Get Sussex Working Plan | Stakeholder Engagement | ESCC

1. Introduction

Purpose

This report informs the development of the Get Sussex Working Plan (The Plan) a local initiative aligned with the UK Government's broader Get Britain Working (GBW) strategy to reduce economic inactivity and raise national employment levels to 80%. The GBW agenda promotes systemic reforms across employment, health, and skills sectors.

The Get Britain Working White Paper outlines a national vision for addressing workforce challenges, improving employability, and driving sustainable economic growth through systemic reforms across employment, health, and skills sectors. It has a strong focus on local solutions tailored to community needs. Local GBW Plans are central to delivering this ambition, serving as a bridge between national objectives and regional priorities and ensuring labour market responsiveness.

In Sussex, the 'Get Sussex Working Plan' (The Plan) coordinated by West Sussex County Council, East Sussex County Council, and Brighton & Hove City Council will provide an interconnected vision, narrative and shared ambitions for Sussex.

The Plan will identify opportunities for pan-Sussex collaboration, for example relating to common stakeholders and demographics. Each local authority area will also develop an Action Plan to support the Sussex ambitions through place-based responses to local opportunities and challenges, identified in part, through stakeholder engagement.

Effective solutions depend on strong stakeholder engagement, with individuals and organisations that play a critical role in tackling employment barriers and fostering inclusive growth. Understanding lived experience is also essential to designing practical, impactful policies that work well for residents.

This report provides an overview of East Sussex stakeholder engagement activity and contributions, the challenges and opportunities identified, and the key areas of focus to inform local actions.

Methodology

Stakeholder engagement activities in East Sussex were coordinated by East Sussex County Council's Employment and Skills team, and the outline report was prepared by Fresh Ambition Ltd in collaboration with the team.

Each local area selected stakeholders for group discussions and one-to-one consultations, with the survey disseminated through direct outreach and via partner networks.

Stakeholder engagement data sources comprised MS Forms surveys, Teams-based consultations transcribed using automated tools, Mentimeter outputs, in person consultation.

In East Sussex the team held Get Sussex Working Plan workshops for the following Skills East Sussex groups:

- Joint Construction & Built Environment and Engineering & Manufacturing Task Group
- Joint Creative, Cultural, Digital and Media and Visitor Economy Task Group
- Health and Social Care Task Group (Sussex-wide coverage)
- East Sussex Adult Learning Network
- Apprenticeships East Sussex
- Additional workshop for Sussex Council of Training Providers (SCTP) members (Sussex-wide coverage)

The team undertook 18 stakeholder interviews and collated 75 survey responses.

User voice was an important aspect of the stakeholder consultation with 68 inputs from young people and adults via interviews and small focus groups. Themed questions for surveys, groups and 1:1s were developed around the policy priorities outlined in the Get Britain Working White Paper, including employer engagement, workforce inclusion, and labour market barriers. The resultant data (much in the form of open text responses) was then analysed using a thematic framework. The themes presented in this report were informed by this analysis, shaped to align with the strategic aims of the Get Britain Working programme, to support the local plan.

Secondary stakeholder insights from the 2023 Connected Futures Hastings Research, which involved peer-to-peer engagement with 450 young people, 91 employers, and 84 stakeholders in Hastings and East Sussex, identified systemic barriers to young people's social mobility and economic prosperity. High level findings are included in the stakeholder report.

Confidentiality and data integrity were ensured through secure data handling, participant consent protocols and anonymisation of texts.

2. Stakeholder group – summary of insights and perspective

The below table provides a top-level summary of the insights and perspectives from a number of stakeholder groups, this includes challenges, current landscape as well as suggested solutions.

Stakeholder Group	Unique Perspective/ Relevant Insights
Local Employers	• Employers report a lack of work-ready skills and behaviours among young people • Employers' needs often conflict with young people's aspirations. • Incentives (financial or resource) would enable employers to host apprenticeships/work experience etc • Employers need to adapt to change to differing ways of working / learning • Concern over managing complex needs in small businesses/teams who lack HR/senior staff with the right knowledge or training • Strong support for job carving/tailored induction • Struggles with retention where wage expectations differ • Current financial climate means it is a challenge to upskill workers to allow progression • Siloed relationships with providers – myriad of information and lack of one-stop shop to see it all in one place (clarity of programmes – what, where, how, when) • Cross sector brokerage and coordination would be beneficial -Transform and SES cited – increase promotion and knowledge amongst sectors. • Open to new models and ways of working (eg creative sector – shared work experience to address micro nature of the sector)
Education	• Learners lack knowledge of LMI and careers progression pathways once in work • Demand for apprenticeships outstrips supply • Need for structured employer links • Curriculum often misaligned with job market demands - support for collaborative curriculum development to address this • SEND learners face transition challenges – insufficient understanding or fear of reasonable adjustments Improved links between schools/VCSE and health are needed

Employment Support Providers	• Demographics of job seekers has changed – more complex and significant needs and vulnerabilities • Difficulties placing clients due to employer misinformation or misunderstanding • Young people, those with caring responsibilities and over 50s are most underserved by current employment system • Need for coaching/121 bespoke support, not just signposting • Childcare/caring responsibilities are a barrier to progression and maintaining employment • Losing essential benefits can discourage upskilling or seeking better-paid roles • Poor feedback loop limits progress tracking • Integration of DWP, health and housing is key • Data sharing/CRM to support client journey – to avoid telling their story multiple times.
Voluntary & Community Sector	• Complex needs require intensive engagement • Geographical accessibility is a substantial challenge • Need for inclusive employer toolkits • Discrimination and access barriers persist • Need for wrap-around models with health, housing and work • Limited funding currently available for supported placements • Short-term programme contracts reduce continuity of support • Job seekers lack necessary skills to maintain employment • Call for commissioning based on lived experience insight • Importance of VCSE sector inclusion in strategic skills and employment partnerships • Case conferencing and warm handovers to support client journey • Collaboration can be challenging due to competition for and reduction in available funding
Health Sector	• Employment can be a recovery tool Work • is a health outcome • Health professionals want clear employment information and referral options • Social Prescribing - embedding employment into health spaces and provision

