

GET SUSSEX WORKING PLAN

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Executive Summary

Vision:

A dynamic Sussex workforce, enabled by integrated support across employment, health, post-16 education and skills. All residents are empowered to aspire, to develop the skills they need now and for the future; to access meaningful employment that improves lives, addresses inequalities, and enables businesses to thrive.

The Get Sussex Working Plan has been developed in response to the UK Government's Get Britain Working white paper. Its purpose is to reduce economic inactivity and increase long-term employment by taking a whole-system approach to employment, health, post-16 education, and skills support across Sussex. This is a live and evolving plan, to be delivered and reviewed over the coming decade.

Sussex is located in the South-East of England and is generally assumed to be prosperous, an area with high employment, high skills, high productivity and high pay. However, the reality is a Sussex that faces multiple challenges in relation to work and skills, including:

- high unemployment,
- low employment density and a high proportion of SMEs,
- low wages and low economic activity,
- an ageing workforce,
- inter-generational worklessness,
- low educational attainment,
- high deprivation and
- skills and labour shortages in key industries.

In addition to addressing these and other challenges, such as coastal deprivation and rural access to work and learning, there is a need for solutions that address the specific requirements of different groups of residents.

Our priority groups include:

- unemployed people with multiple complex needs including mental and physical health conditions and disabilities
- young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), including those who are vulnerable, with special educational needs, or disabilities (SEND) or experience of the social care system,
- residents who are aged 50 and over,
- adults with learning disabilities and neurodivergence,
- global majority communities - particularly migrants and refugees,

- parents and unpaid carers and
- adults with low skills and low incomes.

Each group needs tailored approaches to effectively support them into learning and work.

To meet needs and realise the region's full potential, The Plan presents clear, credible, evidence-based ambitions, that will provide a constant during the coming period of change:

Ambition one: Build a skills and employment infrastructure to achieve the Get Sussex Working Plan.

Ambition two: Address needs of diverse resident groups to increase economic activity

Ambition three: Develop a joined-up approach with employers to inclusive workforce development, training and careers progression.

Ambition four: Respond to diverse place-based needs to increase economic activity, health and wellbeing outcomes

Ambition five: Embed careers, employment and skills at the heart of decision-making to facilitate a systems-wide approach

Ambition six: Develop and upskill our workforce to boost employment and growth.

Under each of these ambitions, the GSW Implementation Plan (Section 8) outlines the strategic and aspirational short and medium-term actions that we will undertake to move towards our KPIs (Section 7).

Sussex's abundant natural assets, historic towns, villages, cities, rural areas and protected landscapes such as the South Downs National Park, make it an attractive place to live and work. However, these protected landscapes and coastal geography boundary restrict development and economic opportunities and create challenges for transport and digital connectivity, particularly in remote and rural areas.

The Sussex economy is broad and varied, with a diverse polycentric nature and presents with a mix of urban, coastal and rural challenges and opportunities. While many coastal and rural communities continue to face long-term productivity issues, there are significant areas of strength across the county. The economy around Gatwick Airport and Crawley in particular, is a major driver of growth, with strong transport links and a concentration of businesses including in the aviation supply and value chains, logistics and advanced manufacturing. In 2024, according to the Centre for Cities Outlook Report 2025 Brighton and Hove had the highest share of new economy (technologically advanced knowledge driven sectors) firms per 10,000 population and Worthing was the fourth most productive city or large town for Growth Value Added in 2022.

Across Sussex, there are important economic hubs and clusters of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in key sectors such as advanced manufacturing and engineering, creative industries, digital technologies, health and life sciences and a growing green economy. Brighton and Hove continues to be a hub for digital and creattech and professional services. The city has the biggest concentration of Games companies outside of London, while areas like Crawley, Burgess Hill, Worthing, Hastings and Horsham support a growing number of tech, engineering and manufacturing firms. Sussex has a strong coastal and cultural visitor economy offer, and a significant land-based sector with strengths in agritech, farming, horticulture and a growing viticulture presence. These clusters are not only vital to the resilience of the local economy but also provide real opportunities for future-focused growth, innovation and high-quality employment.

Anchor institutions (large, established organisations such as local authorities, universities, education providers, hospitals and major employers) are deeply embedded in their local communities, unlikely to relocate and therefore play a pivotal role in supporting social and economic wellbeing. These organisations have a stake in the prosperity of Sussex, not only through providing essential services and employment, but also by fostering partnerships, investing in local development and driving inclusive growth. Their presence enables collaborative approaches that address the region's specific challenges, helping to adapt and expand innovative practices in employment and skills provision across diverse communities.

It is critical that these strengths are recognised and built upon as we collectively shape and deliver the future strategy for growing work and skills capability in Sussex. Adopting a place-based approach which harnesses the potential of our sectoral clusters, addresses longstanding challenges, seizes existing opportunities and ensures inclusive access to skills development via a strong employment and skills infrastructure will be vital.

Significant changes that will affect the skills and employment infrastructure and funding in Sussex are imminent. The Plan covers the period when a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) will be formed for Sussex and Brighton. Powers will be devolved from government to the new authority with an elected mayor from May 2026, including authority over skills and employment support. Future funding such as Adult Skills Fund and Skills Bootcamps, which are key to employment pathways, will be devolved to the MCCA.

In addition, local government reorganisation will see the whole of Sussex made up of unitary Councils by 2028; Job centres and the National Careers Service will integrate to form a new Jobcentre and Careers Service; and it has been proposed to NHS England that the Integrated Care Boards of Surrey and Sussex combine, to deliver on the Government's 10-Year Health Plan and improve outcomes for the populations of Surrey and Sussex.

Some key funds will cease to exist in 2026, such as the UK's Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which currently supports some programmes for young people not education, employment and training (NEET), for unemployed adults who are furthest from the workplace and careers provision. Employment support programmes and funds such as Adult Skills Fund (ASF) and Skills Bootcamps will be devolved to the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) who will need to secure more and longer-term funding to meet employment and skills objectives.

Nationally, the UK Industrial Strategy and Sector Action Plans aim to drive coordinated action across government and with partners at national, sectoral and regional levels to support informed decision-making on labour market and skills policy, helping to align investment, innovation and workforce development to address fragmentation in the skills system and ensure that strategies and policies work together to meet current and future economic needs.

Other national reforms expected to have an impact on the future workforce include changes to the immigration system (Restoring Control over the Immigration System), employment rights (Employment Rights Bill), Education and Skills White Paper (anticipated), Pathways to Work (reforming benefits and support to Get Britain Working) and the Plan for Small and Medium Sized Businesses.

As policy, governance and funding change, Sussex must secure the investment and strategy needed to grow its economy, strengthen its workforce, support residents in finding meaningful jobs and help businesses to access a skilled workforce.

The success of the Get Sussex Working Plan (GSWP) and its six ambitions will depend on:

- Adopting a clear shared strategic vision and dynamic and committed collaboration across a wide range of Sussex stakeholders
- Making effective use of existing financial and infrastructure resources
- Availability of new and additional long-term funding streams to facilitate the delivery of the GSWP Implementation Plan

Government policy and reforms, including housing to business taxes, being delivered and conducive to the delivery of the Get Sussex Working Implementation Plan

1. Introduction and approach

The Get Sussex Working Plan ('The GSWP' or 'The Plan') is a Pan-Sussex response to the Government's Get Britain Working strategy, which aims to reduce economic inactivity and raise national employment levels to 80% via systemic reforms across employment, health and skills sectors. The Get Britain Working white paper identifies six areas for Local Plans to consider:

- Labour market exclusion
- Essential skills and youth support
- Insecure and low-quality work
- Barriers for women carers
- Labour and skills shortages
- Regional and community labour market disparities

The Plan is informed by robust evidence - a comprehensive data review and stakeholder insight. It sets out a focused approach to bring together multi-agency stakeholders to address barriers and seek collaborative opportunities to improve skills and employment outcomes across Sussex. The Plan is designed to support and align with existing Council and Stakeholder resources and strategies in areas such as economic development and skills, education, health and wellbeing, transport and housing infrastructure and social inclusion. While the Plan recognises the interconnected nature of these challenges, it concentrates on levers and interventions within the employment landscape. It should be read alongside wider strategic frameworks to understand the full picture of Sussex priorities and opportunities.

Grounded in the strengths and needs of our communities, it sets out ambitions to reduce inequality and increase opportunity, ensuring that no one is left behind.

1.1 The approach to developing The Plan

The Plan has been collaboratively written by representatives from East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove City Council, to align with Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) and Integrated Care Board (ICB) geographies, in accordance with the Department for Work and Pensions, April 2025 [Guidance for Developing local Get Britain Working plans \(England\) - GOV.UK](#). It has been steered, co-designed and reviewed by a wider Partnership Group comprising Sussex Chamber of Commerce, Public Health and the Department for Work and Pensions DWP. The guidance sets out that The Plan should be signed off by each Local Authority, the Regional DWP lead and the ICB, prior to publication.

The development of The Plan draws on local authority expertise and extensive stakeholder engagement encompassing the health sector (including with the ICB), the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, higher education institutions (HEIs), further

education (FE) and independent training providers (ITPs), employers and careers and employment services. It is supported by a substantial data review of the Sussex-wide geography and consultation with people with lived experience and service users. The Get Sussex Partnership Group has worked together to understand the commonality and nuances across Sussex and to carefully consider how to address existing and future employment and skills needs over the coming decade.

1.2 Methodology

To support the development of this plan, the three local authorities commissioned two key pieces of research to ensure that the ambitions, priorities and proposed implementation plan are evidence led, data-informed and rooted in stakeholder insights and lived experience.

1.2.1 Evidence report - Data mapping and analysis

The Pan-Sussex Labour Market Data Mapping and Analysis Report (Appendix 1) provides an evidence base, drawing primarily on publicly available data, local plans and strategic reports to review employment and skills across the area. While it focuses on quantitative data at district, city, county and regional levels, it recognises the limitations of such data, particularly at smaller geographies, where sample sizes can be inconsistent. Where possible, maps and charts have been used to illustrate more localised trends. The mapping recognises that data is time sensitive for example the report recognises that data about job vacancies is based on postings on job boards, whereas there are significant levels of word-of-mouth recruitment in construction, health, visitor economy and land-based industries in Sussex.

To ensure strategic alignment, The Plan has been informed by relevant strategies, plans and reports including:

- Invest 2035 (The UK's industrial strategy)
- The NHS 10-year plan
- The Get Britain Working white paper
- Keep Britain Working review
- Brighton and Hove Economic Plan, 2024-27
- East Sussex Economic Prosperity Strategy, 2024-2050
- West Sussex Economic Strategy, 2025-2035
- West Sussex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, 2025-2030
- 'Creating healthy and sustainable places' framework for West Sussex
- Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan and associated sector deep dives
- Public Health Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA)
- NHS Sussex Workwell Discovery report, 2025

- DWP reports 'Work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers' July 2025
- Plan for Small and Medium Sized Businesses, July 2025
- Youth Employment UK, Pathways for All: Towards Universal Opportunity for Young People
- Think Work First: The transition from education to work for young disabled people

These reports are not referenced in the Plan itself but are used to inform the supporting Mapping and Analysis report, the findings of which inform the Plan. Whilst overall the key challenges identified in The Plan are relevant to the whole of Sussex to a greater or lesser degree, the county and city level data does not reflect the nuanced situation in districts and boroughs. Whilst The Plan does highlight some areas of difference, the pan-Sussex Labour Market Data Mapping and Analysis report (Appendix 1) accompanying this plan should be referred to for greater detail.

1.2.2 Stakeholder engagement

The Plan draws on a blend of stakeholder insight gathered from across East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove (Appendix 3). Feedback was gathered through group discussions, one-to-one conversations and a widely distributed on-line survey. Engagement questions were aligned with the Get Britain Working White Paper and tailored to the participants' areas of expertise, generating cross-sector insight on workforce and training inclusion, partnership working and effectiveness of current provision and best practice to support the coordination of skills, work and health and wellbeing interventions and strategies. Additionally, individuals with lived experience of barriers to employment and periods of economic inactivity, shared personal experiences and views through facilitated sessions with trusted partner organisations.

In total, over 200 stakeholders were included in the consultations (Appendix 2) including:

- 11 stakeholder workshop consultations
- 28 stakeholder interviews
- 68 user voice inputs from young people and adults with lived experience via interviews and focus groups
- 135 online survey responses.

The stakeholder engagement was conducted in coordination with the three Local Authorities, through a working group comprised of Economy, Employment and Skills leads for each of the Councils, who shaped and led engagement locally. A broad range of partners and stakeholders contributed to the process – including employers, local authority services,

the DWP, VCSE organisations, housing providers, education providers (further education, higher education, independent training providers), public health, NHS representatives and the Integrated Care Board. Broad engagement ensured that The Plan captures both place-specific and system-level insights to inform future planning.

The stakeholder insights were further informed by recent Connected Futures Hastings peer-to-peer research, funded by the Youth Futures Foundation. Young researchers with lived experience gathered feedback from 450 young people, 91 employers and 84 stakeholders in Hastings and East Sussex, to identify systemic barriers to young people's employment, social mobility and economic prosperity, much of which is relevant to the experience of young people across Sussex.

Some strong themes emerged from stakeholder engagement including:

- The need for improved careers advice, employer engagement and structured transitions for young people, NEETs, care leavers, and SEND cohorts.
- expansion of supported internships, mentoring and youth hubs to provide support and progression pathways.
- The alignment of skills with infrastructure, regeneration and future skills/green economy opportunities.
- An increased emphasis on community-responsive and person-centred approaches to employment support.
- A greater focus on sustainable funding and joined-up delivery, avoiding fragmented or short-term projects.
- The need for reforms to the benefit system

These are explored further and reflected in the Implementation Plan.

Membership of the Get Sussex Working Partnership Group

Brighton and Hove City Council, Skills and Employment

DWP Regional and Local Area Teams

East Sussex County Council, Employability and Skills Strategy Team

Public Health Departments for Brighton and Hove City Council, East Sussex County Council and West Sussex County Council

Sussex Chamber of Commerce, Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) lead

West Sussex County Council Economic Growth Team

2. The Sussex employment and skills picture

Sussex is a place of contrasts – geographically, economically and demographically diverse and varied. It spans vibrant urban centres, tranquil rural areas and a long and varied coastline with a rich natural and cultural offer, all of which offer unique opportunities and challenges. While Sussex benefits from strong employment clusters many communities face significant labour market challenges. Understanding this complexity and nuance across the county is essential for planning and delivering effective employment and skills interventions that can support inclusive economic growth.

