

Spotlight on **Local Skills**

Supporting devolved skills policies



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Executive Summary

The UK's skills gap is holding the country back. Whilst there have been multiple policy efforts to boost workforce skills, the UK remains on the backfoot when it comes to productivity and the uneven distribution of opportunity across the country. Moreover, with the exponential rise of digital technologies, we urgently need a skills pipeline that can keep pace with automation.

In this paper, we call on government to empower combined authorities to deliver successful skills policies. Different localities have different skills needs, changes and gaps, which each require a bespoke approach. As a starting point, we welcome the devolution deals announced in the March 2023 Budget that will give the Mayors of the West Midlands and Greater Manchester access to devolved post-19 skills funding, as well as greater co-ordinating powers over 16-19 skills delivery and more greater autonomy over careers advice for adults of all ages.¹ Our research reiterates that local leaders are best placed to understand local labour market conditions, and to work with local employers and education providers to support the development of future skills.

These devolved powers must be delivered in concurrence with detailed labour market analysis. New tools offer data-led projections of future skills requirements, helping us to understand the supply and demand of specific skill sets. Pearson's predictive AI allows us to model skills demand changes on a local and regional basis - and in this report we focus on the impact of automation on the West Midlands' workforce to 2032. Our insights indicate that **15% of jobs in the West Midlands will see significant change as a result of technology in the next decade.** It is now for the sector to identify and respond to these opportunities, before they become challenges.

Finally, we must be realistic about the barriers we face. Through roundtable conversations with employers, education establishments, representative bodies and politicians, we have surfaced the systemic issues that undermine coherent skills planning. And through extensive public opinion research, we have considered the frictions that prevent ordinary working people from learning new skills.

Our key findings are as follows:

Data insights can help anticipate the shifting demand and supply of skills in different regions.

Devolving skills policy to a local level is necessary to drive better skills policies within a national framework.

The public want to upskill themselves, but a significant proportion have never completed any kind of skills training.

There is clear appetite from the public, employers, and providers for a modular approach to learning. This can help contribute to the development of a culture of lifelong learning.

Glossary

ERB – Employer Representative Bodies

GLA – Greater London Authority

LEP – Local Enterprise Partnership

LSIP – Local Skills Improvement Plan

MCA – Mayoral Combined Authority

SAP – Skills Advisory Panel

Skills for the Future - West Midlands

Pearson's analytics platform which helps to identify skills needs and support future workforce planning. Using AI it can identify future workforce requirements, within countries, regions, or companies, in a time of significant technological advancement and automation. The insights this data brings are vital in supporting economies to proactively embrace the change.

Taking the West Midlands as a case study, we used Pearson's AI modelling to look at what the next decade holds for the region's workforce. This includes where parts of the local economy will grow and where others could experience a reduction in roles as a result of technology. These projections offer critical insights to decision makers – whether as part of local government, an education provider, or employers – as they plan for the future.

We found that:

15% of jobs in the West Midlands will see significant change as a result of technology in the next decade.

Over the next ten years, almost 15% of jobs in the West Midlands- some 430,000 roles – in the West Midlands could see significant change as a result of technology. And we must be recognise the impact that this will have. This will affect individuals of different ages, skills levels and seniority – there will be changes for every workplace and every family in the West Midlands area.



SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE (CONTINUED)**Automation does not mean fewer jobs, it means *different* jobs.**

Our models suggest there will be an increase in headcount (jobs) in the West Midlands over the next five and ten year periods. However, we do expect a significant technological impact on the sectors that survive and thrive.

In the five years from 2022, technology is projected to add close to 7,000 jobs in wholesale and retail trade, and close to 5,000 in manufacturing. However, it is perhaps unsurprising given current online shopping trends, that after considering the 41,500 jobs no longer needed due to technology impact, wholesale and retail trade has the largest predicted drop in headcount. Of all 466 jobs analysed, Sales and Retail Assistants are predicted to experience the largest decline in headcount. The region will need 9,000 fewer people in this role, a 7.2% reduction.

This is largely consistent with the West Midlands Combined Authority's Regional Skills Plan, which has identified advanced manufacturing, building technologies, digital and business and professional services as priority sectors when it comes to increasing the number of skilled people and the level of their skills.²

Overall Change

	2022	2027	2032
Headcount	2,973,330	2,994,870	3,005,640
Change from 2022 (#)		21,540	32,310
Change from 2022 (%)		0.72%	1.09%

NB High-level figures of jobs demand in the West Midlands for 2027 and 2032. Final Headcount for future years is calculated by adding economic growth, technology impacts and jobs added.