	• People with long term health conditions need continuity of support
• Recovery trajectories do not match current programme funding models
• Employment boosts self-esteem but can destabilise benefits
• Careful management of phased return to work needed across the board
• Integration with local VCSE and employers underdeveloped
• GPs need to be a core part of the employment conversation and networks – health often considered a missing voice
• Joint commissioning and delivery of programmes
• Ageing population offers an opportunity to reimagine role for retirees to provide mentoring support for new entrants to the labour market
• Frontline Primary Care staff have an important role to play – those who issue fit notes, receptionists, occupational health
• Social prescribers need to understand the benefits of employment and who to refer patients to for support
Local Government	• Need for joint work with DWP VCSE Health and training/Employment support providers to address unemployment
• Importance of encouraging employers to offer opportunities for job seekers/young people
• Social value procurement is a powerful tool for leveraging jobs and training
• Workforce/LMI data is underused in planning
• Seasonal, low density and low skilled, low paid roles are dominant, although do provide valuable entry routes and experience for young workers
• Need to be raising aspirations at an early point in disadvantaged geographies, especially where there is multigenerational unemployment
• Consistent, ongoing support for disadvantaged cohorts such as Care Experienced and SEND young people should be prioritised
• Connect to Work / Skills Bootcamps provide opportunities but loss of UKSPF will be a problem as it helps those very far from the labour market. What funding will fill this gap?
• Working with employers to support their growth is essential. Need to make sure they have clear channels for information about training, HR support, recruitment options

	• Pooled budgets and joined up planning needed
	• Challenge of aligning with differing accountability structures and funding
	• Employment and skills should be factored into all key local authority plans as a cross-cutting theme (housing, health, infrastructure, transport etc) to ensure that opportunities are leveraged to support skills and jobs
	• Simplified referral routes
	• LAs provide a coordinating role for partnerships/groups
Adult user Voice	• Location and transport key to participation • Job market sparse, especially in coastal areas – not well suited to those with additional needs • Lack of awareness/clear signposting of support available • Instability of jobs (e.g. seasonal, short term etc) is a disincentive • Need for more flexible/empathetic workplaces over more training – barriers include inflexible hours, lack of childcare, transport • Access to locally based employers is needed • Prefer trusted providers for support • Housing is a challenge. Hard to find affordable rent near where the jobs are. • Homelessness is a barrier to working. If you have unstable housing it is hard to pin down a job • Employer attitudes are sometimes not optimum, they can lack understanding and empathy about challenges some adults face and dont know about things that can help like (eg reasonable adjustments, access to work) • Need for advocacy and benefits guidance • Poor experiences with mainstream provision • Once stop shop model preferred for employment support programmes for ease of access and support. They need support but dont want to navigate which programme would be right for them • System wide coordination and better collaboration needed • Online only or centralised services often a barrier for many

Young People User Voice	• Anxiety around failure and lack of experience • Peer mentoring – highly valued • Lack of knowledge and support on job application process • Inadequate careers preparation and limited awareness of local job opportunities and progression pathways • Limited work experience - opportunities are scarce and often inequitable • Confidence, physical/mental health conditions and social isolation are key barriers to employment • Roles requiring experience exclude most young people – is the experience requirement necessary or can it be taught? • Frustration with service inconsistency and jargon • Desire for exploratory informal workplace experiences • Employers need better training/information on how to support young people, especially those who are neurodivergent/additional needs • Value continuity and personal relationship with advisors • Digital tools are helpful if co-designed from the outset • Insufficient support for neurodivergent and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) young people to find employment. • Late identification SEND and neurodivergent needs can hinder outcomes and negatively impact young people. • Not enough support for transition from education to employment. • Young people are underrepresented in decision-making and therefore do not reflect the diversity of groups such as Care Experienced, SEND or those who have missed education. • Inconsistency in services and funding for young people leads to missed opportunities to access practical guidance, mentorship and support tailored to their needs.

2.1 Understanding employment barriers

Stakeholders in East Sussex identified multiple, complex and interconnected challenges that prevent many residents from entering or staying in work. These include long-term physical and mental health conditions, low confidence and lack of motivation, caring responsibilities, housing instability, lack of or low qualifications and digital exclusion. These barriers are even greater for individuals with SEND, social care experience, insecure immigration status, long-term unemployment or little work experience and for those living in deprived rural or coastal areas.

These are not one-off issues; rather, they accumulate over time and reinforce each other, leaving people stuck in cycles of disadvantage. Many services are not set up to respond flexibly to these realities, particularly when people's needs are hidden or frequently change.

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

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

Often, applicants do not meet employer needs due to insufficient job ready skills, such as communication, customer services, workplace professionalism, or because they lack technical expertise and qualifications.

"If you can build the confidence, the communication skills and the aspirations of a young person or an adult, that's priceless, because actually the rest of it then will come quite naturally in my experience" – VCSE sector (CXK).

Working expectations or requirement may differ from business needs or prevailing operating models. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, approaches to communication and perspectives on employment, such as work life balance, flexibility, hybrid working and reasonable adjustment requirements, have further contributed to this disparity.

SES Task Group employers noted that limited access to information on employment support programmes, financial incentives or resources hinders their ability to employ and support staff, especially young people and those with additional needs or health conditions. The current economic climate and increases to National Minimum Wage (NMW) and National Insurance (NI) were also cited as a challenge when employing, with some pausing recruitment or becoming more risk adverse. Wage incentives such as those on the Kickstart scheme (2020-2022) or for apprentices were noted as a way of mitigating this.

"For people that have no experience. In order for a business to take that risk, we would need funding. If it's only partial funding or whatever because we need some kind of basis in order to say that to my bosses, we've mitigated that risk is

only going to cost us £6 an hour instead of £12 an hour for the first six months while we're trialling". - Employer (SES Task Group).

Limited capacity of small employers and a lack of large employers contributes to unstable or scarce job opportunities. Stakeholders fed back that smaller employers, without significant HR functions, are not always able to explore the myriad of employment support programmes or put in the necessary support in place for people with additional needs in the workplace. Seasonal, short-term, and part-time work, especially in coastal areas, was also cited as a particular concern.

Young people, particularly those who are NEET (not in education, employment or training), often experience isolation, low confidence, unclear job pathways, limited support, and a lack of adult role models.

"Navigating the employers and what they're asking for is the hardest thing because they ask for experience that no young person could feasibly have". Young person's focus group participant.

Insights from the Connected Futures Hastings project reinforced these findings – transitions from education to employment are fragmented, careers advice can be inconsistent, and local opportunities and labour market awareness are limited. Young people identify that opportunities to access work experience are crucial in helping them to develop practical skills, build confidence and stand out to employers.