2.1 The Sussex economy and labour market context

Sussex is often viewed as an affluent area, benefiting from proximity to London and being situated in the South-East. Sussex has a diverse, polycentric nature meaning that it does not fit comfortably into a neat economic geography. West Sussex has a relatively strong economy with diverse employment sectors including aviation and manufacturing with Crawley and Worthing performing particularly well; Brighton & Hove is heavily service sector based with a strong creative and digital cluster and benefits from two large universities and a well-qualified resident population. In contrast, East Sussex has too few jobs for its working-age population, with an economy that is generally reliant on lower and intermediate level service sector, public and health and social care sector jobs.

The overall perception of prosperity masks deep disparities. Much of East Sussex and many coastal towns across Sussex face economic underperformance, characterised by lower job density, weak infrastructure and reliance on low-paid, seasonal industries such as tourism, retail and social care. These sectors often lack clear progression routes, leading to insecure jobs and underemployment and limiting long-term earnings potential.

The region has high levels of self-employment, often driven by necessity or lifestyle choice, which although reflects entrepreneurial spirit, does not consistently translate into business growth or job creation.

Technological change is affecting Sussex. The rise of automation and AI is altering job roles and driving demand for higher-level creative, digital and analytical skills. Hybrid and remote working models are expanding, creating new opportunities for innovation and flexibility, including opportunities to access higher paid roles in other parts of the country or even internationally while living in Sussex, but hybrid working can also exclude and amplify digital exclusion for some. Economic growth plans and strategies across Sussex seek to boost productivity and growth, including through key sectors with potential for growth, increased high value employment, and inward investment.

Nationally, government funded employment support programmes, for example Connect to Work, are evolving to address economic inactivity and reduce ill-health-related

worklessness, aiming to support more people into sustainable jobs. These reforms provide opportunities for Sussex to develop locally tailored and more holistic approaches to employment support and inclusive workplaces, that address current and future workforce needs and residents' experiences. Many residents have an immediate financial need to work and earn; there is also a need to develop pathways to career progression.

2.2 Demographics and geographic disparities

Sussex has a total population of 1.74 million. Of these, 60.5% are of working age, lower than the national average (62.9%). This is particularly acute in East Sussex (57.2%) and West Sussex (59.2%), compared to Brighton & Hove (71.2%), which has a younger population, influenced in part by its student demographic.

Dependency ratios, the proportion of dependents (young or elderly) to working-age people, are increasing, particularly in Rother District (0.89) and Arun District (0.74), due to ageing populations. By 2035, Sussex's post-working-age population is projected to grow by over 94,000 (23%), while the working-age cohort is expected to decline. This demographic imbalance presents significant risks to labour supply. It also increases pressure on services for older people and is likely to increase the volume of vacancies in the health and social care sector.

There are significant geographic differences in job availability across Sussex. Crawley and Chichester are among the few areas with more jobs than working-age residents, while East Sussex and Brighton and Hove have 0.72 and 0.88 jobs per adult, respectively. Many rural areas and coastal towns face transport challenges, which affect employment prospects. Housing affordability remains a major issue, with median prices exceeding ten times median earnings in all parts of Sussex. Deprivation in Sussex is concentrated along the coastal strip, with Hastings ranking the 13th most deprived local authority in England and many of its neighbourhoods among the most deprived 10% nationally. Parts of Eastbourne, Newhaven, Bognor Regis, Littlehampton, Crawley and wards in Brighton & Hove also face significant deprivation, marked by high unemployment, poor health outcomes, low educational attainment and limited progression. These areas struggle with entrenched socio-economic challenges, limited access to higher education (particularly in East Sussex where there are no Higher Education Institutions) and economies reliant on low-paid, seasonal work.

East and West Sussex both feature significant rural areas, as well as urban hubs and the coastal strip. This rural character presents distinct challenges and opportunities for employment and skills development. Transport and digital connectivity impacting access to essential services, training, job centres and employment support can restrict opportunities for both residents and employers and create disparities between communities. However, rural locations offer growth opportunities in sectors such as green tourism, agritech,

advanced manufacturing and viticulture, which can boost local employment, when backed by targeted support.

2.3 Labour supply

The mismatch between labour supply and labour demand is a central issue across Sussex. On the supply side, an ageing population, low qualification levels in some geographies, health inequalities and caring responsibilities reduce the number of people available and able to work. The region has high levels of self-employment. For many, part-time or flexible work is essential to support health and caring commitments but for many it can be illusive and low-paid.

2.4 Disability and health

Disability and health are critical barriers to labour market participation in Sussex. Over 311,000 residents, or 18.2% of the population, live with a disability that limits their daily activities, 60% to some extent and 40% significantly. This is above both the South-East average (16.1%) and the national average (17.3%).

In Sussex, 50% of people with long-term mental health conditions are employed, similar to the South-East average (50.9%) and above the national rate (46.4%). Musculoskeletal and mental health conditions are the leading causes of work absence in Sussex, creating a cycle of poor health, limited job access and reduced productivity.

Within this picture, people with learning disabilities are especially underrepresented in the labour market. In West Sussex, just 2.8% of adults with learning disabilities are in paid employment, below the average in Sussex of 5.4% and close to the lowest figure nationally (1.1%). East Sussex performs slightly better, with 5.7% in paid work, above the mean but still far from the maximum (11.8%). In Brighton & Hove, 8.6% of adults with learning disabilities are employed, significantly above the unitary authority average (5.4%) but still some way off the highest national figure (21.1%). These figures highlight persistent inequality in access to work and the need for more tailored pathways into employment for this group and improved representation, leadership opportunities and employer training to foster inclusion and well-being.

Research commissioned by the Office for Equality and Opportunity: Disabled people's employment in the UK: Reviewed academic and other material about disabled peoples lived experience of employment in the UK. It concluded that disabled people continue to encounter significant barriers to work, especially those with learning disabilities. Systemic discrimination, negative employer attitudes and limited career progression contribute to

exclusion. Disclosure of impairments often reduces employability and workplace cultures can undervalue disabled staff.

Further research recently commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions, titled 'Work aspirations and support needs of health and disability customers' (July 2025), surveyed 3,401 individuals receiving health and disability benefits, including Personal Independence Payment, Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit. The findings revealed that nearly half of respondents (49%) felt they would never be able to work again, with the majority being over 50 years old and most anticipating a decline in their health. Only 5% believed they could work immediately with the right support, particularly those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions. Furthermore, 27% felt future employment was possible if their health improved, a sentiment more common among those experiencing mental health conditions. The study also highlighted substantial barriers, such as lengthy waits for healthcare treatment and concerns about losing benefits if attempting work. Despite these challenges, 69% were receptive to support from the DWP, expressing a desire for more tailored assistance, improved skills development and better coordinated services.

2.5 Education, skills and youth employment

Qualification levels are below national averages in both East and West Sussex. Only 52.6% of 19 year-olds in East Sussex and 56.9% in West Sussex achieve Level 3 qualifications, compared to 57.6% nationally and 61.1% in Brighton and Hove. In Hastings qualification levels are particularly low at 36.4% and coastal areas of both counties including Bognor Regis, Littlehampton and Eastbourne fall below or close to 40%.

Across Sussex, there is a significant gap in attainment and achievement at Level 3 between young people who receive Free School Meals (FSM) or have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and their peers. For young people with SEND, Brighton & Hove has the highest gap at 36.5%, above the South-East average of 29.4%. For those receiving Free School Meals (FSM), Brighton & Hove also records a 33.2% gap, compared to 31.7% regionally. In East Sussex, the FSM attainment gap is 25.7%, but even non-FSM learners attain 10% less than Brighton & Hove and 5.5% less than West Sussex. In Hastings in particular, only 36.4% of 19-year-olds achieve a Level 3 qualification, severely limiting their future prospects.

In West Sussex, the SEND attainment gap reaches 41.0% in Worthing and 34.8% in Horsham and Chichester. For FSM students in Mid Sussex, the gap is 35.65%. It is of note that there is a marked gap in attainment in some of the more affluent areas of West Sussex where the attainment gap for young people receiving free school meals and those with SEND are

considerably higher than South-East and national averages highlighting pockets of disadvantage that can be difficult to reach.

Low levels of skills remain a significant barrier to employment progression in parts of Sussex, particularly in coastal and rural areas. In East Sussex, 34.5% of adults are classified as low-skilled, rising to 42.7% in Rother and 40.9% in Hastings. In Crawley, where job demand is high, 35.4% of residents still lack essential qualifications, with a similar figure in Arun (37.1%). Brighton and Hove has a more highly qualified population overall, but data is skewed by the high volume of students and disparities exist across the city.

Lower skills often confine people to low-wage sectors such as care, hospitality and retail, with limited progression opportunities, increasing reliance on Universal Credit to supplement earnings. Skills mismatches are also evident: of Sussex's 221,000 working adults, 29% are in roles demanding higher skills than they currently hold, leaving them vulnerable to automation and other labour market shifts.

The annual national NEET comparator scorecard published by the Department for Education in July 2025 recorded the percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in each area: in Brighton and Hove 5% are NEET, in East Sussex 4.9% and in West Sussex 2.2%. While West Sussex reports a relatively low NEET rate, 9.3% of young people have an 'unknown' destination (compared to 0.9% in East Sussex and 1.7% in Brighton and Hove), which may conceal a higher number of NEET young people within the county.

The data illustrates how the challenges are compounded for vulnerable young people, those who are looked after/in care or have left care, refugees and asylum seekers, carers, with disclosed substance misuse, mental health issues, youth offenders or have been in alternative provision. 40.6 % in Brighton and Hove of this cohort are NEET, 24.7 % in East Sussex, 35.1 % in West Sussex. And for those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or with SEND, often combined with the above vulnerabilities, the figure is 30.1% (combined) in Brighton and Hove, 21.4% for both East Sussex and West Sussex.

There are also notable concentrations of NEET young people, particularly in coastal areas and in certain deprived wards, most significantly in Hastings, where the NEET rate stands at 9.5%. East Sussex and Brighton and Hove were identified in a recent report by Impetus, 'Exploring Compound Disadvantage', as one of the few places in the South of England where disadvantaged young people have a similarly high likelihood of being NEET as in some of the most deprived areas of the North and Midlands.

Rising numbers of NEET young people, limited access to post-16 education and training in parts of Sussex and low attainment hinder long-term labour market prospects and highlights deep-rooted challenges in ensuring equitable educational outcomes and life chances.

2.6 Employment rate and economic inactivity

Between April 2024 and April 2025, claimant unemployment in Sussex rose 11.7% (33,010 to 36,875), outpacing South-East and national averages. West Sussex experienced the sharpest increase at 14.7%, and Brighton & Hove had the highest unemployment rate at 4.4% (East Sussex 3.7%, West Sussex 3.1%). The steepest rise was among people aged 50+, up 17%.

Universal Credit Claimant rates are particularly high in coastal areas: Hastings (3.3%), Adur (3%), Brighton & Hove (2.9%) and Eastbourne (2.6%). Older workers (50+) represent 70% of the increase in Universal Credit claims. Due to wages not covering the cost of living, around 41% of Universal Credit claimants in West Sussex are in employment, higher than the national average of 36%. While Universal Credit claimant numbers have risen, it is important to recognise that part of this increase reflects those that have transitioned from legacy benefits. As such, caution should be exercised when interpreting UC growth figures in isolation, as they may not fully represent new demand."

Resident earnings are below average in East Sussex where workplace earnings are 87% of the national average. The result is a workforce that is often underpaid and reliant on Universal Credit, which is claimed by 2% of Sussex's population, slightly above the regional average of 1.8%.

Benefit data reflects wider health-related worklessness. As of November 2024, 31,807 residents across Sussex were claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA), which supports people whose disability or health condition limits their ability to work. Around half of these claims were linked to mental health issues, with musculoskeletal conditions another leading cause. These trends point to the critical role of health, both physical and mental, in shaping labour market participation.

The Keep Britain Working review identifies several groups disproportionately affected by unemployment and economic inactivity, including young people, over-50s, disabled people, and those with long-term health conditions. It emphasises that tailored, flexible support is needed to address the specific barriers each group faces from skills gaps and lack of experience among younger people, to health-related challenges and employer perceptions for older workers and disabled people.

People who are economically inactive are neither employed nor have they been actively seeking work in the previous four weeks. The main reasons for economic inactivity include being a student, having ill health, providing care or being retired. Economic inactivity, excluding students, stands at 14.9% across Sussex lower than England (16.3%), however higher than the South-East (13.7%); and it is particularly high at 18.9% in East Sussex.

Health-related worklessness is the most common reason for economic inactivity. Just over a quarter of Sussex's economically inactive residents are not participating in the labour market due to long-term sickness, with the highest percentages reported in Chichester (44.2%), Crawley (44.1%) and Rother (38.9%). However, the majority are inactive for other reasons, notably early retirement, which accounts for 17% of all working-age residents, much higher than the regional and national averages. Looking after a family or home accounts for just under 16% of economic inactivity in Sussex, lower than both the South-East and England (both at 19%), though the voluntary or involuntary nature of this remains unclear due to factors such as work-life balance, childcare costs and those with lone parent responsibilities. In Sussex, there are over 42,000 lone parent households with dependent children, accounting for 5.7% of all households. While slightly below the national average (6.9%), areas such as Crawley (7.8%) and Hastings (7.7%) stand out as hotspots.

Sussex also has 145,000 residents providing unpaid care (8.9% of the population), with nearly half supporting someone for 20+ hours per week. The proportion of intensive carers is highest in East Sussex (4.9%).

Sussex has an increasingly ageing population, with many individuals choosing early retirement or relocating to the area after retiring. People aged 50–64 account for over 20% of residents in East and West Sussex. Currently, 34,400 working-age residents in Sussex are inactive due to early retirement, representing 17.2% of all economically inactive individuals, higher than both the national average (11.5%) and regional average (12.8%). National statistics from March–May 2025 indicate that economic inactivity among 50–64-year-olds at 25.9%, more than double the 11.5% rate for 35–49-year-olds. Given Sussex's demographic profile, the local inactivity rate is likely even higher, posing a significant barrier to achieving the national target of 80% employment.

Over the past year, unemployment claims from people aged over 50 rose by 17% in Sussex, with Brighton & Hove recording the highest increase at 20.2%.

