tailored to specific local contexts. But participants also strongly felt that it was important to recognise areas of commonality, as well as hyper-local priorities.



Identifying common areas from the rich data sources and active employer engagement, represented by LSIPs, to inform and drive national strategy was felt to be a missed opportunity. Some participants noted that creating this connection would allow the voice of SMEs to be truly heard at national level.

Chambers of Commerce embody unique characteristics tailored to the diverse needs of their regions. This individuality provides opportunity for personalisation and regionalisation, allowing LSIPs to be finely tuned to specific local contexts. At the same time, the British Chambers of Commerce network can act as a conduit. It can foster collaboration at the national level and enable the exchange of valuable insights and strategies among different chambers, and on into Government.

This study has identified that Chambers recognise the importance of a personalised **and** unified approach to national challenges. The British Chambers of Commerce network provides a mechanism for ERBs to share and learn from each other, and the potential to use that insight to focus strategy at the national level.

The study highlighted the huge potential of LSIPs to build on the employer-led system, improve strategic planning, maximise the impact of skills funding and boost employer investment. These recommendations are set out in the BCC's 2024 Skills Manifesto.



## 4. INTRODUCTION

**This report was commissioned by the British Chambers of Commerce on behalf of 17 of the Chambers of Commerce who had been designated through legislation<sup>1</sup> as Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs)<sup>2</sup>, leading Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)<sup>3</sup> for their business communities.**

ERBs are tasked with leading the process for change, as well as producing the Plan for their areas. LSIPs give employers a stronger voice in shaping local skills provision. The aim is to forge a stronger and more dynamic partnership between employers and Further Education (FE) providers. Done effectively, this allows provision to be more responsive to the skills needs of employers in local labour markets.

LSIPs aim to provide a clear articulation of skills need, setting out the priorities for change in local provision, and driving collaboration and actions to ensure this happens. In November 2023, the Government announced £200 million of funding for local areas to offer more high-quality training opportunities to meet local skills needs, including sectors such as green skills and digital. This funding included £165m from the Local Skills Improvement Fund for collaborations with further education colleges and training providers, to meet specific regional skills needs identified in LSIPs.

This report, using research conducted in the Autumn of 2023, analyses the approaches taken by Chamber-led LSIPs and identifies their impact so far. It reflects the experiences of ERBs and LSIPs over the first year of activity. A desk-based review was carried out of all 32 Plans led by Chambers, which were published in August 2023. In addition, researchers spoke to a range of people involved in 21 of those Plans, including Chamber representatives, employers, training and education providers and local agencies and partners.

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<sup>1</sup> Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk))

<sup>2</sup> To be designated an Employer Representative Body, an organisation must not be a servant or agent of the Crown, a body to which the Secretary of State appoints members, or a public authority. It must also be reasonably representative of employers in the area and capable of developing and reviewing the Plan. In thirty-two of the thirty-eight LSIP areas, accredited Chambers were the designated ERB.

<sup>3</sup> Defined in legislation, a Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is a plan which is developed by an employer representative body (ERB) for a specified area; draws on the views of employers operating within the specified area, and a wide range of other evidence, to summarise the skills, capabilities or expertise that are, or may in the future be, required in the specified area; and identifies actions that relevant providers can take regarding any English-funded post-16 technical education or training.



The aim was to get under the skin of LSIPs, to go beyond the published Plans, understand and report on the actions that are rolling out and identify the strengths of the approaches taken, as well as the challenges and recommendations for improvement.



## 5. DESK BASED RESEARCH: THE CHAMBER-LED LSIP REPORTS

This summary is based on the 32 Chamber-led LSIP reports that were published in August 2023.

### Employer Engagement and Input in the Published Reports

The table-top analysis of the published Chamber-led LSIP reports identified over 65,000 employers had been involved in Chamber-led discussions regarding LSIPs from November 2022 to May 2023.

**65,765 employers engaged in LSIPs by Chambers of Commerce (May 2023)**

The LSIPs led by Chambers employed a variety of methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and technology, for data collection. Many published reports noted ambitions to engage employers who had not participated in the skills system before, with a specific focus on SMEs, to engage them in meaningful, productive conversations.

*Chambers are the best route to market: to find out what employers want; you need an employer focused organisation.*

**Small Business Owner, Media, and Communications**

As an illustration, the Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce conducted a thorough investigation involving over a thousand businesses and sixty education providers. Seventy-four percent of these surveyed employers had not collaborated with post-16 education and training in the last five years, indicating a previous, significant engagement gap. This underscores the need to address collaboration barriers and highlights the opportunity for strategic interventions to encourage partnerships between businesses and education providers.

Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce employed a diverse range of methods aimed at ensuring comprehensive reach. Special attention was given to companies traditionally considered harder to reach due to their lack of prior engagement with the skills system. Additionally, strategic engagement initiatives with trade-specific Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs), such as CITB, focused on priority sector businesses. A key aspect of the

research involved bringing together and reinforcing a collaborative approach among Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), and Independent Training Provider (ITP) institutes within the area.

An analysis of the published reports and annexes also established that many Chamber-led LSIPs were forging new connections with employers through deliberately using business-led language and priorities, rather than educational or policy language and concepts. The research approach adopted by the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce gave priority to conversations and dialogue as the primary and crucial source of information. Engaging employers in discussions regarding skills development posed challenges for the Chamber, which recognised the potential for employers to feel despondent and overwhelmed in the face of recruitment difficulties. To illustrate their methodology and the complexities associated with discussing skills, the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce developed a shared approach amongst LSIP officers, making sure that all employer engagements were as meaningful as possible.

## Other Stakeholder Engagement in the Published Reports

All published LSIPs reviewed cited engagement with education and training providers and other strategic partners such as other representative membership bodies, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Authorities. For example, the LSIP in West Midlands and Warwickshire was collaboratively developed by the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce, alongside the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Black Country Chamber of Commerce, with support from various skills providers, firms, and strategic oversight from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

The Sussex Chambers of Commerce created a 'Future Skills' Framework. This offers an opportunity for partners in Sussex to work collaboratively under one umbrella on the challenges faced by the people and businesses based in Sussex, as set out in the Sussex LSIP Case for Change. The Framework consists of five themes which are interdependent and rely on partnership working for their success.

In many LSIP areas, including Hertfordshire, Cumbria, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire, ERBs combined efforts with other trade bodies or member-based organisations. For instance, Berkshire and Oxfordshire developed plans for Construction and Built Environment with the Home Builders Federation, Electrical Contractors' Association and CITB. Hertfordshire are working in close collaboration with the BFI in the screen sector and Cumbria Chamber of

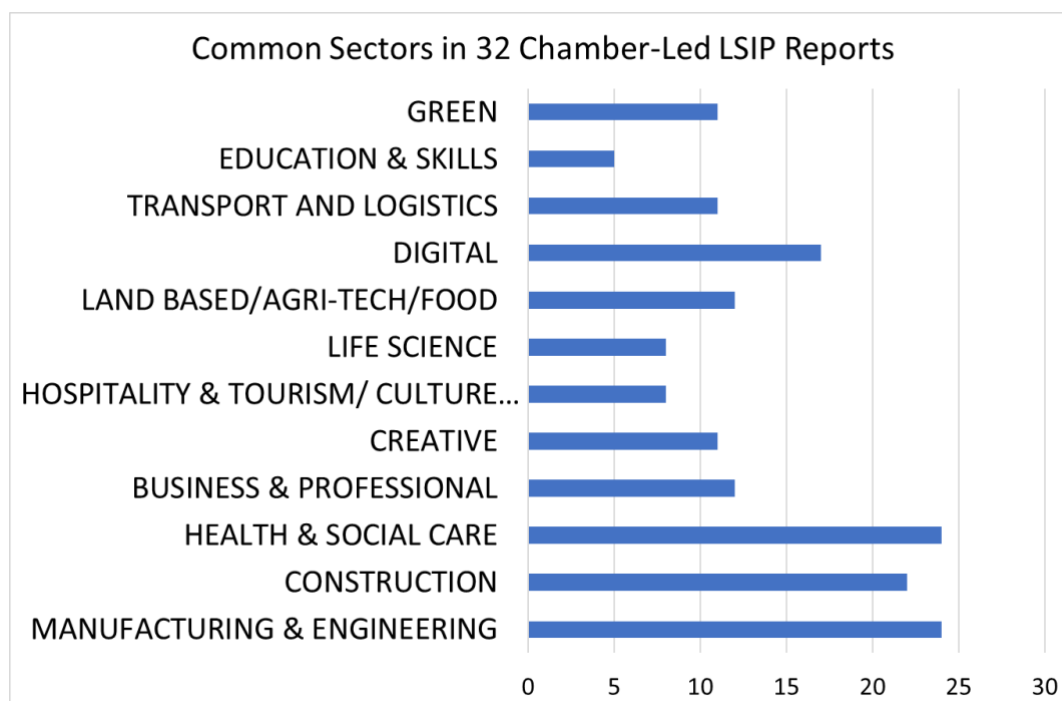
Commerce are working in partnership with Cumbria Tourism on actions related to the visitor economy.

All LSIP reports acknowledge the importance and role of education and training providers in ensuring LSIP actions are relevant and practicable. In many cases, providers had played a part in LSIP development and governance. As an example, in Hampshire, local Further Education Colleges had worked closely with the Chamber, specifically collaborating with the ERB on College Business Centres. In Hull and East Yorkshire, the Chamber was significantly involved in College-led Skills Boards.

## Sectoral Themes in the 32 Chamber-led Published LSIP Reports

The analysis of the 32 published Chamber-led LSIP reports identified commonalities as well as distinctive, hyper-local skills priorities.

In total, there were twelve common sectoral priorities. For the purposes of this report, these categories have been created by clustering some sectoral priorities together as often, each particular LSIP report had its own particular focus or technical definition within these broader categories.



These commonly expressed sectoral priorities mainly align with the expressed National Skills Priorities<sup>4</sup> which have been agreed across Government. These are areas with high volumes of vacancies which are expected to increase; long-term structural barriers to recruitment, retention, and progression issues; and are important in providing opportunities for employment in key growth areas such green jobs<sup>5</sup>, creative industries and science and technology (including AI and quantum computing).

These sectors are:

- Construction
- Manufacturing
- Digital and Technology
- Health and Social Care
- Haulage and Logistics
- Engineering
- Science and Mathematics

As to be expected, all LSIPs identified common solutions such as state-funded courses (e.g. apprenticeships, skills boot camps, adult education budget (AEB)). For example, in the Tees Valley, the North East Chamber of Commerce identified the need for additional short courses in specialist technical skills. In most areas, research participants identified that these solutions were rolling out, in part pump-primed by the Local Skills Improvement Funds (LSIF) that were explicitly aligned with LSIP priorities.

Analysis of the reports also identified a large number of priorities and actions that were related to local initiatives or needs. Some common areas identified by the LSIPs under review but not explicitly highlighted in the National Skills Priorities are Hospitality & Tourism, Education & Skills and Land-Based.

LSIP reports that focused on Hospitality were often responding to urgent skills needs driven by the location of visitor attractions and tourism hotspots. The skills requirements for hospitality and tourism in England vary based on the specific demands of the sector and the regional characteristics of different areas. For example, in partnership with Cumbria Tourism, the Cumbria LSIP had identified a shortage of chefs as a particular issue.