Impact

	2027	2032
Economic Growth	192,660 (6.48%)	393,950 (13.25%)

This impact analyses how job demand changes as the economy grows or declines over time. It considers industry growth, industry supply-chains and employment elasticity.

Technology Impact	-205,340 (-6.91%)	-433,970 (14.60%)
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This impact analyses how jobs will be impacted by automation and augmentation, reducing their demand. It utilises Pearson's technology adoption, work attribution models and AI engines.

Jobs Added	34,220 (1.15%)	72,330 (2.43%)
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Information of jobs added by industry to support technology adoption in the West Midlands for 2027 and 2032.

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE (CONTINUED)**Jobs Added by Industry (Top 10)**

Industry	2027	2032
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	6,910	12,560
Manufacturing	4,880	9,340
Administrative and support service activities	4,080	8,710
Professional, scientific and technical activities	3,010	5,560
Human health and social work activities	2,670	6,440
Transportation and storage	2,370	6,060
Accommodation and Food service activities	2,160	5,060
Education	1,880	4,150
Financial and insurance activities	1,210	2,020
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	1,170	2,640

Jobs Added: Information of jobs added by industry to support technology adoption in the West Midlands for 2027 and 2032.

We know what skills we need and how to teach them:

This is not vague speculation. Pearson's modelling offers specific insights based on existing behaviour patterns, and builds a tangible picture of the real skills needed across the future economy.

The West Midlands has the fastest-growing and highest concentration of companies specialising in the digital sector outside of London.³ It is therefore unsurprising that technology-focused roles – such as programmers, IT managers and telecoms professionals – will see the biggest percentage increase in demand over the next five years.

Efforts thus need to be made to generate a highly skilled workforce with qualifications and experience in Information, Communication and Technology.

We should also acknowledge that the largest net increase in demand will be for cleaners, carers and HGV drivers; in other words, roles that technology and automation will struggle to replace in the medium term.

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE (CONTINUED)

Top 10 jobs with the highest growing demand in 2027

	FTEs	Net Change	Net Change %
Cleaners and Domestic	94,719	3,286	3.6%
Care Workers and Home Carers	86,879	2,778	3.3%
Large Goods Vehicle Drivers	37,230	2,680	7.8%
Programmers and Software Development Professionals	14,099	2,064	17.1%
IT Specialist Managers	15,229	1,977	14.9%
IT And Telecommunications Professionals	12,597	1,732	15.9%
Taxi and Cab Drivers and Chauffeurs	23,698	1,726	7.9%
Managers and Proprietors in Other Services	34,516	1,703	5.2%
Security Guards and Related Occupations	29,007	1,645	6.0%
Bus and Coach Drivers	17,342	1,556	9.9%
Grand Total	365,316	21,147	

Top 10 jobs with declining demand in 2027

	FTEs	Net Change	Net Change %
Sales and Retail Assistants	115,642	-8,986	-7.2%
Other Administrative Occupations Nec	66,281	-3,436	-4.9%
Bookkeepers Payroll Managers and Wages Clerks	34,095	-3,320	-8.9%
Kitchen and Catering Assistants	42,681	-3,085	-6.7%
Receptionists	25,564	-2,153	-7.8%
Metal Working Production and Maintenance Fitters	24,256	-1,863	-7.1%
Personal Assistants and other Secretaries	26,535	-1,636	-5.8%
Bank and Post Office Clerks	15,009	-1,603	-9.6%
Retail Cashiers and Checkout Operators	12,766	-1,592	-11.1%
Elementary Process Plant Occupations Nec	17,335	-1,559	-8.3%
Grand Total	380,164	-29,233	

NB This data is based on the base case scenario. The base case assumes economic growth of 1.8% and moderate technology adoption for the next 15 years.

We need to act now, to help the workforce adapt.

Across the region, local democratic leadership, colleges, universities, independent training providers and employers need to work in concert to develop an effective skills pipeline.

- There is an immediate need to support **those in roles at risk**, and to consider how these people can be upskilled to meet the needs of the growing sectors of the economy.
- There is also the need to engage **those who are economically inactive**. What is the best way to help individuals enter or re-enter the workforce a sustainable career?
- And finally, there are **those still in formal education** and not yet ready to join the world of work. What courses and programmes are required to best prepare those young people and to meet local needs?