A significant number of economically inactive residents in Sussex, 44,200 (22.1%), express a desire to work, a figure that surpasses regional and national rates but the majority of economically inactive individuals do not state a wish to rejoin the workforce; although figures are subject to wide confidence intervals and should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

2.7 Labour Demand

While areas like Crawley and Chichester have more jobs than working-age residents, the job density lags behind in the rest of West Sussex (0.86), in Brighton and Hove (0.88) and in East Sussex (0.72). This underscores a fundamental shortage of local employment opportunities and results in out-commuting and underemployment.

According to Lightcast data, there were 16,231 unique job postings across Sussex in May 2025, marking a substantial decline from the June 2023 peak of 26,341. Despite this overall drop, these remain above pre-pandemic levels and job demand has persisted across key sectors. Between December 2024 and May 2025, the most in-demand occupations across Sussex included teaching assistants (around 19,400 postings) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers (around 7,400 postings), followed closely by roles in cleaning, education, care work and administration. Translator and sales roles also featured prominently in job posting volumes.

At the local level, this wider trend is reflected with varying emphasis. East Sussex recorded 4,215 job postings in May 2025 (down from 6,092 in June 2023 but well above pre-pandemic levels), with top vacancies in teaching assistants (around 3,500) and homecare roles (around 1,800). Other notable sectors included translation services, cleaning, early years, admin, nursing and care work. In West Sussex, there were 11,045 job postings in May 2025 (a significant reduction from a peak in June 2023 of 21,342, but higher than general levels pre-pandemic), with homecare and cleaning leading (around 1,500 each), followed by administration, finance, education, retail, sales, healthcare and translation services. Meanwhile, Brighton and Hove saw 5,713 job postings, (significantly lower than the 16,334 posted in June 2023), with demand highest for sales-related roles and care workers (around 1,600 each), as well as cleaners and teaching assistants (around 1,200 each).

Across Sussex, jobs in tourism, retail and social care make up a significant proportion of employment in some areas but provide limited opportunities for progression into higher-skilled or better-paid roles.

Some residents in Sussex face additional challenges in securing employment including people with a disability or health conditions and those whose first language is not English. While larger employers and public sector bodies could help drive programmes of activity that facilitate truly inclusive recruitment practice, there are relatively few large employers, with most concentrated in around Crawley and Gatwick particularly in the Manor Royal Business District, one of the largest business parks in the South East. A high proportion of businesses in Sussex are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) or microbusinesses, reflective of the national picture, many of whom do not have the in-house human resources

capability to engage in supporting inclusive recruitment interventions or workforce development.

Self-employment is high, which may reflect either lifestyle choices or limited access to traditional employment for some.

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3. Current employment support infrastructure and provision

Like many areas, Sussex benefits from established anchor institutions, including local authorities, universities, education providers, hospitals and major employers such as Gatwick Airport, which play a key role in creating jobs and promoting inclusive employment. Their presence enables collaborative approaches that address the region's specific challenges, helping to adapt and expand innovative practices in employment and skills provision across diverse communities. Their collaboration is essential to support the region's employment and skills.

Further Education, training providers, the three universities, centres of innovation and the new Institute of Technology provide a solid platform for delivering high-level, qualifications, skills and training that match the evolving demands of the local economy. Strong sectoral partnerships, for example through the Sussex LSIP, Skills and Employment East Sussex, the SEND Supported Employment Forum, the Synchronise Network in West Sussex and the ICB's WorkWell Board, facilitate coordinated responses to employment and skills needs. Skills networks and economic growth boards provide further governance to support skills policy across the region.

The following institutions and delivery mechanisms play a key role in the employment and skills agenda:

3.1 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) offers a range of services and support programmes to help jobseekers in the UK find employment. These include:

Job search and training support is offered through Jobcentre Plus, which provides training, CV and interview preparation, Work Experience Placements, and Work Trials. Jobcentre Plus also offers employers recruitment support, help with job descriptions, faster hiring, vacancy promotion, interview space, recruitment events and future recruitment campaign planning.

Financial support includes New Style *Jobseeker's Allowance* (JSA), a fortnightly payment for eligible jobseekers based on National Insurance contributions, and Universal Credit, a monthly payment that can be claimed alongside or instead of JSA depending on income, savings, and circumstances. Both help provide stability while people search for work, undertake training or prepare to re-enter employment.

Programmes like *Sector-Based Work Academies* (SWAPs) combine training, work experience, and guaranteed interviews, while *The Skills Toolkit* offers free online courses in digital, numeracy, and employability skills. Work Coaches give tailored job-search guidance, the *Restart Scheme* is a National Contracted provision, offering additional support for UC

Jobseekers upon reaching six months of unemployment and is also accessible from day one for disadvantaged claimants, and the *Flexible Support Fund* (discretionary) can cover costs related to starting in work such as travel or work tools.

Specialised support includes *Access to Work* grants for people with disabilities or health conditions for equipment, workplace adaptations, or support workers. Jobcentre Plus also offers targeted help for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions, alongside advice for individuals balancing work with caring responsibilities, including guidance on flexible working and childcare. A range of Specialist Advisers offer this support (e.g. Prison Work Coaches, Youth Work Coaches, Family & Community Work coaches, Disability Employment Advisers).

3.2 Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP)

The Pan-Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan (Future Skills Sussex) is funded by the Department for Education and led by the Employer Representative Body (ERB), Sussex Chamber of Commerce. It sets out a framework to tackle regional skills shortages in sectors such as health and care, construction, creative and cultural, engineering and manufacturing, digital, visitor economy and hospitality, and land-based industries. Its goals include helping employers recruit and upskill staff, improving access to training, raising sector profiles and aligning education with business needs. Its priorities are:

- Speak with one voice in Sussex to influence national and local policy using an evidence-based approach.
- Ensure a joined-up approach to meeting the skills needs in Sussex as identified by local businesses
- Supporting employers to recruit, retain and upskill their workforce
- Ensuring a coordinated approach to addressing skills needs identified by local businesses
- Raising awareness and building the profile of key Sussex sectors
- Making training and employment inclusive and accessible.

Oversight is provided by the Future Skills Sussex Board, which brings together employers, colleges, universities, the ITP representative body, local authorities and public agencies (including the DWP), with sector champions representing priority industries and themes.

The next iteration of the LSIP will be published in Summer 2026 which will set the priorities for 2026 to 2029.

3.3 Local Authorities

3.3.1 Brighton and Hove City Council

Brighton & Hove City Council's Skills and Employment Team sits within the Families, Children and Wellbeing Directorate, which also includes Public Health, Education and Health, Commissioning, Communities and Family Health and Protection. Strong collaboration across the directorate reflects the links between health, wellbeing, skills, employment and social cohesion, with close external partnerships across the voluntary sector, post-16 education and independent training providers.

The team supports delivery of the council's vision of a healthy, fair and inclusive city where everyone thrives, aligning with the Council Plan goals.

Skills and Employment covers adult education, Skills Bootcamps, post-16 education, youth employment, supported employment services, skills partnerships and the West Sussex & Brighton and Hove Careers Hub. Work focuses on tackling unemployment, digital exclusion, ESOL provision and sector-specific skills gaps through delivery and procurement of adult learning. Key priorities include:

- Reducing barriers to participation and increasing employment rates
- Meeting employer skills needs to support business growth and resident earning potential
- Coordinating a collaborative citywide response to skills challenges
- Implementing national policy locally, securing funding and supporting Skills England priorities
- Engaging employers to promote inclusive recruitment

Brighton & Hove City Council delivers a range of initiatives that could inform wider practice. Integrating Adult Learning into Jubilee Library, a recognised Library of Sanctuary, has created an inclusive space for learning, supported by outreach such as commissioned films promoting ESOL provision, community participation, and employment services. Public Health's recent Health Counts survey, the largest of its kind in the city, provides valuable data on inequalities to shape targeted interventions. Projects such as Step by Step offer tailored English, maths and digital skills support for residents in supported housing, while an ESOL common assessment framework streamlines learner referrals across providers. The award-winning Youth Employment Hub, delivered with the DWP, offers a safe and supportive environment for unemployed young people, and from autumn 2025 the Connect to Work programme will provide sustained employment support for 1,500 residents over the next five years.

3.3.2 East Sussex County Council

East Sussex County Council's Employment and Skills Team sits within the Education and Economy directorates and works collectively across the county council through the Corporate Employment and Skills board (HR, procurement, property, Adult Social Care &

Health) delivering the council's core priorities to drive sustainable economic growth, maximise resources through obtaining external funds and helping people help themselves. The aim of the team is to ensure that local people have access to well-paid, high-quality employment; and that employers are able to address critical skills gaps in order that their businesses are able to grow.

The team facilitates the Skills and Employment East Sussex (SEES) Board established in 2015, a multi-agency partnership including FE, HE, ICB, DWP, HMPS, independent training providers, VCSE organisations, employers, District and Borough councils and the National Careers Service.

SEES works to six shared priorities, with business led Sector Task Groups developing new initiatives, curricula and careers campaigns. Three specialist groups - Apprenticeships East Sussex, ESTAR Employability Forum, Adult Learning Network - focus on apprenticeships and technical education, employment support and adult provision.

The Employment and Skills Team delivers work experience, NEET prevention, a Careers Hub, adult learning (Skills Bootcamps, ASF), Apprenticeship Levy transfer and employment support programmes, managing large-scale projects like Connect to Work through commissioning of local VCSE place-based delivery and small sector specific projects via task groups. The Team works closely with colleagues to address priorities identified by the Supported Employment Forum and deliver on Internships Work funding.

The County Council commissions the East Sussex *Youth Employability Service* (YES) to provide personalised careers guidance and support for young people aged 16-18 who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET.

East Sussex County Council leverages social value via its commissioning processes, encouraging suppliers to offer vacancies, placements, apprenticeships and other opportunities for local people.

Community Learning is delivered by a countywide library network offering job search help, CV support, and free digital skills coaching from volunteers.

The Employment and Skills Team delivers a range of targeted skills and employment programmes with potential for wider application, pan-Sussex.

- The *Skills and Employment East Sussex* board and task groups provide a robust multi-agency model able to respond quickly and actively to changing employment and skills policy and employer needs.
- The *Transform Service* enables SMEs to access apprenticeships, skills training and workforce development support, including financial incentives, such as ESCC's apprenticeship levy transfer to fund apprenticeship training.

- Initiatives such as *Moving on Up* and *Level Up* provide personalised guidance, training, and employer-led experiences for unemployed residents, including for adults who are low-income, housing-insecure, or NEET young people aged 16–24, helping to improve confidence, employability and access to sustainable work.
- The *Homeless Prevention Employment Service* works with those at risk of homelessness via local housing teams to improve financial stability.
- *Support into Work* offers bespoke employment support for refugees and migrants, from CV preparation to qualification translation.
- The *Careers Hub* strengthens links between education and employers, coordinating initiatives like careers fairs, Open Doors, and Industry Champions.
- *Steps to Success* is a NEET prevention programme providing 1:1 careers coaching and work experience for young people in years 10 and 11 who are at risk of becoming NEET, with a focus on those facing multiple barriers to progression.
- Resources such as the *Careers East Sussex* website offers information and signposting about skills and jobs for residents and businesses, and a common application system for year 11s applying for post-16 courses.

3.3.3 West Sussex County Council

West Sussex County Council has a diverse skills offer embedded across council teams and services. The Economy Team leads on skills initiatives and supports the West Sussex Economic Growth Board, which oversees the West Sussex Economic Growth Strategy (2025–2035) aiming to ensure a dynamic, skilled workforce. This includes developing training for growth sectors and helping residents access employment.

The council delivers *Connect to Work* and the *Internal Skills Reset* – a cross-council strategy aligning skills development to foster a demand-led system supporting inclusive economic growth. Close partnership with District and Borough Councils includes joint engagement and funding, notably for the *West Sussex Careers Hub*. UKSPF-funded programmes support young people and older adults into employment.

The *Adult Learning Team* delivers a broad service via a devolved adult skills budget, including ESOL, ‘Routes into’ courses for priority sectors and a wide Skills Bootcamps offer co-designed with business and education to meet local skills gaps. The Library Service runs a countywide network offering job search and CV support, plus digital skills training via Library Digital Volunteers.

The *Learning and Development Team* promotes career tasters and apprenticeships, including levy transfer to SMEs and partners with Jobcentre Plus to boost council workforce diversity. Employment support is delivered through *Work Aid* and *Workability* supported employment,

the *Your Space* youth hub, Careers Service for NEET youth, care leaver support and refugee employment services. Supported employment will expand with *Connect to Work*.

The council's social value offer creates opportunities for the Careers Hub, including work experience and school engagement, with plans to grow further.

West Sussex County Council delivers approaches that could be scaled across Sussex.

- *The Internal Skills Reset* strategy promotes cross-council collaboration to develop a demand-led, inclusive skills system
- The Adult Learning Team's co-designed *Skills Bootcamps*, '*Routes into*' programmes and *Adult Skills Fund* provision address local skills gaps and widen access to work.
- *Community Learning*, including ESOL and sector-specific training, is supported by a countywide library network offering job search help, CV support, and free digital skills coaching from volunteers.
- *Apprenticeship levy transfers to SMEs* and targeted recruitment initiatives with Jobcentre Plus help increase workforce diversity, while supported employment programmes
- *The Connect to Work service* provides comprehensive support for residents facing barriers to work.
- Embedding *social value* in commissioning creates tangible Careers Hub opportunities, linking procurement to community benefits and employer engagement.

3.3.4 District and Borough Councils

The District and Borough Councils engage with skills and employment in different ways.

Where Districts and Boroughs are more actively involved in skills and employment work this is often linked to planning and development, leveraging Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and social value to support local job creation and learning opportunities or to community hubs and partnerships.

In East Sussex, the Districts and Boroughs allocated a share of their UKSPF funding to ESCC to use for county-wide employment support initiatives; they engage in collaborative skills and employment activity through Skills and Employment East Sussex. In East Sussex, the District and Boroughs have allocated a portion of their UKSPF to enable ESCC's Employment and Skills team to commission the *Moving on Up* and *Level Up* programmes, providing personalised guidance, training, and employer-led experiences for those furthest from the labour market – adults who are low-income, in insecure housing, or are NEET young people

aged 16–24. The programmes have provided an importance stepping stone to employment by helping to improve confidence, employability and access to sustainable work.