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<sup>4</sup> [Accountability agreements for 2023 to 2024 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>5</sup> The Office for National Statistics defines a green job as “Employment in an activity that contributes to protecting or restoring the environment, including those that mitigate or adapt to climate change.” “Green jobs” update, current and upcoming work - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

Five of the LSIPs under review highlighted Skills and Education, in the main focusing on the skills shortage of teachers in technical education. LSIP recommendations include investment in recruitment, awareness raising and collaboration with industry partners. As an example, the LSIPs in Berkshire and Oxfordshire champion the efforts of the Thames Valley Further Education Colleges and their campaign for [Teach Your Trade](#). In the Tees Valley, the North East Chamber LSIP report recommends a Mentoring and “Lending” Scheme: A mentoring scheme would allow experienced and specialist employees to pass their expertise on to the future workforce, filling the gap in up-to-date practices whilst not facing the disparity in wages between industry and the education sector. The Chamber had identified that businesses are open to flexible methods of mentoring and tutoring if there is a mechanism in place to put such a scheme together.

Land-Based priorities were identified in the following LSIP areas:

- Cumbria- Land Based
- Hull & East Yorkshire- Agri-Skills
- York & North Yorkshire- Agri-Skills
- Worcestershire- Agri-Tech
- Cambridgeshire & Peterborough-Agri-Tech
- Essex, Southend on Sea, and Thurrock- Agritech and Food Tech
- Norfolk & Suffolk- Agri-Food Tech
- Brighton & Hove- Land-based (including Horticulture And Viticulture)
- Enterprise M3- Land based including Animal Health & Welfare
- Dorset- Agriculture
- Gloucestershire- Agriculture, Agritech and food
- Swindon & Wiltshire- Agriculture, Farming and Pre-Gate Production

These examples illustrate one potential strength of the LSIP initiative- the granularity of information. Behind the one heading of ‘Land-Based’, individual plans focus on diverse, different, hyper-local skills priorities such as Viticulture, Animal Health, or Pre-Gate Production. As an illustration, in the Swindon & Wiltshire area, LSIP priorities identified by Business West include Advanced Commercial Agri-Tech, Digital Farming, Smart Farm Management, and addressing the Net Zero theme by decarbonising farm infrastructure. The plan advocates for a technology-driven approach, emphasising skills related to robotics, data management, sensors, and smart farm practices.



## Cross-Sectoral Themes in the Published 32 Chamber Led LSIPs

Many of the published LSIP reports reflect that employers are interested in cross-sectoral skills such as employability or 'soft' skills. In some of the research conducted by local LSIPs, employers indicated that these 'soft' skills were more important to them than technical skills that could be instilled as part of continuing workforce development.

This finding had proved to be initially problematic as the 'exam question' and remit established by the Department for Education had indicated that LSIPs should focus on specific technical skills, not generic areas. However, many LSIPs have formulated excellent employer engagement to create business-led initiatives to tackle the problem of employability or 'soft' skills. For example, The West of England Institute of Technology (WEIoT) has launched a new "soft skills certificate", after working with Business West on the LSIP. The certificate will enable people to gain the soft skills and certified credentials requested and recognised by local employers. WEIoT are offering the training free of charge delivered by industry and specialist partners. Modules include Digital Skills for Inclusive Cloud Collaboration, Team Working, Effective Communication, Workplace Skills And Behaviours, New World Working, Soft Skills for Project Managers and Insights Discover.

## Strategic Themes in the Published 32 Chamber-Led Reports

At the time of writing, the Department for Education is completing an analysis of the thirty-eight LSIPs using a large language model. Early drafts of this have structured the analysis using education and training categories- identifying sectoral priorities and responses such as qualification types (apprenticeships, Skills Boot Camps etc.). This provides valuable insights but is very much viewed through the lens of training and education.

The following brief summary, based on a review of thirty-two published Chamber-led Local Skills Improvement Plans, considers themes through the eyes of employers and business.

### **A Purposeful Focus on the Language of Business**

Many Chamber-led LSIPs share a recognition of the critical importance of defining actions through the lens of business rather than 'education and skills'. Although many LSIPs cite qualifications or state-sponsored activity as a potential solution (apprenticeships, bootcamps, or Adult Education funded initiatives), the collective focus in the published reports is on bridging gaps, addressing vacancies and business productivity, and cultivating a workforce attuned to the evolving demands of industries.

This focus was also highlighted by some participants in the study who emphasised that the use of language that was business focused rather than educational was better to engage employers and describe potential solutions. As examples, in Herefordshire & Worcestershire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire, emphasis had been placed on the language of 'workforce development' rather than skills, In Sussex, branding had been developed around the 'Future Skills Framework', and in Shropshire, much thought had gone into developing compelling marketing messages to bring a wide range of employers to the table.

### **A Desire to Help Employers Navigate the Skills System (and Students Navigate Career Opportunities)**

The LSIPs reported that employers often encounter challenges in navigating the skills system due to various factors such as complexity, lack of responsiveness from providers, provider competition and limited employer awareness of local opportunities. Some Chambers, such as the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, identified that providers should collaborate to offer a more cohesive offer and eliminate duplication and confusion. Many, such as Staffordshire Chamber, had begun to disseminate clear, accessible information for partners. Targeting companies traditionally deemed harder to reach due to their limited engagement in the skills system, the Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce leveraged various methods, including semi-structured interviews, to capture diverse perspectives. An important outcome was the creation of the Staffordshire Insights dashboard, a versatile tool offering valuable data on current skills shortages, career opportunities, and required skills.

### **A Need to Promote Mutual Understanding Between Providers and Employers**

All LSIPs underscore the pivotal role of actively engaging employers in the education and training planning process.

For instance, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce's LSIP sets out the establishment of four industry councils, each overseen by employers, reflecting a commitment to fostering collaboration. These councils will actively engage with educational institutions providing practical insights into the skills demanded by industries. In the North of Tyne LSIP Report, engagement work had identified the need for increased communication between providers and employers with the aim of generating valuable work experience for people in training, careers days to gain knowledge of different industries, and ultimately to streamline the recruitment process for employers.

In Norfolk and Suffolk, four working groups are set up, designed to be an open forum for discussion with a clear direction on output. These include both employers and providers to

ensure that any plans put forward are robust, workable, and deliverable. The Net Zero/Climate Adaptation Group encompasses representation from Further Education, Higher Education, Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and employers.

The Liverpool City Region LSIP Report benefits from a consistent and authentic employer voice. In designing, researching, and drawing together the LSIP Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce drew upon strong engagement from central Skills Strategy teams in the Mayoral Combined Authority, the FE Colleges group, the grouping of Independent Training Providers in Greater Merseyside Learning Providers Federation, and several sector specialist groups and organisations.

### **A Clear Need for Streamlining and Supporting Processes**

Most Chamber-led LSIPs express frustration at bureaucratic impediments hampering the streamlined implementation of programmes. The call for more support to help employers and people navigate apprenticeships, are cited in many Chamber-led LSIPs as part of a collective desire for a more accessible and straightforward system to train employees.

For example, in their published Local Skills Improvement Report, the Doncaster Chamber of Commerce initiated a transformative action: the establishment of The South Yorkshire Apprenticeship Hub. Funded by the Mayoral Combined Authority and the South Yorkshire College Partnership, in collaboration with the South Yorkshire Provider Network, the Apprenticeship Hub is designed to assist SMEs in hiring apprentices, debunk misconceptions surrounding apprenticeships, and advocate for their value across age groups. It also manages South Yorkshire's new Apprenticeship Levy Matchmaking Service, pairing SMEs with larger organizations to optimise unspent funds and contribute to the region's economic growth.

### **A Focus on Improving Inclusivity and Access to Training**

The need to expand access and foster inclusivity in education and training is acknowledged across several LSIPs. West Yorkshire's concern about the lack of access for disadvantaged groups exemplifies the commitment to address inclusivity issues and broaden the impact of apprenticeships, bootcamps, and other initiatives. In addition, Herefordshire & Worcestershire, Cumbria, and Staffordshire are raising awareness of recruitment of prison leavers and other traditionally underrepresented groups.

For instance, the Staffordshire LSIP sets out an ambition for a 'Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Employer Pledge' which will encourage employers to have an on-going commitment to training and best practice in recruitment. As part of this employers will be

encouraged to engage with non-traditional recruitment groups, creating inclusive job opportunities for vulnerable sections of the population.

### **A Further Focus on Improving Flexibility and Adaptability of Provision to Fit Needs**

The LSIPs have called for flexibility and responsiveness from providers. Many LSIPs capture very granular skills requirements, driven by specific, local developments. They serve as an effective convenor of partners, drawing institutions together to work in partnership.

As an example, the Hampshire Chamber of Commerce's LSIP for the Solent region focuses on building a responsive skills ecosystem tailored to the Solent Freeport. Designated in 2022, the Freeport is anticipated to attract substantial investment. The LSIP identified critical skills needs in areas such as freight and water transport, through stakeholder discussions which emphasised existing and potential skills gaps, particularly in technical roles. The LSIP sets out actions to foster collaboration between employers and training providers, especially those working with SMEs, to ensure a resilient and adaptable skills ecosystem.

### **An Employer-Driven Focus on Cross-Sector Employability Skills**

Although the focus on LSIPs was intended by the Department for Education to be specific technical skills, many LSIPs reflected that employers, time and time again, cited the importance of cross-sectoral 'soft' skills such as communication and team working. In response, many LSIPs have promoted innovative collaborations with employers to help encourage and promote these skills. As examples, in Norfolk and Suffolk, Morgan Sindall have worked with the local FE College to co-create a framework for soft skills to help shape both full-time curriculum for young people and continuous development for the workforce. In the West of England, the Institute of Technology worked with Business West to develop a soft skills certificate.

### **A Need to Promote Awareness of Opportunities in Priority Sectors to Prospective Employees and Educators**

LSIPs such as Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire spotlight the need to elevate awareness amongst schools, teachers, young people, and parents and promote technical career routes, underscoring shared challenges in improving the perception of apprenticeships. This recognition also features in many of the LSIPs, emphasising the need to dispel misconceptions and enhance the overall image of diverse educational initiatives.

The Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce highlights a vibrant programme of careers awareness for local primary schools that has demonstrably improved children's attitude to their work.

### **A Recognition That the Next Step is to Deepen Employer Engagement and Collaboration for Impact**

In different ways, and suggesting different solutions, all of the Chamber-led LSIPs have ambitions to establish dynamic relationships between employers, training providers, and educational institutions. This collaborative ethos is deemed indispensable in the published reports for tailoring programmes precisely to meet employer needs.

Many published LSIP reports set out actions for creating collaborative fora (such as Herefordshire & Worcestershire's Industry Councils) in which employers and education providers come together to discuss and enact solutions. For instance, the Hull & Humber Chamber of Commerce is establishing new sector-based groups and networks and in the Berkshire and Oxfordshire LSIPs, new Workforce Development Partnerships are planned for 2023 and 2024.



