

Get Sussex Working

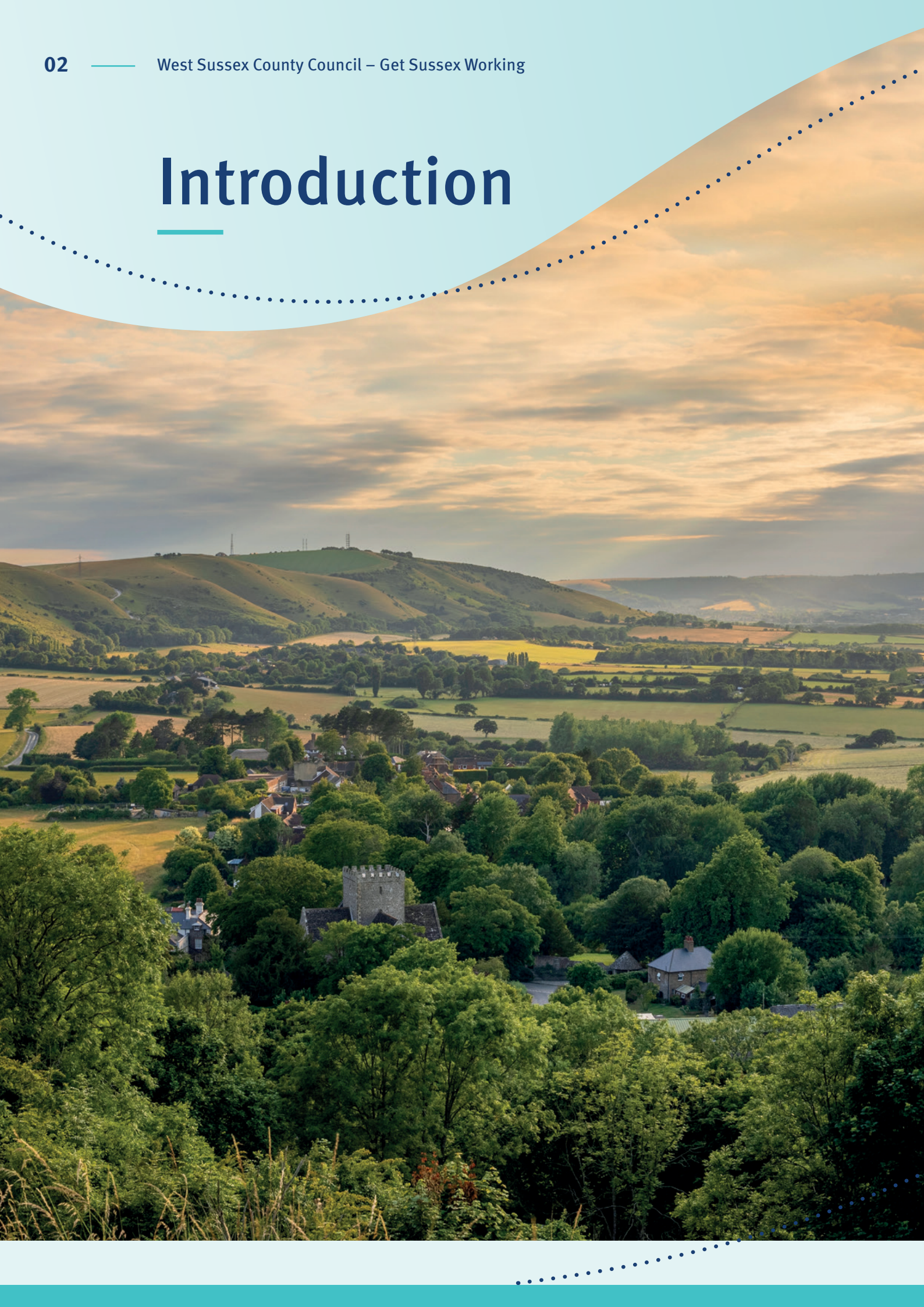


Stakeholder Engagement



West Sussex County Council

Introduction



Purpose

This report informs the development of the Get Sussex Working Plan (GSWP), a local initiative aligned with the UK Government's Get Britain Working strategy aimed at reducing economic inactivity and increasing national employment levels to 80%.

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

In Sussex, the GSWP coordinated by West Sussex County Council, East Sussex County Council, and Brighton & Hove City Council will provide an interconnected vision, evidence-informed narrative and shared ambitions for Sussex.

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

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

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

Methodology

Stakeholder engagement activity in West Sussex was coordinated by West Sussex County Council, and delivered in partnership with Fresh Ambition Ltd.