The Districts and Boroughs have used UKSPF funding to deliver a range of commissioned and in-house careers and employment programmes. In West Sussex, this has included funding the WSCC Careers Service to deliver NEET support, in-house delivery of employment programmes for adults with barriers to employment (e.g. Choose Work in Chichester, Journey to Work in Arun and Employ Crawley) and commissioned specialist provision for older workers in Horsham. They are also joint funders of the West Sussex Careers Hub. In West Sussex, the District and Borough authorities will be instrumental to the delivery of local, place-based, generalist Supported Employment for Connect to Work.

3.4 National Careers Service (NCS)

The National Careers Service (NCS) offer information, advice and guidance appointments to individuals as well as sector focused group sessions. In Sussex, CXK holds the main contract, offering services in East Sussex and, and through a sub-contract with the Education and Development Trust, in Brighton and Hove and West Sussex. The NCS will be merged with Jobcentre Plus to create a *Jobcentres and Careers Service*, with DWP pilots underway in England to inform future planning.

3.5 Post-16 education and training providers

Post-16 education in Sussex is delivered through a rich network of FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, ITPs and HEIs, offering academic, technical and vocational pathways such as higher level apprenticeships to support progression into employment and further study with the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, offering adults the opportunity to access this higher level provision as careers changers or for the first time. These organisations collaborate through groups like FE Sussex, Sussex Council of Training Providers (SCTP), the Sussex Learning Network (SLN) and SES Sector task groups to drive and shape employment and skills strategy and respond to employer need.

FE institutions deliver technical education including apprenticeships and T-Levels, adult education, Skills Bootcamps, NEET and employability programmes, supported internships and bespoke courses for adults tailored to support employment pathways and address local skills gaps.

The new Sussex and Surrey Institute of Technology (IoT) brings together FE and HEI providers with employers to deliver high-quality technical education in priority sectors such as digital, engineering and sustainable technologies, helping to address local skills gaps and drive economic growth across the region.

ITPs play a key role in the skills system, delivering specialist employability and skills programmes that help people enter work, reach their potential, and contribute to the local economy. They deliver a wide range of government-funded schemes, for example, Restart, Shared Prosperity Fund, Skills Bootcamps, NEET and Pre-employment programmes, Adult Education, Study programmes, Apprenticeships, Supported Internships and the National Careers Service. ITPs also design bespoke vocational provision to address locally identified skills needs.

3.6 Public Health (within the local authorities)

Public Health directorates in all three authorities play a part in commissioning programmes relating to employment.

East Sussex County Council Public Health commissions employability and skills initiatives with a focus on underrepresented groups. The *ESTAR employability* programme provides tailored support for vulnerable and homeless adults, with Employability Brokers helping residents at risk of homelessness, into work. *Changing Futures* expands trauma-informed training across housing, health and care and the *Wellbeing at Work* accreditation scheme helps employers create supportive, healthy and productive workplaces. *Aspirations* inspires Hastings primary school pupils to explore careers in health and care, engaging peers, parents and teachers through interactive sessions with local professionals.

West Sussex County Council Public Health commissions schemes and promotes employment within other services. Commissioned community drug and alcohol treatment services delivered by *Change Grow Live (CGL)* offer *aftercare services* which includes supporting employment, training and education. *Individual Placement and Support (IPS)* employment support is also commissioned as part of CGL service. This is a 'work first' intervention designed to support people into jobs that they want to do regardless of their stage on their recovery journey. In addition, Turning Tides is commissioned to deliver *accommodation-based support for people on their recovery journey* from high-risk substance use with clients supported to gain employment whilst within this service. West Sussex County Council Public Health contributes to the commissioning of the *Changing Futures* Programme which expands trauma-informed training across housing, health and care.

Commissioned services such as Family Nurse Partnership and Citizens Advice may also support in their interactions with individuals to get to a better place in their lives and be able to work. West Sussex County Council seeks to promote social value within its commissioned services, for instance through encouraging employment of staff who live in the county and an apprenticeship offer in some cases. **Wellbeing programmes** provide support to SME workplaces offering advice and support to keep people of working age well. The **Making**

Every Contact Count programme supports local workplaces with training to encourage behaviour change. An **inclusive approach to recruitment** has been fully embraced in West Sussex including the development of Public Health Apprenticeships as a career entry point, as well as providing information, advice and guidance for careers in Public Health for local people.

Brighton and Hove City Council Public Health commission Individual Placement and Support (IPS). IPS is recovery-oriented, focusing on competitive employment as a key step toward independence, improved wellbeing, and long-term social inclusion. IPS helps people with health conditions, such as alcohol or drug dependence, enter and sustain paid employment, delivered locally by *Change Grow Live (CGL)*. IPS prioritises rapid job search over lengthy training, matching individuals with roles aligned to their interests and strengths. Specialist employment advisors work closely with treatment teams to integrate support at all stages of the employment journey. A personalised coaching service *EVOLVE* is also commissioned from *YMCA Brighton* for people in drug and alcohol treatment or residential rehab, often in partnership with IPS. The up to 12-week programme offers one to one support to overcome barriers and move toward recovery, independence, and to progress into work, learning, or volunteering. Public Health support the health and wellbeing for all through a workplace wellbeing offer for city employers, Brighton and Hove city council teams and schools.

Across Sussex Public Health invests in system-wide workforce development, providing a vibrant learning environment through Foundation Year 2 doctor placements, public health registrars, apprenticeships and technical training, and other staff development opportunities.

3.7 The Integrated Care Board (ICB)

The local ICB, serves as the statutory body responsible for planning and funding of local NHS services to address hospital and community health needs. Informed by NHS transformation, reforms to ICBs were announced in March 2025 which strengthen their role in the employment and skills arena by making them more central to work, health and skills integration, working collaboratively with local authorities and mayoral combined authorities.

Currently, NHS Sussex commissions employment related provision supporting those who are economically inactive or at risk of losing employment due to their mental or physical health. These include:

- *Individual Placement and Support in Employment (IPSE)*: Delivered by Southdown (VCSE) across Sussex, this programme helps people with severe mental health conditions secure and maintain paid employment through personalised, one-to-one support integrated with local mental health services. Partners include NHS Sussex, local authorities, employers and employment specialists.

- *Local Workwell Pilots*: Funded by small grants of £12,000 will pilot place-based initiatives in Crawley, Brighton and Hastings for individuals with specific health needs, such as musculoskeletal or mental health conditions.
- *Integrated Community Teams (ICTs)* are being established in all local areas in Sussex, bringing together health, social care, and community services to make services easier to access, better coordinated, more proactive and more tailored to community needs. Over time, it is anticipated that services like community nursing, mental health, primary care, social work, voluntary support and housing will be brought into ICTs to provide consistent and comprehensive care locally. ICTs have the potential to identify and refer people into appropriate employment support provision at a local level and to offer a 'no wrong door' approach for referrals from employment support programmes for wider health and wellbeing support.

The ICB works with the Primary Care Network, Social Prescribers, Allied Professionals (Occupational and Physio Therapists), GPs and front line (reception staff) to issue 'Fit Notes' and to hold Fit Note conversations with patients, providing an opportunity to refer those at risk of becoming unemployed into employment support programmes.

The new WorkWell Discovery Report outlines steps that the NHS can take to support the skills and employment agenda in Sussex through integrated partnership approaches.

3.8 The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCSE)

Sussex boasts a plethora of VCSE organisations who are key to place-based delivery of employment support. Most are strongly embedded into local communities and are trusted by and able to access the priority groups identified in The Plan. Many have specialist knowledge about key cohorts (e.g. neurodivergence, NEET, SEND, homeless, long-term unemployed) and highly trained staff (e.g. Employment Specialists, Careers and Wellbeing Advisers).

They deliver a range of programmes from Supported Internships, Connect to Work, employment support, 'first steps' and confidence building schemes for those who are furthest from the workplace and not yet able to access mainstream offers, wrap-around wellbeing and employment/benefit related advisory services, health and housing support services.

The VCSE is key to the effective implementation of the Get Sussex Working Plan, and going forward, it is important to provide opportunities for small and grass roots organisations to access funding to sustain this vital work at the heart of their communities.

3.9 Employers

Employers in Sussex play an active part in job creation, investing in the training and development of their workforces as well as in inclusive employment. Many offer apprenticeships and technical training and inform the school and college curriculum. Many play a part in raising aspirations through involvement with Careers Hubs and Jobcentres.

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4. Which priority groups will the Get Sussex Working Plan support?

Analysis of the data (Appendix 1) and stakeholder feedback (Appendix 3) has identified a need to focus on key priority groups. Tailoring interventions to meet the needs of these groups will reduce labour market inequalities, change lives and contribute to reaching 80% employment across all areas of Sussex.

Individuals in these priority groups often experience multiple and complex barriers to employment, such as homelessness, time in care, criminal records, disabilities, neurodiversity, health issues, caregiving duties, family unemployment, poverty, low qualifications and poor educational experience. Various infrastructure and support organisations are needed to provide tailored support for individuals in their communities, including local employment support organisations, local authorities, education and training providers, health services and VSCE organisations.

Within the wider bracket of economically inactive people in Sussex, the more specific priority groups identified are:

4.1 Unemployed adults with multiple complex needs:

“Flexible work would help, but no one is offering it in jobs I can do.” - Single parent

“I needed more than a job offer. I needed someone who understood what I’d been through.”
Participant with lived experience

“Until their wider barriers to employment are addressed... a successful progression into work is quite challenging... those support issues come first.” - SCTP representative

The economically inactive and unemployed population in Sussex is diverse and often faces multiple, overlapping barriers to work, including long-term physical and mental health conditions, addiction recovery and extended absences from the workforce. Many individuals become discouraged after repeated unsuccessful job searches, may disengage from mainstream services or find traditional jobcentre programmes impersonal or hard to access.

Long-term worklessness is often linked to health issues, low qualifications and a shortage of flexible, secure jobs. Returning to work is hindered by a lack of accessible training, workplace adjustments and employer caution in the current economic climate.

Service provision is often fragmented, with individuals ‘bouncing’ between multiple agencies without coordinated support or clear plans, especially those with limited digital access or support networks. Geographic challenges further restrict access: rural areas face unreliable public transport, while coastal communities contend with high travel costs, poor infrastructure and limited affordable options.

Government data from 2023 shows that while benefit sanctions may shorten Universal Credit claims, they fail to improve long-term employment or pay. Many sanctioned claimants continue to struggle after exiting benefits, highlighting the urgent need for approaches that go beyond short-term fixes. Therefore, we must co-design person-centred employment pathways with local partners, focusing on building skills, confidence and durable employment opportunities. These pathways must be rooted in the lived experiences of economically inactive and unemployed individuals and designed with a deep understanding of the specific obstacles they face in their towns, villages and communities.

To deliver genuine impact and lasting change, Sussex needs place-based employment initiatives that respond directly to the realities faced by local communities. It is not enough to apply generic solutions, effective support must be tailored to the distinct challenges brought by geography, transport, infrastructure and digital access in rural and coastal areas. Only by recognising and actively responding to these limitations and barriers can we build employment pathways that are truly inclusive and sustainable.

Effective engagement relies on approaches that prioritise active listening, peer-led outreach, mentoring, lived experience panels, one-to-one support and community-based interventions. These methods build trust, foster social connections and gradually increase self-confidence, improving prospects for returning to work and contributing to the local economy.

Local authorities, education, health service providers, jobcentres and community organisations will need to collaborate to create coordinated, place-based solutions that break down systemic barriers, restore hope and offer everyone in Sussex a fair chance to thrive in meaningful and secure work. Through collective action, informed by local insight and partnership, employment support can reach those who need it most and pave the way for a more inclusive future across Sussex.

4.2 Young people

If you're anxious, broke and stuck at home, getting a job feels like climbing a mountain." -
Young person

Young people face significant barriers when entering the workforce, often due to limited qualifications, skills, experience and restricted access to early career opportunities. For those with disrupted backgrounds including experiences in care, seeking asylum, mental health challenges, substance misuse, youth offending, poverty, young carers, interrupted education, alternative provision, SEND, or low educational attainment the journey toward employment can be especially difficult. Many have not received the targeted support necessary to prepare them for work.

Young people who are NEET express experiencing isolation, low confidence and a combination of complex needs that require prolonged and flexible support. They may lack clear information about career paths and have minimal access to professional adult role models. The transition from education to employment is frequently disjointed, with inconsistent careers advice and limited awareness of the labour market, emphasising the need for local work experience and personalised guidance. Young people with SEND face a 'cliff edge' with the sudden loss of support and services as they transition from childhood to adulthood, leaving them unsupported and struggling to navigate new systems for education, health, and social care.

At present, there is insufficient post-16 provision at Entry Level, Levels 1 and 2 for NEET young people, those with SEND, or needing re-engagement and employability support. This gap in foundational education limits further progression in both education and employment, adversely affecting long-term career prospects, earning potential and increasing the risk of economic and social exclusion. Expanding targeted programmes that both support young people before they become NEET as well as to re-engage young people when they have fallen out of education, employment or training will be vital to help build resilience and empower young people to progress and achieve personal and financial independence. However, additional funding is required to provide a suitable range of services at appropriate levels and locations, acknowledging that certain young people face geographical challenges to accessing provision.

The rising number of NEET young people, constrained access to post-16 education and training in parts of Sussex and persistently low attainment rates highlight deep-seated challenges in ensuring equitable educational outcomes and life chances. With many young people concentrated in coastal areas where work is often seasonal and low-paid, or in rural locations where access to transport is limited, holistic place-based interventions are essential for tackling the complex issues they face and supporting meaningful, long-term engagement in employment.

To effectively support young people, especially those who are NEET, have SEND, or come from backgrounds marked by disadvantage, the approach to employment pathways must be more comprehensive and inclusive. This begins with offering local, personalised careers advice, job coaching, mentoring, preparation for adulthood, employability provision,

volunteering, work experience opportunities, alongside sector-specific qualifications and bespoke training, to provide the practical exposure needed to enable progression into employment. This will require investment to increase access to foundational post-16 education at Entry Level, Levels 1 and 2 and the targeted expansion of programmes such as supported internships, traineeships, foundation apprenticeships and tailored employability initiatives.

These pathways are crucial for ensuring that all young people can engage with learning and progress in both education and employment and to help young people develop essential skills, build confidence and acquire the relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours required for successful careers.

