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Get West of England Working Plan

October 2025



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Mayor's Foreword

The West of England is where I am proud to call home. It is a place of talent, creativity and ideas. A place where people want to work, where businesses want to invest, and where communities support each other to thrive. Our region has enormous potential – potential we can further unlock by helping every resident access the opportunities and support they need to succeed.



WEST | HELEN GODWIN
OF ENGLAND | MAYOR OF THE
WEST OF ENGLAND

The region has a strong £53.7bn economy and the highest employment rate of any Combined Authority area, but challenges remain. Employment gaps persist for a range of groups including disabled people, women, and ethnic minorities. Long-term ill health and caring responsibilities account for almost half of economic inactivity. Child poverty is rising in parts of the region, and educational attainment for disadvantaged pupils lags behind national averages. Without action, these inequalities risk constraining growth and leaving many residents excluded from opportunities.

That is why this plan has been developed alongside our Growth Strategy. By supporting more people into work, we provide businesses with the skills they need and open up more chances for residents to build careers and increase their incomes, whilst ensuring the benefits of growth are shared across the region. At the same time, actions set out in our Growth Strategy are vital to achieving the employment ambitions of this plan, recognising that transport, housing, health, and childcare all shape people's access to opportunities.

The Get West of England Working Plan is all about tackling the labour market inequalities that persist here and making sure everyone in the West can benefit from our region's success. For me, this means young people are healthy and have clear pathways into the jobs of the future, women can work the hours they want

with access to affordable childcare, families are lifted out of poverty with higher household incomes, and employers can access the skilled workforce they need to grow and thrive.

This plan builds on the Government's devolution agenda, which is giving Mayors greater influence over local services and investment. It aligns with the NHS 10 Year Plan and the emerging strategies of the region's Integrated Care Boards, shifting focus from sickness to prevention and from hospital to community. By working with government and local partners we can bring services together, so they deliver more effectively for the people who need them.

The opportunities collaboration can bring are at the heart of this plan – and we can build on the strong foundation of partnership working we have across the region. Jobcentre Plus coaches and our Skills Connect teams are already working together to share insights and fill gaps in provision. The WorkWell programme is embedding work and health coaches into GP practices, and our close collaboration with Unitary Authorities ensures skills and employment support reaches every community. There is opportunity to work more closely with VCSE sector to reach those facing the greatest barriers to work and shape future provision that truly meets local needs.

By setting out the region's labour market priorities, this plan, in tandem with my Growth Strategy, offers a blueprint for change. It will help bring partners and resources together, focusing on what matters most – the needs of our residents. That's how we'll build a West of England that works for everyone.



Executive Summary

The Get West of England Working Plan (GWEWP) sets out how we as a region¹ will work together over the next ten years to tackle unemployment, economic inactivity, and labour market inequalities.

By 2035, the West of England aims to be a place where every resident can access good work, employers have the skilled workforce they need, and young people benefit from clear, inclusive pathways into education and employment.

The Plan identifies three interconnected strategic priorities, underpinned by two cross-cutting themes: working with employers to reduce vacancy rates and tackling employment and health inequalities.

1. Get more people into work – Focused on supporting economically inactive and unemployed people into work, particularly those with ill health, and groups facing persistent employment inequalities. **Key actions include:** building evidence on employment inequalities and automation, launching *Connect to Work* for those out of work due to health conditions, and exploring joint investment approaches with partners.

2. Get more people into better paid, more secure work – Recognising that people in low-paid, insecure jobs are more likely to cycle in and out of unemployment and that there are opportunities to prevent people from falling out of work as well as progress their careers.

Key actions include: expanding the *Skills Connect* “no wrong door” model, targeting outreach to those facing inequalities, and directing funding to support businesses and workers in both everyday and growth sectors.

3. Get more young people into education, employment or training – Recognising that we’re attracting top talent and have strong universities but there is need to ensure more young people, particularly those with additional needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds, fully benefit from the region’s opportunities.

Key actions include: expanding the Youth Guarantee, launching a child poverty strategy and conducting research to better understand barriers to attainment, and exploring opportunities to deliver careers advice from an earlier age.

In addition, the plan sets out some actions we will take to address systemic challenges:

- Formally setting up and launching the Get West of England Working Steering Group chaired by the West of England mayor.
- Developing a new regional skills strategy: delivering on the ambition of the Growth Strategy.
- Launching the Mayoral Priority Skills Fund² (MPSF) as a flexible funding mechanism to respond quickly to emerging regional challenges and opportunities, enabling partners to pilot innovative approaches and scale effective intervention.
- Further developing our evidence base, working with partners to build understanding of employment inequalities in the region and the impact of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- Implementing a regional data sharing agreement to enable integrated tracking of residents’ journeys.
- Strengthening our use of data to track participation and outcomes by protected characteristics and priority groups, ensuring programmes reach their intended audiences and reduce inequalities.

- Collaborating with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), local authorities, and partners to develop Neighbourhood Health and Care services, including accelerators in Woodspring and South Bristol, delivering joined-up, community-focused health, care, and wellbeing support
- Driving collaboration at regional level to develop services that work best for residents. For example, exploring how MCA and partner levers can best support Pride in Place investment from government.
- Working closely with the Business Board to strengthen engagement with employers across the region, building networks which support businesses to employ people who are out of work due to ill health or other factors.
- Working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department for Education (DfE) to identify national policy changes that will help improve the welfare, employment and skills system for our residents.



Introduction

Why this plan is needed

The West of England has a strong and diverse economy which has outpaced national growth over the past 15 years with a unique mix of assets, people and creativity. We are playing a strong role in the Government's growth mission, but we do not simply want to achieve growth for its own sake – we want to achieve a better, healthier future for everyone in the West of England and prepare our workforce for big changes in the world of work. Getting more people into work and better paid, more secure work, is key to this.

While the West of England benefits from higher-than-average wages and more people in employment than other areas, too many of our residents are locked out of the labour market or working in low paid, insecure employment. This is often a waste of talent and potential and something we are determined to change. Evidence shows that people in work are happier, healthier and wealthier than those who are not. Employment provides financial independence, stability and a sense of purpose, helping to improve mental health and overall wellbeing as well as reducing health inequalities.

At the same time, children brought up in low-income households are more likely to be unhealthy, achieve lower grades at school and are less likely to progress into

positive outcomes on leaving school, creating a cycle of poverty that runs through generations. Furthermore, while we attract top talent and have strong universities, our educational attainment lags the national average, and too many young people are not fully benefitting from the region's opportunities.

This is why we welcome the Government's Get Britain Working White Paper which sets an ambition to raise the national employment rate to 80% by 2035 but also to halve the disability employment gap and reduce long term sickness related inactivity by at least one million people.

Employment provides financial independence, stability and a sense of purpose, helping to improve mental health and overall wellbeing as well as reducing health inequalities.



With a focus on joining up local work, health and skills support in ways that meet the needs of their area, the White Paper is built around six pillars:

- Transforming services for the economically inactive.
- Integrating health and employment support.
- Boosting skills for growth sectors.
- Improving childcare and caring provision.
- Driving employer demand for inclusive recruitment
- Leveraging data to track outcomes.

These align well with the Mayoral Combined Authority's (MCA) existing Employment and Skills Plan, the West of England Growth Strategy and the strategic plans made by our ICBs, including the Healthier Together 2040 vision. The relationship between employment and health is undisputed and goes both ways. People in work are more likely to have better health and people in better health are more likely to be in work. Therefore, by bringing together and co-ordinating employability and health services, we can achieve more than each can working alone. However, the lack of geographical alignment between the MCA, ICBs and our Local Authorities presents a real challenge to co-ordinating services on the ground which can result in gaps in provision, particularly in North Somerset.

Getting more people into work will benefit our people, and our economy, creating opportunities for all. But we can only do this

by working closely with our partners in local authorities, health, education and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sectors. Likewise, our plan recognises the vital role that employers of all sizes can play in supporting employment and health outcomes. We have many excellent employers who:

- Look after employee health.
- Provide good, secure work that pays above the living wage.
- Offer flexible working practices and fair recruitment.
- Develop their people.

These employers benefit from higher staff retention, lower levels of sickness and better productivity as a result. We need more employers to work in this way; but recognise the need to support them on this journey. Therefore, this plan has working with employers as a cross-cutting theme running across our priorities.

How we developed the plan






This plan sets out how we will shape the work, health and skills offer in the West of England to better support our residents. It covers Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES), Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset.

It builds on existing regional and local authority strategies and has been informed by comprehensive research and engagement with stakeholder groups including:

- **Nine cross-sector design workshops** (April–June 2025) – that brought together 121 stakeholders including employers, Further and Higher education, VCSE, health, unions and Jobcentre Plus.
- **Lived-experience focus groups** (August 2025) – which convened 28 residents with long-term health conditions, disabilities, caring duties or recent redundancy.
- **A youth peer-research programme** – which trained twelve 18–24-year-olds as peer researchers who completed 76 semi-structured interviews with young people that are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), feeding into the Youth Guarantee offer.
- **An online resident survey** (May 2025) – promoted via Skills Connect which collected 402 responses.

Our Focus and Alignment







From the evidence base, consultation work, and on-going discussions with our strategic partners, we have developed the following priorities for the Plan:

Priority		Cross-cutting	
	Get more people into work		Tackle employment and health inequalities 
	Get more people into better paid, more secure work and prevent people from falling out of the labour market		
	Get more young people into education, employment or training, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds		

The West of England Growth Strategy sets out how we will use our devolved powers and funding over the next ten years to drive growth and transform our region, building on our unique strengths and opportunities. The Strategy sets out a range of ambitions including to:

- Create 72,000 jobs across a range of sectors.
- Deliver 15% growth in our core economic sector strengths.
- Decrease the number of young people not in employment, education or training by 25%.

The Get West of England Working Plan will be essential to achieving these ambitions and ensuring our residents benefits from these aims.

Supported by enabling actions in the West of England Growth Strategy related to:					
Job creation 	Transport & Connectivity 	Housing 	Skills 	Green Jobs 	Child Poverty 

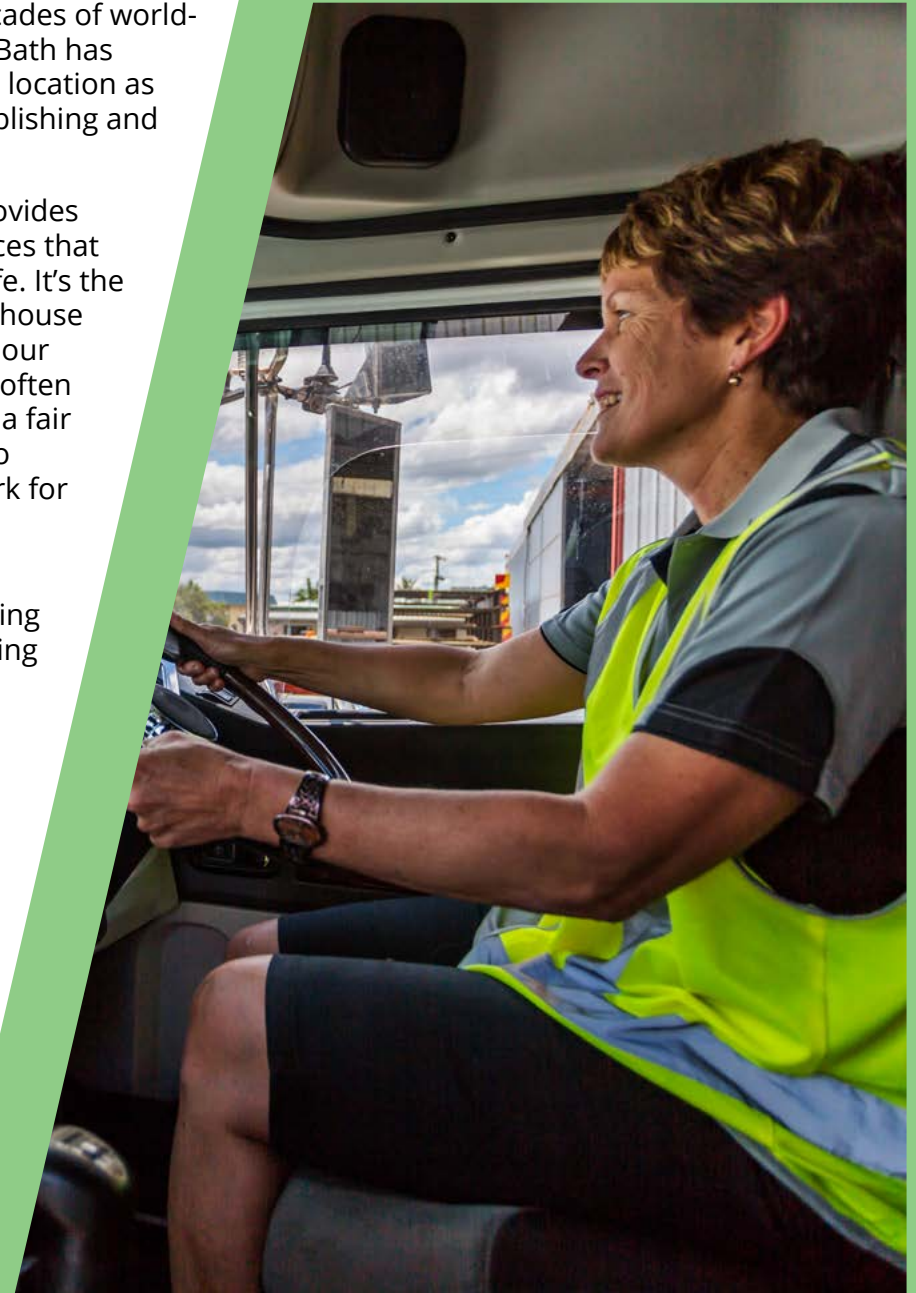
The Growth Strategy also sets out the region's priority growth sectors which will drive our growth potential:

- **Advanced Manufacturing** – the West of England is a national engine in advanced manufacturing and engineering. From composites and robotics to propulsion and smart materials, our R&D ecosystem drives innovation. Flagship investments like Airbus' Wing of Tomorrow tap into world-class expertise from the National Composites Centre, Bristol Composites Institute, and IAAPS at the University of Bath.
- **Digital & Technologies** – the region brings together frontier tech with commercial firepower. From AI and quantum to cyber and semiconductors, our globally competitive strengths fuel innovation across health, defence, finance, and advanced manufacturing. It hosts global tech giants like BAE Systems and Epic alongside cutting edge start-ups like Zero Point Motion or Ensilitech.
- **Clean Energy Industries** – this portfolio covers community energy, Small Modular Reactors, tidal, hydrogen, and advanced wind – the region is shaping the future of sustainable power. Rolls-Royce SMR is a preferred bidder for the UK's first Small Modular Reactor programme, backed by world-class R&D from the region's universities and the South West Nuclear Hub.
- **Creative Industries** – the West of England is one of the UK's most dynamic creative hubs, with global reach and deep roots in film, TV, and creative tech. Bristol's UNESCO Creative







City of Film status reflects decades of world-class screen production, and Bath has enormous appeal as a filming location as well as strengths in digital publishing and content production.

- **The Everyday Economy** – provides the essential goods and services that people rely on for everyday life. It's the jobs that care for us, feed us, house us, and move us and support our thriving visitor economy. Too often undervalued, but essential to a fair and functioning society. It also provides a vital route into work for many people.

The Growth Strategy highlights some of the region's most exciting investment opportunities, ranging from creative industry scale-ups and an AI supercluster to floating offshore wind, nuclear energy, digital technology, and rural productivity. These investments will play a vital role in transforming our region and creating new job opportunities. Our employment and skills offer is a crucial component of our priority actions to accelerate growth as we focus on equipping residents with the knowledge and expertise needed to shape the region's future.



As the overarching plan for the region, the Growth Strategy has six ambitions for growth, which can play an important role in tackling inactivity and unemployment as illustrated below:

Ambitions for Growth	Role in tackling inactivity and unemployment
 <p>Contributing to national economic growth helping our businesses succeed and creating jobs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By creating more and better paid jobs, our residents will have access to more opportunities where they can progress. • By increasing household incomes more people will be lifted out of poverty, health better health and life chances.
 <p>Better connectivity through public transport & active travel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By improving transport links more people will be able to get to work and educational opportunities.
 <p>Building affordable and attractive homes in sustainable communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By ensuring our homes meet modern standards, our residents will keep warm and save money on their bills, reducing ill-health and poverty.
 <p>Empowering residents with the skills to access the jobs that will shape our future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By improving the skills of our residents, more people will be able to access and progress in work.
 <p>Making the West of England the home for green jobs and green growth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By delivering green growth, our residents will benefit from green jobs, as well as a cleaner, healthier environment
 <p>Lifting children and families out of poverty in the West of England</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By lifting child and families out of poverty, we will ensure all young people have the opportunities to thrive, regardless of their background

Likewise, by getting more people into work, this plan can help us deliver these ambitions for growth. Achieving our ambitions will increase demand for labour in key areas such as transport and green skills. For instance, we will need more people to drive buses, retrofit homes and install green energy infrastructure to name but a few. This plan will help us fulfil these labour requirements by getting more people into work.

This Get the West of England Working Plan is a delivery plan for this overarching strategy and will make a particularly strong contribution to delivering the West of England Growth Strategy Priority Four and Six as illustrated below.

Alignment with Growth Strategy

Making a strong contribution to:

Priority 4: Empowering residents with the skills to access the jobs that will shape our future

Skills power growth – and the West of England is ready to lead.

We'll build a future-ready, diverse workforce that drives innovation, strengthens our everyday economy, and ensures no one is left behind. With national reforms and greater regional control, we'll shape an employment and skills system that meets tomorrow's economic demands.

By 2035, our young people will thrive, adults will access good jobs, and employers will find the talent they need. Vacancy rates will fall, inequalities will shrink, and the West of England will be a national leader in skills innovation.

Working in partnership with Government: we have agreed that over the next decade we will address high vacancy rates in key growth sectors across the region.

Addressing this will require Government and the West of England MCA to work together to explore actions including how to:

- Join up national and regional employment and skills services, with a specific focus on boosting and retraining opportunities linked to growth sectors across the region.
- Boost skills training in key sectors required to enable economic growth such as construction.
- Address barriers to employment in the region helping more people be able to progress in employment.

This action will help address the high vacancy rates experienced by the region and help sectors with high growth potential fill the existing and new jobs that will boost regional productivity.

Priority Six: Lifting children and families out of poverty in the West of England

The West of England is committed to lifting children and families out of poverty by focusing on the factors that shape long-term outcomes for children and families. This includes improving access to quality early education, supporting families into secure and well-paid work, and ensuring children grow up in healthy, safe environments. Our ambition is for every child in the region to have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background.

Tackling child poverty is essential for both economic growth and social fairness. When children grow up in poverty, they face significant barriers to education, health, and future employment limiting their potential and reducing

the region's overall productivity and talent pool. Breaking the cycle of poverty means investing families and in the next generation, enabling more young people to thrive, with the skills needed for future jobs, giving them the opportunity to contribute positively to society and the economy.

Every child deserves the chance to succeed, regardless of their background. Reducing child poverty promotes equal opportunities and helps build a more inclusive, cohesive society we can be proud of. By addressing the root causes such as housing, education, transport and health inequalities we not only improve individual life chances but also lay the foundation for a stronger, fairer, and more resilient region.

We will launch a strategy to tackle child poverty by the end of 2025.

Our Track Record and Commitment

We have achieved much together in partnership already:

- Our flagship Skills Connect site has received 220,000 visits, with user figures growing month on month and Unitary Authority coaches have, to date, supported over 3,460 participants.
- Our Future Bright programme to help people in work take their next steps, supported 4,600 people by end of March 2025.
- Our multi-disciplinary WorkWell teams working in partnership with VCSE specialists have supported over 460 participants, with 62 % reporting improved mental health.
- 63,970 of our residents have been supported to realise their potential and achieve 115,762 learning aims through the devolved Adult Skills Fund.
- Our Youth Guarantee Trailblazer has already supported 232 young people engaged and a further 122 in pilot wards.

These provide excellent foundations on which to build.

However, we need to go further and faster if we are to 'move the dial' on economic inactivity and unemployment in the region. We cannot simply continue with 'business as usual.' To achieve this step change, we must work much more closely with our partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors to join up our services, address geographical disparities and

get people the help they need. At the same time, our Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and larger businesses can play a vital role in supporting people into work and preventing people from leaving work and we must support them in this role, recognising the challenges they face.

To achieve this systems integration, we have formed the Get West of England Working Steering Group, chaired by the West of England mayor. The mayor is set to play a growing role in public service reform, with new duties to improve health and tackle inequalities across the region. Under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the mayor will also have a stronger voice in the NHS, with a future seat on the Integrated Care Board, helping to align health with housing, transport, skills and other local priorities. Alongside the NHS 10-Year Plan's focus on prevention and community-based care, this positions the West of England mayor as a key leader in driving more joined-up and prevention orientated public services for residents.

The Get West of England Working Steering Group therefore brings together voices from the Business Board, local employers, the ICBs, DWP, councils, colleges, universities, and the VCSE sector. By sitting around the same table, these partners can agree priorities and align resources so that residents get the right support at the right time.



Labour Market Analysis

This part of the plan summarises the core features of our labour market, drawing out key challenges around participation, progression and work. The full analysis is presented in a separate annex which also references all sources used.

Demand from Employers

We have a £53.7bn economy, supporting 662,000 jobs, 110,000 more than in 2016

The West of England benefits from a strong, diverse and growing economy, worth over £53.7bn (GDP). We have over 45,900 businesses which support approximately 662,000 jobs. Nearly half of our employment is found in Bristol, followed by South Gloucestershire. Since 2015, employment in our region has grown by 110,000 or 20% and the strongest growth has been seen in Bristol (23%). Our strong economy means we have opportunities for people to fill.

Employment will increase in particular growth sectors and locations

Our Growth Strategy identifies our productive and growing sectors, including advanced manufacturing, digital and technologies, clean energy industries and creative industries. These sectors already account for significant employment and our distinctive assets in these sectors mean further growth is expected.

Our region is also driven by a large everyday economy with large numbers of people employed across retail, wholesale, visitor economy, and in the professions that ensure our residents are well cared for and able to learn. This accounts for around 55% of all jobs across the region including over 91,000 in health and social care and over 8,000 teachers.

Looking to the future, further employment growth is expected in the region's growth zones, including:

- Central Bristol and Bath – which includes major development sites like Bristol Temple Quarter, Bath Riverside and more.
- The West Innovation Arc – the hub of our R&D, advanced manufacturing, innovation and security capability and home to Brabazon, new city district for the region.
- Severn Estuary – where our strength in the green energy transition is located along with

Breaking down barriers to employment by growing the care economy

The MCA and North Bristol NHS Trust worked with the community to break barriers to employment through mentoring, training and practical support tailored to their individual goals and aspirations. By reaching out to people in the community that are unemployed and living in the more socio-economically deprived areas of Bristol, adapting employability support to the individual residents' goals and aspirations the innovative Access to Healthcare Programme helped them find work within a large variety of occupations within the NHS Trust and more employment elsewhere.

significant logistics capability. A key site in the transition to clean energy.

- Somer Valley – unlocking rural productivity and building net zero manufacturing.
- North Somerset Gateway – which offers the dual opportunity of investment in innovative production and manufacturing; and growth opportunities in digital technology and its supply chain, stemming from the new Epic Campus.

These growth zones will create jobs at all levels, providing pathways to employment and progression for thousands of people.

Demand is comparatively strong, especially in Bristol

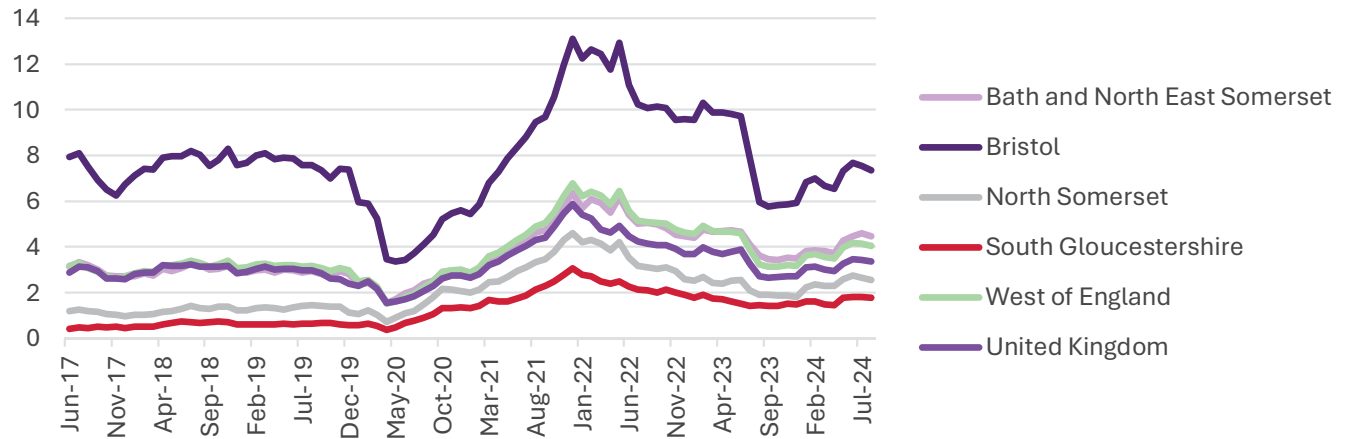
Demand for labour is strong, with approximately 30% of establishments reporting vacancies in 2022 which is equivalent to 35,819 jobs. This is higher than the England average at 23%. More recent data from Textkernel/ONS highlights that this is being driven by a strong job market in Bristol. Whilst our strong labour market means that there are opportunities for people to re-enter employment, there are fewer opportunities in North Somerset and South Gloucestershire.