## 6. A DEEP DIVE INTO 21 CHAMBER-LED LSIPS

This research study aimed to comprehensively assess the impact of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) by engaging with key stakeholders involved in their implementation. The stage of the research adopted a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews with diverse participants, including employers, Chamber employees, and partners such as local authorities and other agencies. An initial survey of participating Chambers and a table-top review and analysis of the thirty-two published Chamber-led Plans<sup>6</sup> were conducted to inform the interview questions. Interviews were conducted with participants in 21 LSIP areas.

The choice of a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, was driven by the desire to capture in-depth and nuanced insights into the impact of LSIPs. This method allowed for open-ended questioning, enabling participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions in their own words. There were 17 participating Chambers, representing 21 LSIP areas.<sup>7</sup>

The inclusion of key stakeholders, such as employers, Chamber employees, and partners, was crucial for obtaining diverse perspectives. These individuals play distinct roles in the implementation of LSIPs, and their insights provide a comprehensive overview of the programmes' impact.

### Interviewees

44 people were interviewed in total. All had been nominated as key participants in their LSIP.

Chambers of Commerce Representatives	Employers	Education & Training Providers	Other Partners and Agencies
19	12	9	4

### Chamber Participants

The full list of Chamber-led LSIPs is available at Appendix 1. The 17 Chambers of Commerce that participated in the interviews represented the geographical spread and

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<sup>6</sup> A list of all 32 Chamber-Led LSIPs is included in Appendix 1.

<sup>7</sup> A full list of the 17 participating Chambers and LSIP areas are shown in Appendix 1.



diversity of the Chamber Network, encompassing differences in size, history, and activities that mirror the unique economic and regional contexts across the country.

The British Chambers of Commerce is a member-owned network of Chambers. There are 53 Chambers of Commerce in the UK, accredited by the British Chambers of Commerce representing over 70,000 businesses of all shapes, sizes and sectors.

## Summary Views of Partners, Providers and Employers

Thirteen interviewees represented a range of partners from local authorities, LEPs and providers. In summary, the identified positives included recognition of the Chambers' position as long-standing, trusted partners of business. Some partners, including a local authority, suggested that LSIPs should be brought together with other economic development plans in a more systemic, structured way. One queried whether the LSIP process would better fit under local authority control.

Most education and training providers considered that the LSIPs had been managed by Chambers in an inclusive way, considering the views of providers. In some areas, the challenges of including the independent training sector were highlighted. Overall, providers felt that the main benefit of the LSIPs were to engage with a wide range of employers, and to involve employers in co-creation of solutions. The concept of relationship building was particularly emphasised.

Providers considered that the findings of the LSIPs, in the main, were not surprising. One provider queried the value of the LSIP report if it did not produce any new insights. However, other providers, whilst recognising that the main themes of the LSIP in their area were not unexpected, also praised the LSIP for a granularity of detail that they had not previously had, as well as the fact that the process was creating new connections between providers and employers.

The twelve employers interviewed represented a range of sectors and size of business. They had all been positively engaged in the LSIPs in their area. In summary, employers considered that the Chambers had the track record, trust, and credibility to act as an intermediary between providers and business. Moreover, SME employers felt that there was a need for an ERB to create capacity and coordinated effort, to help employers influence the skills and training provision and they felt that an employer representative body was the best entity to do this, rather than a public authority, as the Chambers were perceived to have flexibility, agility, business knowledge and understanding, and neutrality.

## Positives Identified by the Deep Dive Research

The following section expands upon the positive aspects of a Chamber-led LSIP approach that was identified by all participants in the research- from Chambers, employers, providers, and partners.

### Chambers Are Trusted

The LSIPs have prompted one of the biggest discussions regarding skills and business needs in recent times. In the majority of LSIP areas, the range and reach of these discussions have been supported by the good standing and reputation of local Chambers of Commerce in their communities. A key theme that was repeated across many interviews was that Chambers of Commerce in England are widely trusted as reputable and influential business organisations that play a crucial role in supporting and representing the interests of local businesses.

*Chambers have the credibility within the business community to run this and run it well.*

#### **Large Corporate, Manufacturing**

They are viewed as trusted entities due to their longstanding presence, often spanning several decades or even centuries, fostering a sense of continuity and reliability. Many interviewees suggested that Chambers of Commerce are recognised for their commitment to promoting economic growth and advocating for business-friendly policies. Additionally, Chambers of Commerce are trusted for their role in facilitating networking opportunities, fostering collaboration, and serving as a collective voice for businesses in various sectors.

Most participants felt that Chambers of Commerce are well-placed to deliver Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) due to their well-known and established presence in local business communities. Their longevity and reputation create a foundation of trust and credibility, providing a solid framework for effective collaboration. Being deeply embedded in the business landscape, Chambers have established networks that span across various industries and sectors, making them natural facilitators for engagement between employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders. Their existing relationships with businesses allow for efficient communication and coordination, fostering a seamless implementation of LSIPs. Chambers possess a wealth of local knowledge and understanding of the unique economic landscape, enabling them to tailor LSIPs to address specific regional needs and challenges.

## Chambers Can Reach the ‘Unusual Suspects’

The well-established nature of Chambers of Commerce positions them as key players in delivering LSIPs, leveraging their credibility, connections, and community insights for successful outcomes. The ‘borrowed good-will’ of the Chambers, and their existing, extensive networks across the private and public sectors have significantly benefitted the national LSIP initiative as they have enabled discussions with a range of employers who may not have been involved otherwise. Interviewees identified that Chambers reach many parts of the skills system, as they are already embedded into local structures, including with local authorities and other agencies. Chambers are also well-placed to respond to the complexity of skills needs as they have experience and presence across a range of sectors, and a range of business types- from the very small to the very large.

The Chamber-led LSIPs benefited from a broad range of differing and multi-faceted data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups and the use of technology. Many interviewees emphasised that a strength of the work so far was that it had reached employers who had not been involved in the skills system.

## Chambers are Adaptive and Responsive

Many interviewees suggested that the Chambers’ ability to reach parts of the skills system that others had not, was driven by their organisational agility.

Deeply rooted in local communities, Chambers possess an intimate understanding of regional economic dynamics, allowing them to swiftly adapt strategies to align with the ever-changing needs of businesses. Interviewees reported that Chambers had utilised existing networks and connections for the benefit of the LSIP as well as creating and nurturing new business networks specific to LSIP activity.

Some noted that, as independent entities, Chambers are not bound by bureaucratic structures, affording them the flexibility to quickly adjust to emerging challenges, adopt innovative approaches, and tailor solutions to the diverse needs of businesses. Acting as advocates for their members, chambers play a crucial role in promptly addressing issues and championing the interests of businesses of all sizes and types.

*The Chamber of Commerce’s ability to swiftly bring together, organise, and push through the publication was truly remarkable. Having worked extensively with local authorities, where progress often faces numerous hurdles, witnessing the Chamber’s effectiveness was a pleasant surprise.*

**Business Owner of a Small Care Home**

## Chambers Can Convene Collaborative Partnerships

A recurring theme in interviews was the emerging success of attempts to bring a range of partners, employers, and people together to find local solutions, such as the [Insight Unlocked tool in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire](#).

*Co-creating the curriculum is challenging alone; articulating our specific needs becomes complex. For instance, when it comes to digital skills, the spectrum is vast, from Excel to AI. Employers often struggle to pinpoint their requirements. Thus, collaboration becomes essential. It is not just employer-led; it is a collaborative effort where both employers and providers play pivotal roles. Together, we can shape a more effective and tailored solution.*

*The LSIP, led by the Chamber, has served as the glue that binds many of our conversations together. As it develops and matures, we hope it becomes a strong signpost, enabling us to mark key pathways and navigate the landscape effectively.*

**Managing Director of a Medium Sized Technology Firm**

This study identified many examples of Chambers fostering collaboration by bringing together businesses, local government bodies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders, promoting cross-sectoral dialogue and cooperation. Chambers have seized opportunities and experimented with new initiatives. Recognising the unique challenges faced by different businesses, Chambers have provided tailored support, responding promptly to the specific needs of diverse business sectors. In some areas, this has entailed significant partnership working across complex geographies and administrative.

Some training and education providers expressed their view that LSIPs, along with the wider policy direction, had promoted greater collaboration.

The emphasis on collaborative action is repeated across many Chamber-led LSIPs including a new Quarterly Forum in Hull and East Yorkshire, innovative Industry Councils in Herefordshire & Worcestershire, Workforce Development Partnerships in Berkshire and Oxfordshire and sector-led collaboration in Kent & Medway.

Analysis of responses from interviewees indicated that sector-led collaboration was felt to be important for local skills development as it ensures that skills initiatives directly address the current and future needs of specific industries, tailoring training programmes to bridge skills gaps. Engaging employers in this collaborative effort enhances their active involvement, providing crucial insights into industry-specific requirements and promoting the practicality of

training programmes. Many Chambers were directly involving industry stakeholders to promote a heightened sense of accountability, as employers actively contribute to the planning, design, and implementation of these programmes. Also, interviewees suggested that sector-led collaboration can minimise skills mismatch by aligning workforce skills with industry demands, reducing the gap between employer needs and available talent. This collaborative approach allows for swift adaptation to technological advances, ensuring that training programmes stay current with emerging industry technologies.

### **Chambers Are Neutral and Objective**

Participants in this study thought that Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) had benefitted from the involvement of an ‘honest broker’ such as Chambers in bringing together employers and providers. Chambers of Commerce play a crucial role as neutral intermediaries, providing a platform for collaboration that is unbiased and detached from specific industry, political or educational interests. Their established reputation within the business community brought confidence and trust among employers and providers, creating an environment conducive to open engagement in the LSIP process.

*The engagement of businesses in an open and safe space like the Workforce Development Partnership is crucial to make that kind of change.*

**Small Business Owner**

It should be noted that, in some areas, Chambers are also training providers in their own right. This was touched upon by some interviewees who recognised the potential for a conflict of interest and the resulting need for particular local arrangements and mitigations.

### **Chambers Can Talk and Listen Meaningfully to Both Business and Education**

An important theme in the interviews was the perception that Chambers’ facilitation skills, advocacy role, and track record of collaboration contributed to a culture of cooperation, allowing LSIPs to leverage the collective expertise and perspectives of employers and providers.

*The mix of companies that they had in the room really helped with the discussion.*

**Senior Manager of a Large Corporate**

Interviewees felt that Chambers of Commerce possess a distinctive ability to understand both the language of business and education, stemming from their dual role as intermediaries between these sectors.

Deeply embedded in the local business community, Chambers have used LSIPs to forge close ties with businesses regarding skills, gaining firsthand insights into industry practices, needs, and challenges. Representing a diverse array of industries within a local or regional economy, Chambers can be fluent in the language of various sectors, understanding specialised vocabulary and operational nuances.

*The inclusion of the specific 'hard to fill roles' and skills needs are really helpful and give us a level of detail we've not always had when doing our own engagement work with businesses.*

**Senior Manager of a Large FE College**

Many participants identified that brokering meaningful conversations, both with employers and between employers and education providers was difficult. However, Chamber-led LSIPs had discovered a range of methods and for a with which to engage employers in a constructive way for collaborative work.