Collaboration across education, health, employment services, charities and local authorities is vital to coordinate interventions and respond effectively to the complex, multifaceted needs of young people. Enhancing employer engagement is a key part of this effort, championing inclusive hiring practices, reducing barriers to entry and creating flexible entry routes into the workforce. Sustained mentoring from professional adult role models, as well as the guidance and aspiration-building offered by community mentors, help foster long-term personal and financial independence.

By investing in these place-based interventions, particularly within coastal and rural communities where access is most limited, we can break down persistent cycles of disadvantage and ensure that every young person is equipped to build a meaningful future and contribute to a resilient, diverse workforce.

4.3 Residents aged 50 and over

“There is an emotional toll to job searching, receiving lots of rejections affects your motivation and self-esteem” - Older job seeker

“We need coordinated efforts... not just individual projects, but collaboration among councils, services, charities and employers.” – Older job seeker

Sussex has a growing ageing population, including many individuals over 50 who retire early or relocate to the area in retirement. While many are economically inactive, they bring a wealth of skills, experience and insight. Meaningful employment, volunteering and mentoring draw on their skills and offer valuable opportunities to this cohort not only to support the development of younger workers and local community initiatives, but also to enhance older residents' own wellbeing, confidence and sense of purpose.

Whilst being unemployed is a challenge regardless of age, analysis shows that over 50s face unique barriers to re-entering or staying in the workforce, including health conditions, entrenched age-related bias in recruitment and progression, gaps in digital skills and a lack of flexible employment options. Furthermore, the upward shift in retirement age has widened the vulnerability window for older individuals who are unable to remain in work due to poor health, care responsibilities, or job market barriers. Without adequate support, this cohort faces a heightened risk of poverty, with long-term implications for public health, social care demand, and economic inclusion. These obstacles can undermine confidence, threaten financial stability and increase the risk of social isolation, ultimately reducing participation in the workforce and impacting wellbeing.

Older employees can contribute significantly with valuable knowledge and skills that can enhance team performance and drive innovation. Employers can support this demographic by fostering inclusive workplaces, delivering digital skills training, offering flexible working arrangements and proactively tackling age bias. Furthermore, involving older workers as mentors can accelerate the professional development of younger staff, promote confidence, foster intergenerational learning and build stronger, more resilient organisations.

To address the challenges faced by residents aged 50 and over, it is essential to change the narrative around older workers by highlighting their skills and value to employers. Strategies include broadening recruitment from this cohort by promoting retraining opportunities via lifelong learning entitlements and programmes such as Skills Bootcamps and those funded by the Adult Skills Fund to enable career changes or upskilling. Additionally, engaging early retirees and asset-rich older adults in activities that foster aspiration, mentorship and knowledge sharing can extend their valuable contribution to the community.

The Plan calls for targeted interventions including bespoke, sector-specific training, expanded hybrid and flexible work models and efforts to address workplace bias through active employer engagement. Collaboration among councils, services, charities and employers is key to delivering these solutions effectively and maximising the contribution of older adults. In parallel, harnessing the skills of older adults who choose to leave work early by involving them as mentors or community volunteers offers a meaningful way to support younger generations and strengthen workforce resilience through intergenerational learning.

4.4 Disabled and neurodivergent individuals

“They say they’re inclusive, but when it comes to reasonable adjustments, they either don’t understand or don’t want to.” – Adult job seeker

Disabled and neurodivergent people in Sussex continue to face significant barriers when entering or re-engaging in the workforce, with those who have learning disabilities particularly underrepresented. Key challenges include non-inclusive recruitment processes, limited workplace awareness of neurodiversity and poor access to reasonable adjustments. Stakeholders have observed that the growing reliance on AI and automated recruitment systems is especially detrimental to this group, as screening tools often exclude their applications early in the selection process.

As a result, too many are excluded from meaningful employment which has an impact not only on their financial security, but also on their confidence, social connections and overall wellbeing.

Yet the case for inclusion is strong. When organisations create accessible career pathways and foster genuinely inclusive cultures, the benefits extend far beyond the individual. Businesses gain from diverse perspectives, enhanced problem-solving and greater innovation. Supporting disabled and neurodivergent workers through targeted outreach, flexible roles and proactive adjustments helps unlock potential, build stronger teams and create more resilient, connected communities.

Within this picture, people with learning disabilities are especially underrepresented in the labour market.

Tackling the persistent inequality in access to work for people with disabilities or neurodiversity will require tailored pathways into employment and deeper collaboration between education providers, health services and local authorities, including Integrated Health Teams. Continued NHS reform is also vital, particularly to improve access to mental health care, preventative services and timely treatment. Employers, meanwhile, need support to adopt inclusive hiring practices, embed reasonable adjustments and better understand the value of neurodiversity and difference in their workforce.

Our ambition is that everyone who wants to work should be able to work. By removing both structural and attitudinal barriers and investing in inclusive recruitment practices and workplace cultures, we can work towards making this goal a reality and ensure that all Sussex residents, regardless of their circumstances, have the chance to contribute, thrive and help shape a stronger, fairer economy.

4.5 Global majority communities, migrants and refugees

“Refugees and ESOL learners often have high-level qualifications in [their] home country, but often re-do lower-level training to secure work. If better supported, there’s much potential here.” – Community Learning provider

“Community hubs... that combine ESOL, employment and wellbeing support have delivered strong results.” – Local Authority representative

Global majority communities, migrants and refugees in Sussex often face significant barriers to employment, even when they hold advanced qualifications and extensive professional experience from their countries of origin. Limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with UK recruitment practices and non-recognition of overseas qualifications frequently result in underemployment or unemployment. Visa restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles can further complicate job searches and deter employers from offering opportunities.

Across Sussex, around 136,000 residents (18.1%) identify as being from a global majority background. Diversity is highest in Brighton & Hove, where over 26% of residents are from global majority groups and in Crawley, where the figure is 38.2%. The largest ethnic group is ‘White Other’ (45.7%), which includes sizeable Polish, Irish and other European communities. Language remains a key barrier: in 2021, 14,200 residents reported speaking little or no English, with the highest concentration in Crawley (2,500 people).

Since 2021, Sussex has welcomed over 8,800 refugees and asylum seekers, including 5,400 Ukrainians, 1,800 Afghans and 1,500 from other countries. Many arrive with complex needs such as trauma, disrupted education and unrecognised qualifications, which can further limit access to meaningful employment.

Brighton & Hove and Crawley are particularly diverse. In Brighton & Hove, 20% of residents were born outside the UK and between 2011 and 2021 the proportion of residents from global ethnic majority backgrounds increased by 35%, reaching 26.2% of the population. In Crawley, 38.2% of residents are from global majority groups. While growing ethnic diversity offers opportunities to diversify the workforce, it also highlights the urgent need for sufficient English language provision and employment and skills services that are responsive to newcomers navigating the UK labour market for the first time.

To address these challenges, The Plan considers expanded ESOL provision, culturally informed employment and skills services and stronger employer support for inclusive recruitment. By improving access to training, work experience and fair hiring processes, Sussex can better unlock the skills, experience and perspectives these communities bring, helping to tackle labour shortages while building a more inclusive and dynamic workforce.

4.6 Parents and unpaid carers

“Flexible work would help, but no one is offering it in jobs I can do.” - Single parent

“Lack of childcare places [is] challenging - government provides funding but there are not enough early years staff to provide places.” - Employment support provider

“I’d love to work part-time, but there’s no flexibility for carers.” Over-50 jobseeker and unpaid carer

“When you’re out of the workforce for a few years, your confidence just disappears.” — Former care worker now unemployed

“Until their wider barriers to employment are addressed... a successful progression into work is quite challenging... those support issues come first.” - SCTP representative

Caring responsibilities are an important factor in economic inactivity in Sussex, including caring for children or other individuals. These responsibilities commonly affect women and may result in individuals leaving the labour market when childcare options are unaffordable or when caring duties require significant time. Parents, lone parents and unpaid carers often take career breaks and face limited opportunities for progression and financial challenges. High childcare costs, limited flexible working options and the emotional toll of juggling multiple roles can affect wellbeing and confidence, making returning to the workforce more difficult.

While some employers offer hybrid or flexible arrangements, access remains uneven across sectors. Expanding flexible hours, remote work, job-share schemes and targeted support, such as peer networks and tailored job matching, can help carers rebuild skills, confidence and access meaningful employment. These steps will enable employers and communities to benefit from the resilience, adaptability and valuable life experience carers bring. Improved alignment between employment and care systems, including more flexible jobs, sufficient local childcare and respite services, alongside tailored employment support for parents and carers can create the conditions for people to combine work with caring responsibilities.

4.7 Adults with low skills levels and low incomes

“The lack of clear, trusted advice about how earnings affect benefits leads people to avoid job offers or limit hours with many afraid to connect with agencies, leaving people unconnected from employability options” - Voluntary sector representative

Adults with low skills, who earn low incomes and who are often in insecure employment face persistent barriers to progression that may be compounded by perceived benefit-related disincentives. The precariousness of their work means they are less likely to access training or development opportunities, while apprehension regarding losing benefits and limited knowledge of available options can discourage individuals from upskilling or seeking better-paid roles. Many in this group may experience digital exclusion, prohibiting access to learning, careers information and the capacity to apply for work.

Low qualification levels can often confine people to low wage sectors such as care, hospitality and retail, with limited progression opportunities and increasing reliance on Universal Credit to supplement earnings. Poor literacy, oracy and numeracy skills also impede the successful uptake of learning and work. The mainstream use of AI tools to support job applications also puts this group at a disadvantage due to a lack of digital and AI language model skills.

To address these challenges, The Plan must prioritise tailored interventions such as flexible, locally accessible training linked directly to career advancement, clearer and accessible information on in-work benefits and personalised guidance to support transitions between benefits and employment. Improving the availability and consistency of support with Better Off Calculations (BOC) through training community organisations and stakeholders can help to change perceptions. Strengthening links between employers, training providers and support agencies will help individuals build skills and confidence, enabling sustainable progression out of low-wage, insecure work. The Plan will need to reduce skills gaps through accessible, sector and progression focused adult skills provision.

By fostering strong partnerships across education and community providers, adult skills programmes can be aligned with employer needs, creating more opportunities for adults to upskill and reskill, increasing both employment prospects and earning potential. Targeted, bespoke interventions will need to focus on areas with identified skills gaps and specific learning needs.

5. Identifying the key challenges and opportunities for Sussex

As well as identifying who the Get Sussex Working Plan needs to support, the data mapping and stakeholder feedback enabled the Partnership Group to identify the core challenges to employment faced by the seven priority groups for Sussex:

- Unemployed adults including those with health conditions and disabilities
- Young people
- Residents aged 50 and over
- Adults with learning disabilities and neurodivergence
- Global majority communities, migrants and refugees
- Parents and unpaid carers
- Adults with low skills levels and low incomes

The Implementation Plan addresses the following challenges in order to support Sussex residents towards sustained employment in line with the national 80% employment target.

5.1 Unequal economic activity, universal credit claimants and unemployment across Sussex

What the data says:

Economic inactivity, defined as people aged 16-64 who are not employed and have not actively sought work in the previous four weeks, affects approximately 147,500 people (excluding students) in Sussex, representing 14.9% of the working-age population, higher than the South East average of 13.7%. East Sussex experiences particularly high levels at 18.9%, with coastal wards including Adur District (25.8%), Worthing Borough (18.1%), Hastings and Bexhill in Rother (31.8%) showing especially elevated rates.

The main causes of economic inactivity include long-term health conditions and disabilities (accounting for 25.8% of cases), caring responsibilities (looking after a family, relative or home) predominantly among women and early retirement which represents 18% of economically inactive working-age residents in East Sussex, 20% in West Sussex and 10% in Brighton & Hove.

200,000 economically inactive residents (including students) report that they want to work. This represents a higher proportion than in the South East 18.7% and England 20.5%. 37.5% of economically inactive residents in Brighton & Hove want work compared to 14.9% in East Sussex and 21.2 % in West Sussex.

Universal Credit claimant rates align with these trends. In 2024, Sussex had an average claimant rate of 2%, slightly above the South East's 1.9%. Coastal areas like Hastings (3.3%),

Adur (3%), Brighton & Hove (2.9%), Eastbourne (2.6%), alongside Crawley (2.8%) have higher rates. Hastings particularly has a high 16–24 claimant rate of 7.2%, while Brighton & Hove's highest claimant groups are aged 25–49 and 50–64.

These statistics point to a skills mismatch between local populations and jobs, limited employability support and the pressures of high living and housing costs, amongst other issues. Unemployment in Sussex rose by 11.7% between April 2024 and April 2025, exceeding the 10.3% national rise. West Sussex increased most sharply (14.7%), followed by Brighton & Hove (12.1%). Employment rates vary: Sussex overall is at 77.6%, West Sussex highest at 81.4%, Brighton & Hove at 76.6% and East Sussex lowest at 72.1%. Areas such as Rother (64.7%), Hastings (67.3%) and Adur (68.1%) fall well below South East and England averages. Employment for adults with learning disabilities also varies, with West Sussex at 2.8% , compared to , East Sussex at 5.7% and Brighton & Hove at 8.6%, but some way off the highest national figure of 21.1%.

What stakeholders say:

Stakeholders emphasise that unemployed and economically inactive residents face complex, intersecting barriers including long-term physical and mental health issues, low confidence, caring responsibilities, housing instability, low or no qualifications and digital exclusion. These challenges are amplified for individuals with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), insecure immigration status and those living in deprived rural or coastal areas. Unemployment severely affects financial resilience and self-worth.

“Many clients have complex situations, multiple conditions, health and mental health issues, language barriers, it is hard for people to consider employment on top of managing what is a complex life”. Local authority representative.

“Flexible work would help, but no one is offering it in jobs I can do.” — Single parent

“A lot of the time you need lots of experience, which young people won't have.” — NEET young person

“My main challenges have been my addiction and recovery which has affected my mental health. However, with counselling, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, service and involvement, medical support, working a daily programme, completing courses and support of my IPS worker, I have been able to identify my full potential.” - Service user with multiple needs

Barriers in employment practices include rigid qualification requirements, which are sometimes in excess of that required for the role, inaccessible recruitment processes and a lack of flexible working, alongside employer bias and a lack of awareness and

misconceptions of disabilities and neurodivergence. Stakeholders report that many employment support services fail to accommodate mental health challenges and the impact of housing instability, highlighting the need for integrated, person-centred, trauma-informed approaches. They all requested accessible, consistent careers advice and personalised support that builds on each individual's starting point, including early interventions and work experience for those not yet ready for employment.