Policy Context

Pearson's data insights cannot exist in a vacuum, and should be considered in conjunction with the current policy context.

On his arrival into Number 10, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promised a renewed focus on skills, positioning it as a means to accelerate economic growth. Central to this is the "levelling up" agenda and moves to devolve some skills related powers to local mayors.

Following the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper in February 2022, we have seen more and more regions sign devolution deals – many of which include control over the Adult Education Budget (AEB).⁴ And, in a speech delivered to the Association of Colleges conference in November 2022, Education Secretary Gillian Keegan set out her commitment to Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) as a "gamechanger" for post-16 education.⁵

Skills is a devolved matter, with administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland leading their policy and the UK Government looking only at England. In England, there is variation in the level of power different regions and authorities have. This paper concentrates on the English system.



A DECADE OF CHANGE



2011

Launch of Local Employment Partnerships: Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were launched to bring together the private sector, local authorities and other stakeholders to create local economic growth, replacing regional development agencies. There are now 38 across England.

2016

2016 – Sainsbury report: A panel - convened by the then Skills Minister Nick Boles MP and chaired by Lord Sainsbury - published a high-profile report calling for fundamental reforms to the technical education system.

2017

Abolition of UKCES: Government funding was withdrawn from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, making way for the new Institute for Apprenticeships.

Introduction of Apprenticeship Levy: The Apprenticeship Levy was introduced as a means of funding government plans to deliver more quality apprenticeships. The levy is applicable to companies with a payroll bill of £3 million or more, but companies of all sizes are eligible to access the funds collected.

2018

2018 - Skills Advisory Panels: Since 2018, the Department for Education has provided grant funding to MCAs, the GLA and LEPs through the Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) programme. The programme has aimed to increase the quality of local-level skills and labour market analysis, strengthen links between employers and skills providers and increase the continuity of output across the country.

2019

Devolution of Adult Education Budget: The funding was apportioned between the Education and Skills Funding Agency, six Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority. As of December 2022, almost half of England is covered by a devolution deal.

A DECADE OF CHANGE (CONTINUED)



2020

First teaching of T Levels:

Teaching for the first three T Level subjects began in 2020. Thirteen more followed across 2021 and 2022, with more due to launch in future.

Lifetime Skills Guarantee:

This is a commitment to providing every adult with the training and education they need across their lifetime, underpinned by the Lifelong Loan Entitlement and the provision of free courses for adults.

2021

Skills for Jobs White Paper:

This White Paper set out a raft of reforms to ensure that “everyone has the skills which will allow them to get good jobs, both now and in the future”.

2022

Levelling Up White Paper: This White Paper highlighted the centrality of skills to the levelling up agenda and set out plans for £3.8bn of investment by 2024-5, including: new Education Investment Areas; the creation of the Unit for Future Skills; nine new Institutes of Technology; and the introduction of the In-Work Progression Offer.

Post 16 Skills Act: The Skills and Post-16 Education Act was passed in 2022, designed to help transform the skills and training landscape and level up opportunities across the country. Its key measures cover: Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs); promotion of technical training; prioritisation of green skills; new funding options; and the creation of a unified skills system. This includes placing a legal requirement on colleges and other providers to work with employers to develop skills plans, to ensure the training on offer meets the needs of local areas. The hope is that people stay in an area and do not feel the need to move away for employment.

2023

Trailblazer Devolution Deals: The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced two new “trailblazer” devolution deals with the Mayors of the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, including a direct funding settlement and devolution of post-19 skills funding. The deals extend existing devolved adult skills functions to include further areas of post-19 education and skills activity; and provides greater oversight of post-16 technical education and skills and careers.

Local Skills Improvement Plans

LSIPs connect local employers with training providers to inform skills planning to meet local skills needs. They are led by Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs), and were introduced to put employers at the centre of the skills system, build stronger stakeholder partnerships, and to make skills provision more responsive to labour market needs.

LSIPs should set out key priorities for skills training in a given area based on employer views and robust evidence, be reviewed and updated as appropriate, and consider skills that support Net Zero targets.

However, LSIPs are not intended to cover the entirety of local provision, and ERBs are not being asked to take a direct role in funding or commissioning skills provision.

Two sources of funding – from the Local Skills Improvement Fund and Strategic Development Fund – will be available. £92 million has already been awarded to FE providers across England.

Milestones for LSIP rollout:

Summer 2023: DfE expects most of the country will have an LSIP developed and approved by the Secretary of State.