The research also identified many instances of Chambers actively collaborating with educational institutions, engaging in dialogue about curriculum development. This role in facilitating partnerships between businesses and educational institutions allowed Chambers to navigate and bridge the communication gap, ensuring effective dialogue between these two critical sectors. As neutral entities, many participants thought that Chambers approached the understanding of both business and education languages with objectivity, positioning them as honest brokers capable of fostering collaboration without bias.





## Barriers Identified by The Deep Dive Research

There was evidence that Chambers had proactively worked collaboratively with other agencies and institutions, expanding their reach through employer networks held by other such as Local Authorities, Sector Based ERBs and others.

### **There is Often a Crowded Local Landscape with Complex Administrative and Institutional Borders**

However, in some cases, tensions across geographical or administrative borders or between institutions had impeded partnerships. Some participants suggested that leading Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) can present challenges for Chambers of Commerce when working with other agencies, such as local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Some participants in the study reported that barriers had emerged due to overlapping jurisdictions, with each entity having distinct priorities and strategies. Conflicts over decision-making and resource allocation had the potential to arise, hindering Chambers from asserting leadership in LSIPs. Additionally, differing priorities among Chambers, local authorities, and LEPs had led, in some areas, to varied approaches in skills development, making cohesive planning challenging. In one interview, a Local Authority representative wondered whether Chambers would prioritise the immediate needs and concerns of the business community, while local authorities and LEPs might have broader community development goals. Differing priorities among these entities had the potential to result in divergent approaches to skills development, hindering cohesive planning and execution of LSIPs.

Some reported that resource competition is a significant hurdle, as local authorities and LEPs typically have access to substantial resources for economic development initiatives. Bureaucratic complexities within multiple agencies can slow down decision-making processes. Chambers often considered themselves to be more agile entities and often expressed frustration and found it challenging to navigate bureaucratic structures.

Competing stakeholder interests, involving businesses, educational institutions, and community groups, further complicate LSIPs. Different agencies representing various stakeholder interests can hinder consensus-building and coordination. The lack of clear leadership roles among Chambers, local authorities, and LEPs had, in some areas, the potential to lead to confusion and ambiguity. Additionally, limited collaboration experience and a lack of history among some of these entities required efforts to build trust and establish effective working relationships.

However, most, if not all participants, considered that employer engagement in skills development was critical if solutions were to be found. This included the importance of

understanding employer skills needs, as well as a recognition that there needed to be a culture shift, to share responsibility of skills development across education and training providers **and** employers. To do this, employer involvement needed to be central to local and national policy.

### **The LSIPs Have Identified That Employers Need Support to Navigate the Skills System**

Many LSIPs had identified that employers find themselves in need of substantial support to navigate the intricate landscape of the skills system. A notable challenge they face is the difficulty in navigating a landscape that is influenced by market competition and discerning the quality and reliability of various skills providers. As a result, employers often grapple with the dilemma of selecting the most effective and reputable providers for their workforce development needs. To address this issue, a number of LSIPs had embarked on initiatives to provide information or a structured support system to guide employers and provide reliable information on skills development programmes.

However, some interviewees remarked that local efforts on this aspect, in themselves, might create duplication, complexity and confusions across geographies. A more cohesive, national approach could empower employers to make informed decisions, foster stronger partnerships with high-quality providers, and contribute to the overall enhancement of the skills ecosystem.

### **Chambers and Employers Could Be Frustrated by the Limits of Their Influence**

Some Chambers expressed frustration that employers still had limited influence on skills spending priorities, both in national policy (such as the apprenticeship levy) or in local systems.

Many LSIPs had identified employer appetite for flexible, bespoke training and there was frustration that funding was mostly linked to larger, nationally accredited qualifications. The research also identified some frustrations with the limited scope of the LSIP report itself. As the reports, at local level, were intended by the Department of Education to focus on specific technical skills, and then only on actions at a local level, many Chambers found themselves in receipt of employer feedback that they could not act upon. For example, many employers engaged in LSIPs were eager to suggest improvements or changes to national policy.

As a further illustration of the LSIP work extending beyond the prescribed LSIP report, many LSIPs identified that employers prioritised employability or 'soft' skills above technical skills. However, the research also found that, although there were limitations to the prescribed format and content of the published LSIP reports, many Chambers were taking forward

innovative action on initiatives such as employability skills, illustrating the ability of Chambers to respond to local need.

Some interviewees expressed frustration over the limited influence that employers, have in funding decisions and action. There was some evidence that employers recognised a disconnect between the education providers' focus on funding and the employers' actual skill needs. The challenge was for the Chamber to bring the business community to the table, fostering genuine engagement that goes beyond the current dynamics driven by funding priorities.

Whilst the Local Skills Improvement Fund was welcomed, there was equally recognition that the funding it represented was small in scale, both in duration and quantum. In Norfolk and Suffolk, the Chamber prioritised the £20 million Adult Education Budget in the area. They highlighted the LSIP's efforts to have a systemic impact by forming a formal partnership with the local authority. However, in most areas, partnership with funders (such as the Combined Authority) was inconsistent and dependent on existing relationships.

### **The System May Provide Advantages to FE Colleges at the Expense of Other Providers**

In some areas, concern was expressed regarding the degree of influence the ERB had over providers' responses to the LSIP. In a few areas, frustration was expressed that the statutory Further Education sector (FE Colleges) dominated the solutions due to the design of the process and the Local Skills Improvement Fund allocation, at the risk of excluding the private sector that could, potentially, be more agile in response.

A few interviewees felt that the independent training sector's engagement has been limited. Some independents may have recognised opportunities in the LSIP process, but the initial emphasis on colleges set by legislation posed challenges for broader participation. Limited access to skills capital funding has constrained independent providers, particularly in fields like construction and engineering, where substantial capital investment is required. There was a recognition that sectors like digital, and logistics have shown more openness, with some independents exploring opportunities, such as designing boot camps for logistics-related skills. However, in other areas, in contrast, it was felt that the independent training sector had been involved.

### **Inflexible Funding Policy and Rules May Restrict Solutions Available**

Many participants in the study from a range of partners identified that inflexibility in national funding policy inhibited local solutions. There were a range of observations from criticism of

the Apprenticeship levy to expressed concern that funding was solely driven by formal qualifications.

Some employers and Chambers suggested a critical need for a more adaptive and versatile approach. They stated that rigidity in funding, often tied exclusively to formal qualifications, fails to capture the full spectrum of skills development required by individuals and industries. The rapidly evolving job market demands a dynamic workforce with a blend of technical and soft skills, necessitating a departure from a solely qualification-centric funding model. Employers emphasised the significance of practical skills, problem-solving abilities, and real-world application, which may not always align neatly with traditional qualification structures. To address this gap, a more flexible funding system was suggested, one that accommodates a broader range of skill development initiatives, including apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and continuous learning programmes.

### **Short-Term Funding and Short-Term Policy May Risk Disengagement**

Nearly all participants, across Chambers, industry and local agencies expressed concern that any efforts to improve local skills were hampered by short-term funding and policies, particularly around business engagement.

Many participants felt that currently, business engagement seems to revolve around specific initiatives such as a new qualification or project. The research indicates a need to transition to a more cohesive and sustained strategy for engaging businesses on the skills agenda. This entails fostering a long-term connection wherein businesses feel a genuine sense of ownership over ongoing conversations and agendas. To truly secure the future of the skills landscape, employers and Chamber participants stated that business engagement should be a continuous, visible, and employer-led process.

Chambers expressed fears that employers who had given their time to engage would become disillusioned by further change in the system of engagement. Participants suggested that significant change, particularly change in culture and collaboration between education and employers, required more time than the short-term funding implied.

*For businesses seeking long-term certainty and planning, the March 2025 deadline of LSIP funding falls short. We should think beyond short-term solutions.*

**Small Business Owner**

## Opportunities Identified by The Deep Dive Research

The following section outlines what participants in the research said about the change needed in the future to secure the progress LSIPs have made so far and improve their ability to achieve more in the future.

### **Longer-Term and More Responsive Funding**

The research identifies a significant opportunity for transformative change through a longer-term and more substantial funding settlement, anchored in business insights and LSIP priorities. A shift towards public funding for flexible skills training and accredited qualifications, guided by business insights, could enhance responsiveness to dynamic workforce needs.

### **Shift the Culture to Ensure Joint Accountability for Skills Between Education and Employers**

To make a true culture shift towards a better skills system, skills should not solely be a state-sponsored exercise. Participants in this study indicated there would be further opportunities for incentives for employers to invest in training for their existing workforce, allowing businesses to tailor programmes to meet specific requirements. This includes introducing flexibilities to the Levy.

### **A Long-Term Vision for Employer Representative Bodies**

Sustaining the influence of employer voices in skills development requires allocated resources for meaningful ongoing conversations and integrating employer input into funding policies. The LSIPs' success in bringing employers to the table must continue, emphasising the need to deliver on raised expectations. Partnerships led by employers and Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs) present an opportunity to develop cohesive local systems, genuinely driven by employer needs.

### **A Long-Term Vision for the Voice of Employers**

#### **At a local level:**

A partnership approach, involving Combined Authorities collaborating with designated ERBs before setting spending priorities for skills budgets, can align business-led contributions with regional planning. This approach could extend to various local authority responsibilities, including planning and inward investment.

## **At a national level:**

The Chamber Network, with established and trusted partners, can bridge the gap between local and national strategies. The LSIP model, connecting local action to national strategy, offers a replicable approach for other policy areas. The Chamber Network's ability to address both local challenges and establish national sectoral steering groups positions it to influence policy, especially in priority sectors.

### **Recognition of High-Quality Skills and Workforce Development Advice for Businesses**

Efforts to establish a clear support system to help employers navigate the skills system provide an opportunity for the Chamber Network to lead an accreditation programme. This programme, showcasing excellence in advising and supporting businesses, could introduce a mandatory standard or kitemark for Skills Advice and Support for Businesses. This initiative aims to enhance employer understanding, establish credibility, and elevate the prominence of technical skills provision.

### **Give the Chambers an Opportunity to Connect Local Action to National Strategy**

Chambers of Commerce, with their regional focus, offer opportunity for personalisation and regionalisation within LSIPs. While acknowledging the potential for duplication, the individuality of Chambers allows for finely tuned LSIPs tailored to specific local contexts. However, recognising and navigating the commonality between areas, as well as hyper-local priorities, is essential for optimising the impact of LSIPs nationwide.

Some interviewees pointed out that the LSIP policy and system might inadvertently create duplication of effort as, although each LSIP has hyper-local priorities, there is evidence of much commonality between many areas.

The British Chambers of Commerce network can serve as a connective tissue, fostering collaboration at the national level and enabling the exchange of valuable insights and strategies among different chambers.

This study has identified that Chambers also recognise the importance of a unified approach to national challenges. The British Chambers of Commerce network provides a mechanism for ERBs to share and learn from each other, and then share that learning at a national level.

The dual nature of chambers, uniquely attuned to regional needs yet interconnected at the national level positions them as ideal convenors. This unique combination of regionalisation

and collaboration ensures that skills improvement actions are not only finely tuned to local contexts but also benefit from a broader collective intelligence, driving national progress.