Services often lack flexibility for hidden or changing needs:

"If someone has poor mental health and unstable housing, they're not going to prioritise work, they need support first." Support Practitioner, VCSE

"We need to start with the basics – housing, transport, food. Then people can think about work." VCSE representative

"Until those wider barriers to employment are addressed... a successful progression into work is quite challenging... those support issues come first." ITP representative

Due to complexity in the benefits system claimants can make incorrect assumptions about the impact of work on benefits and the fear of losing them can discourage upskilling, seeking work or better-paid roles. People in supported accommodation can sometimes be discouraged from working due to a benefits cliff edge. The precariousness of their situation often means they are less likely to access training or development opportunities.

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

Addressing this challenge and levelling out employment across Sussex requires a nuanced, coordinated approach across agencies. Opportunities include:

- The expansion in childcare provision which should help working parents.
- Multi-agency partnerships (e.g. Integrated Care Teams, housing services, social services and employment support) can tackle the varied causes of unemployment in areas with the greatest needs.
- Holistic national employment programmes like Connect to Work and Workwell target high-need geographies, focus support on those with health-related barriers like musculoskeletal and mental health conditions and help employers improve their awareness of inclusive employment practice.
- A future local Youth Guarantee plan could offer young people advice, employability skills, workplace exposure and experience, as well as helping them to address barriers to employment.

- Social Value requirements in procurement could be leveraged to stimulate support for areas with high claimant and unemployed populations.
- Enhanced careers provision and employer engagement in schools, colleges and communities, especially in deprived areas
- Engaging economically inactive older adults as mentors, sharing skills and raising aspirations among unemployed residents.
- Tailored programmes such as Bootcamps can offer specific qualifications in combination with employment support, providing an opportunity for careers changers and older adults to progress their careers.
- Recent Universal Credit reforms may improve financial incentives for part-time work and may boost labour market participation.
- Launch of the new national jobs and careers service (DWP) may make it more possible to offer personalised guidance on benefit-to-work transitions but it will be important that employers, training providers and support agencies are aware of benefits and how to support individuals to progress from low-wage, insecure work.

5.2 Availability of jobs in Sussex

What the data says:

Job availability varies significantly across Sussex. Only Crawley (1.16 jobs per working-age resident) and Chichester (1.08) have more jobs than their working-age population, largely due to concentrations of public sector roles, employment at Gatwick Airport and jobs within Manor Royal Business District. By contrast, East Sussex has just 0.72 jobs per working-age resident. Lower job density, especially in East Sussex and coastal areas of West Sussex, limits residents' ability to work locally and access quality employment. Rural and urban disparities are evident, with rural communities facing additional accessibility barriers.

What stakeholders say:

Seasonal, short-term and part-time jobs dominate coastal areas, contributing to instability and limited progression opportunities. Such roles can suit young workers as entry points to employment but often discourage those with additional needs or health conditions due to lack of security.

"Job market is sparse, especially in coastal areas – not well suited to those with additional needs." Adult user voice participant

"Young people are often drawn to larger cities. More could be done to retain young people in the county, working with FE and HE to promote local opportunities." Local Government officer

“There’s no low-risk recruitment. If it doesn’t work out, we’re the ones carrying the cost.”

Local employer

Stakeholders stress that rural areas face unreliable or expensive public transport, making it harder to reach workplaces, interviews, or training. Weak digital infrastructure and low digital literacy further disadvantage rural jobseekers, hampering job searches, online training and applications. These combined barriers can leave residents, particularly those on low incomes, isolated from the labour market unless transport and digital access are improved.

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- Leverage **Skills Bootcamps** to help residents transition into employment or self-employment.
- Employers harness automation and hybrid working to increase remote work options, reducing transport barriers.
- Use programmes such as **Adult Skills Fund** to upskill residents in AI and new technologies to enable remote or tech-based work.
- **Growth Hubs** support micro-business and SME growth, creating more local jobs.
- Exploit opportunities can from the **Industrial Strategy** in sectors like construction, green energy and retrofitting (insulation, solar, heat pumps).
- Capitalise on national advertising campaigns to support job growth in sectors such as early years provision.
- Use Levers such as the Apprenticeship Levy to incentivise employers to offer opportunities
- Explore opportunities through Anchor Institution Social Value policy and related commitments in commissioned contracts and in Section 106 agreements to lever job opportunities
- Use other incentives to encourage employers to provide opportunities such as training (Bootcamps), HR or OT support around inclusive workforce policy.
- **Growth Plans** can support job creation

5.3 A limited number of large employers

What the data says:

Sussex's business landscape is characterized by a predominance of small and micro-enterprises. In East Sussex, for instance, 86.3% of business units have fewer than 10 employees, and 73.8% have fewer than 5 employees, surpassing the national averages of

84.6% and 71.8%, respectively. This trend is mirrored across the region, with the majority of businesses being small-scale operations.

The public sector remains a significant employer in many areas of Sussex, encompassing local authorities, health services, and education. However, notable exceptions exist with some larger employers across the area, and with a particular concentrations around Gatwick Airport and Crawley including at the Manor Royal Business District.

The overall scarcity of large employers in Sussex limits the availability of higher-skilled roles and career progression opportunities. Many microbusinesses and SMEs lack dedicated Human Resource departments, which can impede their capacity to recruit individuals from priority groups who may require additional support.

What our stakeholders say:

"We want to help but don't have a clue where to start or who to talk to." - Small business owner

"There are so many schemes out there - it's hard to know what's still running or worth our time." - SME manager

"Many employers lack the knowledge and skills to employ the disabled. Even those signed up to the 'Disability Confident scheme' [are] not necessarily employing disabled people. The support to do so, especially for SMEs, could have an impact." Local Authority officer

"I'd offer placements if someone could guide us through it." — Construction SME

"Flexible working helps us attract staff, but we need clearer guidance to make it work for different needs." — Hospitality employee

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- By improving the skills and diversity of the workforce, businesses can grow, leading to more job opportunities
- There are many SMEs and micro businesses that have scope to grow. Growth Hubs can be leveraged to deliver sector-specific support and employer engagement that reflects the unique needs of Sussex's economy and supports the growth of our SMEs.
- Employers don't always know about advances in new technology or artificial intelligence, so are not always aware of the skills that they may need to grow. There is an opportunity for Employer Representative Bodies to support this knowledge.

- Advocate for simplified and consistent messaging around funding streams and recruitment incentives to help SMEs access and sustain inclusive employment practices.
- Developing tailor support and guidance for SMEs to implement inclusive recruitment and employment practices, (e.g. Promoting flexible working arrangements with practical guidance and case studies to help employers meet diverse workforce needs) including dedicated HR toolkits and workshops.
- Support SMEs to offer placements and work experience through hands-on guidance, brokerage services, that connect businesses with local talent pools.
- Build on existing employer engagement initiatives that build stronger partnerships between education providers, training organisations and businesses, fostering collaboration.
- Leverage the employing power of our anchor institutions and larger employers, exploring options for them to offer job opportunities and retain and upskill/make resilient their existing workforce.

5.4 Low resident earnings

What the data says:

Across Sussex, median resident earnings are lower than both the England and South-East averages. The gap is widest in East Sussex, where resident earnings are just 87% of the national average (£37,630). Both East and West Sussex show significant disparities between the north and south of the counties. Much of the local economy is dependent on lower-value sectors, many of which provide insecure, seasonal, or part-time work, limiting long-term financial stability. Disposable incomes is a real challenge across Sussex.

What our stakeholders say:

“Where I live is rural which makes getting to places difficult and can take a long time... bus fees have gone up meaning I have to budget and limit my journeys.” - Young benefits claimant and jobseeker

“We can’t just count job starts; we need to see people staying and growing in those roles.” - Community employment support provider

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- Increase qualification levels to Level 3 and Level 4 through Bootcamps, Higher Level Technical Qualifications, Apprenticeships, T Levels and lifelong learning, helping to stimulate a higher-wage economy.
- The Lifelong Learning entitlement can support adults to access higher level learning.

- Offer good quality careers advice to support people through their employment pathway
- Support people with undertaking Better Off Calculations, so that they can understand how earning can help them with living costs.
- Capitalise on potential economic uplift from the second runway at Gatwick.
- The LSIP to focus on developing higher-skilled roles and career pathways.
- Enable and grow sector clusters identified as locally significant to stimulate job creation and economic growth.
- Harness opportunities from the growth of future and green jobs, new technologies, AI and automation such as use of drone technology in landbased and construction, roles in planning, bio-diversity, cybersecurity and food production.

5.5 Low qualification attainment levels

What the data says:

Level 3 attainment among 19-year-olds in Sussex is below both national and South-East averages. Only **52.6%** in East Sussex and **56.8%** in West Sussex achieve Level 3 qualifications, compared to **58.7%** in the South-East and **57.6%** nationally. Coastal districts like Arun and Crawley have particularly low attainment and Hastings is markedly low at **36.4%**. Brighton & Hove is slightly above regional averages at **59.1%**.

For adults, **34.5%** of working-age residents in East Sussex lack Level 3 qualifications, **31.2%** in West Sussex and **28.4%** in Brighton & Hove. Levels of adults lacking a level 3 qualification are especially high in Hastings (**40.9%**) and Rother (**42.7%**). LSIP data (2023/24) shows that Sussex residents have lower essential skills (17.4%) than the England average (23.6%).

What stakeholders say:

‘To attract larger businesses into Sussex and or to help our existing SMEs to grow, we need a higher skilled workforce. Higher skilled jobs would mean better pay and growth and would encourage people to aspire to more complex roles and to continue in learning to secure higher level qualifications.’ Local Government Officer

“Colleges are trying, but they can’t do it alone. We need real dialogue with employers.” — Training provider

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- Expand the **Careers Hub** to connect young people with clear, informed pathways and to raise aspirations.
- Build on **NEET prevention programmes** to support transition into higher level learning

- Promote technical education by creating more apprenticeships particularly foundation apprenticeships and increasing the provision of **T-Levels** as practical, career-focused alternatives.
- Use **Skills Bootcamps** to quickly upskill residents in priority sectors.
- Target funding through the **Adult Skills Fund (ASF)** to improve access to higher-level learning.

5.6 Gaps in skills and employment support for young people

What the data says:

The annual national NEET comparator scorecard published by the Department for Education in July 2025 recorded the percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in each area: in Brighton and Hove 5% are NEET, in East Sussex 4.9% and in West Sussex 2.2%. While West Sussex reports a relatively low NEET rate, 9.3% of young people have an 'unknown' destination (compared to 0.9% in East Sussex and 1.7% in Brighton and Hove), which may conceal a higher number of NEET young people within the county.

The data illustrates how the challenges are compounded for vulnerable young people, those who are looked after/in care or have left care, refugees and asylum seekers, carers, with disclosed substance misuse, mental health issues, youth offenders or have been in alternative provision. 40.6 % in Brighton and Hove of this cohort are NEET, 24.7 % in East Sussex, 35.1 % in West Sussex. And for those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or with special educational needs (SEN), often combined with the above vulnerabilities, the figure is 30.1% (combined) in Brighton and Hove, 21.4% for both East Sussex and West Sussex.

Level 3 attainment among 19-year-olds in Sussex is below both national and South-East averages as detailed above.

Provision at Level 1 and 2 for young people with SEND, NEET status, or requiring re-engagement is limited, restricting foundational skill-building and progression. Without tailored support, this can lead to reduced career opportunities, lower earnings, long-term unemployment and social isolation.

What stakeholders say:

Young people face compounded barriers including lack of personalised guidance, limited work experience opportunities, unclear career pathways and insufficient employer engagement. Those living with poverty, family unemployment, care experience, SEND, health issues, or poor school attendance often face the greatest challenges and may have low aspirations. Stakeholders consistently highlight the need for closer collaboration between education providers, the VCSE sector and health services.

On post-16 guidance:

"Everything stops when college ends. No one checks where you land." Parent of SEND learner.

"You leave school and it's like, now what? No one really prepares you for work." Young jobseeker.

"I just think there needs to be more opportunities, better training and better preparation, because you only really get help if you actively seek it." Young person focus group participant.

On employment:

"Navigating employers' requirements is hardest because they ask for experience no young person can feasibly have." Young person focus group participant.

"We need more employers willing to take a chance and provide real, supportive placements." Youth support worker.

"Not for the lack of trying, but I haven't found work beyond volunteering, that's the best I've been able to get." Young jobseeker.

On aspirations:

"Most training doesn't help unless you have hard qualifications like A-levels or degrees - things I cannot and will never achieve." Young person

"Young people come to us already defeated – they don't think work is for them." Education provider.

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- Develop and deliver a **local Youth Guarantee** offering advice, guidance, employability preparation, workplace exposure and early intervention for NEET prevention and re-engagement.
- Design and formalise transition pathways for key subgroups within the 'Young People' priority group (such as SEND and Care Leavers) into post-16 provision, employment and employment support schemes.
- Expand NEET prevention programmes such as **Steps to Success** to provide personalised careers support and structured work experience for at-risk young people.
- Strengthen the **Careers Hub** to embed labour market insights and prepare young people at key transition points (post-16 and post-18).
- In the absence of funding for NEET provision, maximise the benefits of programmes such as Connect to Work to support young people with aspirations.
- Improve awareness and accessibility of technical and vocational pathways including **Apprenticeships and T-Levels** and support employers to create more entry-level opportunities such as Foundation Apprenticeships and industry placements.
- Work collaboratively with the VCSE sector, positioned to engage young people furthest from the labour market through a community-rooted approach, to provide increased pre-employment opportunities for example volunteering, mentoring and career support.

5.7 Health inequalities

Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England recognises the importance of supporting people with long-term health conditions to remain in or return to work. Poor health is both a cause and consequence of unemployment, and work is generally good for physical and mental health. The NHS plan commits to expanding access to occupational health and employment support, particularly for people with mental health problems and musculoskeletal conditions. The NHS Sussex Workwell Discovery report reinforces, calling for greater integration between health and employment services, recommending co-located provision, shared data to identify those at risk of leaving work, and rapid access to vocational rehabilitation.