"I just think there needs to be more opportunities, better training and better preparing people for how to do these things because you only really get help as a young person to get a job if you actively seek it out." Young persons focus group participant.

Many stakeholders reported that services can be fragmented or challenging to access or locate. Individuals may interact or 'bounce' between multiple agencies and repeat their information several times without a coordinated plan in place. This is particularly hard for those with limited digital access or who lack a support network.

Geographical accessibility can significantly restrict access to support services and employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas where public transportation may be unreliable, or on the coast, where transport costs present substantial barriers. Inadequate road infrastructure, high parking fees, and a general lack of transportation options, especially for individuals with low incomes, can further limit access to the workforce.

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

2.2 Labour Market Needs

Business recruitment and retention challenges

Employers across East Sussex face ongoing recruitment challenges, particularly in health and social care, hospitality, logistics, construction and hospitality. Emerging growth sectors such as retrofit, digital, AI and professional services remain less visible to job seekers and young people due to lack of information.

While many businesses want to improve diversity and create more inclusive workplaces, many report limited confidence or practical knowledge about how to do so. This is particularly the case for small and medium-sized enterprises.

"We're told to engage young people, but no one trains us how." — Small business employer

"It's not just hard skills – it's how to act in a workplace, how to manage anxiety." — Education provider

Employers that engaged in the consultation via the SES Task Groups frequently cited that they are committed to supporting, young people, individuals with additional needs or health challenges, and former prisoners in joining their workforces. However, the majority of employers in the county are SMEs, many of them microbusinesses, and this presents challenges. Many lack the capacity and knowledge to provide the appropriate support.

Inclusive employer toolkits, an on-call employer advice service and access to a one stop shop of information on the myriad of organisations and support available were noted as helpful tools to address this. Those that proactively build partnerships reported positive experiences. The county council's Transform Service was highlighted as a valuable resource, offering impartial and tailored support to SMEs, particularly on accessing apprenticeships.

Young people with additional needs, including those with mental health issues, special education needs or from care backgrounds, often feel unprepared for work. Employers, in turn, lack the resources to provide structured, supported placements. This mismatch leads to placement failures or missed opportunities.

The Sussex LSIP Inclusive Pathways report (2023) highlights that traditional recruitment processes often disadvantage neurodivergent applicants, and there is a clear need for guidance on making reasonable adjustments and accessible jobs design.

There is a mismatch in East Sussex between the needs of employers and the local workforce. Although there are vacancies, especially in health, care, construction and emerging green sectors, many residents face barriers that prevent them from accessing or progressing in these roles. In addition, some training and employment

pathways are misaligned with the skills currently in demand. There is also a gap between jobseekers' expectations and those of employers. For example, some young people may have job expectations that are not aligned with available opportunities, while employers often expect job seekers to be job ready even at entry level.

"Some young people aspire to careers without understanding the qualifications or steps required" – Local authority representative on care experienced young people

The county's ageing population means a shrinking working-age base alongside increased demand for care and health-related roles. SES stakeholders identified an opportunity to engage older workers and retirees to support the development of new entrants to the labour market through mentoring and coaching.

Stakeholders recognised that effective partnerships and collaboration depend on coordinated efforts. Skills East Sussex and the Sector Task groups were identified as a robust framework for advancing employer engagement, partnership development and alignment of skills training and employment in key sectors. They also pointed out that a local approach is needed in order to ensure that opportunities are seized.

"The way it's constructed here with oversight from the SES board and the 6 clear priorities I like and the way the task groups work within that, its quite clear. I like the collaboration between private sector business, voluntary sector and public sector. It is a well-developed structure that supports what we're all trying to achieve really well" DWP Officer

"What works in Brighton doesn't work in Bexhill – we need local answers." — Education provider.

Organisations that are engaged with the SES task groups noted that employers are more likely to participate when there is clear benefit to them. Programmes need to be framed around the labour market recruitment needs of East Sussex and involve employers in programme design. While many employers already engage positively with job seekers, those not involved in Skills East Sussex networks may require additional guidance, so current engagement initiatives should be better promoted.

"Just by knowing you [officer from the ESCC employment and skills team], if I if I don't know where to get something or how to do it, I can speak to you. And if you're not the right person, the chances are you know the right person. And within days I've got an answer to how I might be able to proceed with a project or whether there's no support there or whatever so yeah, like I said, as far as the support there, I think the support is relatively flawless. I just don't think enough people know about the support." East Sussex employer and SES task Group member interview.

East Sussex task group employers acknowledge their role in supporting workforce development and addressing current challenges. They spoke positively about engagement with the Careers Hub as a way to engage with schools, teachers and young people. Stakeholders noted that the current education curriculum needs to better align with the reality of the world of work to support understanding of the labour market, and to offer consistent opportunities for young people and businesses to engage with each other. It was noted that careers exposure often starts too late, limiting young people's understanding of sector pathways and progression beyond entry-level roles.

"There's got to be a step change in industry because not everyone that comes out of college is going to be a fully skilled engineer. That's where we add the context. And I think that that's where Industry, whether it knows or not, needs to make that step change to actually start out reaching more and engaging with the colleges and being a constant throughout the education career of the students." East Sussex Manufacturing employer.

2.3 Reaching and supporting priority groups

Stakeholder insights consistently identified several key cohorts that require targeted support to access of sustain employment or training in East Sussex. These include:

- **Young people**, particularly those not in education, employment or training (NEET), care leavers, and those with SEND or mental health challenges.
- **Economically inactive and unemployed individuals**, facing multiple barriers to employment such as poor mental health, addiction recovery, or long-term health conditions
- **Older workers**, face workforce exit, age-related bias, health issues, and limited upskilling opportunities.
- **Disabled and neurodivergent people** often face employer uncertainty about reasonable adjustments and systemic access barriers.
- **Parents and unpaid carers** are impacted by high childcare costs and limited flexible working options.
- **Global majority communities, migrants and refugees**, many of whom possess high qualifications but may encounter challenges related to language proficiency, credential recognition, and access.
- **Rural residents**, both younger and older, who are affected by limited transport links and restricted digital access.
- **Adults with low skills on low incomes** in insecure work or facing benefit-related disincentives to progression.

Stakeholders were clear that some groups face additional, and often overlapping, challenges in accessing employment.