Our Workforce

Our population is expected to grow faster than the England average

People are our greatest asset and will be the drivers of growth over the next 10 years. The region has a population of 1.2 million people and is expected to grow by 9% by 2040, a faster rate of growth than the projection of 4.3% for England. Overall, the region benefits from a younger age profile than the national average, driven in part by the presence of four universities, with over 110,000 students. Nonetheless, our aging population, with increasing long-term illnesses and caring responsibilities, means that fewer people will be available to work.

Figure 1: Job adverts per 100 working-age residents, June 2017 to August 2024



Source: Textkernel, ONS

We benefit from a highly qualified workforce but 4% of people have no qualifications

The region has a higher-than-average proportion of residents with degree level skills, reflecting strong demand for skills from the region’s growth sectors, as well as the presence of four universities. However, the headline can mask lower level skills challenges and whilst the region has fewer working age residents with no qualifications than the national average (4% compared to 6.7%), this nevertheless represents 29,300 people. These people are more likely to be unemployed, inactive or working in low paid, insecure employment.

We have a higher-than-average employment rate

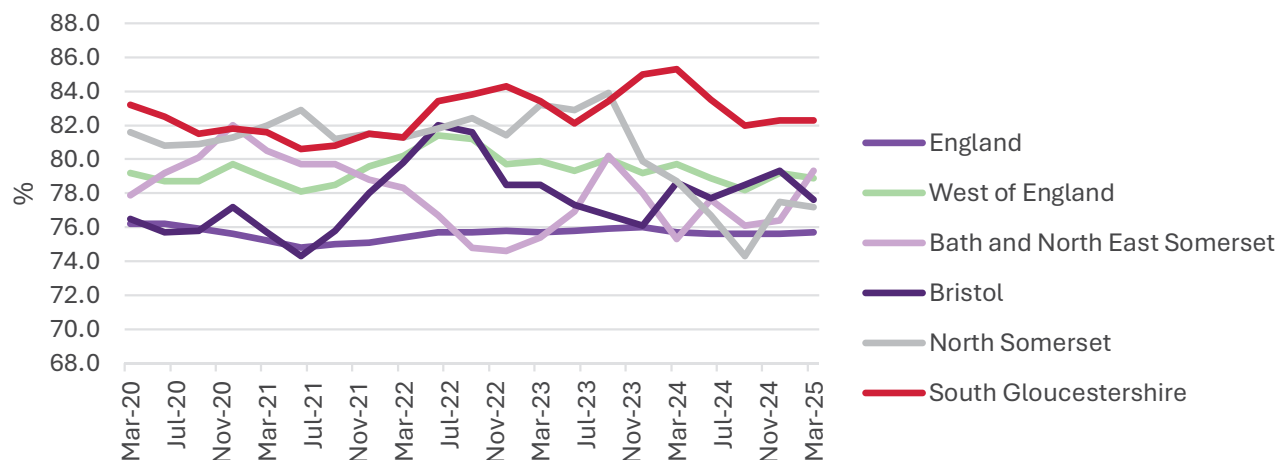
Of the working age population (16-64), 78.9% are in employment. This is higher than the England rate of 75.7% and exceeds all other Combined Authority areas in England. While the available statistics are less reliable at local authority level, all four districts have had an employment rate above the national average for most quarters since the pandemic, with South Gloucestershire exceeding 80% for every quarter.

But employment rate gaps persist for some groups

The employment rate varies for different groups in our society and whilst considerable progress has been made in addressing this, gaps nevertheless persist. For instance:

- Women – the difference in the employment rate between men and women has fallen from 12% 20-years ago to 3% in April 2024. This is faster progress than the national average, where the gap is just under 7%. Nonetheless, the gap represents 11,000 women.
- People with disabilities – whilst the employment rate for people with Employment Act (EA) core or work limiting disabilities is higher than the national average (62.3% compared to 57.6%), it is lower than the overall employment rate (78.9%).

Figure 2: Employment rate for working age residents (16-64)



Source: Annual Population Survey

- Ethnic minority groups – over the last 20 years, there has been a consistent gap between the employment rate of ethnic minorities and white people. However, the size of the gap varies considerably from quarter to quarter.
- Evidence suggests that English not being a first language acts as a significant barrier to securing and sustaining employment.

These gaps highlight persistent inequalities in our labour market and mean these groups are more likely to experience long-term poverty, reduced career prospects and financial insecurity. At the same time, our economy loses out on their skills, creativity and innovation and through this 10-year plan, we hope to see these gaps close.

There are lower levels of full-time working, particularly amongst women

The proportion of people working full time in the West of England is below the national average (73.9% vs 76.9%). There is a significant difference between the proportion of men working full time (87.4%) and women (59.6%). Less than 45% of women over 50 work full time, therefore reinforcing labour market inequalities.

Earnings are above average, but significant pay gaps exist

The median earnings of residents in the region are above the national average. In 2023, residents' annual median pay was approximately £39,200 compared to £37,600 in England. Median earnings were above the national average in all four local authority areas. However, the average hourly pay of part time work is approximately £5/hour less than full time work and there continues to be a significant pay gap between male and female full-time workers.

In 2024, 11% of employee jobs in the region had hourly pay below the living wage, compared to 15.9% nationally. This equates to approximately 66,000 jobs. Alongside this, there are reportedly a growing number of people working in insecure employment such as zero hours contracts and the gig economy (where short-term flexible workers are paid on the completion of tasks (known as gigs), though there are no robust sources of data on this at the regional level. While the gig economy works for some people, for others it is high risk. People working in low paid, insecure jobs are more likely to be living in poverty, with implications for their health and well-being and that of their families.

Unemployment and Economic Inactivity

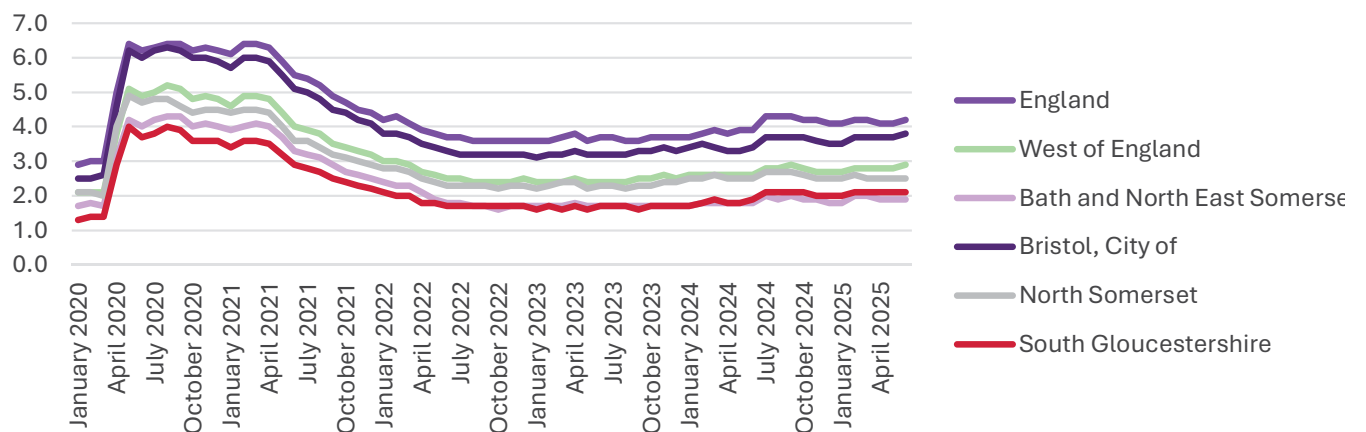
Unemployment claims are lower than the England average but are increasing

Claimant Count data (whilst not the official measure of unemployment), shows that the proportion of people claiming unemployment related benefits in the area, has historically been and continues to be lower than the England average (2.9%, compared to 4.2%). However, the rate has been increasing over the last two years, which may point to a weakening jobs market. Within the region, the proportion of people claiming is highest in Bristol, but the rate is nonetheless lower than the national average.

Economic inactivity has increased since March 2020 with 133,100 people now inactive, reflecting the rise in population

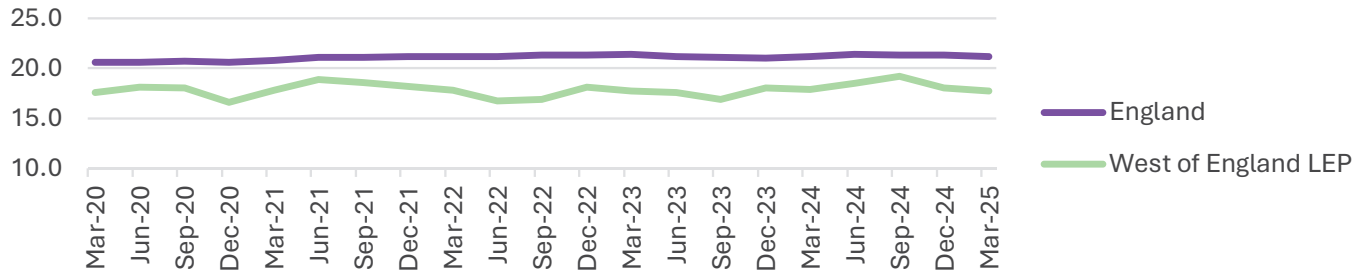
17.7% of the population are economically inactive, which is equivalent to 133,100 people. Whilst the trend line shows considerable variability from quarter to quarter, there is no discernible trend (upwards/downwards) over time. However, while the rate has remained broadly constant over this time period, the number of inactive people has increased from 129,900 (17.6%) in March 2020 to 133,100 (17.7%) in March 2025. This increase reflects the rise in the population. Inactivity, when it is not by choice, can trap households in poverty and lead to poor health and well-being.

Figure 3: Claimant count, proportion of residents aged 16-64



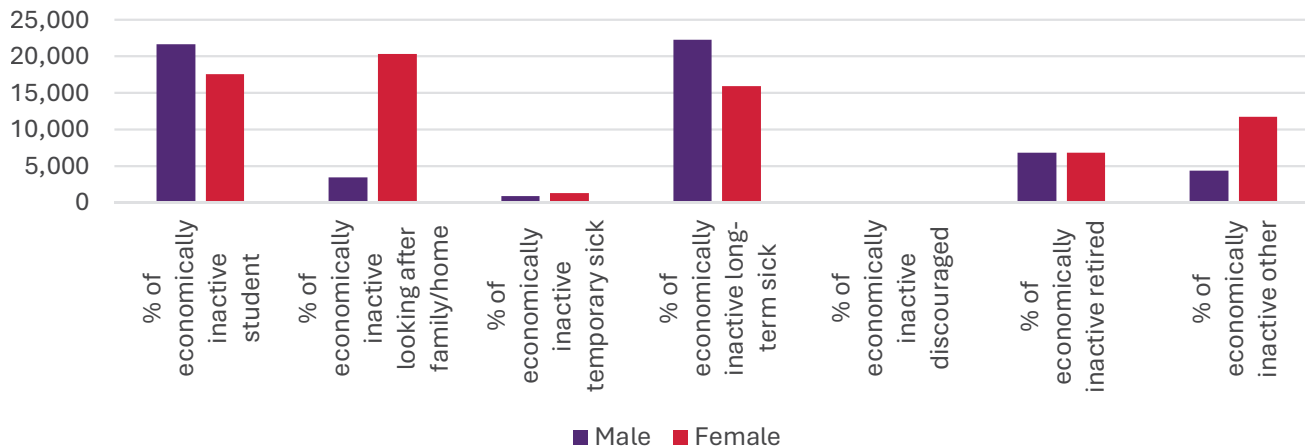
Source: Claimant Count

Figure 4: Economic inactivity rate 16-64



Source: Annual Population Survey

Figure 5: Number of economically inactive by reason and gender



Source: Annual Population Survey, April-24 – March 2025

29,500 inactive people want a job

Of this inactive population, 22.2% or 29,500 people want a job, which is a higher rate than the national average (19.4%). This highlights a key group that could be better supported back into work.

For almost half of all inactive people, the reasons are long term sickness and caring responsibilities

29% of inactive people are inactive due to long-term sickness and 18% due to caring responsibilities. When broken down by gender, six times as many women are inactive because they are looking after their home/family than men.

Modelling based on the Census explored the demographic and social characteristics of inactive people in the region and found (for the MCA area):

- The vast majority are **over 35 years** of age, and around half are over 50.
- For most, **general health** is reported as **'bad'** or **'very bad'** – though for over 45% who classify their health as 'fair', 'good', or 'very good', general health may not be a barrier for accessing work with the right support.
- 58.7% are in **social rented housing** – significantly higher than the England & Wales average.
- 20.5% have **dependent children**.
- **35.7%** have **no qualifications** – lower than the England & Wales average.
- **33.8%** have **never worked or are long-term unemployed** – lower than the England & Wales average.