What the data says:

The leading causes of sickness absence in Sussex are mental health conditions and musculoskeletal disorders, which often overlap. Multiple factors contribute to poor mental health, including environmental stressors, physical health issues and family history. In 2022-23, General Practitioners issued 262,409 Fit for Work notes across Sussex, predominantly for mental and behavioural disorders and musculoskeletal and connective tissue diseases.

The Keep Britain Working review emphasises that the chances of returning to work decline rapidly the longer someone is out of employment, with a marked drop after six months and an even steeper fall beyond 12 months, often requiring more intensive support. The

Workwell report highlights that early intervention is key, showing that timely employment support for people with health conditions can reduce average sickness absence from six months to under three, significantly improving the likelihood of a successful return to work.

The national disability employment rate for Q2 2024 (latest data published June 2025) stood at 53.1%, compared to 81.6% for non-disabled people, a gap likely reflected locally in Sussex. The employment gap is especially wide for disabled men, older disabled adults (aged 50–64) and those without qualifications. Sussex has a higher registered disability rate (18.2%) than the South-East (16.1%) and England (17.3%). Of these, 40% report their condition limits daily activities significantly, equating to 7.2% of Sussex's population and 8.3% in East Sussex.

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment highlights deep-rooted health inequalities in Sussex, driven by structural challenges such as unaffordable housing, precarious employment and low pay. These factors create significant barriers to wellbeing and pose risks to economic resilience.

What stakeholders say:

Poor physical and mental health are key barriers to employment, often exacerbated by social isolation, low confidence and a lack of personalised, trauma-informed support. Stakeholders consistently call for integrated, person-centred services offering mentoring, counselling and flexible employment pathways to help individuals rebuild confidence and secure meaningful work. Challenges are worsened by fragmented health and employment systems and stretched services.

"Everything feels more difficult when you have anxiety and don't know where to start." Adult participant

"If someone's struggling with anxiety or trauma, you can't just give them a job and hope for the best." — Health practitioner

"Be aware that my addiction is not a choice, be non-judgmental and educated and remove the stigma." Adult Jobseeker IPS

"Just being listened to made a difference. It felt like someone was finally on my side." Mentored jobseeker

"I didn't even know we could get funding to help adapt a job for someone with health needs." Employer in logistics

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- Programmes such as Workwell and Connect to Work offer the opportunity to develop and expand integrated, person-centred support services that combine mental health, physical health and employment assistance to address complex barriers holistically.
- Building on the interagency integration work developed through Workwell and Connect to Work, strengthen this collaboration between health, employment and social care services to ensure seamless pathways between other training and wellbeing programmes.
- Increase investment in trauma-informed mentoring, counselling and coaching programmes to support individuals with health-related work challenges.
- There is a need to support employer awareness about health-related workplace adaptations, Access to Work including funding options, improve job retention and recruitment of people with disabilities and health conditions and about supporting flexible, hybrid and part-time working models to accommodate varying health needs to enable sustained employment.
- Use programmes such as Bootcamps to introduce sector-specific training and reskilling initiatives for individuals with health challenges to open new job opportunities and career progression or to enable people to sustain their jobs.
- Build on existing partnerships and commissioning with VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) organisations to deliver place-based support in the most affected communities.
- Reforms to Access to Work and the Disability Confident Scheme which are widely considered to be failing and ineffective and are under review.
- Embedding health and employment within community settings

5.8 Ageing population

What the data says:

Across Sussex, the population is older than both the South-East and national averages. Coastal areas such as Rother (East Sussex), Arun and Chichester (West Sussex) have particularly high proportions of older residents, with 33% aged 65 or over. While Crawley and Brighton & Hove have younger populations, all areas are projected to see growth in the 65+ age group over the next decade, with Crawley expected to reach 31% by 2035. This shift presents competing challenges: Brighton & Hove must sustain enough job creation to retain its younger workforce (16–49), while other areas face a shrinking working-age population, higher dependency ratios and significant economic inequalities.

What stakeholders say:

“No one tells you what help is available and when you ask, it’s a maze.” Older jobseeker

“I had to leave my job to care for my mum. Going back now feels impossible.” Unpaid carer

“I’ve worked for 35 years — now I’m told I’m ‘over-qualified’ for everything.” Worker aged 58 facing redundancy

“Retraining sounds great, but courses are far away and buses stop early.” — Older resident in rural Sussex

What opportunities are there to address this challenge?

- Leverage older residents’ skills and experience through targeted over-50 employment and retraining programmes.
- Expand flexible and remote work opportunities, especially in sectors facing skills shortages.
- Support transitions for unpaid carers back into work, including re-skilling and flexible hours.
- Predicted job vacancies from retirements could be used to create pathways for younger and mid-life jobseekers.
- Growth in leisure, health and care sectors due to the effects of an ageing population could be matched with local workforce development plans.

5.9 High levels of deprivation

What the data says:

Deprivation remains a significant challenge across Sussex, particularly in coastal areas. In East Sussex, 14% of wards fall within the most deprived 20% nationally, with half of these concentrated in Hastings and a further 25% in Eastbourne and Newhaven. West Sussex has 4% of its wards in the most deprived national quintile, 90% of which are coastal, including 10 in Arun. These deprived areas consistently show higher rates of economic inactivity and lower skill levels. In Brighton & Hove, 15 neighbourhoods are among the 10% most deprived nationally, 6 are in the East Brighton ward.

What stakeholders say:

Stakeholders highlight the importance of delivering holistic support directly within the communities most affected by deprivation. Services that are embedded in trusted community hubs, where people already seek help, greatly improve engagement and outcomes. This place-based, accessible approach removes barriers related to travel and complex service navigation. West Sussex community hubs received particular praise for their integrated employment support tailored to local needs.

"Having services in one place — where people already go for help and support — really helps engagement." — Local coordinator

"The support has to come to us - not expect us to travel or know where to start." — Health-related benefit claimant

What are the opportunities?

- Leveraging regeneration funding such as Plan for Neighbourhoods funding in Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne, or Town Deals in Crawley, Hastings and Eastbourne to drive regeneration and targeted support
- Capitalising on local investment plans including housing development to improve economic conditions
- Expanding growth in key sectors clustered along the coastal strip such as the visitor economy and niche specialisms in manufacturing and engineering to create employment opportunities
- Building on strong VCSE sector presence and multi-agency collaboration to deliver coordinated, community-centred, place-based services
- Delivering at local place-based level through joined up approaches via programmes such as Connect to Work.

5.10 Transport, Housing and Infrastructure challenges

What the data says:

Transport infrastructure across much of rural Sussex, combined with an overburdened East-West A27 corridor and A259 coastal road, creates significant challenges for accessing training and employment in both rural and many coastal areas. Housing supply is inadequate, especially for affordable homes. Many residents find house purchase unaffordable and private rental costs consume a disproportionately high share of household income compared to regional and national averages. These issues are particularly acute in areas where wages are low, compounding economic pressures.

According to the ONS Rural Urban Classification (2024), Horsham, Chichester, and Rother are designated as Majority Rural, while Wealden is classed as Intermediate Rural - reflecting residents' relative limited access to urban centres and services. As of May 2025, the average house price in England was £290,000, yet prices in Brighton and Hove (£435,157), West Sussex (£373,743), and East Sussex (£327,154) far exceed this (ONS). Rural areas such as Horsham (£449,471), Chichester (£435,157), and Wealden (£412,068) face significantly higher average house prices, creating acute disadvantage for residents on low incomes and those facing barriers to employment and training associated with rural connectivity.

What stakeholders say?

These transport and housing challenges constrain access to employment and opportunities, especially for people facing additional barriers, and for those in rural areas. Stakeholders highlighted that many low-paid workers in this high-cost region experience financial hardship, which limits their ability to commute and access training or jobs.

Key stakeholder insights include:

- Public transport is a fundamental barrier, particularly in rural areas where services are infrequent, poorly connected and expensive. This especially affects those without personal vehicles, such as young jobseekers, shift workers and low-paid employees, limiting their access to jobs, support services and education.
- High housing costs make it difficult for residents to access and sustain employment or training, reducing mobility and sometimes forcing individuals to leave training early or prioritise immediate income over longer-term skill development.
- Digital exclusion is prevalent, notably but not exclusively among older people, disabled jobseekers, refugees, care leavers and low-income groups. Poor connectivity, limited device access and low digital literacy mean many struggle to engage with online job applications, remote learning, or digital-only services, increasing inequality.

"Public transport is unreliable in rural areas." Adult user voice participant

"It takes me over an hour to get to the nearest Job Centre and I can't afford the bus." — Coastal resident

“The cost and reliability of public transport is a major barrier for our services, especially in remote areas.” — Rural employment advisor

“Where I live is rural which makes getting to places difficult and can take a long time... bus fees have gone up from £2 to £3 per journey and means I have to limit my journeys and budget more”. JCP client

“We’re constantly hiring for the same roles because people can’t get here or can’t afford to stay.” — Care provider

“We’ve got vacancies we can’t fill because the bus doesn’t run early enough.” — Logistics employer

“I lost count of how many forms I had to fill in online — I gave up.” — Participant with limited digital access

What opportunities are there to address this challenge?

- The Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) is taking on responsibility for transport, presenting a chance to better integrate access to work and learning in transport planning.
- Using the evidence base in the Plan to advocate for infrastructure investments, such as transport, digital connectivity, and accessible learning space, that enable equitable access to education and training across all communities.
- The upcoming Local Transport Plan 5 (LTP5), under the MCA, offers an opportunity to shape regional transport strategy to improve connectivity and affordability, specifically embedding employment and education access priorities across Sussex.
- There are opportunities for Get Sussex Working ambitions to be integrated into local Transport plans (Freight, Rail, Logistics, Haulage, Bus etc).
- Local Government Reorganisation will see changes to how Housing policy and Planning is undertaken locally. This may present opportunities for new approaches to considering pan-Sussex housing needs in relation to access to work and learning.
Digital inclusion is often delivered by VCSE organisations who have insecure funding.
Digital inclusion needs to be a priority of all Local Authorities.

5.11 Insufficient service integration or system-wide approaches

What the data says:

While no single dataset captures “integration” between services, stakeholder evidence highlights that fragmented systems including how services are funded by central government, local government, health, education and the VCSE, leave individuals facing duplication, confusion and missed opportunities for coordinated support into employment. This affects residents across Sussex but is felt most acutely in coastal, rural and disadvantaged urban areas where needs are complex and resources are stretched.

What stakeholders say:

Partnership working is widely recognised as essential, yet gaps remain in integration and communication.

- **Fragmentation and silos:** Poor information-sharing, unclear referral pathways and a lack of coordination between organisations mean people are “bounced between services.”
- **Loss of frontline voice:** Strategic decisions sometimes overlook valuable operational insights.
- **Differing local authority priorities and funding structures:** Each upper tier local authority is funded and resourced to support the skills and employment agenda differently, so the infrastructure to support this area of work varies across Sussex. Where some employment and skills infrastructure is recognised as strong and proactive, this has fostered a desire to collaborate and led to good outcomes.
- **Barriers to trust and efficiency:** Duplication of work, competition for funding and limited joint commissioning reduce effectiveness.
- **Underrepresented partners:** Health services (especially GPs and social prescribers) and smaller faith-based and cultural organisations are not consistently involved, despite being trusted community anchors.

“People fall through cracks because we don’t know what each other is doing.” — Careers adviser

“We all want the same outcome, but we’re not talking to each other.” — Public sector partner

“Everyone is doing good work, but we’re not all rowing in the same direction.” — Strategic partner

“People are bounced between services; it’s exhausting and confusing.” — Young Adult Service User

“The way [Skills East Sussex] is constructed... is a well-developed structure that supports what we’re all trying to achieve really well.” — DWP Officer

What are the opportunities to address this challenge?

- There are existing structures in Sussex that could be built on or replicated to support better multi-agency coordination (e.g. Skills and Employment East Sussex, the West Sussex Synchronise Group and Supported Employment Forum as well as the commissioning structure for West Sussex Adult Skills.)
- Programmes such as Connect to Work and Workwell offer an opportunity to pilot colocation or community setting models for Employment Support and to deliver joint/multi-agency professional development (e.g. trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity awareness, inclusive communication, local employment support offers)

to build shared understanding across sectors. In the longer term, these programmes offer opportunities to better align employment, skills and health services.

- Youth Guarantee funding could provide Sussex young people with valuable additional resources and targeted programmes to support youth employment.
- Local navigation roles within Family Hubs, Youth Hubs, GP surgeries could help to guide residents through services.
- Co-development of programmes is starting but in an adhoc way. Embedding regular feedback loops from service users in all new employment support programmes, with visible action taken on input (e.g. lived experience panels, check-ins during/after programmes) would improve the quality of the offer and outcomes.
- Partners with employer engagement teams and strategies could identify how better to coordinate and align their practice, linking into local provision (Growth Hubs, the Transform programme) to ensure that employers have streamlined access to information about training and employee support.
- Many areas have a 'No Wrong Door' approach so residents can access advice and support from any entry point, with effective signposting and warm handovers between services. Improved mapping and awareness of provision linked to shared multi-agency training (above) would assist with this.
- There is a need to work with central government to consider how best to share data between agencies and data about the support that clients are receiving or have received with a longer-term goal of creating cross-sector case management systems, multi-agency referral and delivery data processes.

6. Pan-Sussex vision, goal and ambitions

The following shared vision, goal and ambitions have been determined for the Get Sussex Working Plan. These ambitions have been shaped through the robust data mapping and extensive stakeholder engagement outlined above, which has provided a clear understanding of the main considerations and challenges including current barriers and opportunities across Sussex's labour market.

By aligning national employment goals with local insight, we have identified six Sussex ambitions to provide strategic focus through pan Sussex and local area action planning, to help build an inclusive, dynamic economy. where employers thrive and residents are supported into meaningful work through integrated approaches to health, skills and employment.

Vision statement:

A dynamic Sussex workforce, enabled by integrated support across employment, health, post-16 education and skills. All residents are empowered to aspire, to develop the skills they need now and for the future; to access meaningful employment that improves lives, addresses inequalities, and enables businesses to thrive.

Overarching goal:

Sussex aims to meet the government's national ambition of an 80% employment rate across the county, through an integrated and targeted, data and stakeholder-led approach, providing inclusive services which meet the needs of people, employers and places.

The Get Sussex Working Plan ambitions:

Ambition one: Build a skills and employment infrastructure to achieve the Get Sussex Working Plan

To achieve our overarching goals - in light of the anticipated changes brought by Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation in Sussex, ICB restructures and the launch of the new national jobs and careers service - we must work collectively to design systems, forge partnerships and establish processes that directly support through and beyond this transition.