Young people

Young people in East Sussex can often encounter difficulties entering the labour market as a result of insufficient personalised guidance, limited opportunities for work experience and a lack of clear career pathways. Young people living in poverty, with SEND or who have experienced the care system are particularly affected; they frequently do not receive adequate support to become employment ready. To better support these groups, closer cooperation among education providers, the VCSE sector and health services is essential.

Provision at Entry Level, Level 1 and 2 for young people who are NEET, have SEND, or require re-engagement and employability support is currently limited. This lack of comprehensive support at foundational levels may result in many young people facing persistent barriers to education and employment, limiting their ability to acquire essential skills for the workforce. Over time, these constraints can lead to reduced opportunities for career advancement, lower earning potential, and increased risk of social isolation. Expanding tailored programmes and interventions would not only address immediate gaps but also foster long-term resilience and empowerment, enabling young people to participate more fully in society and achieve sustainable personal and professional growth.

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

"Most training and learning doesn't really do anything in helping you get a job as a young person, unless you have hard qualifications, A levels, Degrees – things I physically cannot and will never achieve." – Young person

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

Economically inactive and unemployed individuals

The economically inactive and unemployed population in East Sussex is diverse. Many are facing multiple barriers to employment such as poor mental health challenges, ongoing addiction recovery, or long-term health conditions. Some have lost confidence after long absences from the workforce, and others are discouraged by repeated failures. Many are hidden from mainstream services and do not engage with traditional jobcentre offers. Some individuals avoid conventional support services, which can be perceived as impersonal or inaccessible.

These barriers can deeply affect their well-being and reduce opportunities for sustainable employment. The most effective engagement occurs through approaches that prioritise active listening, peer-led outreach, mentoring, participation in panels sharing lived experience and targeted, personalised and community-based interventions. These strategies help rebuild trust, foster social

connections, and gradually restore self-belief, ultimately improving individuals' prospects for re-entering employment and contributing positively to the local economy. Stakeholders agreed that connecting VCSE employment services with health care and establishing clear referral pathways is essential.

"It's not just about finding a job. It's about managing pain, energy, confidence." — Participant with a health condition

"Co-production works when it's not rushed, when we're treated like equals." — *VCSE facilitator*

"You can't build confidence if you're thrown in the deep end with no support." — *SEND specialist*

Overall, stakeholders emphasised that re-engaging inactive individuals requires time. To build confidence and enter (or re-enter) the workforce, a personalised, integrated approach is needed. Short-term interventions are rarely enough.

Older workers

Older workers, particularly those over 50, encounter a complex set of challenges when re-entering the workforce. These can include health concerns, changes in personal circumstances such as caregiving responsibilities, persistent age-related biases in hiring and advancement, limited access to or familiarity with new digital technologies, and a shortage of flexible or part-time positions that accommodate evolving needs.

"We need joined-up working... not just one project doing its bit, but councils, services, charities, and employers all working together." – Older job seeker

Despite these obstacles, organisations greatly benefit from the depth of experience, reliability, and unique perspectives that older employees provide. Their institutional knowledge and problem-solving skills often lead to improved team performance and innovation. Employers can make a significant impact by building truly inclusive workplaces. This includes implementing targeted digital skills training programs, designing roles with flexibility in mind, and actively combating ageism through policies and culture. When older workers are involved as mentors, they help accelerate the professional development of younger staff, foster confidence, and promote valuable intergenerational learning. Ultimately, such support not only enhances workplace productivity and morale, but also creates more resilient and adaptable organisations.

Disabled and neurodivergent people

Disabled and neurodivergent people continue to encounter significant obstacles when entering or re-engaging with the workforce. These barriers include a lack of tailored recruitment processes, limited workplace understanding of neurodiversity, and insufficient access to reasonable adjustments. As a result, many are excluded from meaningful employment, impacting their financial security, social connections and sense of purpose.

Yet, when organisations invest in accessible career pathways and foster genuinely inclusive cultures, the benefits extend far beyond the individual. Businesses gain from diverse perspectives, enhanced problem-solving, and increased innovation. Supporting disabled and neurodivergent workers, through targeted outreach, flexible roles, and reasonable adjustments, can unlock untapped potential, build resilient teams, and strengthen community cohesion. By removing structural and attitudinal barriers, we can ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute, thrive and shape a more equitable local economy.

Stakeholders have highlighted the need for proactive outreach, greater employer awareness of reasonable adjustments and support for navigating digital and AI driven recruitment processes.

"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

"Joining up... making sure organisations can support an individual through a journey... sharing information to support those individuals."- SCTP representative

Parents and unpaid carers

Parents and unpaid carers experience a unique set of impacts, balancing employment aspirations with the demands of caregiving often leads to interrupted careers, limited job progression and financial insecurity. The emotional strain of managing both roles can affect mental wellbeing and confidence, making re-entry to the workforce daunting. They can be e impacted by high childcare costs and limited flexible working options. However, as awareness grows and employers increasingly adopt family-friendly policies, new opportunities emerge. Expanding access to flexible hours, remote work and job-share schemes enables carers to participate more fully in the labour market without compromising their responsibilities at home.

Additionally, targeted support services, peer networks, and tailored job matching can empower carers to upskill, regain confidence, and pursue meaningful employment. By embracing inclusive practices and harnessing the potential of this often-overlooked group, organisations and communities can benefit from their resilience, adaptability and valuable life experience.

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

Global majority communities, migrants and refugees

Global majority communities, migrants and refugees frequently face significant obstacles in accessing employment opportunities.

"I can't apply for jobs because my visa doesn't allow me – it's a trap." — Migrant support worker

Even when holding advanced qualifications and significant professional experience from their home countries, these individuals often struggle to find roles that reflect their skillsets. Challenges such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with UK recruitment practices, and the lack of recognition for overseas qualifications can result in underemployment or joblessness. In addition, visa restrictions and lengthy bureaucratic processes can hinder both job search efforts and employers' willingness to offer positions.

By investing in targeted outreach, flexible training options, and inclusive recruitment practices, organisations can tap into the resilience, adaptability and diverse perspectives that refugees and EAL individuals bring. In turn, this not only addresses skills shortages but also adds richness to the cultural fabric of the workforce and community.