March 2025: Plans will be drawn up for an initial period up to March 2025. ERBs will work with partners to regularly review and update their LSIP to ensure it remains relevant.



The Experts' Perspective

To understand the scale of the challenge at the local level, and attempt to formulate some answers to these questions, we held two roundtables in September and October 2022 covering the West Midlands and the North West. Participants included local government officials, national politicians, local employers, local providers, and representative bodies. We discussed how skills policy can reduce regional inequality, and considered the roles of different tiers of government in providing tailored local support, as well as how decision-makers can use data to inform their local skills planning.

Six themes emerged across the two discussions:

- **Strong support for further devolution.** Both groups agreed that central government should play a reduced role – providing funding and a standards framework; but leaving strategy and execution to local or regional government to achieve the most meaningful results. As one example, individuals with lower levels of skills are not as mobile (i.e. willing or able to move to another place for work) and so it is vital that local provision is able to cater for their needs. The call was clear: give local freedoms to meet local needs.
- **Improved coherence is needed at local level.** Participants highlighted that there is no lack of goodwill at local level, with the main barrier to effective delivery the piecemeal nature of projects and funding available. One body described the local picture as a “lottery”. In contrast, devolution is bringing clear benefits to the West Midlands as they have been able to “tidy up” a system that was not bespoke to the region, rationalising the base and creating better links. It is a similar picture in Liverpool, as they have undertaken a skills audit, showing what employers want and what trained talent is coming through. Providers also told us it was easier to work with the MCAs, be they in the West Midlands, North West or elsewhere.



THE EXPERTS' PERSPECTIVE (CONTINUED)

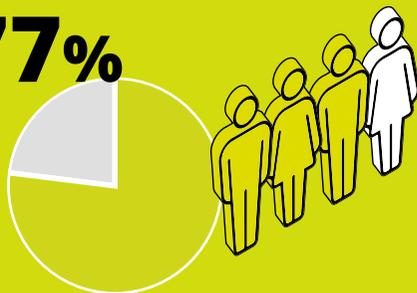
- **Engaging with the variety of central government departments is difficult.** Participants who had engaged with government departments on skills development highlighted the need for better coherence in terms of departments' policy direction for industry, and that the bureaucratic nature of engagement can feel like a deterrent. A number of participants also found policy contradictions between the different parts of central government.
- **Improved advice and guidance is needed for learners.** Both sessions agreed more could be done to improve careers advice, with some believing that it is not sufficiently tailored to local labour markets. Pastoral support targeted at harder-to-reach people designed to keep vulnerable learners in programmes is also a key facet of local skills development, and something that SMEs are currently struggling to provide effectively.
- **Reskilling as a continuous piece of work.** Participants agreed that skills needs will continue to evolve across the country, and so reskilling and upskilling will be a continuous process rather than a single effort. In support of a culture change relating to lifelong learning several participants called for more modular provision, creating "step on, step off" learning ladders suited to local needs. Creating "step on, step off" learning ladders. To aid this shift, there was support for a personal digital skills portfolio that evolves with the learner, demonstrating credentials to employers and providers.
- **Use of data.** Participants recognised the need for "fresh", high quality data, with some pointing out that a lot of data used is "old". It was thought that central government has a part to play here in collecting and collating relevant data. There was also agreement that there is a role for data in helping systematically identify future skills and needs.



The Public Perspective

Skills policies need to work for the people they target. We therefore conducted extensive public opinion polling to better understand attitudes to skills training.

77%



Over three quarters of people (77%) agree that today's economy makes the ability to learn new skills more important than ever.

64%



Two thirds (64%) are interested in undertaking a course to learn new skills.

41%



This enthusiasm does not necessarily translate into action. A significant proportion of individuals (41%) have never completed a course to learn new skills.

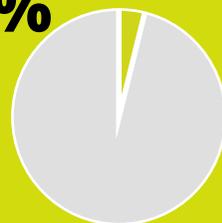
53%



And this rises to 53% of respondents from the lowest socio-economic quartile.

Only 4% of the public claim to know exactly what type of courses are available to learn new skills.

4%



Only 5% know which institutions offer programmes that develop skills.

5%

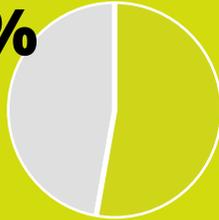


1%

Only 1% of respondents who are temporarily out of work know exactly what types of courses are on offer to learn new skills. The public is willing, but not sure where to get help and advice.