## 7. SPOTLIGHT ON CHAMBER-LED LSIPS- CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES

### Business West

*Our approach is non-prescriptive and agile, gathering intelligence from diverse sources. We collaborate with stakeholders, providers, and businesses to decipher the implications of this intelligence, collectively identifying potential opportunities, solutions, and addressing barriers or gaps in a dynamic and responsive manner.*

#### Business West

### CASE STUDY

#### **Addressing Workforce Skill Gaps: A Case Study on Collaborative Upskilling with GKN Aerospace**

This case study examines a successful collaboration between an educational institution and GKN Aerospace to address a specific workforce skill gap in the aviation industry. The initiative, born out of the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) engagement work, focused on upskilling individuals in the specialised field of handling aluminium, particularly double curvature turning. Through targeted training and collaboration with redundant workers from Honda in Swindon, the programme not only met the immediate needs of GKN Aerospace but also provided a transformative solution to potential shortages in skilled fitters.

Recognising a unique skill gap in their workforce, GKN Aerospace used the LSIP engagement to partner with the West of England Institute of Technology to devise a solution. The collaboration aimed to address this specific industry need and simultaneously provided an opportunity for individuals affected by redundancy in the automotive sector to transition into aerospace manufacturing.

Through the LSIP, it was identified that the skill of handling aluminium with double curvature turning was scarce in the country. To meet this demand, the educational institution collaborated with GKN Aerospace to design a targeted upskilling programme. Leveraging the redundancy situation at Honda in Swindon, individuals with a background in fabricating cars were selected for a 10-week intensive course. The course focused on imparting the skills necessary for aluminium handling in aircraft manufacturing.

The upskilling programme provided a rapid and intensive training experience for the selected individuals, equipping them with the specific skills required by GKN Aerospace. The training

ensured that the workforce was prepared for the specialised demands of the aviation industry. The participants, originally skilled in car fabrication, are now actively contributing to aircraft manufacturing on the shop floor in Filton.

The initiative not only met the immediate skill requirements of GKN Aerospace but also addressed a broader concern regarding potential shortages in skilled fitters. By identifying and responding to the anticipated shortage through targeted upskilling, the collaboration set a precedent for proactive industry-education partnerships to bridge skill gaps and ensure a well-prepared workforce.

### **Addressing the ‘Soft Skills’ Gap: A Case Study with the West of England Institute of Technology**

The West of England Institute of Technology (WEIoT) has launched a new “soft skills certificate”, after working with Business West on the LSIP.

The certificate will enable people to gain the soft skills and certified credentials requested and recognised by local employers. WEIoT are offering the training free of charge delivered by industry and specialist partners. Modules include Digital Skills for Inclusive Cloud Collaboration, Team Working, Effective Communication, Workplace Skills And Behaviours, New World Working, Soft Skills for Project Managers and Insights Discovery.

Soft skills have also become increasingly important in a post-pandemic world, where communication can be more complex as people don’t interact as much face-to-face. Global job site Monster’s The Future of Work 2021: Global Hiring Outlook revealed soft skills such as collaboration, dependability and flexibility are among the skills employers most value in workers. However, Michael Page recently found that 63% of hiring managers surveyed said they felt candidates focused too much on their hard skills and not enough on the human side.

Business West’s LSIP Trailblazer research found that employers reported that soft skills around people and project management, problem-solving and leadership are generally lacking in staff and that they are not cohesively aware of dedicated formal training to help develop these.

## Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce

*I have witnessed first-hand how an independent training provider responds to the needs identified in LSIP stage one by offering relevant courses. They not only put on the necessary courses but also actively assist employers in navigating the skills landscape. The reason for this understanding is attributed to the provider's meticulous examination of the outcomes from LSIP, ensuring a tailored and effective approach to meeting their needs. accentuate the necessity for flexibility and adaptability in educational programmes.*

**Coventry & Warwickshire Chambers of Commerce**

### CASE STUDIES

#### **Reaching the Parts Others Cannot Reach' in the West Midlands and Warwickshire**

We conducted an extensive investigation involving over 1,000 businesses and over 60 education and training providers across the region, aiming to unveil the current and future skills needs of employers. The research encompassed a thorough exploration of how skills are delivered, and the identification of barriers faced in the process. Early analysis of the vast dataset revealed five key themes: strategic leadership, core and technical skills needs, provider identification, means of delivery, and recruitment into education.

74 percent of the surveyed employers had not collaborated with post-16 education and training in the last five years, shedding light on a significant gap in engagement. This finding underscores the urgency of addressing barriers to collaboration and highlights the opportunity for strategic interventions in fostering partnerships between businesses and education providers.

#### **Transformative Impact of £10.3 Million Local Skills Improvement Funds on West Midlands and Warwickshire**

The Department for Education has awarded a substantial sum of £10,304,523 in Local Skills Improvement Funds (LSIF) to the West Midlands and Warwickshire region, marking the highest allocation for any area in the UK. This funding is a response to the region's Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), collaboratively developed by the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce, alongside the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Black Country Chamber of Commerce, with support from various skills providers, firms, and strategic oversight from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

The LSIF aims to address key areas crucial for the economic growth of the region, identified through the LSIP. The six primary focus areas include:

- **Engineering and Manufacturing:** Prioritising electric vehicles and batteries.
- **Construction:** Emphasising low-carbon techniques and future housing.
- **Green Skills:** Training the local workforce in environmentally sustainable practices.
- **High-Level Digital Skills:** Focusing on AI and machine learning for non-IT businesses.
- **Essential Digital Skills:** Supporting basic IT provision for employment and career advancement.
- **Employer Skills Landscape:** Streamlining access to training and skills support for businesses.

Solihull College and University Centre, as the lead applicant, will collaborate with businesses and other providers to execute the LSIF projects. Partners include Dudley College of Technology, WCG, Fircroft College, Halesowen College, and Birmingham Metropolitan College.

The infusion of funds is expected to have a transformative impact on the region. Corin Crane, Chief Executive of the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce, sees it as a crucial step in addressing skills and recruitment challenges, providing necessary funds for businesses to grow and explore new markets.

The collaborative approach, replicated in many LSIP areas, involving Chambers of Commerce, businesses, training providers, and funders reflects a new model for delivering skills funding. This innovative approach places businesses at the forefront of the process, ensuring focused engagement and effective delivery.

## Cumbria Chamber of Commerce

*Part of our problem is the translation of what business voice is saying into education language... it's being able to translate between those two.*

*It is easier for us to ask it in a way that fits with the language of employers, but I think equally valuable is drawing those businesses together with providers and having those direct conversations. This is something that Chambers are particularly good at.*

**Cumbria Chamber of Commerce**

*We have got breadth and depth. We have a national footprint and local networking- real local engagement combined with research and policy ability.*

**Cumbria Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### **Advanced Manufacturing Pathways and Land-Based Skills Service in the Cumbrian Region**

In Cumbria, a positive case study has emerged, led by a consortium of manufacturers, and supported by various stakeholders. The initiative focuses on developing a comprehensive pathway in advanced manufacturing, spanning from Level 2 qualifications to degree apprenticeships. What makes this endeavour particularly exciting is its genuine employer-led approach, with 70% of the curriculum at each level being core and delivered collaboratively by all colleges and providers.

The remaining 30% of the curriculum is tailored to specific aspects of advanced manufacturing, showcasing the specialisation within the sector. For instance, leading food manufacturers are actively developing the 30% dedicated to food-related manufacturing, while companies like Pirelli and James Walker are focusing on rubber and materials used in nuclear submarines and oil and gas applications.

To optimise learner experiences, providers are working collaboratively to share learners, allowing them to attend specific colleges for specialised segments of the curriculum. This innovative model enhances collaboration among larger providers, ensuring a holistic and tailored approach to advanced manufacturing education.

Furthermore, Cumbria is pioneering a Land and Nature Skills Service, spearheaded by employers in the region. This service centres around land-based, agriculture and conservation, consolidating various careers and pathways. It includes an advice service,

providing comprehensive guidance for individuals (whether already in the sector or looking to enter it) and businesses.

In response to the closure of a land-based college just before the LSIP initiative began, several Cumbrian providers stepped up to fill the gap. Additionally, Myerscough College, located just over the border in Lancashire, collaborated with Cumbrian providers to contribute to the delivery of land-based skills education. Ongoing collaborations and developments are in progress, reflecting a dynamic and responsive approach to meeting the region's evolving educational needs.



## Doncaster Chamber of Commerce

*We have really benefited from the way that the chambers have worked together and then the way the chambers have drawn in employers. But they have been very skilful at keeping providers in that loop.*

*We have seen an uptick in people who actively want to get in and want to talk to us, which is brilliant, absolutely brilliant.*

**FE College Principal**

*Our unique position as a place-based membership organisation positions us as a versatile entity that is not restricted to a single narrow view. Indeed, unlike many specialised entities, we cater to a diverse membership which includes startups, international traders, retailers, health businesses, manufacturers, and rail engineers.*

*The inclusive nature of our membership, combined with our own internal expertise when it comes to business engagement and economic development, allows us to bring various perspectives to the table, which is especially useful in shaping skills policy.*

*On that note, while the past decade has indeed seen a move towards co-design between government and big businesses, the real impact on SMEs (which constitute over 90% of our membership), has been limited and that's something we believe we can address.*

*We excel in our convening role, navigating policy and strategy discussions in both the public sector and the business world. Our ability to touch different parts of the system and the economy gives us a unique advantage, allowing us to question the intent and propose considerations for SMEs and micro-businesses.*

**Doncaster Chamber of Commerce**

## CASE STUDY

### **A New Apprenticeship Hub Service to Help South Yorkshire Businesses Access Fresh Talent**

A brand-new service, The South Yorkshire Apprenticeship Hub was originally put forward as one of the practical recommendations from the LSIP and, as such, stands as a testament to the value of employer-led initiatives like this.



Funded by the Mayoral Combined Authority and the South Yorkshire College Partnership, working alongside the South Yorkshire Provider Network, The Apprenticeship Hub is a freely accessible service that aims to support SMEs in employing apprentices, while also dispelling common myths about this type of training and encouraging people of all ages to see its value.

Among other things, the scheme will assist businesses in making better-informed decisions when it comes to recruiting apprentices, signpost them towards relevant funding opportunities, connect them with the providers that most closely meet their needs, and ultimately help them access a wider pool of talent.

It will also oversee the administration of South Yorkshire's new Apprenticeship Levy Matchmaking Service. In a nutshell, this will pair SMEs up with larger, levy-paying organisations, so that the former can benefit from the latter's unspent funds. In turn, this ensures that the smaller businesses can pay for their apprenticeship training and recruitment, and that the levy investment itself remains in South Yorkshire.

Through the cumulative effect of all these different services, the overarching ambition for the hub is that it will deliver a net increase of three hundred new apprenticeships within the next two years.

Enthusiasing about this, Dan Fell, Chief Executive of Doncaster Chamber and Chair of the Apprenticeship Hub, said: "We are very optimistic about what this means for the future of our region, its residents, and the broader economy as a whole. The founding of this hub was one of the practical recommendations from our recently published Local Skills Improvement Plan, and so it is heartening to see that our voice, as well as that of the business community, is being heeded.

"When we were initially putting together that plan, employers — from across all different sectors and of all different sizes — made it clear that they needed more streamlined support in order to help them navigate the complexities of recruiting and then training apprentices. The hub will help to address this very concern, and its creation is also a testament to the value of employer-led initiatives like our LSIP, as well as to the partnership working that we are capable of in this region when we all unite behind a common goal.