"Community hubs such as the Links Project in Hastings and the Sanctuary Café in Eastbourne, that combine ESOL, employment, and wellbeing support have delivered strong results." – Local Authority representative

Adults with low skills or low incomes

Adults with low skills or low incomes, and in insecure employment face persistent barriers to progression that are often compounded by benefit-related disincentives. The precariousness of their work means they are less likely to access training or development opportunities, and the fear of losing essential benefits can discourage upskilling or seeking better-paid roles. Many are caught in a cycle where taking on additional hours or responsibilities leads to only marginal financial gains, or in some cases, leaves them worse off.

To address these challenges, tailored interventions are essential—such as flexible, locally accessible training linked directly to career advancement, clearer information about in-work benefits, and personalised guidance to manage transitions between benefits and employment. Establishing stronger links between employers, training providers, and support agencies can empower individuals in

this cohort to build skills and confidence, ultimately enabling sustainable progression out of low-wage, insecure work.

More broadly, the low workforce skills levels were recognised as having wider implications for economic growth and job creation locally.

'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

Improving the skills of residents was seen not only to have benefits to individuals, but to the local economy as a whole, supporting the potential to attract businesses into the county and to raise the aspirations of adults and young people. This was described as a 'chicken and egg' scenario – new businesses can encourage higher skills and aspirations, and higher skilled workers can attract new businesses.

Rurality

Rural residents, including both younger and older individuals, often experience unique barriers to employment and inclusion. Limited transport connections can isolate these communities, restricting access not only to job opportunities but also to essential services and training programmes. In areas where public transport is infrequent or prohibitively expensive, the practical challenge of simply reaching interviews or workplaces can be insurmountable.

Compounding these issues, weak digital infrastructure or low rates of digital literacy further disadvantage rural jobseekers, making it harder to search for roles, complete applications, or pursue online qualifications. As a result, talented individuals in rural areas are frequently underrepresented in the labour market, and their potential contributions to the local economy and society are left untapped. Addressing these challenges through targeted investment in transport and digital access is essential to ensure rural residents are not left behind.

Strategies for inclusivity and tailored provision

Stakeholders called for more holistic, person-centred services, particularly for young people, and those with mental and physical health conditions, neurodiversity or SEND, or caring responsibilities. The strongest feedback was around the need for continuity, trust, and services that reflect real lives.

The LSIP reports reinforce the need for more inclusive recruitment and training practices. For example, supported internships and on-the-job coaching have been successful for young people with SEND, especially when employers receive guidance and peer support.

"People's circumstances now are so varied and nuanced that one to one support seems to us to be the thing that is necessary." VCSE representative

Examples of good practice

East Sussex has examples of integrated support that tackles health, housing, and work readiness together; local travel funds for rural jobseekers; and confidence building programmes that blend practical skills with personal development. **Moving on up, Work and Health Programme, Sector-based Work Academies (SWAPs) and the Homelessness Prevention Employment Service,** were frequently cited by stakeholders as helping priority groups take steps towards employment. Some of these schemes are no longer funded but finding ways of continuing the best elements of them was strongly advocated by stakeholders.

"We launched a 50+ SWAP campaign following the great resignation after COVID... we called it 'Your Experience Matters'... and that yielded a lot of positive outcomes." – FE Provider

Steps to Success was cited as an effective programme for engaging young people at risk of becoming NEET. Pupils on Free School Meals (an indicator of poverty), persistently absent or with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) were provided with an individualised approach of careers coaching and tailored work experience, with proven impact in supporting their transitions post-16.

"If you had like a list of children and you see someone who is probably like me, really bad attendance, not great grades, I would pick them for this, because I feel like you could improve that and that's going to change the trajectory of the rest of their lives" Steps to Success longitudinal case study participant.

The Youth Employment Service (YES) works with NEET young people aged 16-18 and is seen as critical in providing an individualised approach. The service excels in identifying and understanding at-risk youth but lacks access to adequate provision to refer young people to and enable them to take steps towards further training, apprenticeship or employment.

"I like the Youth Employability Service (YES). They have a great team and provide a great service" – young person's focus group participant.

"YES is a very good service. They have helped me as much as they possibly could." – Young person

"Youth employability service has helped lots of my friends." – Young person

2.4 Employer engagement and workforce inclusion

Perspectives on business engagement

Stakeholders fed back that there is a lack of reasonable adjustments readily available in workplaces as standard, including from application and interview stage. Some people only feel able to work in the third sector peer-led organisations that understand their health needs and are supportive of them.

Some stakeholders reported that AI and automated recruitment and screening systems, particularly used by larger employers, disadvantage individuals who are less connected to the labour market. Feedback indicated that candidates, who had completed pre-employment courses, were required to complete pre-screening tests, and that the use of specific words or requests for reasonable adjustments excluded them from progressing with the application process. Additionally, online application processes can be challenging to navigate, and in some cases, who have been unsuccessful are unable to reapply through the platform.

'She said she was unable to go any further after she added reasonable adjustments [to the recruitment application].' Pre-employment provider

"There's a lack of suitable and supportive employment pathways... even though the rhetoric is often very positive from employers... unreasonable and unnecessary recruitment policies and practices prevent that from happening."- VCSE

"Employers just having more understanding of disabilities... It's like, no, I'm not lazy. I do want to do this. I just need help." – Young person

Employers involved in the stakeholder feedback expressed a willingness to support inclusive employment but highlighted practical and cultural barriers. Smaller businesses often lack dedicated HR capacity and feel under-equipped to take on candidates with additional support needs. While many are open to employing a more diverse workforce, they are unsure where to begin or how to navigate the support landscape.

 "We want to do more, but we don't know where to start or who to speak to." — SME employer

"There's a lack of suitable and supportive employment pathways... even though the rhetoric is often very positive from employers... unreasonable and unnecessary recruitment policies and practices prevent that from happening."- VCSE

"We've got the roles, but not the resources to mentor someone properly." — Local employer

Stakeholders noted that business engagement efforts are often fragmented or short-term, with little continuity or follow-up. This creates confusion and disengagement. There is a clear appetite for more consistent employer-facing support and clearer communication about the benefits and practicalities of inclusive recruitment.

"You build up a head of steam working with people and then contracts end… there needs to be some longevity in the approach." – Local education provider

The **Transform service** was cited as a way of working with employers to help them navigate government funded programmes like apprenticeships and skills training, as well as an effective vehicle to deploy apprenticeship levy transfer as a financial incentive. It provides an example of 'one-stop shop' employer engagement that enables impartial signposting to a number of different programmes according to employer need.