THE PUBLIC'S PERSPECTIVE (CONTINUED)

53%



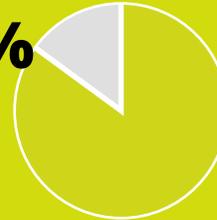
Employers have a clear role to play in driving skills training. Over half of people (53%) believe that learning new skills is only worthwhile if they are in demand from employers.



The public value official recognition for their training.

85% said they would want a certificate or diploma on completion.

85%



84%



Flexibility and online delivery are essential for the public and the same number agree about the importance of flexible timelines for completion. Almost three quarters (72%) believe a micro-credential course would help an employee find a job in a new industry. This preference for flexible learning and a modular approach echoes the views from our roundtables.



The public are also confident that local decision makers are better placed to improve local skills levels than central government. 42% back their local authorities compared to just 14% for central government. This fits with the shift in policy thinking, be it the government's levelling up and devolution deal agenda, or the emerging thinking of the Labour Party, as some powers are passed to Metro Mayors and their combined authorities.

42%

VS

14%



It is imperative that government policy, including the recently announced skills bootcamps and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, fosters a genuine culture of lifelong learning that can be easily accessed by people in their day-to-day lives.

The public are clearly committed to learning useful skills that will help them find better, sustainable jobs – but careers advice and guidance is required to steer individuals towards employable skillsets that will boost their prospects.

Recommendations

Further devolve skills and employment funding to combined authorities:

Those at the heart of English regions understand local needs and what can be done to meet them – and the Mayors have the democratic legitimacy to act on them. The current level of devolution, although giving some powers, does not go far enough. For example, the Adult Education Budget is devolved in many deals, but is only a fraction of what contributes to skills development. Building on the recent announcement of two “trailblazer” devolution deals for the West Midlands and Greater Manchester. We need to go further on devolution when it comes to co-ordination over 16-18 skills delivery, post-19 skills funding, and autonomy over careers advice for adults of all ages.

Use data to plan for the future: The government should utilise private and public sector data to ensure skills policy is forward looking, and to ensure that we are planning for the jobs of the future - not just the jobs of the present. In all areas where greater devolution of funding is agreed, mayors and combined authorities should commit to at least annual data exercises of future workforce trends that should be commissioned and published, to aid decision making.

Embrace modular learning: We should embrace technology to make it as easy as possible for individuals to integrate skills training into their day-to-day life. The Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) will be the major central government vehicle and funding stream for adult learning. Within the LLE, learners should be able to access funding for modular, hybrid learning that is formally recognised by employers and institutions. This includes stackable microcredentials that can be accumulated over flexible timelines.

Bring together universities, colleges and independent training providers:

The planned LSIPs offer the opportunity for all participating educational institutions to come together in a single forum, chaired by the mayor. These discussions should focus on anticipating future skills needs, and ensuring there is a unified ‘supply side’ architecture for training in a local area.

Incentivise employers to take the lead: Individuals are more likely to make the time for skills training when encouraged by their current or prospective employer. However, when left to their own discretion, employers consistently prioritise older and more highly-trained employees over younger and less trained ones. For some industries, employers are further disincentivised to commit to training because of erratic or short notice contracts. Central and local government officials should therefore explore which policy levers can empower employers to offer more robust training to their employees, including in short notice and gig sectors of the economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

Pearson's next steps

This paper has concentrated on the central policy platform underpinning the local skills debate. With this macro picture in place, our focus now moves to the English regions and the exploration of their particular skills needs – both today and into the future.