Higher levels of unemployment and economic inactivity can be found in the region's more deprived areas

Figure Six shows that unemployment and economic inactivity are not evenly distributed across the region, and some wards (particularly those in urban and coastal centres) have a higher proportion of unemployed and inactive people (shown in darker blue and orange respectively). These areas are also likely to be the most deprived and people in these wards have a greater risk of premature death and a poorer quality of life through poor physical and mental health.

Linked to this, it is important to recognise that the region is a network of cities, towns, coastal and rural areas. Whilst these different types of community share many common challenges, they can also experience unique problems, that need to be recognised in delivery. For instance, Weston-Super-Mare in North Somerset, shares many of the challenges faced by coastal communities across the UK.

Figure 6: Ward level measures of inactivity, unemployment, multiple deprivation and health deprivation

Inactivity by ward (people aged 16 plus, excluding people inactive due to retirement)



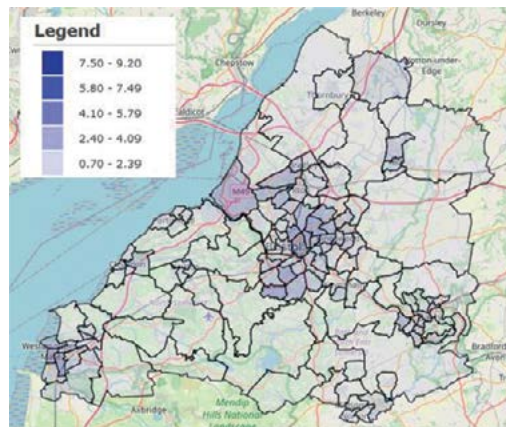
Darker orange = higher levels of inactivity
Source: Census 2021

Index of Multiple Deprivation by ward (2019)



Darker reds = greater deprivation
Darker green = less deprivation
Source: IMD, 2019

Claimant Count, % of 16-64 population, June 2025



Darker blue = higher levels of unemployment
Source: Claimant Count, 2025

Health Deprivation and Disability



Darker reds = Greater health deprivation
Darker green = Less health deprivation
Source: IMD, 2019

Health Inequalities

Whilst life expectancy is above the national average, inequalities exist between the most and least deprived neighbourhoods

Life expectancy at birth is above the national average for both men and women in all local authority areas except Bristol. Likewise, whilst all areas have inequalities in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas, these inequalities are lower than the national average for all areas, except Bristol (for males, but not females). In this case, a boy born in the most deprived parts of Bristol is expected to live 10.7 years less than one born in the least deprived parts of the city.

54,900 working age people in the region receive Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) and 85% of these claims are associated with four conditions: psychiatric disorders (45%), musculoskeletal disease (15%), neurological disease (13%) and musculoskeletal disease-regional (10%). Whilst PIPs are not linked to work and are designed to help people with the extra cost of living associated with having a long-term condition, they do highlight the significance of some health conditions.

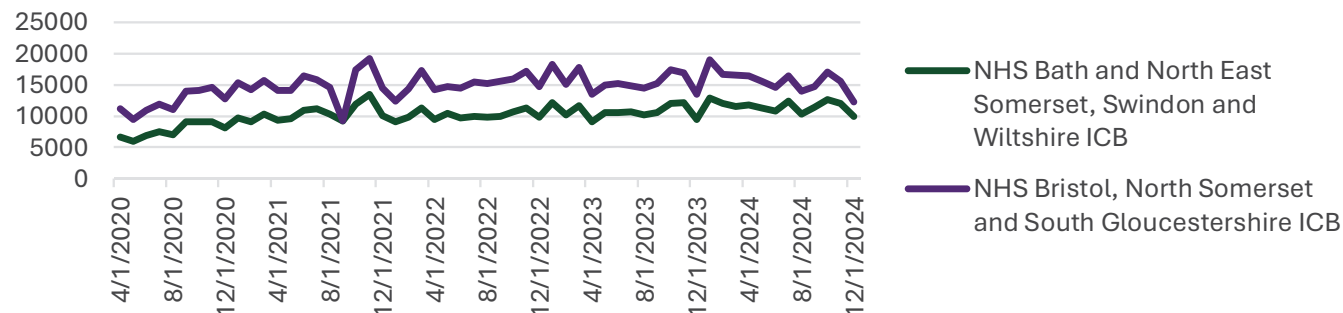
Where provided, the most common reasons are:

- Mental health and behavioural disorders.
- Diseases of the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue.
- Diseases of the respiratory system.
- Symptoms, signs and abnormal clinical and laboratory findings.

The number of Fit Notes has been rising

The number of fit notes issued by GPs in the two ICB regions has been rising since 2000. This highlights that more people in work are becoming sick and are at risk of becoming unemployed or inactive and this presents an opportunity for preventative work.

Figure 7: Number of fit notes issued by ICB area



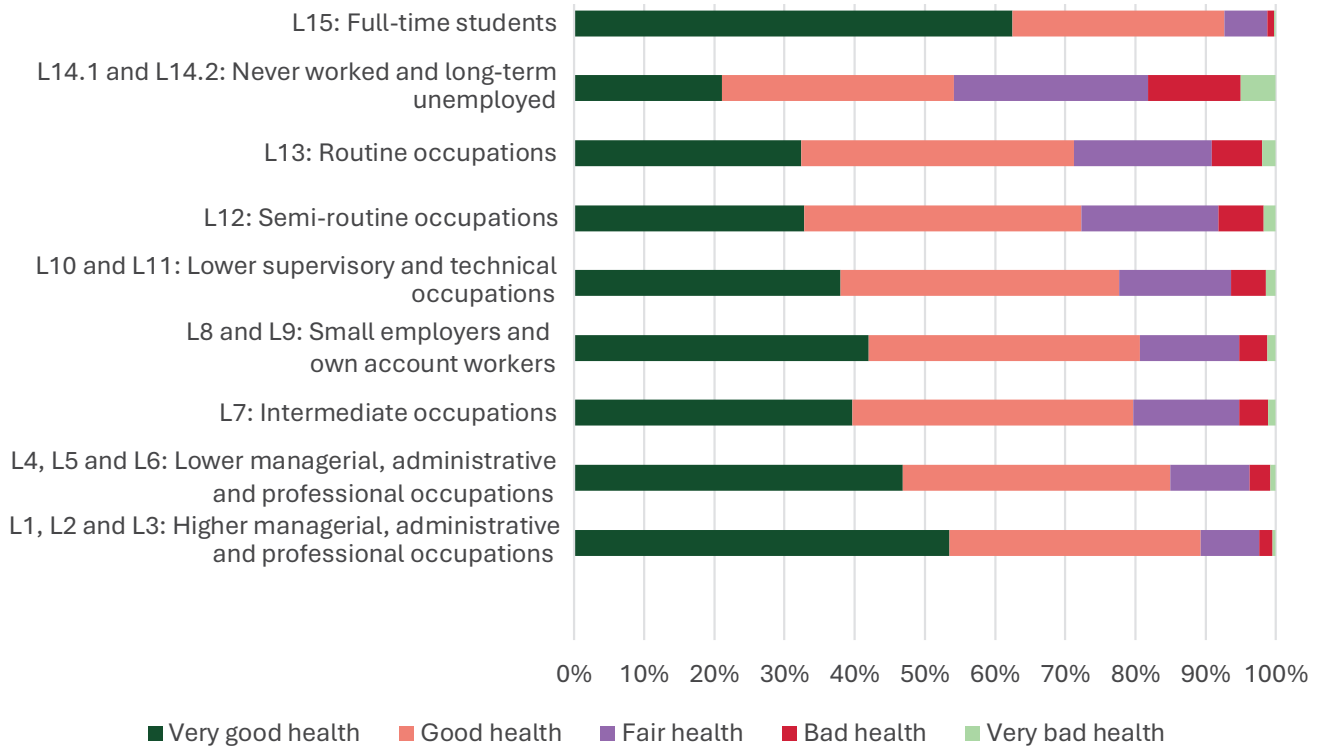
Source: NHS, Fit Notes Issued by GP Practices

Evidence from the Census (2021) shows that people in lower skilled occupational groups or unemployed reported higher levels of 'very bad health' than their counterparts in higher skilled occupational groups and at every step of the occupational ladder, people experience progressively worse health. The trends are unlikely to have changed significantly since the Census.

Approximately 95,000 people provide unpaid care

Around 8.5% of people aged over the age of five, provide unpaid care to someone who has a long-term physical or mental ill-health condition or illness or problems related to old age. This is equivalent to approximately 95,000 people and is likely to grow as our population ages. The amount of care provided varies, with approximately 5% providing 19 or less hours a week and approximately 2.5% providing more than 50 hours a week. For many of these people, caring responsibilities are a significant barrier to employment.

Figure 8: General health by occupational group



Source: Census, 2021

Children and Young People

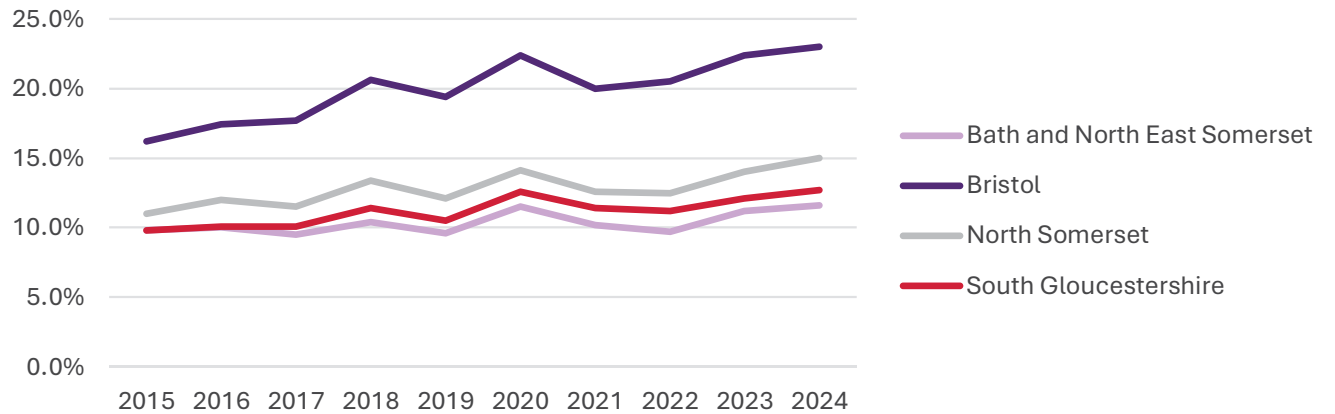
The number of children living in poverty has been rising over the last 10 years, especially in Bristol

The number of children living in (relative) poverty has been rising over the last 10 years in all four local authority areas, especially in Bristol, where it has risen by almost 7%. Across the area, 35,359 or 16.9% of children are estimated to be living in poverty. Of these, 70% lived in working families and 56% in lone parent families. When housing costs are considered, the number of children living in poverty almost doubles to 67,550, of which half are in Bristol. As the evidence in this plan shows, children growing up in poverty often do less well at school and are less likely to achieve positive outcomes after Key Stage Four (KS4).

Educational attainment at KS4 and KS5 is slightly below average, but there is a significant attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils

The average attainment 8 score for pupils sitting their GCSEs is slightly lower than the national average (45.7 compared to 46.1), but the proportion of pupils achieving at least a grade 4 in English and Maths GCSE is very slightly higher than the national average

Figure 9: Children living in relative poverty



Source: Children in Low Income Families: local area statistics, DWP

(65.7% compared to 65.4%). However, the attainment 8 score is much lower for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (28.3) and disadvantaged pupils (32.0). This matters, because the attainment of GCSEs grades 4-9 (particularly English and Maths) is often a gateway to post 16 education.

There is geographical variation across educational outcomes

93.8% of students achieve a sustained education, employment or apprenticeship destination after the end of KS4, which is slightly better than the national average (93.2%). However, the results range from 92% in Bristol to 95.8% in North Somerset. Following on from KS5, whilst overall progression rates are comparable with the national average, the proportion of students going on to an education destination is almost

10% lower than the national average (35.6% compared to 45.0%). Disadvantaged students are less likely to achieve a sustained outcome than their peers who are not disadvantaged (65.7% compared to 82.6%). Likewise, care leavers are less likely to be in education, employment or training.

The number of apprenticeship starts between 2019/20 and 23/24 has fallen by 6% for under 19s, 11% for 19-24 year olds and 2% for people aged 25+.