Support needed to diversify and expand hiring practices

Larger employers reported better awareness of initiatives such as supported internships and Access to Work funding but often face internal challenges in scaling inclusive practice across departments or sites.

Employers identified several areas where they would welcome support. There was a strong demand for inclusive employer toolkits and practice support for employers to de-risk and support them to take on employees who may need additional support or adjustments. Other areas highlighted by stakeholders include:

- Advice on making reasonable adjustments for candidates with disabilities or health conditions
- Help designing inclusive job descriptions and interview processes
- Clarity around legal responsibilities and funding available for support in the workplace
- Peer learning opportunities to share what works with other local employers

"We've had great results with supported interns, but it took a lot of trial and error." – Public sector employer

"Sometimes just having someone to call makes all the difference." – Local employer

"Access to these groups [priority groups] is not a problem… it's having the time and the resource to be able to set this up — that's the crunch." - Local employer

Insights from LSIP and Connected Futures Hastings reports also underline the value of employer networks and co-designed placement models, particularly for young people with additional needs or those seeking their first experience of the

workplace. New programmes like Connect to Work offer opportunities and some funding to support employers to embed more inclusive workplace practices.

Many employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, continue to view recruitment as a considerable financial and operational risk. Concerns frequently centre around the costs associated with onboarding, uncertainty about whether candidates are truly ready for the workplace, and a lack of sustained support to aid retention. These factors contribute to cautious hiring behaviours and a hesitancy to engage with formal employment programmes unless they are accompanied by robust, locally responsive wraparound support.

Stakeholders suggested the growth of a more structured and visible employer engagement offer, through a single access point like Transform, including dedicated advisers, training on inclusive employment and recruitment support.

Employer appetite for work experience, apprenticeships and flexible training

While enthusiasm for offering work experience and apprenticeships was high, practical barriers persist. These include limited capacity to supervise new entrants, uncertainty around expectations, and concerns about the impact on productivity. Some businesses, particularly in hospitality, creative, cultural and digital, and health and care, noted that current apprenticeship models are not always well suited to their operational needs.

Nonetheless, there is strong interest in more flexible and responsive models, such as bite-sized work tasters, shared apprenticeships, and tailored pre-employment preparation. Employers also expressed support for models that provide continuity and light-touch support before and during placements. The emerging Foundation Apprenticeships offer provides an opportunity for employers to engage in this way.

"Short tasters work well, it's less pressure on us and gives people a chance to see what the job is really like." —Construction employer

"We'd like to offer more opportunities, but we need help setting them up properly." — Tourism employer

"They [SMEs] need support in understanding what each option is and what's best for their business… demystifying apprenticeships for them… peer-to-peer mentoring support." –Sussex LSIP Lead

Financial incentives for hosting work experience or apprenticeships would be welcomed to increase the number of businesses offering opportunities. It was noted that apprenticeships can be a challenge for businesses to set up and manage, particularly if they have never done it before or are small/micro.

There is a clear opportunity to expand and sustain employer engagement by offering more tailored and supported options that reflect local business realities.

Examples of good practice:

Supported employment models that are already delivering locally for those with additional needs were cited as effective. Kickstart, Future Jobs Fund, Traineeships and Level 2 apprenticeships were given as examples of provision that have provided positive 'first rung' entry onto the jobs ladder. The new Foundation Apprenticeships may further enhance this offer.

The Transform Service was cited as an example of where bespoke support is key to supporting organisations fill employment and skills gaps in their current and future workforce, as well as providing financial incentives to employers through Apprenticeship Levy transfer.

The East Sussex Careers Hub plays a pivotal role in supporting employers by brokering meaningful relationships with schools and colleges to strengthen opportunities for young people to meet employers and gain workplace experience. Through structured employer support via Enterprise Advisers and established links to Industry Champions, and Cornerstone Employers, businesses help shape careers education and provide young people with valuable real-world insights. This model has been widely praised for offering employers a supported and strategic way to influence future workforce development. Additionally, the Open Doors initiative complements this work by giving students direct access to local workplaces, helping them explore career opportunities and understand the skills employers value, further reinforcing the connection between education and employment in East Sussex.

Steps to Success (see above) was also cited as an example of best practice, offering longer periods of bespoke work experience to young people identified as at risk of NEET.

2.5 Strengthening local collaboration, innovation and inclusion

Partnership working in employment and skills delivery

Stakeholders across East Sussex recognised that effective partnership working is essential to addressing the complex barriers people face in entering and sustaining work. Although there is strong strategic oversight and collaboration via Skills East Sussex, associated sector task groups, Apprenticeships East Sussex and the Adult Learning Network, further collaboration between local authorities, the VCSE sector and education providers can be vulnerable to disruption when funding or staff change.

 "We support the same person three times because no one else picks up the thread." — Local authority officer

"Real collaboration starts with trust – tech and forms come after." — Commissioning manager

In many cases, duplication and disconnection remain significant issues. Repeated assessments, inconsistent referrals, and lack of shared planning lead to missed opportunities and inefficiencies. There is a shared appetite for more joined-up delivery models, with multi-agency teams, shared outcomes, and aligned funding streams.

Education provider roles, curriculum alignment and funding

Education providers are key partners in preparing young people and adults for work. However, stakeholders noted a need for more responsive curriculum planning, especially to reflect employer needs in growth sectors such as care, construction, and green industries. While some colleges and training providers are working closely with local employers and Careers Hubs, others reported challenges aligning offer with demand.

"You can't copy and paste services – they have to reflect place." — Local authority representative

Funded provision for NEET young people and SEND transitions remain a particular concern. Despite the submission of a 'Gaps in Provision' funding request to the Department for Education, there are young people aged 16-18, many with additional needs, who are currently on waiting lists to access vocational courses or employability provision. There is a distinct lack of Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 vocational courses for young people to access.

Those with SEND often experience abrupt endings to support after leaving school or college, with limited progression into training or work. Improved transition protocols and closer coordination between education, health, and employment services are seen as vital.

"The SEND cohort... they're one of our highest cohorts of NEET young people... not necessarily having the skills or work experience to be successful in employment." – East Sussex County Council representative.

Health integration across stakeholders

Health professionals are often the first point of contact for individuals who could benefit from employability support. However, integration between health and employment systems is inconsistent. Stakeholders noted that Primary Care settings, mental health services and community health teams are not always aware of local employment offers and employability is rarely embedded as a health outcome.