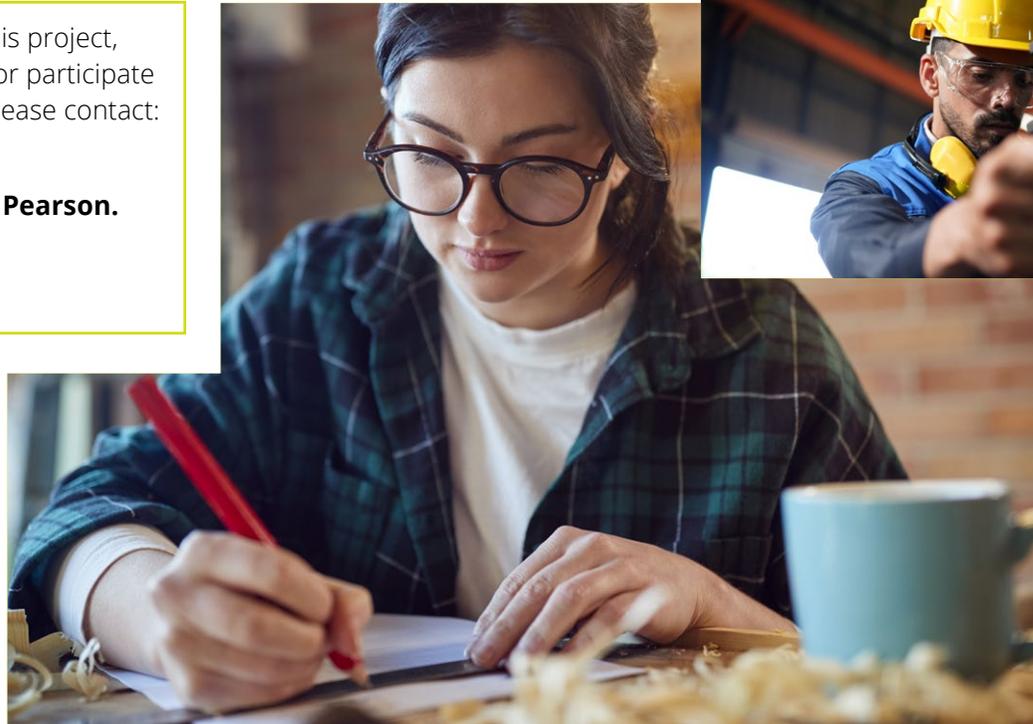
As an important contribution to local workforce planning and skills policy development, we will be publishing a series of regional skills bulletins, which draw upon Pearson's AI-driven modelling. They will consider the current picture and then look forward five and ten years, taking into account the impact of technological change and economic forecasting.

The skills bulletins are being developed to help inform local policy makers, education and training providers, and employers, and will be supported by a series of local roundtable discussions to consider the findings.

Should you wish to learn more about this project, request similar research for your area, or participate in one of our roundtable discussions, please contact:

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Acknowledgements & Methodology

Public polling

Public First conducted polling for Pearson on consumer attitudes to local skills. The poll was carried out between 18th November – 21st November 2022. The sample size was 2003 respondents nation-wide, with data weighted by interlocking age and gender, region, and social grade to nationally representative proportions.

Policy roundtable discussions

We held two policy roundtables in September and October 2022, at the Labour and Conservative Party conferences, investigating the question of local skills policy, powers, and provision. The series was organised by the Institute for Government (IfG) and the debates chaired by Thomas Pope, Deputy Chief Economist, IfG. Each event ran for 1.5 hours and included Mayors, senior figures from local government, MPs, education providers, higher education institutions, employers, and representative bodies.

We are grateful for the following people's time in attending the policy roundtables and wider engagement with the project. Their insights have been instrumental in shaping these reports. The final recommendations are our own and are not intended to reflect the views of individuals or organisations.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & METHODOLOGY (CONTINUED)

Attendees:

Anna Firth MP, Member of the Education Select Committee

Arun Advani, Assistant Prof. of Economics at
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Becci Newton, Director of Public Policy Research at the
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Ben Fletcher, Chief Operating Officer, Make UK

Ben Harrison, Director, The Work Foundation

Cllr Brigid Jones, Deputy Leader, Birmingham City Council

David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges

Freya Thomas Monk, Senior Vice President at Pearson plc

Helen Milner, CEO, Good Things Foundation

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Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP, Chair,
Work and Pensions Select Committee

Steve Dowling, Government Relations Manager, Tesco

Steve Rotheram, Metro Mayor of the Liverpool City Region

Professor Steven Spier, Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University

Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe, Vice-Chair of the LGA's City Region's
Board and Leader of Bradford Metropolitan Council

Tallulah Eyres, Policy and Public Affairs Officer - North,
Chartered Institute of Building

Cllr Toby Savage, Vice-Chair of the LGA's City Regions' Board
and Leader of South Gloucestershire Council

Will McWilliams, Partner Head of Public Services Advisory,
Grant Thornton

Endnotes



- 1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/levelling-up-at-heart-of-budget>
- 2 <https://www.andystreet.org.uk/sites/www.andystreet.org.uk/files/2021-04/Andy%20Street-Manifesto%202021-Summary.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/productivity-and-skills/digital/>
- 4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>
- 5 <https://feweek.co.uk/keegan-the-3-gamechangers-for-fe/>



Spotlight on **Local Skills**



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 [Spotlight homepage and other papers in the series](#)