## Hampshire Chamber of Commerce

*As the voice of business, we leverage compelling trust in our engagements. Our relationships are built on representing businesses from a policy and voice perspective, unencumbered by financial ties to the government. This independence allows us to provide an open platform for businesses to express their views, even when they differ from the government's stance. Our geography-based approach further strengthens our local stakeholder relationships, encompassing colleges that are often members of our chamber. This cross-cutting trust factor positions the Chamber of Commerce as not just a county-based entity but one that is genuinely 'for the county,' resonating with businesses and stakeholders alike.*

**Hampshire Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### **Building a Responsive Skills Ecosystem for the Solent Freeport: Navigating Challenges and Meeting Diverse Workforce Needs.**

The Solent Freeport, designated in 2022, is expected to unlock significant investment on port activities, logistics, marine manufacturing, technology, advanced manufacturing, and clean growth.

The Solent Freeport will generate demand for a diverse set of skills across various sectors, encompassing low-level to highly skilled and technical occupations. The maritime sector, which includes shipping, ports, leisure marine, engineering, and maritime business services, is estimated to support 20,000 FTE jobs across 2,700 enterprises.

The LSIP identified skills needs in the Solent Freeport primarily revolve around freight and water transport, cargo handling, data analysis, engineering (battery, mechanical, electrical, and system engineers), business administration, gas engineering (specifically hydrogen-based fuels), industrial machinery mechanics, and pilots of large vessels. Employers in the maritime sector, especially in technical roles, face challenges in recruiting individuals with specialized skills and struggle to find employees with the right levels of employability and personal skills.

Discussions with stakeholders and employers operating in Freeport target sectors have highlighted several considerations, including existing skills gaps, potential future gaps due to emerging technologies, and the need for a paradigm shift in recruitment, emphasizing transferrable skills. The priority is to establish an agile and responsive skills ecosystem, acknowledging the role of both employers and providers in meeting the diverse needs of the

Freeport. The challenge lies in navigating and adapting the skills ecosystem, ensuring that curricula meet the requirements of smaller employers while addressing the financial risks faced by training providers working with SMEs.



## Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce

*We recognise that it is not just school leavers who need support. We are actively working with individuals over the age of 50 and have engaged with the prison service. Our goal is to break down barriers and foster social mobility as a result. Additionally, we hope to focus on ways to support neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, leveraging their skills for roles that require such abilities.*

**Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce**

*This company, based in Droitwich, attended our construction forum last year, and the passion and vision of the representative were truly inspiring. Frustrated by a specific training element he could not access, a college immediately responded, 'We do that,' leaving him pleasantly surprised. This swift connection led to several meetings, and now they have successfully recruited four apprentices from the college.*

**Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce**

*We are already at the heart of the business community, and it has already been established that employers very much need to be more integral to the skill system. We are master connectors. We connect businesses with the support that they need.*

**Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### Employer-Led Impact on Education in Worcestershire

The Chamber established four industry councils, each led by employers. The purpose is to foster a collaborative approach wherein these councils actively engage with institutions, such as Kidderminster College, offering practical insights into the skills required. Take, for instance, a plastering course in our building trades curriculum. Instead of a generic approach, employers play a pivotal role in shaping the training provision. It is not about merely adhering to a textbook; it is about a dynamic interaction where employers, particularly in the context of net zero demands, guide the learning process. This collaborative effort ensures that the courses align precisely with the evolving needs of industries, contributing to a more responsive and relevant skills system.

## Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce

*It is evident that our efforts have yielded positive outcomes. We have successfully facilitated connections between companies and colleges, fostering collaboration that benefits both parties. A notable achievement is the integration of employability and soft skills into one college's curriculum for the new academic year. This development signifies a significant step forward as the college now actively engages in imparting essential skills, such as proper telephone etiquette and effective letter and email communication. This tangible progress exemplifies the impact and progress we have achieved in bridging the gap between education and the practical needs of businesses.*

**Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### Leveraging SME Connections for the LSIP

Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce leveraged its extensive business network to drive meaningful engagement. With nearly 1000 members, predominantly SMEs, the chamber recognized the pivotal role SMEs play in the local economy. The chamber's proactive approach to networking became a catalyst for LSIP awareness. Hosting approximately 120 events annually, including meetings and webinars, the chamber ensured LSIP discussions were seamlessly integrated into their gatherings. Utilising banners, surveys, and promotional materials, LSIP became a regular topic of conversation at every event, fostering a culture of awareness and participation. By strategically embedding LSIP discussions into their extensive event calendar, Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce showcased a robust model for engaging and informing businesses within their network about the benefits and opportunities offered by the LSIP initiative.

## Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce

*At the heart of LSIP, it is not a one-hit wonder confined to reports. It is a dynamic catalyst, a constant effort to foster sustainable relationships, meaningful dialogues, and ongoing conversations. LSIP is about connecting people, igniting discussions from which constructive outcomes naturally emerge.*

**Hull & Humber Chamber of Commerce**

*Chambers are the best route to market: to find out what employers want; you need an employer focused organisation.*

**Small Business, Media, and Communications (Hull and East Yorkshire LSIP)**

### CASE STUDY

#### **New Partnership Working Driven by the LSIP**

In Hull and East Yorkshire, the Chamber of Commerce has pioneered a Quarterly Forum for Employers as a dynamic platform to collaboratively address challenges and strategise solutions in the realm of local skills improvement.

For example, one recent theme discussed was support for SMEs in Technical Training:

#### **Barriers:**

Information overload for SMEs

Insufficient employer time for upskilling

Lack of access and funding for training

#### **Solutions:**

Clarity in funding communication

Roadshows, bootcamps, and accessible data

Employer flexibility and tailored support

The Quarterly Forum is focused on collaborative problem-solving and targeted initiatives, open dialogue, and practical solutions, to implement a robust local skills improvement plan.

## Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce

*Currently, business engagement seems to revolve around specific initiatives – a new qualification or project prompts the call for business involvement. The key is to transition to a more cohesive and sustained strategy for engaging businesses on the skills agenda. This entails fostering a long-term connection wherein businesses feel a genuine sense of ownership over ongoing conversations and agendas. To truly secure the future of our skills landscape, we must ensure that business engagement is a continuous, visible, and employer-led process.*

**Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce**

*Building and infrastructure developments present a wealth of opportunities in various fields, including planning, architecture, design, and on-the-ground support roles. However, schools may not be fully aware of these opportunities, lacking the knowledge and interest in the dynamic developments right in their local area. Over the past 18 months, Kent & Medway has assessed its needs, made necessary adjustments, established manufacturing groups, and collaborated closely with chambers. This proactive approach will successfully attract a significant number of students eager to learn skills tailored to the local market.*

**Large Utilities PLC**

## CASE STUDY

### Enhancing Manufacturing Skills Collaboration in Kent and Medway

To bridge the gap between businesses and education providers, the Kent and Medway Manufacturing Focus Group has been established as a dynamic forum facilitating dialogue. This group's purpose is to address challenges, including the impacts of automation and digitalisation, perceptions of the manufacturing sector, and the anticipated demand for short courses. The Forum has organised insightful site visits to local businesses, such as the SEC Works Group, a specialist in converting and operating London buses, coaches, vans, and trailers into promotional, educational, and exhibition vehicles and, recently, groups were hosted at the Further Education Providers within the region - MidKent College, North Kent College and EKC Group - for a tour of their facilities and a chance to hear about the fantastic work they are doing to support these sectors. Future proofing the workforce and ensuring there is a talent pipeline is at the forefront of all they do.



## Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce

*It cannot just come to an end. We have worked hard to build a strong relationship with these businesses, and one challenge we faced was convincing them that our engagement is not just a short-term effort. The current buy-in from businesses is significant, and it is crucial for us to convey that this is not just another brief period – it is an ongoing commitment. We want to be a reliable anchor for them, a constant point of contact where they can share information and concerns at any time. This stability is particularly valuable considering the numerous uncertainties businesses are facing.*

*Despite the challenges, we have successfully gained their trust, and we want to maintain this relationship as a supportive and attentive partner.*

**Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce**

*There is a Knowsley Construction Forum event and some companies attended and presented about what they are doing with renewable materials to reduce their carbon footprint. And it was incredibly interesting. This is a great example of what is happening with the LSIP- linking in with education and universities and research that I don't think they are shouting about enough. It is amazing the work that they are doing.*

**Large Construction Business, Liverpool City Region LSIP**

## CASE STUDY

### Partnership Working Across Five Chambers of Commerce

Liverpool City Region's five Chambers of Commerce are working together to help give businesses across the Region a voice and strengthen the relationship between employers and training providers through the (LSIP).

Working together, they have conducted an in-depth consultation, encouraging as many businesses as possible to have their say in shaping the future skills development and training in the Liverpool City Region.

These valuable insights are providing a representative and coherent employer view of the skills most needed to support economic growth and boost productivity in the City Region.

## Norfolk Chambers of Commerce (Norfolk & Suffolk LSIP)

*But the beauty of the chambers is the breadth of their reach across sectors. It has enabled us to broaden our reach in terms of cross-curricular activity and throughout the whole of Suffolk rather than just in Ipswich or at Suffolk Rural.*

**Principal of an FE College (Norfolk and Suffolk LSIP)**

*We've consistently aimed to establish the LSIP as a driving force within the system. This objective led us to forge a formal partnership with our local authorities, fostering close collaboration and alignment in our efforts. We bring business expertise to the table, not skills expertise. This approach guides our LSIP, designed in collaboration with local authorities. Over the past 6-8 months, we have diligently solidified this partnership, culminating in a formal MOU for phase two. This agreement clearly outlines the LSIP's and the skills hub's respective objectives, identifies crossover points, and allocates responsibilities. By coordinating efforts, we ensure an efficient and collaborative delivery of essential initiatives within the local skills landscape.*

**Norfolk Chambers of Commerce (Norfolk & Suffolk LSIP)**

## CASE STUDY

### Fostering Business-Education Collaboration: A Case Study on Soft Skills Development through the LSIP

This case study explores a successful collaboration between Suffolk New College and Morgan Sindall, a prominent employer partner, to enhance soft skills development through the LSIP (Local Skills Improvement Plan) with the EPASS (Employability, Personal and Social Skills) framework. The initiative not only addressed the identified needs of young learners but also resulted in the creation of a comprehensive soft skills programme for Morgan Sindall's workforce. The study delves into the development, implementation, and validation of the programme, highlighting the pivotal role of the Suffolk Chamber in extending its reach to a broader network of employers.

In response to the LSIP, Suffolk New College embarked on a journey to bridge the gap between education and industry by incorporating the EPASS framework. This framework identified six core soft skills elements crucial for employability. Collaborating with Morgan Sindall, an employer partner, provided a unique opportunity to align these soft skills with the corporate values of the organisation.

Morgan Sindall recognised the alignment between the EPASS framework and its corporate values, challenging Suffolk New College to extend the benefits beyond the study programmes for young learners. Subsequently, a system was developed to measure the competencies of Morgan Sindall's workforce against the soft skills milestones. The platform not only assessed the workforce but also offered a personalised profile for each employee, enabling targeted training in areas where development was needed.