"Staff are expected to deal with complex trauma without any training or supervision." — Youth service manager

"Locating an employment support coach in each GP practice… you'd get your money back really quickly on that." – Local employer

"We need joint working between health services and employability services… combined training and resources." – Housing support provider

The Future Skills Sussex LSIP (2024) highlights examples of integrated support, such as trauma-informed care and mental health-informed coaching models, that could be scaled across the county.

The Work Well Board for Sussex is exploring small pilot Work Well schemes that will start to test new approaches around health and employment referrals in Crawley, Hastings and Brighton that may offer models to roll out across the county to support better integration of existing employment support and health practice (e.g. around fit notes).

Good practice and potential innovation

Across East Sussex, stakeholders noted examples of effective practice where services are joined up, person-centred, and tailored to local contexts. Several highlighted the value of consistent, trusted relationships, whether through named support workers, community-based programmes, or wraparound delivery models. These approaches are most effective when they address the whole person, recognising the interconnection between health, housing, learning and employment.

"We don't need more pilots—we need the people who work with someone from beginning to end." — Local authority officer

"We need joined-up working... not just one project doing its bit, but councils, services, charities, and employers all working together." – Job support service

Integrated delivery models, such as co-located employment and health services or shared Youth Hubs, were seen by stakeholders as particularly effective, although not yet widespread. Connected Futures Hastings was frequently cited as an approach to involving those with lived experience in project design.

"We need to trust our local areas... local decisions for local people." – VCSE Partner

Supported internships and realistic work tasters also emerged as strong models for young people with SEND or those lacking work experience. Where placements were supported by well-briefed employers and dedicated mentors, stakeholders described improved outcomes and increased confidence among participants.

"Having a mentor in place made all the difference—it gave both us and the young person a safety net." — Employer

Other promising innovations included travel subsidy schemes for rural participants, an example being the Wheels to Work scheme (2013-2021) trauma-informed coaching in employment settings; and flexible outreach through community

venues. However, many stakeholders noted that these successes are often dependent on short-term funding or individual champions, raising concerns about sustainability.

The Homelessness Prevention Employment Service and Steps to Success were both identified as innovative preventative approaches to supporting transitions into employment.

Cross-sector collaboration and suggestions for improvement

There was strong support for improving collaboration across employment, skills, health and voluntary sectors. While pockets of good practice exist, particularly in communities where long-standing relationships have been built, many participants described current systems as fragmented. Information is often not shared, referral pathways are unclear, and different organisations may work with the same individuals without coordination.

"We're all pulling in the same direction, but with different maps. We need a shared route." — VCSE partner

Suggestions for improvement included creating more consistent multi-agency planning forums; enabling joint commissioning across services; one stop shops for employment support and training for unemployed people and for businesses, and introducing shared professional development, such as training on neurodiversity, trauma-informed practice, or inclusive communication. Stakeholders also called for improvements in data-sharing arrangements, led by clear protocols and client consent, rather than risk aversion.

"People fall through cracks because we don't know what each other is doing." — Careers adviser

Unrepresented stakeholders who can add value

Several groups were identified as underrepresented in the current stakeholder landscape. These included smaller faith-based and cultural organisations, which often serve as trusted anchors in communities experiencing disadvantage, and young carers or home-educated young people, whose employment pathways are less visible.

Stakeholders also called for more structured involvement from primary care professionals, such as GPs, social prescribers and link workers, who regularly support people facing both health and employment barriers but may not be connected to local labour market initiatives.

"We often pick up people at crisis point, but the GP saw them months earlier. That's the intervention point we're missing." — Employment adviser

Transferable programmes or models from other areas

A number of national and regional models, past and present, were cited as useful references for East Sussex. These included a joined up 'No Wrong Door' approach to service access, with effective referral across and between different agencies and organisations, including health, education and employment. Specialist models offering tailored support for neurodivergent individuals were also highlighted as particularly impactful in offering workplace coaching, job design advice, and neurodiversity awareness training for employers and practitioners. Inclusive employer toolkits, supported employment and supported internships were all highlighted as effective delivery.

Stakeholders also referred to proven models that had been funded in the past, including the Entry-to-Employment (E2E, 2003-2010) programme of individualised support for young people to help them into training or employment; and the Future Jobs Fund (2009-2012) and Kickstart (2020-2022) which provided incentives for employers to provide job opportunities.

While stakeholders were open to drawing on successful programmes from other areas or periods, they consistently emphasised that these must be adapted to local contexts, particularly the distinct needs of East Sussex's rural, coastal and economically disadvantaged communities.

"You can't just import a model and expect it to land, it has to reflect the place."
- Local authority representative

Stakeholders were clear: the challenge is not a lack of effective ideas, but rather the need for long-term investment, political leadership, effective coordination and a co-production approach that embeds these models into everyday delivery rather than treating them as time-limited pilots.

2.6 Monitoring progress and driving improvement

Local measures of success

Stakeholders across East Sussex strongly emphasised the need for a broader understanding of success that reflects the varied and often non-linear journeys people take into employment. While achieving job outcomes and qualifications is important, many stressed that these alone do not capture the full story. Progress might include small but significant steps such as building confidence, developing a daily routine, improving wellbeing, or engaging in volunteering or short work tasters.

"For some people, just turning up every week is a breakthrough. We need to count that." — VCSE support worker

Participants suggested that success should be assessed both at the individual level and across systems. For individuals, meaningful markers of progress might include sustained engagement over time, increased digital skills, improved mental health, or a growing sense of stability. At the system level, signs of success might involve better collaboration between services, more joined-up support, and smoother transitions between education, health and employment pathways.

There was also a call for greater use of qualitative data, such as participant case studies and personal stories, to complement standard performance measures. These forms of evidence, stakeholders argued, offer valuable insights into what is working, for whom, and why. They also help humanise delivery and policymaking, ensuring that decisions are grounded in real experiences rather than only numerical targets.

Suggestions for feedback mechanisms and planning

A recurring theme was the need to build stronger feedback loops into both service delivery and strategic planning. Many stakeholders and participants described being consulted on pilots or programmes but never hearing the outcome or seeing any follow-up action.

"They asked our opinion, but I never saw anything change." — Young person

To address this, stakeholders proposed more regular and transparent opportunities for service users to share their views, not as a one-off event but as part of ongoing dialogue. This could include check-ins during and after programme delivery, lived experience panels that shape service design, and clearer routes for individuals to see how their input has influenced decisions.