The analysis above highlights the need to support the following groups:



Causes and Drivers

Having summarised the core features of our labour market above, this part of the plan focuses on the underlying causes and drivers of unemployment and inactivity in the West of England. It is based on findings from previous studies, feedback from our partners

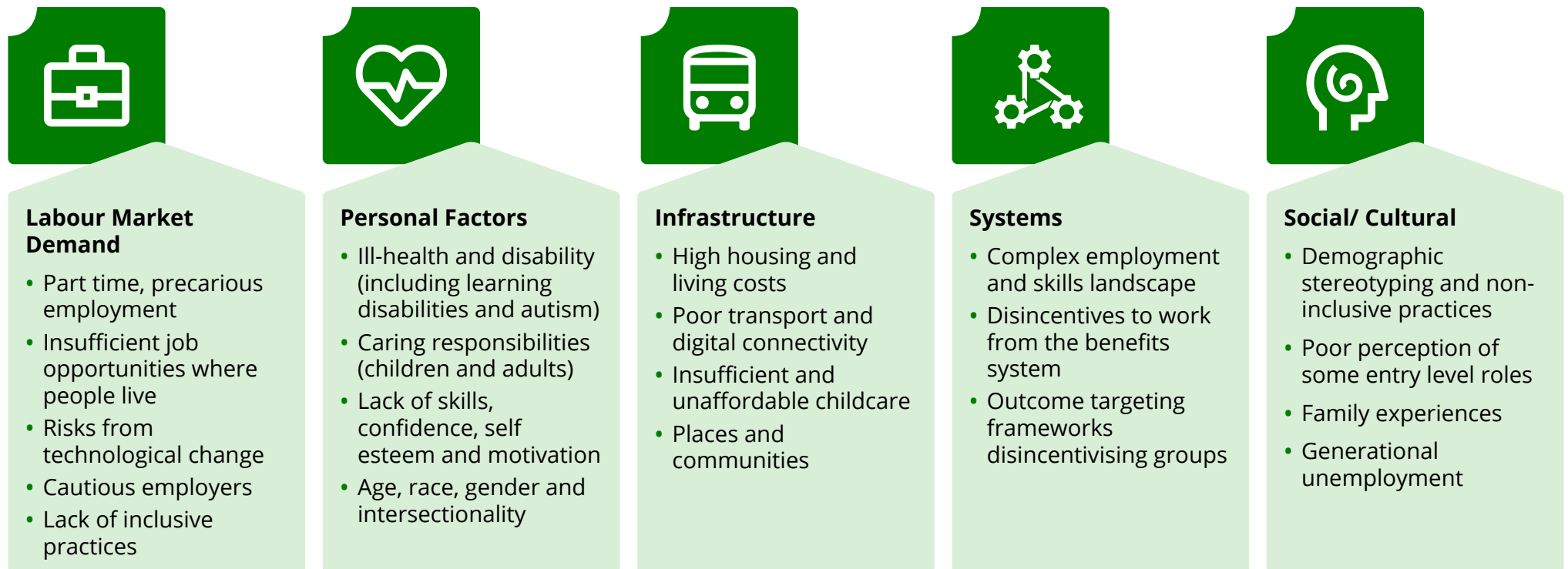
including the VCSE and conversations with inactive people, drawing on their lived experience.

The underlying causes of unemployment and inactivity can be complex and interrelated

Many people face multiple barriers which can stem from:

- The nature of the labour market itself.
- Personal circumstances.
- Poor infrastructure.
- Systems failures.
- Social/cultural factors.

Figure 10: Causes of inactivity and unemployment in the West of England



The nature of the labour market can be challenging for some people

While our Labour Market Analysis shows that the West of England has many growth opportunities (including several growth zones), key challenges include:

- The availability of work close to where people live, particularly in more deprived areas, where poor public transport can be a particular barrier.
- Many people working in part time, low paid and precarious jobs (e.g. zero-hour contracts and the gig economy). In some sectors, tight profit margins and increasing costs are a factor.
- There is also a risk of displacement from technological change, such as AI and automation, although further research is needed to understand this. Furthermore, the pace of change can be a factor affecting the confidence of some people returning to the labour market.
- The lack of inclusive workplaces and employers prepared to make adjustments is a challenge. Some employers, especially SMEs, fear making mistakes in the recruitment of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions which can discourage them from doing so. Others are cautious and reluctant to take on people with additional support needs due to lack of knowledge, capacity or discrimination.

These challenges can act as a barrier for people to access employment opportunities.

Spotlight on technological change

For residents across the West of England, automation and artificial intelligence bring both uncertainty and opportunity. Many worry that the routine parts of their jobs – whether in retail, logistics, professional services, administration or customer service – could soon be taken over by technology. For some this raises real fears of losing work, while for others it means the job they know will change in ways they may not yet feel ready for.

The risk is felt most strongly by people who are already more vulnerable in the labour market: people in roles at high risk of automation, young people entering insecure starter jobs, older workers facing health challenges, and ethnic minority communities who too often face barriers to progression.

“We’re obviously at the moment going through this rapid, maybe slightly scary, growth in things like artificial intelligence technologies... [I’m worried for] the future of jobs and what those are going to look like.”

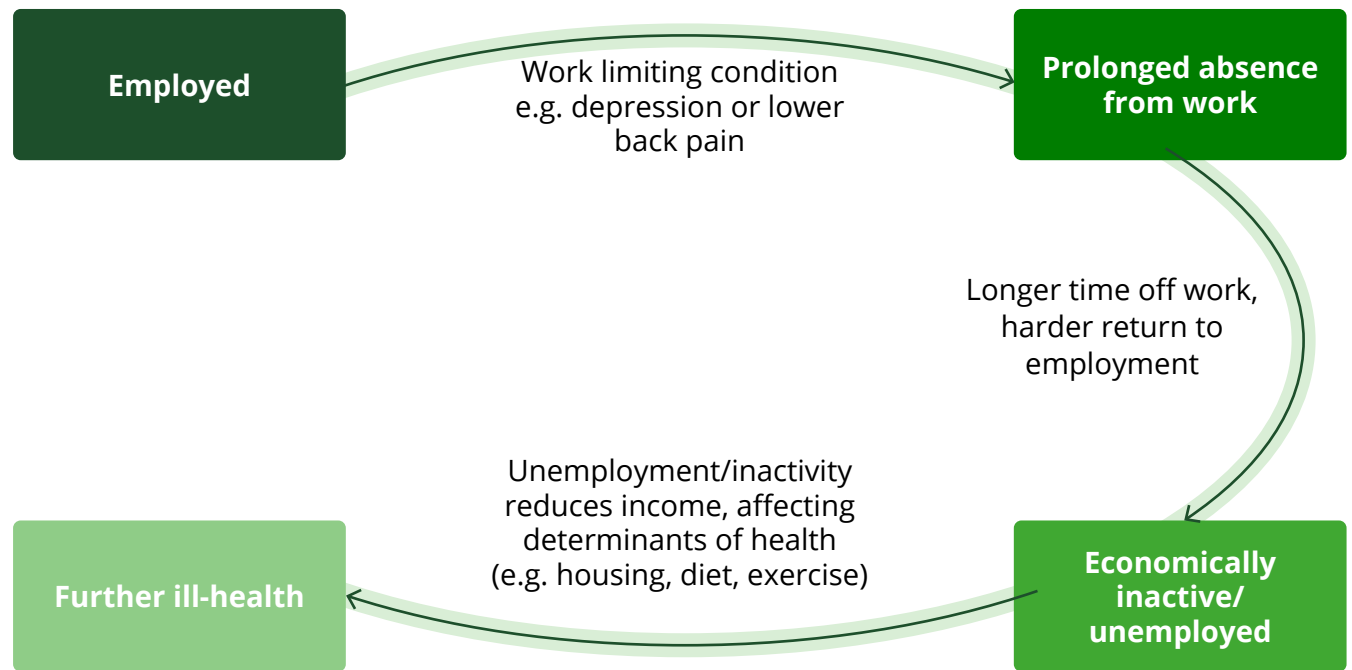
At the same time, employers in growth sectors are struggling to find people with the digital and AI literacy skills needed to fill new opportunities. Without support, this divide could leave many residents excluded from better-paid, more secure jobs.

For many people, the relationship between socio-economic background/ill-health and inactivity is a particularly vicious cycle

Our Labour Market Intelligence highlights that the main 'reasons' why people are inactive in the region (other than being a student) are ill-health and caring responsibilities. However, the underlying reasons why our residents are unwell are often linked to poverty and wider social factors including unemployment and economic inactivity, leading to a vicious circle as shown below.

This can be compounded by other personal factors such as learning disabilities, autism, a lack of skills/qualifications, poor language skills, experience of work, low confidence and self-esteem. Alongside this, demographic factors, such as gender, ethnicity and age all influence employment outcomes.

Figure 11: Relationship between poverty, ill-health and inactivity



Source: Healthy Equity Evidence Centre

A lack of or insufficient infrastructure can act as a further barrier to employment

Poor public transport and digital infrastructure in parts of our region can make it more expensive or logistically difficult to access work or training, particularly in rural communities and for people with disabilities. For instance, only 50% of the region's population can access a major centre in 30 minutes.³

- "I can plan my day if I know the bus is coming. What is a disaster is when they don't show up and I'm late for work. I have to catch the bus before the one I need to be sure."
- "I get a detention if the bus is late and so I'm last to school. That's not my fault and not fair."

Likewise, insufficient childcare places and high cost of childcare mean that some parents and carers are having to reduce their working hours and/or forfeit progression opportunities,⁴ with implications for child poverty.

- "Having no access to any help with my children has severely impacted my mental health. I struggle with ADHD, anxiety, and depression. I often find myself getting overstimulated, depressed, and having panic attacks due to no relief: 24 hours, 7 days a week."
- "It has pushed back having a second child, which is difficult as older parents. We are even considering moving somewhere else with more childcare."
- "My parents have my daughter for two days a week, but my mum also looks after my 94-year-old grandfather. It's a lot."

Similarly, many people are caring for adults or older dependents and face similar struggles.

High housing costs mean that people on low incomes or working in parts of our everyday economy cannot afford to live close to employment opportunities, which impacts on the viability of employment. Poor-quality housing can also impact on health.

Our systems can adversely impact on labour market outcomes

The complexities of the employment and skills support systems and the lack of connectivity to (and within) the health system mean that people do not know where to go for the right support and cannot always get the help they need.

- "Quite often, when you have got multiple things wrong you with, you see one person who's focused on 'that's my area'. Then you go down the corridor and speak to somebody else, and that's their area. And the two never seem to overlap. It's quite clear one side affects the other, but never the twain shall meet, but they do need to meet because one affects the other."
- "There needs to be better publicity for accessing these services... it's hard to know about them unless you hear by word of mouth."
- "I don't think the Jobcentre necessarily tells you about these other organisations that can help you with technology or training."

Furthermore, outcome targeting frameworks, which require providers to get people into sustained employment, can often disincentivise providers from supporting those furthest from the labour market.

And in relation to the benefits system, families also tell us that they fear the negative impact of changing circumstances, for example, if their child takes up an apprenticeship opportunity, that they will lose benefits.

Negative mindsets from both individuals and employers continue to affect employment outcomes for some groups

Our engagement with communities, stakeholders and businesses has highlighted that some groups (e.g. people with disabilities/ learning difficulties/autism, people from ethnic minorities, people who do not speak English as a first language, women and other groups) continue to be stereotyped and face non-inclusive working practices.

“I had an interview that really focused on my gap in employment not what I could offer. I am more than my health conditions [but difficult to believe employers see if that way].”

A fear of discrimination or being perceived as a ‘burden’ can discourage people with long term health conditions from applying for work or requesting adjustments.

Equally, perceptions of some roles in the everyday economy do not always reflect the reality and can deter new entrants. And people with a family history of worklessness may face additional barriers to entering the workforce having had fewer role models in stable employment, limited access to professional

networks and reduced exposure to workplace skills and expectations.

“There’s a decreasing number of students entering the sector. We need younger people coming in but when you look at the chat on social media and in online groups you hear these young voices complaining of smelly nappies, bossy parents, noisy rooms, long hours, lack of quiet space for lunch – it’s all negative. No one’s talking about the joy and celebrating the fun in working with these small children.”

Conclusion: Many people face a complex web of barriers that prevent them from working

The analysis above highlights that many people face a complex web of barriers that prevent them from working. However, our services are often siloed or focused on single issues, which do not work for people with complex needs. Therefore, if we are to move the dial on unemployment and economic inactivity, we need to get better at developing person-centred solutions that respond to the needs of the individual.

Priorities, Actions and Longer-Term Goals

Goals

The Get West of England Working Plan provides an opportunity for us to set out our aspirations and goals for the region over the next 10 years. This part of the plan draws on the evidence base to build a strategic vision, a set of shared long-term goals and priority areas for us to focus on.

Vision

By 2035, the West of England aims to be a place where every resident can access good work, employers have the skilled workforce they need, and young people benefit from clear, inclusive pathways into education and employment






This will mean different things for the people, delivery partners and businesses in our region, as illustrated here.







Figure 12: What our vision means for different people



Priorities

Our evidence base shows that, to deliver this vision, we will need to focus on three priorities, which all contribute to the achievement of two cross cutting themes, as illustrated below.