The collaboration extended beyond Suffolk New College and Morgan Sindall. The Suffolk Chamber played a pivotal role in validating the programme. Discussions with John Dugmore, the CEO of the Suffolk Chamber, are paving the way for the Chamber to endorse and promote the EPASS framework. The intention is to have the Chamber validate the programme, making it widely accepted and recognized.

The EPASS programme, with its gold, silver, and bronze tiers, aims to provide a robust mechanism for assessing and certifying soft skills competence. The long-term vision is for every learner leaving Suffolk New College, whether young or adult, to possess the EPASS certificate. By collaborating with the Suffolk Chamber, the programme is expected to gain widespread recognition among employers within the Chamber's network.

The ultimate goal is for employers, particularly within the Suffolk Chamber network, to integrate EPASS into their hiring practices. The vision is that when a Chamber member interviews a candidate from Suffolk New College, questions about soft skills and the EPASS framework become integral. The EPASS certificate will serve as a reliable indicator of a candidate's competence in soft skills, providing assurance to employers and fostering a culture of skill development within the region.

## North East Chamber of Commerce

*By engaging with 3,500 businesses, producing well-received reports, and identifying a clear path forward, we've not just envisioned but identified how to get to the efficient delivery of large industrial projects.*

**North East Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### **Empowering Regional Skills in Partnership with Educational Institutions**

In the North East region, there is already a significant education and training infrastructure, including Further Education Colleges, universities, and independent training providers. However, there are challenges, including a history of occupational groups with skill shortages and a need for a more coordinated response to meet technical skills requirements for regional growth.

Providers in the region have engaged with employers, leading to successful long-term partnerships. However, there is a risk of employers switching between providers, impacting long-term investments. The region faces skill shortages, exacerbated by increased demand from inward investment and the complexities of emerging technologies.

To address these challenges, a collaborative and inclusive approach involving all stakeholders is set out in the LSIP.

Recommendations include cross-sector actions, acknowledging that LSIPs are part of a complex change process requiring support and appropriate actions. Collaboration models and strategic partnerships exist, but there is a need for sector-level mechanisms to monitor priorities and address them effectively. Regional collaboration, as seen in the Health Science sector through the North East Health Skills Hub, are identified as a model for shared capabilities and leveraging research and teaching resources to enrich vocational technical curriculum.

Driven by this collaborative approach the Local Skills Improvement Funding has been allocated to key educational institutions in the region, including Darlington College, The Education Training Collective, Middlesbrough College, Hartlepool College of Further Education, the Learning Curve Group Limited, and the City of Sunderland College. This funding responds to the LSIP call to enhance skills in green jobs, digital, construction, and manufacturing sectors.

The aim is to facilitate broader access to Higher Technical Qualifications, which serve as a valuable alternative to traditional degrees, positioned between A levels, T levels, and university degrees. This funding is pivotal in supporting the development of skills in digital, healthcare, and engineering, aligning with the region's commitment to meeting evolving industry demands.



## Shropshire Chamber of Commerce

*Without the local integration the Chamber has, we could not have achieved this. Many public sector stakeholders tried hard to support us to raise awareness and interview completion but with very weak take-up, showing that the Chamber is seen by business as a legitimate conduit.*

**Shropshire Chamber of Commerce**

*Many stakeholders were eager to support and connect with businesses, utilizing their business networks. However, the previous outreach efforts did not yield as many results, likely due to a noticeable language and culture barrier between the public and private sectors. Recognising this barrier is essential, and though quick fixes exist, understanding and acceptance are crucial. The employer's voice is fundamental; without it, the entire initiative lacks a solid foundation.*

**Shropshire Chamber of Commerce**

### CASE STUDY

#### Enhancing Local Skills Improvement Plans through Direct Messaging

Shropshire, like many regions, faces the challenge of bridging the skills gap to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving jobs market. Employer engagement, a crucial component of any successful skills improvement plan, has historically proven to be a challenge.

Understanding the importance of clear and accessible language, the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has employed a direct messaging approach that resonates with employers and partners alike. The language used is not only articulate but also accessible, ensuring that the message reaches a diverse audience.

Employer engagement is often hindered by various factors. Employers are typically inundated with numerous requests, and the intricacies of skills improvement plans may seem daunting. Moreover, businesses may perceive engagement initiatives as time-consuming and lacking immediate benefits.

To overcome these barriers, Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has adopted a solution-driven direct messaging strategy. The messages are tailored to highlight the tangible advantages of participating in local skills improvement plans, emphasizing the direct benefits to businesses.

The messages convey the following key points:

- **Relevance:** Highlighting the direct connection between skills improvement plans and the specific needs of local businesses.
- **Benefits:** Emphasising the positive impact on productivity, workforce quality, and overall business growth.
- **Simplicity:** Breaking down complex information into easily digestible content to demystify the process.





## South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry

*The Chamber's well-known brand eliminates the challenges of starting from scratch and building trust with organisations. If the LSIP had been a new initiative by a less familiar entity, it would likely face delays in gaining traction and momentum. The pre-existing network and recognised brand of the chamber allowed it to hit the ground running, making the process more efficient and effective.*

**Lead of The Pledge**

### CASE STUDY

#### **Collaborative approach to skills across the FE Sector**

This case study reflects the LSIP's commitment to regional collaboration across the FE sector.

At the heart of the initiative lies its practical approach to careers, apprenticeships, and skills development within all FE partner settings.

The LSIP roadmap has been used as a tool to bring FE Colleges, Independent Training providers and Careers specialists together, meeting regularly as part of a reinvigorated Cheshire and Warrington Focused Training Provider Network, building commitment and willingness among partners to share best practice across all settings in line with the LSIP priorities. A recent example being the local engagement in an ETF funded Northern Skills Network Low Carbon initiative to bridge the gap between green skills incorporation into industry standards and their practical implementation within apprenticeships. The network's created a Padlet of resources, now freely accessible to colleges and providers across the region, exemplifying the collaborative ethos being driven by the LSIP.

### CASE STUDY

#### **The Cheshire and Warrington Pledge Partnership**

The Cheshire and Warrington Pledge, a collaborative initiative aimed at bridging the gap between education and employment, has showcased impactful outcomes with the active involvement of the Chamber of Commerce. The Pledge Partnership puts employers at the heart of informing and inspiring young people about the career and progression opportunities locally and supporting them to know what skills and qualities employers are looking for.

The aim is to help individuals make informed decisions about gaining qualifications and skills that match the opportunities available locally and build awareness of employers and sectors within our region.

The Cheshire and Warrington Pledge Partnership is a team of people from across the education, commercial, and community sectors. This allows work with every school and college in the region. One prominent example is a partnership between a leading manufacturing firm and a local college, facilitated by the Chamber. Through this collaboration, students gained first-hand exposure to the intricacies of the manufacturing industry, fostering a practical understanding of skills required in the workforce. The Chamber played a pivotal role in orchestrating this partnership, emphasising its commitment to facilitating connections that not only enhance educational experiences but also contribute to the development of a skilled and employable workforce in the region.

For more details on the Pledge, visit <https://cheshireandwarrington.com/growth-and-skills/the-pledge/>

## Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry

*Staffordshire County Council has announced a new 10-year employment and skills strategy, aligning seamlessly with the LSIP, and ensuring a long-term perspective. This strategic collaboration is evidence of our commitment to longevity. Additionally, we are proud to welcome CITB, the Construction Industry Training Board, as a key sponsor and partner. The Chambers play a crucial role, demonstrating engagement with employers, education, and skills—an unprecedented level of involvement.*

**Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry**

*We've closely collaborated with the prison service over the last few months. Prisons offer remarkable training programmes, and some have exceptional facilities. While this may not directly address LSIP challenges, it does tackle the broader issue of workforce shortages. Expanding recruitment from the pool of individuals with criminal records can be a valuable solution. It's surprising that some employers are unaware of programmes like Access to Work or hesitant to hire people from the prison services. Our Positive Pathways contract, working with refugees, has faced similar misconceptions. By broadening our recruitment approach and educating employers about these opportunities, we aim to promote inclusion and tap into diverse talent pools.*

**Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry**

### CASE STUDY

#### **'Recruiting With Conviction' - Unlocking Untapped Talent Through Prison Service Partnerships**

In today's competitive job market, finding qualified and motivated candidates is an ongoing challenge for employers. Staffordshire Chamber is spearheading an innovative approach to talent acquisition by tapping into an often-overlooked pool of potential employees: individuals within the prison system. This case study explores how leveraging partnerships with Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMP) through the New Futures, New Network (a specialist part of the prison service with a remit to broker partnership between prisons and employers) can provide access to a unique talent pool, contributing to workforce diversity and addressing skill shortages.

There was a comprehensive presentation to the Chamber's HR Forum outlining the potential benefits of recruiting from the prison population. To gain a deeper understanding, stakeholders embarked on a tour of the training facilities within local prisons.

Recruiting from the prison system goes beyond just filling employment gaps. It is a holistic approach to talent development that involves understanding and overcoming personal barriers. By delving into the backgrounds of individuals, employers can provide tailored support, creating sustainable positions and fostering a sense of belonging. This approach not only benefits the individuals involved but also contributes to the overall stability and success of the workforce.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **Unlocking Insights for Skills Improvement in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire**

Targeting companies traditionally deemed harder to reach due to their limited engagement in the skills system, we leveraged various methods, including semi-structured interviews, to capture diverse perspectives. Collaboration with trade-specific bodies such as CITB facilitated a deeper understanding of priority sector businesses. Moreover, we fostered a collaborative environment among Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), and Independent Training Provider (ITP) institutes within the region, strengthening our engagement strategy. An important outcome of phase 1 was the creation of the Insights dashboard, a versatile tool offering valuable data on current skills shortages, career opportunities, and required skills. This dynamic dashboard is poised to evolve, providing a visual representation of pathways for career progression in the ever-evolving job market.

To explore the Insights dashboard and its implications for skill enhancement, visit [Insight Unlocked | Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire CISO](#).

## Sussex Chambers of Commerce

*It was truly an inclusive partnership, and with our improvement framework, themes of innovation and talent are led in collaboration with FE Sussex (FE Colleges). Instead of a unilateral approach, it's about how our core partners collectively drive and implement these actions.*

**Sussex Chambers of Commerce**

### CASE STUDIES

#### **A Technological Solution for Talent Seeking**

FE Sussex is planning the development of a mobile app, with LSIF funding, to support employers to fill vacancies more efficiently with the candidates that have the skills and attributes they need. The app will also help jobseekers find the right job for them at their stage of career. This project responds to a several recommendations within the Sussex LSIPs Future Skills Sussex Improvement Framework, particularly within the 'Talent' section of the document.

Jobseekers, including college and university leavers, job- and career-changers, and people who are currently unemployed, will upload a basic CV to the app. At the same time, job vacancies, apprenticeships, part-time opportunities, and work experience in Sussex will be uploaded to the app (either directly or from recruitment websites via an AI data sweep). An algorithm will match the most suitable applicants to the vacancies.