Ensuring we have the right employment and skills partnerships in place, ready to collaborate, adjust to changing needs (economic, social and political) and influence together is key., This way we can be swift to meet the needs of residents; drawing on the skills of partners (for example the research skills and innovation support of HEIs, Local Authority policy expertise, Employer Representative Bodies and voluntary sector access to

employer/service user voice) to respond quickly to funding and policy opportunities that emerge from central government. This will enable us to quickly translate policy into action and outcomes for our residents and employers.

We will need to look at how existing partnerships such as Skills and Employment East Sussex, the Brighton Economic Growth Board, the West Sussex Economic Growth Board, the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) and the Get Sussex Working Partnership can evolve or collaborate to ensure effective delivery to meet our targets.

Exploring how we map and raise awareness of provision to support residents and employers with careers and employment pathways will be key, as will considering how we develop referral processes between skills and employment provision and 'wraparound services' such as health, financial support and housing, to support people coherently, into sustained work. For example, supporting individuals with long-term health conditions who often miss out on training and employment opportunities. Infrastructure must include health-informed support services to ensure these individuals can participate and succeed, and that we are addressing health inequalities.

As the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) works to create the new national jobs and careers service, strong partnerships will be essential to align the new service with local support.

The UK Government is transferring more responsibility for skills and employment to Strategic Authorities and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs). This shift is part of a wider approach to devolution, which aims to give local leaders greater powers to shape services that best meet the needs of their areas.

In line with this direction, MCAs are being given direct control of funding and decision-making for adult education, skills training and employment support programmes. As a result, areas with MCAs will have increasing autonomy to plan and deliver skills and employment support, aligning it with other areas for which they will hold responsibility including transport, housing and economic development, that meets both the needs of local communities and contributes to local growth and productivity.

As the Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority evolves and devolution arrangements are agreed, the three local authorities will need to work closely to ensure careers provision for young people, delivered through the Careers Hub model, informs understanding of the current and future labour market and that activities continue to be place-based and respond to the needs of different geographies, education settings and local employers.

Ambition two: Address needs of diverse resident groups to increase economic activity

Our evidence base and stakeholder consultation clearly demonstrate that in order to move our residents into sustained and meaningful work, we need to support a diverse range of cohorts, addressing their specific barriers to accessing training and work.

When developing programmes collaboratively with stakeholders, we need to ensure that user voice is central to the design or improvement of schemes and that Information, Advice and Guidance including signposting to wider services such as childcare, access to transport, digital inclusion, health services and financial advice are delivered alongside careers advice employment support or training. Without wraparound support we are likely to see people leaving employment after a brief period, re-entering periods of unemployment before embarking on employment support schemes again - a cycle that we need to break.

Confidence, communication, understanding career and progression pathways, working culture and aspiration-raising play a key part in helping young people and adults move into work and future programmes need to consider activities that can help residents with these areas of personal growth as they move towards employment. In geographies which experience intergenerational unemployment, these factors are particularly important to address.

Careers provision should be integrated, progression-focused and responsive to local needs and involve collaboration between employment, education, health and voluntary sector partners, ensuring seamless pathways into work, training and further guidance. There should be a focus on supporting residents into good work with opportunities for progression, using tools such as skills audits, mid-career reviews and targeted upskilling.

Provision should be tailored to the needs of priority groups, including over-50s, parents, young people not in education or work and those with health-related barriers to work, with wraparound support to build confidence and employability. Provision should be inclusive to reduce inequalities – for example health inequalities disproportionately affect certain groups including those with disabilities, neurodiverse individuals, and people from deprived areas. Tackling these barriers means ensuring inclusive pathways into work for all demographics

Delivery should be accessible and co-located in community settings such as Jobcentres, libraries and health and community hubs, combining digital tools with in-person support. Careers advice must be grounded in current labour market intelligence, with a strong focus on growth sectors such as health and care, digital and green industries.

Ultimately, provision should be outcome-focused, measuring success by sustained employment, progression and engagement in learning, to ensure individuals are supported not just into work, but into fulfilling, long-term careers.

Ambition three: Develop a joined-up approach with employers to inclusive workforce development, training and careers progression

Employers are central to the Get Sussex Working Plan, they create jobs, fill vacancies, shape training needs and invest in upskilling staff to support their growth and sustainability. Just as importantly, they play a key role in developing future talent. Young people need to understand the purpose and possibilities of work and employers can be the inspiration that sparks their ambition.

Employer engagement is vital to ensure that employment support and careers information is genuinely demand-led and aligned with local labour market needs.

Employers have said that they want to see better coordination of information about skills and employment.

Collectively, we will need to engage employers effectively, to ensure that they are actively involved in shaping inclusive employment practices and have clarity about the ways that they can support all residents with career pathways. For example, employers often lack awareness or resources to support employees with health conditions. A joined-up approach involves educating employers, promoting reasonable adjustments, and co-developing inclusive career progression models that accommodate health needs.

There is an ambition for organisations that collaborate closely with employers, such as Chambers, FSB, Local Authorities, Job centres, VCSE and training organisations that deliver Employment Support programmes to find ways of working in a more coordinated way with employers. Existing resources, including online communication channels and networks, could be built on, to facilitate this. The LSIP networks and Implementation Framework, overseen by Sussex Chamber of Commerce, offers one such mechanism that can be used for this purpose.

The Sussex economy is largely composed of small and micro businesses, most of whom do not have access to HR teams, training teams or occupational therapists. To create a more inclusive employment base in the county, we need to find ways to support our employers to provide entry roles, progression routes and training and to develop inclusive employment practice, from workplace adaptations, to flexible and inclusive recruitment and employment contracts. We need to find ways to support our employers to welcome a more diverse workforce into their business and offer opportunities for those starting out in their careers to get the experience they need.

Sussex needs to develop a joined-up multi-agency strategy for communicating skills and employment support opportunities with our employers and for supporting our employers and partners to engage with education providers to inform careers activities and training routes, as well as develop inclusive workplaces, recruitment practices, training and progression pathways.

Ambition four: Respond to diverse place-based needs to increase economic activity, health and wellbeing

Sussex has a rich geography of urban, rural and coastal settlements, each with distinct employment and skills needs.

Different geographic areas require tailored approaches that respond to locally specific employment challenges - such as unequal access to opportunities, limited transport links, seasonal job markets, housing affordability issues, concentrations of health-related barriers to work, and entrenched deprivation and generational worklessness

Place-based solutions should build on existing community connections and proven local best practice to strengthen and tailor provision that meets the unique needs of each area.

Approaches will need specific multi-agency partnerships to work together to respond to place-based needs if we are to see residents moving towards increased economic activity.

Ambition five: Embed careers, employment and skills at the heart of decision-making to facilitate a systems-wide approach

To boost employment levels and build a more inclusive economy, large and long-standing organisations, known as anchor institutions, have a vital role to play. These include local authorities, NHS trusts, DWP, colleges and universities, transport providers and other major employers. Because they are deeply rooted in the local area and unlikely to relocate, their decisions have a lasting impact on people and places. By thinking about careers, employment and skills as part of their core strategies, anchor institutions can help drive positive change. For example, embedding employment and skills into health planning ensures that health services actively support work readiness.

This includes building social value into procurement contracts, identifying careers activities and job opportunities linked to new capital developments e.g. construction projects (both during and after development), considering the impact of transport planning and improvements on enabling better access to work and training, or aligning housing plans with local labour market needs. They can also lead by example, putting careers, inclusive employment and upskilling at the heart of their own workforce planning. Through system-wide approaches to policy design, commissioning and investment decisions, anchor institutions have the power to influence the wider system and help more residents into good jobs, while supporting local businesses to thrive.

Ambition six: Develop and upskill our workforce to boost employment and growth

To ensure long-term employment sustainability in the county and to support the growth of local businesses and jobs, we must focus on raising the skill levels of our residents.

This means ensuring that our workforce has sector-specific skills up to at least Level 3 and keeps them up to date with evolving tools and systems, including advancements in AI, automation and digital technology, to help them progress in their careers.

Clear, accessible information about skills development and training opportunities, whether through further and higher education, voluntary and community organisations, or independent training providers, is essential, along with guidance on how such learning can support career progression.

Many people with multiple barriers to training and work, for example those with health conditions, have untapped potential, and with tailored upskilling and confidence-building many could re-enter or progress in work. Encouraging adaptive training and supportive work environments boosts participation and productivity, contributing to regional growth

By collaborating with local employers as active partners, we can help shape inclusive, future-ready training that supports workforce development and empowers residents to advance into higher-skilled, better-paid roles

A more highly skilled workforce will drive productivity, strengthen our local economy and make Sussex an increasingly attractive location for businesses looking to invest and grow.

7. Governance and oversight

This plan has been developed at a time when significant changes are imminent in relation to the way that Sussex is governed and in terms of wider changes to other anchor institutions and stakeholders (NHS, DWP, ICB, National Careers Service).

The Get Sussex Working Plan has been overseen by a Multi-Agency Partnership Group in accordance with the DWP guidance. The group comprises Brighton and Hove City Council, East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council, Public Health, the DWP and the Employer Representative Body (Sussex Chamber of Commerce) for the Local Skills Improvement Plan.

Due to its current period of change and consultation on restructure, the Sussex ICB involvement has been via the Sussex Workwell Board, Skills East Sussex and the West Sussex Economic Growth Board.

Wider input into the formation of the Plan has been sought from the VCSE sector, further education, higher education, district and borough councils and businesses via key local authority strategic partnerships, including Skills East Sussex, the Brighton and Hove Business Board and West Sussex Economic Growth Board. These wider stakeholder forums and existing networks will continue to shape and deliver the Implementation Plan through a highly collaborative process, liaising and working with relevant multi-agency partners across the county to ensure that provision is locally responsive, and grounded in the needs of our communities

The Plan is proposed for endorsement by each of the three Local Authorities (BHCC, WSCC, ESCC).

Until such time as the Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) is established and its remit confirmed and the ICB and DWP new structures are known, it is proposed that in the interim Get Sussex Working Partnership Group will continue to oversee the implementation, monitoring and ongoing evolution of The Plan, liaising with local partnerships. Once the MCCA is established, decisions about oversight of the Get Sussex Working Plan will need to be made by the MCCA with Upper Tier Authorities and key stakeholders.

We have worked to ensure the Get Sussex Working Plan and the current Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) align, using data from the LSIP 'deep dives' to support development of The Plan. The LSIP Board and Get Sussex Working Partnership Group need to work together to ensure that the objectives and delivery of each plan complement and enhance the other as new LSIPs are developed.

Implementation and review

The Get Sussex Working Plan will be delivered in line with the high-level and local area implementation plan (Appendix 3), identifying delivery at pan-Sussex and at East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove geographies to achieve the ambitions.

The Implementation Plan sets out the six ambitions and the priorities to progress them over time. It includes collaborative actions for the whole of Sussex and actions that respond to the challenges and opportunities in each of East Sussex, Brighton & Hove and West Sussex. It highlights actions that are underway or in development and future aspirational areas for focus.

The Plan identifies confirmed activities that are resourced as well as aspirational activities that are not. The success of the overall plan in terms of the ability to meet KPIs will depend on funding and resources being available to the MCCA and partners to continue to deliver effective programmes and interventions and to implement those areas of work that are identified as key. Without funding for needed provision Sussex stakeholders will only be able to work towards the KPIs, rather than able to meet them.

The Get Sussex Working Implementation Plan is a live document that will be reviewed and updated at regular intervals so that the Partnership Group can respond to the changing economic, social, employment and skills context and needs within the county. We will adapt the local-level actions where necessary, to ensure that the implementation plan is focussed on tackling the right challenges and harnessing the right opportunities and will produce a concise annual impact report that includes metrics and narrative. Where project reports already exist (e.g. Connect to Work or Skills Bootcamp delivery reports) these will be used. We will also produce impact reports and case studies where available.

We have agreed key performance indicators with a baseline at the point of The Plan's publication (Sept 2025).

These indicators should be seen as contextual as many of the influences on them are outside the control of local partners. Key to the successful delivery of The Plan is having the right infrastructure and partnerships in place (nationally and locally) and securing investment for key initiatives where available

Where activities are desirable but not yet funded, the expectation is that partners will seek funding to deliver them, or that provision may be made from future MCA, LGR, Skills, ICB or DWP funding allocations to support them. Reports against these activities, will initially relate to whether funding has been sourced. If funds are secured, full reporting will be undertaken as these actions move from desirable to delivery.

The GSW Partnership Group's will have oversight on an interim basis until the Mayoral Combined County Authority role is known. The Partnership members recognise that this is a multi-agency delivery plan that requires a system-wide approach to be effective. This is a

jointly owned plan, with a wide range of stakeholders contributing to its delivery and success. Delivery partners named in the implementation plan will contribute to reporting processes.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

KPI 1: Employment rate (16–64) Baseline (2024): 77.5% Target (2035): 80%

Year	Sussex Target
2027	78%
2030	79.2%
2035	80.0%

KPI 2: NEET rate (16–17) Baseline (2024): 6.5% Target (2035): 4.5%

Year	Sussex Target
2027	5.8%
2030	5.2%
2035	4.5%

KPI 3: Economically inactive over-50s (excluding students) Baseline (2024): 29% Target (2035): 25%

Year	Sussex Target
2027	28%
2030	26.5%
2035	25%

KPI 4: Population holding Level 3 qualifications (19+) Baseline (2024): 58% Target (2035): 65%

Year	Sussex Target
2027	60%
2030	62.5%
2035	65%

KPI 5: Integrated referral processes between health and employment services

Target: Pilot integrated referral processes by 2028 with annual reporting on cross-referrals.

KPI 6: Coordinated approach to employer support and engagement

Target: Develop a coordinated employer engagement strategy and adopt across Sussex by 2028, with agreed sector priorities and shared metrics for employer participation.

KPI 7: Facilitate and enable anchor institutions to actively contribute to economic growth and inclusive employment

Target: Develop a coordinated approach to inclusive workforce strategies with wide engagement from the institutions.

8. Local Implementation Plan**Appendices**

Appendix 1: Pan-Sussex Labour Market Data Mapping and Analysis Report

Appendix 2: List of stakeholders and partnerships that have contributed to the report

Appendix 3: Stakeholder reports:

- Brighton and Hove
- East Sussex
- West Sussex