Priority		Cross-cutting	
	Get more people into work	Work with employers to reduce vacancy rates	Tackle employment and health inequalities
	Get more people into better paid, more secure work and prevent people from falling out of the labour market		
	Get more young people into education, employment or training, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds		

Supported by enabling actions in the West of England Growth Strategy related to:					
Job creation	Transport & Connectivity	Housing	Skills	Green Jobs	Child Poverty
					

As highlighted earlier, this plan will not be delivered in isolation. It will both be supported by and contribute to the delivery of the following regional strategies.

West of England Growth Strategy	Healthier Together 2040	Employment & Skills Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering residents with the skills to access the jobs that will shape our future. • Lifting children and families out of poverty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting working-age adults affected by multiple long-term conditions and those at future risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening and simplifying the employment and skills system. • Enabling all young people to achieve their potential. • Supporting unemployed and inactive people into work. • Training and supporting residents into well paid jobs for the future. • Addressing employer needs and skills gaps.

for different age groups or neighbourhoods, reflecting their needs (e.g. for older adults, offering mid-life career reviews and young people offering real world experiences of work).

- Working closer with the voluntary and community sector to deliver provision, recognising their trusted relationships with target communities.
- Ensuring that our proposals involve employers (including SMEs) who play a vital role in the prevention of ill-health and getting people back into work.

The following tables provide a high-level framework for addressing our West of England priorities. Detailed actions and new interventions will be co-designed to tackle them, informed by:

- Improving our understanding of the problem, underlying issues and needs of communities through:
 - Listening to the people we want to help and their lived experience, including peer research.
 - Engaging with partners in the voluntary and community sector who often have established relationships and embedded ways of working with communities.
 - Utilising data sharing agreements to match data sets and produce a clearer picture of the needs of different groups.

- Learning from what’s been tried before, building on good practice but not being afraid to try something new, or de-commission services that are not working.
- Putting the needs of people at the heart of project design, recognising that people’s lives are complex and those furthest from the labour market often have multiple barriers where the journey back to work may be long.
- Maximising opportunities to target provision/ services at key life stages or transition points (e.g. leaving school, university, having a baby, hospital admissions etc.), exploring opportunities to provide support linked to these transition points.
- Understanding demographic and geographic nuances to get more people into work, for instance, developing aspirational pathways



Get more people into work 1/2

Why this is important

Unemployment and economic inactivity affect approx. 158,000 people in the region and are one of the main drivers of poverty (including child poverty) and ill-health. Conversely, the main reasons for economic inactivity are ill-health and caring responsibilities, creating a vicious circle.

Helping people to overcome barriers to work will address poverty, reduce pressure on the NHS and strengthen our economy by addressing skills shortages.

Focusing on

People:

- With ill-health or disability.
- Who have caring responsibilities.
- Who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and multiple, overlapping barriers.
- Who are re-entering the workplace, as well as those furthest away from it.

Places:

- With the highest levels of deprivation/need including 'hidden groups/cohorts.'

Sectors:

- Everyday economy and growth sectors.

What existing services are we building on

- Skills Connect (signposting, advice and coaching).
- Adult Skills Fund (skills provision).
- Skills Bootcamps (to gain the skills needed by key sectors).
- Work Well, Connect to Work, IPS Way Through, Talking Therapies (for people with disabilities and health conditions who are closer to the labour market).
- JCP provision.
- We Work for Everyone (for people with Autism and SEND).
- A plethora of local services provided by the VCSE sector.

How we will support people in the future

- By strengthening person centred, holistic solutions that address multiple barriers and fully integrate support across different agencies.
- By providing support linked to life stage/ transition points and tackling generational unemployment.
- By developing neighbourhood delivery models that integrate support.
- By improving access to affordable childcare and care for dependent adults.
- By targeting community education and skills programmes (including ESOL and digital skills) where they are needed.
- By improving data management measuring impact.

How we will engage our employers

- By supporting them with inclusive recruitment practices and changes.
- By facilitating business champion and peer support.
- By targeted work with the childcare sector.



Get more people into work 2/2

What outcomes do we want to see

- More residents gaining employment.
- Reduce employment gaps for disabled residents, residents with long term health conditions and other agreed disadvantaged groups with complex barriers.
- Reduce employment inequalities gaps for carers.
- Reduce geographical employment rate gaps for residents of areas of deprivation.
- Increase in residents gaining a qualification.
- Increase in residents progressing to additional learning, volunteering or other goals (such as meeting personal goals set out in health and well-being plans or equivalent).
- Reduce skills gaps and improved skills match.

What regional impacts will be supported?

- A reduction in unemployment and economic inactivity rates.
- A reduction in the health-related inactivity rate.
- A reduction in the care-related inactivity rate.
- A reduction in the number and proportion of residents with no qualifications.
- A reduction in vacancy rates in priority growth and enabling sectors.
- A reduction in geographical inequalities in areas of long-term deprivation.
- An improvement in quality of life in areas of deprivation.

Immediate Actions

- Launch the Connect to Work Service supporting people across the region who are out of work due to health conditions into work.
- Build evidence base on employment inequalities and automation

Longer term Actions (Goals)

- Work together with the ICB, JCP and the voluntary sector to explore joint investment approaches for future provision and other opportunities.



Get more people into better paid, more secure work and prevent people from falling out of the labour market 1/2

Why this is important

People in low paid, insecure employment are more likely to move in and out of unemployment/inactivity. For those in work on low incomes, poverty in turn affects health and wider family outcomes.

For people in work who are managing long term health conditions, there are opportunities to prevent them falling out of the labour market.

Focusing on

People:

- Who are in most need such as women, carers, older workers and those managing health conditions.
- Who are working in jobs at risk of automation or in the gig economy.
- Who have low skill levels.

Places:

- With the highest levels of deprivation/need including 'hidden pockets.'

Sectors:

- Everyday economy and growth sectors.

What existing services are we building on

- Future Bright (job coaching for people in work looking to progress).
- Work Well, IPS Way Through, WE Work and Connect to Work (services for people with health issues/disabilities to maintain employment).
- Skills Bootcamps a flagship programme for upskilling.

How we will support people in the future

- By ensuring there is a single entry point with no wrong door.
- By strengthening person centred, holistic solutions that address multiple barriers and fully integrate support across different agencies.
- By providing support linked to life stage/ transition points, with a focus on prevention and progression (e.g. active ageing).
- By developing upskilling solutions linked to sectors with clear pathways.
- By improving AI and digital literacy skills.
- By improving access to affordable childcare & care for dependent adults.

How we will engage our employers

- By supporting occupational/ workforce health programmes.
- By raising awareness of the benefits of inclusive practices.
- By encouraging take-up of the Good Employer Charter.
- By developing clear progression pathways in key sectors.



Get more people into better paid, more secure work and prevent people from falling out of the labour market 2/2

What outcomes do we want to see

- Reduce the number of low income and workless households
- Reduce the pay gap and underemployment rate
- Increase incomes for target groups
- Increase in residents re-training or gaining additional qualifications
- Increase in residents gaining new skills or work experience
- Reduce skills gaps and improved skills match

What regional impacts will be supported

- An increase in wages for our residents
- A reduction in the number of people earning less than the living wage
- A reduction in the number and proportion of residents with no qualifications
- An increase in the proportion of residents qualified at Level 2 or above
- A reduction in vacancy rates in priority growth and enabling sectors

Immediate Actions

- Evolve the Skills Connect and Future Bright 'no wrong door' referral model.
- Collect real-time data on progression, health outcomes and barriers.
- Run targeted outreach groups facing employment inequalities.

Longer Term Actions (Goals)

- Direct more funding towards the everyday economy targeting business and innovation funding at the sector, developing tailored support for workers, sharing best practice, and funding projects that support workers in specific sectors.



Get more young people into education, employment or training, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds 1/2

Why this is important

Young people who are not in education, employment or training are more likely to be unemployed, inactive or in low paid jobs later in life.

Children living in poverty and from other vulnerable groups are less likely to achieve positive outcomes at school. Children with low attainment (as well as those from other vulnerable groups) are more likely to be NEET.

Mental health issues are increasingly an underlying issue amongst young people.

Focusing on

Young People:

- From disadvantaged backgrounds, SEND, identified as vulnerable, NEET or at risk of becoming NEET.
- With poor mental health.

Places:

- Areas with lowest attainment and highest levels of NEET.

Sectors:

- Opportunities in the everyday economy and growth sectors.

What existing services are we building on

- Careers Hub (provides support to schools to improve the quality of Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEAIG) in schools).
- Youth Guarantee Trailblazer (piloting approaches ensure that every 16–24 year old receives a work, apprenticeship or education offer within 16 weeks).
- Local Authority Post 16 and Youth Services
- Schools and college support systems.

How we will support young people in the future

- By developing earlier and better systems to support young people at risk of becoming NEET, starting from year 7 (prevention) i.e. mapping provision, systems to identify young people at risk, tracking systems.
- By developing new provision building on the learning from the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer pilot activities and including mentoring, coaching and experience of work.
- By improving mental health provision for young people and integrating with education and skills.
- By improving educational attainment amongst disadvantaged groups (including English, Maths and Digital).
- By improving CEAIG for all young people (including mentoring, coaching and experience of work).
- By investing in and developing integrated whole family support.

How we will engage our employers

- By supporting the development of apprenticeship pathways aligned to opportunities.
- By supporting their engagement with CEIAG opportunities.



Get more young people into education, employment or training, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds 2/2

What outcomes do we want to see

- Reduce the number of young people not in employment, education or training.
- Increase in young people completing apprenticeships, further education or university.
- Reduce the employment inequality gaps faced by care leavers
- Reduce employment gaps for disabled residents, residents with long term health conditions and other agreed disadvantaged groups with complex barriers
- Improve careers advice.
- Increase engagement with support, advice and information for children and families.

What regional impacts will be supported

- An increase in employment rates amongst young people.
- A reduction in the percentage of young people (16-17) not in education, employment or training.
- An increase in participation in youth services
- A reduction in educational attainment gaps.

Immediate Actions

- Expand the West of England Youth Guarantee offer supporting more young people into work, education and training.
- Launch a strategy to tackle child poverty by the end of 2025.

Longer Term Actions (Goals)

- Conduct research to better understand reasons for attainment gaps.
- Explore opportunities to deliver CEIAG from an earlier age.

The Current System and Offer

While we have much still to do, we are not starting from scratch. We have a strong portfolio of services to support people, and we are working at pace to make it easier for people to find the support they need. But we know we need to do more, and work harder to reach those people who are not benefitting from the region's opportunities. This part of the plan describes our journey to improve the current system, as well as its weaknesses and plans to address them.

Simplification of the System

Tens of thousands of our residents engage with different parts of the employment and skills system each year and an even greater number engage with the health system. Within each system are a plethora of institutions and organisations delivering contracts that range from multi-million pound services to small scale, localised and often short-term initiatives which address specific gaps and needs.

Our residents have told us that these systems are complicated and difficult to navigate and they often do not know that support exists let alone how to access it.

“There needs to be better publicity for accessing these services... it's hard to know about them unless you hear by word of mouth.”

“I don't think the Jobcentre necessarily tells you about these other organisations that can help you with technology or training.”

To address this, the MCA and its local authority partners have committed to delivering simplification through our Regional Employment Service (Skills Connect). Our Skills Connect website currently lists hundreds support services.⁵ Illustrated overleaf, it provides a single access point for all residents who are seeking skills and employability support, and it is increasingly supporting with signposting to wrap around mental health and wellbeing services and other services such as finance and housing.

The Skills Connect service consists of:

- A website providing a self-service tool to help people 'search' all regional provision including hundreds of courses, services, careers information and other useful resources. This includes health and wellbeing services.
- Unitary Authority (UA) 'spoke' service delivery which comprises individualised support for: those furthest away from the labour market and in-work progression.

The service is supported by a central team within the West of England MCA which manages the website and UA spoke delivery.

Through Skills Connect, individuals are triaged onto the most appropriate services/provision depending on their individual needs. This regional system join-up means that there's 'no wrong door.'