FE Sussex will pilot the app within sectors with the highest number of vacancies initially and, if successful, rolled out to all seven key sectors identified by the within Sussex LSIF (Health and Social Care; Construction; Engineering & Manufacturing, Creative & Cultural; Digital; Land-based; Visitor & Hospitality).

To ensure that the app engages young jobseekers on college courses, it is likely to also host college timetables and signpost to useful resources, such as Careers East Sussex. The app will also provide destination data to colleges, who are required to report to the Department for Education on the jobs and further education to which their learners have progressed after the end of their courses.

#### **Designing an Improvement Framework for Skills to Promote Collaboration**

The Chamber, FE Sussex, and the Sussex Learning Network jointly initiated a comprehensive piece of work to create the 'Future Skills' Improvement Framework. This

document, functioning as a partnership framework, outlines the working dynamics among the core partners, including colleges, ITPs, and universities.

Through surveys and in-depth conversations, the collaborators gathered insights on how to foster effective collaboration. The document delves into the nuances of partnership, addressing key aspects such as working principles, governance alignment, support requirements, opportunities, threats, and tailored actions for each theme.

The iterative process involved extensive engagement with stakeholders, including college principals, during intensive action planning sessions. This approach ensured that the resulting improvement framework was not a unilateral action plan but a collective effort that incorporated findings, challenges, and solutions from diverse perspectives.

This inclusive approach garnered widespread buy-in, fostering commitment and willingness among partners. The ongoing work includes strategic mapping of actions within the framework, focusing on intelligence gathering, data sharing protocols, and aligning skills conversations across various stakeholders to drive progress reports and mutual benefit.



## Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group

*In construction, we're fostering robust connections with stakeholders like Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and the Electrical Contractors Association (ECA). ECA members actively participate in LSIPs, ensuring their voice is heard. As we move forward, these industry partnerships remain integral, with ongoing collaboration through the Workforce Development Partnerships.*

**Thames Valley Chambers of Commerce Group**

*Through the LSIPs, we have developed a Higher Technical Qualification, apprenticeships, two Skills Boot Camps, and an Access to HE Diploma in computing. Additionally, we have introduced T-levels and a couple of short online courses, one in coding and one in cybersecurity. All of these initiatives directly link to the LSIP.*

**Large FE Provider, Berkshire & Oxfordshire LSIPs**

*I think the LSIP is taking a different view. It is looking at people, how they fit roles and workforce development. I think it is really powerful.*

**Senior Manager of an NHS Trust, Berkshire & Oxfordshire LSIPs**

## CASE STUDIES

### Responding to the Screen Sector

The Thames Valley Chamber have developed and launched a series of sector-based Workforce Development Partnerships. These group are driven by identified Employer Champions and are intended to bring educators and employers closer together to collaborate with purpose. There are Partnerships for the Screen Sector, Logistics, Care, Construction & Built Environment, Hospitality and Health & Life Sciences. The Partnerships are committed to addressing skills needs through initiatives such as role mapping, promoting the sectors, and enhancing the alignment of education and training with local employer requirements.

A small business owner who was interviewed explained that she got involved with the Screen Sector WDP which partnered with the British Film Institute and a Lottery Funded Film Hub in Berkshire. With the LSIP's support, training providers have been able to initiate meetings and implement curricula effectively. The immediate benefit has been evident in the



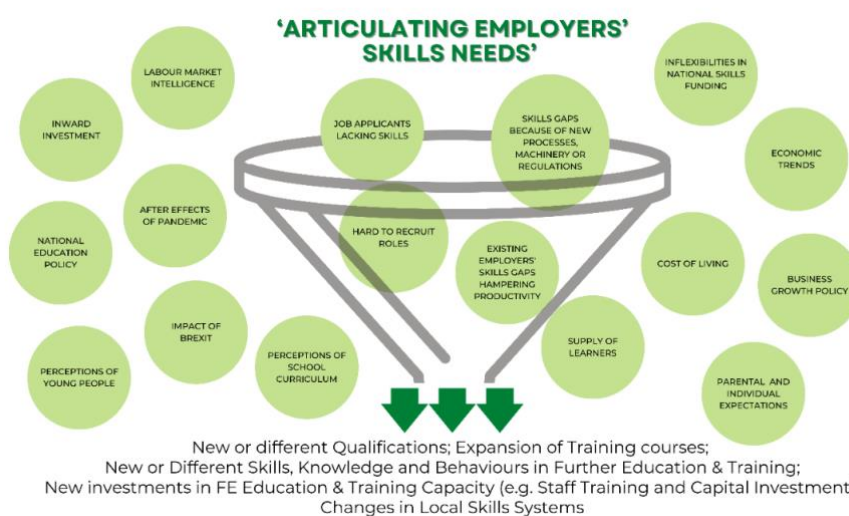
ability of training providers to make things happen swiftly, addressing the half of the problem that involves connecting with the right businesses.

‘The LSIP’s model in Berkshire for my sector is proving to be highly effective. Embedded within a business intermediary like the Chambers, it provides a unique and neutral space – a professional business environment that the creative industry sector lacked. This model has attracted both longstanding and new members, creating a dynamic community. It is particularly beneficial in Berkshire, as the six different authority areas are seamlessly connected through a single touchpoint, fostering cross-boundary discussions. Already, we see tangible success in connecting local employers with training providers, facilitating potential employee recruitment, and aiding curriculum implementation. The Windsor Forest Colleges Group and Cube Studios, with support from an SME intermediary like us, are exemplifying this collaborative approach.’

### Illustrating How to Initiate Meaningful Discussions

Our approach is people-based. We have prioritised conversations and dialogue as our primary and most important source of information. Engaging employers in conversations about skills development is not easy. It is all too easy to become despondent and overwhelmed with the difficulties of recruitment. We have developed the ‘LSIP Hopper’ to illustrate our methodology and the complexities of discussing skills. There are a myriad of issues, interdependencies, and considerations- bouncing balls if you will-, many of which are not in the gift of the Plan to solve. However, all these issues must be heard and evaluated before the important details are bounced directly into the LSIP Plans and Actions.

#### ‘LSIP Hopper’





## THE CHAMBER-LED LSIPS

### 8. APPENDIX 1 LIST OF CHAMBER-LED PUBLISHED LSIPS

The 17 Chambers who participated in this report are highlighted in blue.

REGION	AREA	ERB	LOCATIONS COVERED	LINK TO LSIP
North East	North of Tyne	North East England Chamber of Commerce	Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland, North Tyneside	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North East	Tees Valley	North East Chamber of Commerce	Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Stockton on Tees	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North West	Cheshire and Warrington	South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Warrington	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North West	Cumbria	Cumbria Chamber of Commerce	Cumbria	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North West	Greater Manchester	Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce	Greater Manchester Combined Authority	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North West	Lancashire	North & Western Lancashire Chamber of Commerce	Blackburn and Darwen, Blackpool, Lancashire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
North West	Liverpool City Region	Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce	Liverpool City Region	<a href="#">Click here</a>
Yorkshire and the Humber	Hull and East Yorkshire	Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce	East Riding of Yorkshire, Kingston upon Hull	<a href="#">Click here</a>
Yorkshire and the Humber	South Yorkshire	Doncaster Chamber of Commerce	South Yorkshire Combined Authority	<a href="#">Click here</a>

Yorkshire and the Humber	West Yorkshire	West & North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce	West Yorkshire Combined Authority	<a href="#">Click here</a>
Yorkshire and the Humber	York and North Yorkshire	West & North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce	North Yorkshire, York	<a href="#">Click here</a>
East Midlands	Leicester and Leicestershire	East Midlands Chamber of Commerce	Leicester and Leicestershire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
East Midlands	South-East Midlands	Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce (incorporating Milton Keynes Chamber)	Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes, North Northamptonshire, West Northamptonshire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
West Midlands	Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire	Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry	Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent	<a href="#">Click here</a>
West Midlands	The Marches	Shropshire Chamber of Commerce	Herefordshire, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin	<a href="#">Click here</a>
West Midlands	West Midlands and Warwickshire	Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce	Warwickshire, West Midlands Combined Authority	<a href="#">Click here</a>
West Midlands	Worcestershire	Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce	Worcestershire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
East	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	Cambridgeshire Chambers of Commerce	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority	<a href="#">Click here</a>

East	Essex, Southend-on-Sea, and Thurrock	Essex Chambers of Commerce	Essex, Southend-on-Sea, and Thurrock	<a href="#">Click here</a>
East	Hertfordshire	Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce	Hertfordshire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
East	Norfolk and Suffolk	Norfolk Chambers of Commerce	Norfolk, Suffolk	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Brighton and Hove, East Sussex, West Sussex	Sussex Chamber of Commerce	Brighton and Hove, East Sussex, West Sussex	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Enterprise M3 LEP (including all of Surrey)	Surrey Chambers of Commerce	Hampshire (excluding the districts of Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, New Forest), Surrey	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Kent and Medway	Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce	Kent, Medway	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Oxfordshire	Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group	Oxfordshire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Solent	Hampshire Chamber of Commerce	Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, and the following districts in Hampshire: Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, New Forest, Southampton	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South East	Thames Valley Berkshire	Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group	Bracknell Forest, Reading, Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South West	Dorset	Dorset Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Dorset	<a href="#">Click here</a>

South West	Heart of the South West	Devon & Somerset Local Skills Improvement Plan	Devon, Plymouth, Somerset, Torbay	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South West	Gloucestershire	Business West Chambers of Commerce	Gloucestershire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South West	Swindon & Wiltshire	Business West Chambers of Commerce	Swindon, Wiltshire	<a href="#">Click here</a>
South West	West of England and North Somerset	Business West Chambers of Commerce	West of England Combined Authority, North Somerset	<a href="#">Click here</a>

## 9. APPENDIX 2 LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<p>Activate Learning</p> <p>Ascough Associates</p> <p>Belmond</p> <p>Business West Chambers of Commerce</p> <p>Capula</p> <p>Cherwell Laboratories</p> <p>Cheshire &amp; Warrington Pledge Partnership</p> <p>Cheshire &amp; Warrington Provider Network</p> <p>Coventry &amp; Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Cumbria Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Doncaster Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Greater Merseyside Learning Providers Federation</p> <p>Hampshire Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Hampshire County Council</p> <p>Herefordshire &amp; Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>HML Architects</p> <p>Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Kidderminster College</p> <p>Kimal</p> <p>Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce</p>	<p>Mid Kent College</p> <p>Morgan Sindell</p> <p>Norfolk Chambers of Commerce</p> <p>North East Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Resource Productions</p> <p>Severn Trent Water</p> <p>Shropshire Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry</p> <p>Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce &amp; Industry</p> <p>Staffordshire Partnership for Employment and Skills</p> <p>Sheffield College</p> <p>Suffolk New College</p> <p>Sussex Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>The Close Care Home</p> <p>The South Hampshire College Group</p> <p>The Spark Group</p> <p>West of England Institute of Technology</p>
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- Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce
- Cumbria Chamber of Commerce
- Doncaster Chamber of Commerce
- Hampshire Chamber of Commerce
- Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce
- Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce
- Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce
- Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
- Liverpool City Region Chambers of Commerce
- Norfolk Chambers of Commerce
- North East Chamber of Commerce
- Shropshire Chamber of Commerce
- South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry
- Suffolk Chamber of Commerce
- Sussex Chamber of Commerce
- Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group