The Connected Futures Hastings researchers also proposed that existing decision-making mechanisms would benefit from diverse young people's voices to ensure the creation of more inclusive, supportive and effective pathways into the future workforce.

At a strategic level, there was appetite for more cross-sector reflection, bringing together partners to jointly review what is being learned, share challenges, and agree improvements. Some suggested that learning should be embedded in the culture of services, with space for experimentation and adaptation rather than solely focusing on compliance or output-driven funding.

Digital tools were mentioned as a helpful way to gather feedback from people who may not engage through formal mechanisms. However, stakeholders stressed that technology should enhance, not replace, relational and inclusive approaches to listening and learning.

Ultimately, there was a shared recognition that responsive, effective employment systems are those that listen, adapt and evolve. As one stakeholder reflected,

"We won't get better unless we're brave enough to listen—and act on what we hear."

3. Conclusions and local recommendations

Localised short-term and long-term priorities

Stakeholder feedback clearly highlighted the need for both immediate, practical improvements and longer-term structural change.

In the short term, priorities include improving transitions into employment for young people, particularly those with SEND or who are NEET, and strengthening support for people with health conditions, caring responsibilities, social care experience or insecure immigration status. Enhancing access to tailored employment services in rural and coastal areas, where transport and digital exclusion are particularly acute, is also essential.

Longer-term goals should focus on embedding a joined-up, inclusive system that enables sustained engagement and progression, as well as mechanisms for employers to engage. This means moving beyond siloed programmes towards integrated pathways that align employment, health, and education services. Investments in cross-sector infrastructure, such as shared case management, multi-agency delivery hubs, and locality-based navigation roles, are crucial to making these aspirations a reality.

Good practice and potential innovation

The consultation process revealed strong examples of what works across East Sussex.

The Careers Hub has continued to provide schools and colleges with training and resources to better support young people to understand the labour market and embed careers in the curriculum. It has provided schools with links to employers to provide Open Doors workplace visits and greater take up of work experience to ensure young people are getting a first taste of the world of work to support their career decision making.

Models that provide a tailored approach and early engagement were identified by stakeholders as effective and scalable. Steps to Success has evidenced success in identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET while still in school (those on Free School Meals, persistently absent from school and/or with SEND) and supporting them to transition successfully post-16.

The Youth Employability Service (YES) does a good job of working with individual young people who are NEET but needs greater access to provision for 16-18 year olds such as vocational qualifications and employability support to enable their progression.

Programmes like Moving on Up, Level Up, Homeless Prevention Employment Service and Support into Work, delivered in community settings, have provided a tailored approach to engaging the most vulnerable groups and supporting people into work.

Supported internships, specialist neurodiversity programmes, realistic work tasters and local travel funds were highlighted as practical interventions with demonstrable impact. Stakeholders also showed interest in adapting proven models from previous funding iterations (e.g. E2E, Future Jobs Fund and Kickstart).

Stakeholders flagged that devolved funds through Connect to Work, Skills Bootcamps and the potential of Youth Guarantee in future, if effectively deployed through a joined-up approach, could provide graduated opportunities to engage and support residents into employment, training and career progression. Foundation apprenticeships will also provide opportunities for young people taking their first step into employment.

Stakeholders identified the need for a 'No Wrong Door' approach to providing individuals with advice and support with effective signposting between health, education and employment services. This can be supported through local community-based infrastructure, including via healthcare settings, Family Hubs and Youth Hubs. As the DWP Jobs and Careers Service emerges, it will be important to ensure a joined-up approach, with potential for co-location where possible.

Employers are keen to support new initiatives but they need help, easy mechanisms and incentives to engage and offer training and recruitment opportunities. The Transform pilot has modelled an impartial way of working with employers to help them navigate government funded programmes like apprenticeships and skills training, as well as an effective vehicle to deploy apprenticeship levy transfer as a financial incentive. New programmes like Connect to Work offer opportunities to support employers through training and direct support such as access to HR or Occupational Therapy advice to embed more inclusive workplace practices and Growth Hubs, Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses all have important parts to play in working together to develop better joined up support

Finally, there was a strong consensus that new programmes and services must be sensitive to East Sussex's specific geography and demographics and that local people with lived experience must be involved in programme and service design, monitoring and evaluation.

Challenges

Despite positive examples, stakeholders noted a range of persistent barriers. Funding cycles remain short and fragmented, limiting the ability to plan and sustain effective interventions. Many promising initiatives are pilot-based, with no guarantee of continuation. Inconsistent commissioning practices and a focus on

outputs rather than outcomes can disincentivise the kind of patient, relational work that supports long-term change.

There are also systemic barriers to collaboration. Siloed information systems, unclear referral pathways, and varying levels of digital infrastructure all hinder joined-up delivery. Staff turnover, especially in smaller organisations, affects continuity of support. Several contributors emphasised that even strong partnership working is often dependent on individual relationships rather than embedded structures.

3.1 Calls to action for specific stakeholder groups

Local and strategic authorities are well-placed to lead strategic coordination and should continue to convene multi-agency partnerships with clear governance, shared goals, co-location of services and aligned funding. Commissioners should prioritise longer-term, outcomes-focused contracts that enable flexibility and innovation.

Employers must be supported to adopt inclusive recruitment practices through tailored advice, funding access, and peer learning opportunities.

Education and training providers should co-design curricula with employers and young people, ensuring routes into meaningful work are clearly visible and achievable.

Health services need to embed employability within their recovery and wellbeing frameworks, recognising work as a health outcome.

Meanwhile, VCSE organisations should be recognised not only as delivery partners but as key system influencers with deep community insight.

Finally, individuals with lived experience must be involved throughout, as co-designers, advisers, and evaluators. Their voices are essential to ensuring that services are grounded in real-world needs and experiences.

This report reflects the diverse insights and shared ambition of stakeholders across East Sussex. It highlights not only the complex challenges that many residents face in accessing and sustaining work, but also the creativity, commitment and collaborative spirit that exists across sectors. The path forward will require more than technical solutions, it demands strategic alignment, long-term investment, and the courage to centre lived experience in every stage of planning and delivery. With coordinated effort, mutual accountability, and a clear focus on inclusion, East Sussex has the potential to create a labour market that works for everyone, one that values contribution, supports progression, and responds to local realities. The findings and recommendations presented here provide a foundation for action that is both practical and aspirational, grounded in evidence and shaped by the voices of the community.

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