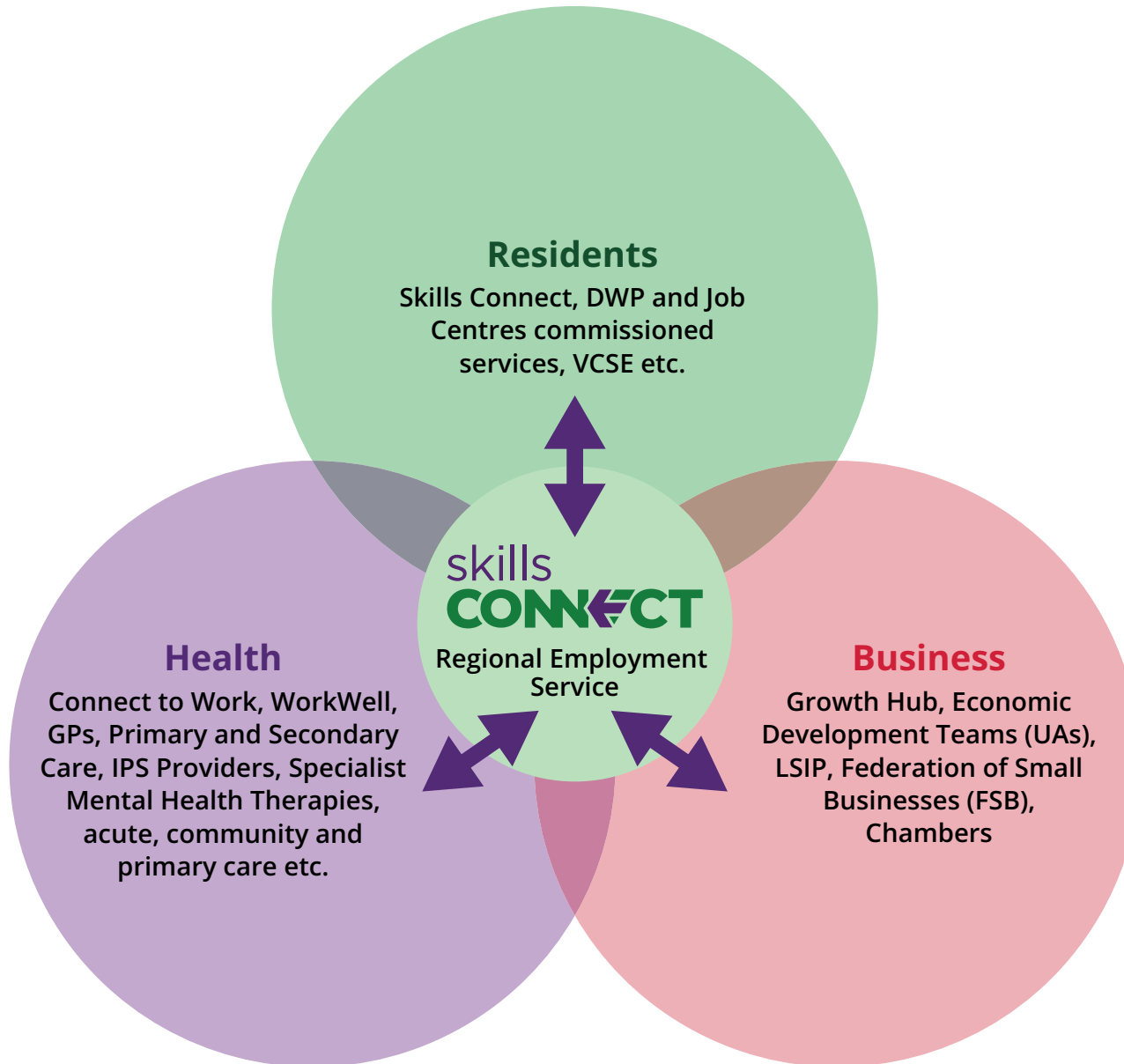
The hub and spoke delivery model 'hides the wiring' and ensures that no resident is turned away and that they are supported to find the correct provision, whether that's support provided by another UA service/team, or strategic partner (e.g. ICB, Housing Association, DWP, skills delivery partner etc).

Skills Connect as a service therefore helps to break down barriers by simplifying the system, raising the visibility of the wide range of programmes available across the region and by signposting individuals to relevant programmes and support dependent on their needs and circumstances.

The site has had over 220,000 visits with user figures growing month-on-month.

We will further strengthen the Regional Employment Service delivering Phase 2 of Skills Connect to ensure that it acts as the central referral route for the region's employability and skills and health provision, with clear mechanisms in place for referrals between partners to 'dock into' the service.

Figure 12: System join up



- Integration between the MCA, ICB and DWP as part of the system join-up (co-designed).
- Builds on existing architecture in the region to simplify access.
- Supporting residents to navigate the system. Strategic partners working together to 'hide the wiring.'
- Links into other local projects and programmes (UKSPF, MPSF, ASF, Skills Bootcamps, Levy etc).
- www.skillsconnect.org.uk

Skills Connect Case Study 1

When D found himself struggling to afford rising living costs he came to the Skills Connect for support to find a job so that he could increase incomings.

The Information, Advice and Guidance Officer (IAG) referred him to Citizen's Advice for financial support, conducted a full benefits review and began ongoing support from the Pod.

They addressed D's confidence to allow him to move back into the employment environment. With support and encouragement of the IAG Officer D began volunteering in a local charity shop for a few hours a week.

They worked on updating his CV, writing job applications, interview preparation and confidence building techniques.

After applying for several part time roles D was offered an interview. D attended the interview and was successfully appointed. He now feels he is much more confident which has had a positive impact on his social life.

'I thought I was beyond help I didn't know what I was going to do. I love being out more and back at work. The sessions I've had with the advisor has changed how I see myself.'

Skills Connect Case Study 2

B came to Skills Connect after being out of work for 4 months. His confidence had been impacted by difficult relationships with management in his previous role and he struggled to see his skills and abilities.

He secured a part-time job which is a good fit for him to continue to prioritise his wellbeing. He is now working with the Future Bright team at B&NES for ongoing career coaching.

'Of all the support I have had this has been the most helpful. It meant so much just to be listened to. It felt amazing know in that someone understood and was rooting for me. Thank you'

Programmes and services that can/will be accessed through Skills Connect include:

- **Future Bright:**⁶ coaching for people who want to progress in work.
- **Connect to Work (CtW):** supported employment for residents with health conditions or disabilities.
- **The Careers Hub:** improving careers advice and employer engagement in schools.
- **Youth Guarantee Trailblazer:**⁷ ensuring every young person has a pathway into work, learning or an apprenticeship within 16 weeks.

- **Adult Skills Fund (ASF):** devolved investment enabling adults to retrain or build qualifications for life and work.
- **Strategic Partner Provision:** specialist support from organisations such as The Prince's Trust, Salvation Army, housing associations and VCSE providers, targeting specific groups and communities.
- **Skills Bootcamps:** rapid training in partnership with employers to meet sector skills gaps.
- **WE Work for Everyone:**⁸ a free programme for people with a learning disability, learning difficulty and autistic people to find a way into paid work.
- **WorkWell:** led by Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board (ICB) to help residents to stay in or return to work.
- **The Jobcentre Plus Integrated Offer:** aligning national DWP programmes (Universal Support, Restart, National Careers Service, Moving Parents Forward) with Skills Connect coaching.
- **Good Employment Charter:** a voluntary network of regional employers committed to fair, secure and inclusive work.

More detail on these services can be found on the Skills Connect website – www.skillsconnect.org.uk.

Gaps in the Offer

The Employment and Skills Advisory Panel (ESAP), which is being replaced by the Get West of England Working Steering Group, has been bringing together employers, skills providers and key local stakeholders to better understand and resolve skills mismatches at a local level. Task and finish groups and sector and/or topic specific focus groups have also helped to identify gaps in provision. These groups have shown that, whilst significant progress has been made in joining up the offer, some gaps remain around:

- **Ensuring young people benefit from the region's opportunities** – including those who are at risk of becoming NEET. This is now, in part, being addressed through the Youth Guarantee but more needs to be done. We will need to recognise the root causes of the challenges our young people face and explore early intervention proposals through social outcome partnerships.
- **Mitigating the potential negative impacts of AI and automation** – stemming from the rapid pace of technological change, which may result in jobs being displaced. We will need to ensure that every resident can access the right training, guidance and support to keep pace with these changes and build their digital confidence. Alongside this, we must work with employers and support them to adopt fair and transparent practices, focusing training on “human-plus” skills like creativity, teamwork, and adaptability, which can ensure technology complements rather than replaces people.
- **Geographical disparities** – as the geography of the MCA does not currently include North Somerset, some services (i.e. those linked to devolved funding and powers) are not always available in North Somerset. Similarly, with two ICBs covering the region, there can be differences in health-related provision.
- **Expanding green skills provision** – grounded in our ambition to be a hub for green businesses and innovation, ensuring our growth is truly green. We aim to create thousands of green jobs in industries such as carbon capture, sustainable construction, and environmental tech. Expanding green skills provision will be central to this ambition, ensuring local people have the training and expertise required to power emerging industries and sustain green growth.
- **Focusing on prevention** – recognising that it is often easier and more cost effective to help people i.e. when they are first signed off work by their GP, or when they are persistently absent from school. Some of our projects and programmes are not able to take preventative action due to strict eligibility criteria, but by working together, we hope to be able to change this.
- **Exploring co-commissioning** – working with other commissioners (such as the ICB) to jointly fund provision with the aim of streamlining services to improve coverage for residents whilst reducing duplication and improving value for money.

Identifying Future Gaps

The new Get West of England Employment Steering Group (which will oversee the delivery of Skills Connect, Connect to Work and other strategic services and programmes) will provide a pivotal role in convening strategic partners across health, employment, skills and other key services. The role of this Steering Group will be to provide strategic insight into emerging sector and/or market priorities, helping to identify gaps and shape and inform skills and employability planning and commissioning.

Using our Data Lakehouse to identify gaps in provision

We recognise that residents should be able to get the right support without having to navigate a maze of disconnected services. Too often people have to repeat their story to different agencies or wait too long to access the help they need. The new Data Lakehouse is being built to change that. By safely bringing together information from stakeholders such as the DWP, the NHS ICBs, and Skills Connect, it will give us all a clearer picture of your journey. This means we can spot gaps more quickly, make sure support reaches the communities that need it most, and design services that work together rather than in isolation.

As we move forward, all delivery data will be consolidated within the Data Lakehouse. This integrated platform will enable a detailed and timely understanding of delivery performance, highlighting gaps, geographic 'cold spots', and emerging areas of need. By consolidating and analysing this information at a granular level, the Lakehouse will provide the robust evidence base required to strengthen strategic commissioning and ensure resources are targeted where they can have the greatest impact.

Working with Partners

Delivering the Local Get West of England Plan requires a coherent system that can align effort, share intelligence, and ensure that residents experience a seamless journey into and through work. We have already been working hard to deliver this through strong regional systems leadership as highlighted throughout this plan. Within this, each partner has a vital role to play but the real impact comes when our respective levers are applied collectively and supported by shared mechanisms.

This part of the plan describes the journey so far, the role and levers that different stakeholders can apply, the systemic and structural challenges that we face, and the mechanisms needed to support collaboration.

The Journey so Far

We have already begun the journey towards stronger systems leadership through:

- Creating a strong, regional skills leadership team in the senior level MCA and Unitary Authority Skills Officer Group.
- Developing a new Get West of England Working Steering Group, replacing ESAP, to provide industry input and perspectives on our work, bringing together oversight of the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) led by Business West, to align delivery and respond to industry need.

- Building stronger relationships with health system stakeholders to work on shared goals. For example, convening workshops with partners from the Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS, local authorities, and the voluntary and community sector to discuss regional challenges and opportunities for tackling health inequalities.
- Integrating and supporting current and future employment support contracts into the regional skills system.
- Maximising our regional return/benefit from mainstream education and skills funded delivery; and continuing to attract further investment.
- Creating an Employment and Skills Fund⁹ to provide longer term certainty for employment and skills services, as well as the flexibility to adapt and deliver new programmes/commission new service provision to address identified gaps.
- Delivering Skills Connect which has provided a significant step change in provision.
- Developing a Data Sharing Agreement between WECA, DWP, the two ICBs and UAs that allows the matching of benefit, health and skills-course records in the resident tracking Lakehouse.

However, there is more work to be done, and this must be achieved in partnership.

Role of Different Partners

Each of our partners has a vital role to play within this landscape, through a combination of their:

- Relationships with residents and employers.
- Delivery of existing support programmes.
- Ability to commission or reshape provision.
- Access to funding.

Figure Fourteen shows the range of relationships and routes to engagement that partners have with residents and employers, which provide opportunities to engage people with support.

Figure 14: Relationships with, and provision serving residents and employers

	Relationships with residents (access routes)	Relationships with employers (access routes)
WECA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills Connect and other direct provision. • Careers Hub (including schools and colleges). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Account management services. • Good Employer Charter. • Careers Hub.
NHS and ICB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple routes including: GP services, Social Prescribing, Work Well, Individual Placement Support, Talking therapies, Locality Partnerships and neighbourhood work, Commissioning for good employment and health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupational health services • WorkWell.
DWP and Jobcentre Plus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefit applicants/case load. • Youth offer (NEET support) . • Support programmes. • Signposting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment solutions.
Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council services (e.g. social services, youth services, housing, council tax/benefits, children’s services, adult community learning etc.). • Existing employment and skill services including NEET reduction, employment support and adult skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business rates, planning enforcement. • Business support services (including business engagement and account management).
Schools and Colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and families. • Provision such as CEIAG, SEND support, NEET/Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer engagement with schools.
FE, HE and training providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprenticeships. • Employer partnerships.
VCSE and community learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support services including trusted outreach, social groups and peer support). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers in their own right.
Housing associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenants. • Resident support programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers in their own right. • Supply chains.
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment, HR processes and occupational health. • Skills and apprenticeships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business networks and supply chains.

Some stakeholders can also access additional funding sources, and/or can commission and re-shape provision. Likewise, there are opportunities for partners to join up funding streams to deliver holistic benefits. For instance:

- **WECA** – can commission outcome-based provision (including modular/micro credential provision), pool funding and use the Mayoral Priority Skills Fund for local pilots. In the future the Integrated Settlement and devolution powers will give the region much more flexibility in how funding is used.
- **The NHS and ICB** – can work with partners to start the delivery of holistic provision within the community. Specifically, communities with significant health inequalities
- **Jobcentre Plus** – can provide tools to reduce practical barriers through Flexible Support Funds and conditionality flexibilities, while aligning national offers such as Restart and Connect to Work with regional priorities. Likewise, the proposals to transform Jobcentre Plus into a new jobs and careers service may provide a powerful lever of change.
- **Local Authorities** – are anchor institutions in our communities that can support regional priorities through their policies, strategies, and resource allocation processes.
- **FE/HE and Independent Training Providers** – can offer stepping-stone courses, contextualised English, maths and digital skills, and flexible timetables funded through Adult Skills Fund (ASF), as well as developing

short credit bearing courses in response to industry.

- **Employers** – can utilise apprenticeship levy funding to influence provision in the local area.

Use of Devolution Powers

We strongly support the Government's devolution agenda which aims to empower local leaders who know their communities best, giving them greater control to address local priorities. We will continue to work with DWP to ensure programmes are devolved in a way that best enables local leaders to design and deliver services that can most effectively support our residents. Further devolution, of employment services will be essential to creating and employment and skills system that works for people and businesses in our region.

Under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill Mayors will also have a stronger voice in the NHS, potentially with a future seat on the Integrated Care Board. This role will help align health with housing, transport, skills, and other local priorities, making public services work most effectively for people across the region.

Challenges

We recognise that, despite the inroads we have made, the skills system, DWP/Jobcentre Plus and health services require further integration. However, a key challenge in delivering this integration is our geographical service boundaries, which are not co-terminus.

The lack of co-terminosity between ICBs and West of England region is making it harder to align priorities and join up services. For example, ICB geographies do not match the West of England region, and this misalignment is being compounded by the new cluster arrangements. Gloucestershire ICB is clustering with the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB (BNSSG ICB) while the Bath, Swindon and Wiltshire ICB (BSW ICB) is clustering with both the Somerset and Dorset ICBs. This means that BNSSG ICB will need to align priorities and services with two Local Get Britain working plans and the BSW ICB will need to align with four.

These proposals limit the Government's ambition for mayors to influence healthcare strategy and weaken opportunities for effective public service integration. We will continue to work with Government to address this issue, recognising the benefits of aligned public service boundaries in improving support for residents and making better use of public money.

Likewise, the geography of the MCA itself, which does not currently include North Somerset presents a similar challenge to achieving parity of provision across the region.

A further challenge to the integration agenda is that funding opportunities can create restricted 'silos' and eligibility criteria, which prevent us from delivering person centric support services that respond to the needs of residents. Securing an Integrated Settlement for the MCA is a key ambition. Achieving this will help provide the flexibility to break down siloed skills funding, align resources with local priorities, and create a more joined-up system that better supports learners and employers.

Future Collaboration Mechanisms

As we move forward, we will need to build on our successes so far and manage the challenges through putting the right mechanisms in place. We will further strengthen the Regional Employment Service delivering Phase 2 of Skills Connect ensuring that it acts as the central referral route for the region's employability and skills provision. Our collective efforts will need to be informed by live data, effective cross-referral systems (which dock into Skills Connect), strong communication channels (at both operational and strategic level), and robust governance structures.

The Data Lakehouse also goes some way to realising our wider aspiration of joining up data across organisations such as the ICB and DWP. Through improved data sharing, we can build a more complete picture of resident journeys – spanning employment, skills, and health – and in doing so, design support that is more

coordinated, preventative, and responsive to individual needs. Ultimately, this means that residents will experience services that are more joined-up, timely, and effective in helping them access good work, progress in their careers, and improve their wellbeing.

Actions to Address Systemic Challenges

Immediate actions to address systemic challenges include:

1. Formally setting up and launching the Get West of England Working Steering Group chaired by the West of England mayor.
2. Developing a new regional skills strategy: delivering on the ambition of the Growth Strategy.
3. Launching the Mayoral Priority Skills Fund¹⁰ (MPSF) as a flexible funding mechanism to respond quickly to emerging regional challenges and opportunities, enabling partners to pilot innovative approaches and scale effective intervention.
4. Further developing our evidence base, working with partners to build understanding of employment inequalities in the region and the impact of automation and AI.
5. Implementing a regional data sharing agreement to enable integrated tracking of residents' journeys.
6. Strengthening our use of data to track participation and outcomes by protected

characteristics and priority groups, ensuring programmes reach their intended audiences and reduce inequalities.

7. Collaborating with ICBs, local authorities, and partners to develop Neighbourhood Health and Care services, including accelerators in Woodspring and South Bristol, delivering joined-up, community-focused health, care, and wellbeing support.
8. Driving collaboration at regional level to develop services that work best for residents. For example, exploring how MCA and partner levers can best support Pride in Place investment from government.
9. Working closely with the Business Board to strengthen engagement with employers across the region, building networks which support businesses to employ people who are out of work due to ill health or other factors.
10. Working with the DWP and DfE to identify national policy changes that will help improve the welfare, employment, and skills system for our residents.

These systemic actions are also complemented with specific actions under each priority as well as the wider implementation of the Growth Strategy, Healthier Together, and the Employment and Skills Plan.

Governance and Implementation

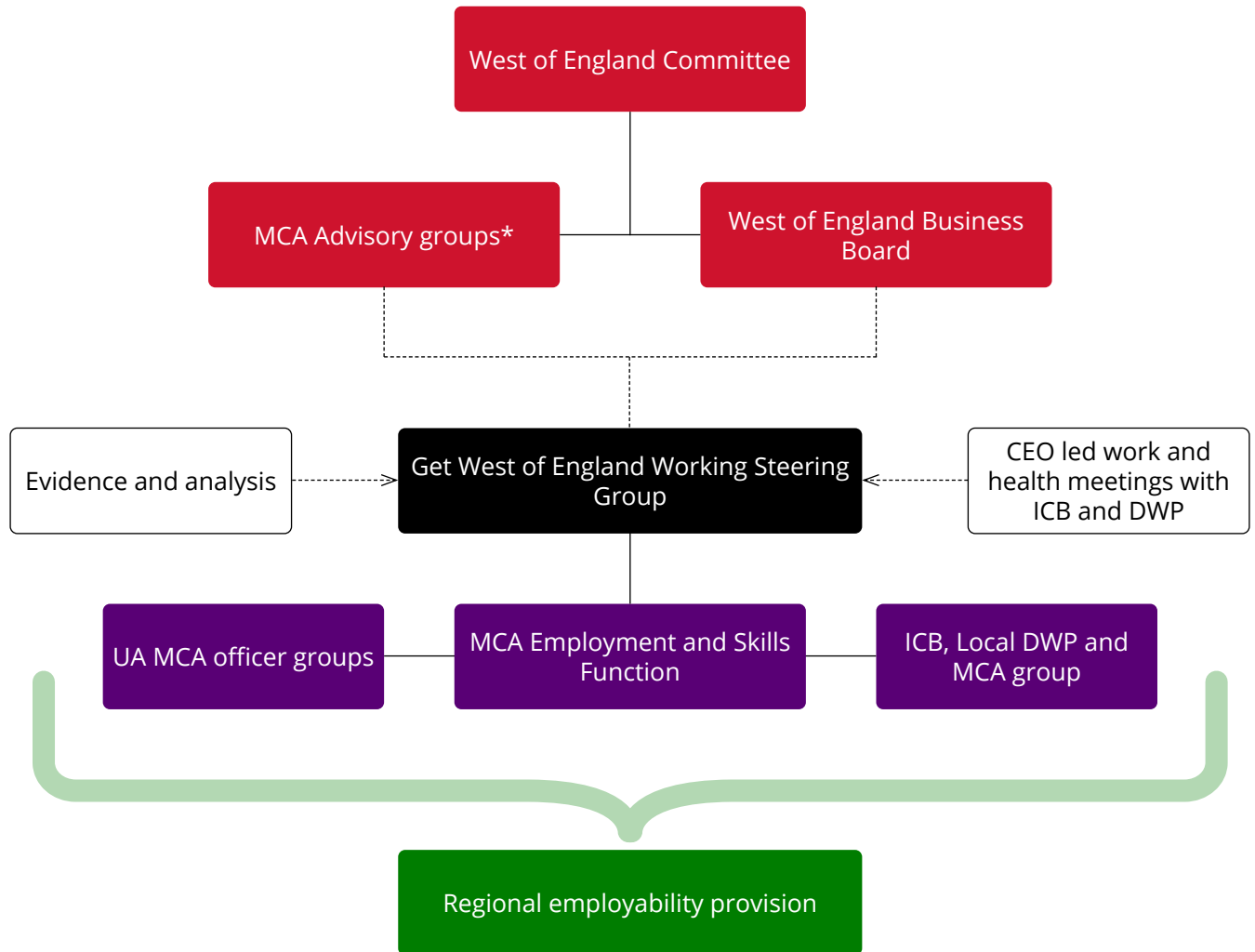
This part of the plan focuses on how it will be governed.

Governance Arrangements

Strong governance matters because it is how we make sure residents experience a joined-up system, not a maze of disconnected programmes. At the heart of this is the Get West of England Working Steering Group, chaired by the West of England mayor. This group brings together voices from the Business Board, local employers, the NHS ICB, DWP, councils, colleges and universities, and the VCSE sector. By sitting around the same table, these partners can agree priorities and align resources so that residents get the right support at the right time. To support the organisational alignment at an operational level, the MCA CEO will chair quarterly meetings with senior ICB colleagues and local DWP representatives.

Figure Fifteen below shows how the Steering Group will be supported by local officer groups and delivery teams across the MCA, ICB and DWP. This structure ensures that decisions made at the top translate directly into action in neighbourhoods – whether that’s more WorkWell+ advisers in GP surgeries, better access to Skills Bootcamps, or clearer routes for employers to offer inclusive jobs. Using

Figure 15: Group architecture and governance



the regional Data Lakehouse, where possible partners will share data to spot gaps quickly and measure what is working, so residents do not have to repeat their story or fall through the cracks.

For people across the West of England, this means governance is not about just meetings and committees – it is the guarantee that health services, employment support and training providers are working together behind the scenes. The goal is simple: to remove barriers, make services easier to navigate, and ensure every resident has a fair chance to move into good work and build the future they want.

Our partners involved in all layers of the plan's governance will also play a vital role in continuing the conversation with residents, businesses, and wider stakeholders through the life of the plan.

Implementation Plan

Working with stakeholders and partners, the Get West of England Working Steering Group will develop, and keep under review, an implementation plan for the Get West of England Working Plan. This will set out the detailed actions to take forward each priority area including resources, responsibilities, and key milestones.

Monitoring and Evaluation

To achieve our aims, we must be able to continuously monitor progress and change our path if we need to. We also need to understand what is working and what is not and the reasons why this is the case if we are going to make a difference. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is therefore a vital part of delivery.

The Steering Group will ensure that all projects and programmes commissioned to support the outcomes in this plan capture robust monitoring data and carry out high quality evaluation studies. Whilst each project will be monitored and evaluated in line with the commissioning authority's M&E policies, the scope of the work will be co-designed with partners. Monitoring data and evaluation reports will be shared with the Steering Group via the new Data Lakehouse.

The Steering Group will also lead on work to monitor progress against the over-arching objectives of the plan. This will involve:

- Consolidation of all delivery data within the Data Lakehouse to allow a detailed and timely understanding of the delivery performance, as well as gaps, geographic 'cold spots', and emerging areas of need.
- Reviewing progress against the outcomes and regional impacts set out in this plan. These are aligned with the Combined Authority's organisational Outcomes Framework that will position us for a single integrated settlement

in due course and provide a sound basis for investment decisions. As a result, the priorities and outcomes set out within this plan are to be reflected in the M&E of the MCA's performance at the highest levels.

- Commissioning thematic evaluation studies to better understand 'what works' in our region.

Endnotes

- 1 Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset
- 2 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.
- 3 WECA Transport Team Modelling
- 4 Childcare Research Project for West of England MCA. By the Centre for Research in Early Childhood. May 2025
- 5 Residents in North Somerset can access the website. If they wish to speak to an advisor they are routed to a landing page on North Somerset Council's website.
- 6 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.
- 7 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.
- 8 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.
- 9 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.
- 10 Currently available for residents in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire only.

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