West Sussex County Council selected key stakeholders for group discussions and one-to-one consultations facilitated by Fresh Ambition, with a 'Your Voice' survey shared more widely through direct outreach and via partner networks. This ensured a broad mix of perspectives (see table on page 5) including those with lived experience.

Data sources comprised of Your Voice survey responses, automated transcripts from online conversations with key partners and stakeholders, and facilitator's notes from conversations and focus groups with end-users of skills and employment support services.



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

Stakeholder Group	Unique Perspective/ Relevant Insights
Local Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify skills gaps and labour market shortages. Provide insights on recruitment challenges and workforce planning. Highlight employer experience of training models.
Education & Training Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess alignment of training with labour market needs. Identify barriers to learning (e.g., funding constraints, inclusivity). Provide insights on qualification trends and emerging skill demands.
Community Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address employment barriers for underrepresented groups (e.g. NEET, disabled individuals, carers, care leavers, older workers). Support inclusive employment initiatives through charity sector. Provide insight on grassroots, community-focused services.
Health Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight workforce shortages in health and social care roles. Provide insight on health-related employment barriers. Support integration of work, health and wellbeing strategies.
Local Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate regional skills strategies and commissioning. Provide multiple perspectives on services to priority residents. Ensure policy alignment with economic development priorities.
Providers of Employment Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support unemployed into work, deliver work-readiness, skills coaching, and job-matching services. Assess multiple, interacting barriers to work and the lived experience. Provide feedback on effectiveness of government-funded schemes.
Recipients of Employment Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer lived experience insight on job accessibility, effectiveness of training and support, and employer engagement. Identify common barriers to work and training. Highlight success and improvement areas for employment support.

Themed questions for surveys, group discussions and conversations were developed around the policy priorities outlined in the Get Britain Working white paper, including employer engagement, workforce inclusion, and labour market

barriers. The resultant data (much in the form of open text responses) was then analysed using a thematic framework. The themes presented in this report were informed by this analysis, shaped to align with the strategic aims of the Get Britain Working programme, to support the local plan.

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





Photo by Darren Cool Images

Overview of West Sussex Key Findings

Understanding Employment Barriers

Key Barriers to Work

West Sussex stakeholders highlighted a complex set of barriers to work that intersect across geographic, structural, personal, and systemic lines.

Transport is a fundamental issue, especially in rural areas, where public transport can be infrequent, disconnected, and expensive. This lack of connectivity particularly impacts shift-based work, lower paid roles, and access to employment support and education.

Coastal resident

“It takes me over an hour to get to the nearest Job Centre, and I can’t afford the bus.”

Young jobseeker

“Where I live is rural which makes getting to places difficult and can take a long time... bus fees have gone up (which) means I have to limit my journeys and budget more.”

Rural employment advisor

“The cost and reliability of public transport are major barriers for our services, especially in remote areas.”

The cost of housing is another key theme. High housing costs in West Sussex are making it increasingly difficult for people – especially young adults (including care leavers) and lower-paid workers – to access and sustain employment or training. Rising rents and a lack of supported accommodation limit mobility, force early exits from apprenticeships and often push individuals to prioritise short-term income over long-term skill development.

Digital exclusion is a common barrier, particularly affecting older residents, jobseekers with disabilities, refugees, care leavers, and those with lower incomes. Connectivity, access to devices and digital literacy remain patchy, and digital-only service delivery models risk leaving people behind. Digital exclusion is a barrier to employment and training, particularly for individuals with limited access to devices, or digital skills, who are often shut out from online applications, virtual interviews, remote learning, and key communication channels signposting to services – widening inequality.

Participant with limited digital access

“I lost count of how many forms I had to fill in online – I gave up.”

Poor physical and mental health

are major barriers to employment across West Sussex, often compounded by isolation, low confidence, and the absence of personalised support. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that individuals facing these challenges require integrated, person-centred and trauma-informed services, such as mentoring, counselling and flexible pathways – to help them rebuild self-worth and access meaningful work. These challenges are often compounded by a lack of health and employment system join-up, and overstretched services. Although several participants did give individual examples of successful schemes that they would like to see scaled or replicated.

Adult participant

“Everything feels more difficult when you have anxiety and don’t know where to start.”

Adult Jobseeker

“Be aware that my addiction is not a choice, be non-judgmental and educated and remove the stigma.”

Caring responsibilities and limited access to affordable childcare are major barriers to work and training in West Sussex. Many people – particularly parents and unpaid carers – struggle to commit to regular hours or structured learning because early years settings lack capacity, and childcare costs outpace wages, forcing them to delay or forgo opportunities.

Employment support provider

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

Age plays a significant role, with younger and older jobseekers each facing unique barriers to training and employment. Younger jobseekers in West Sussex, who often have a lack of paid experience, face limited access to entry-level roles, and unrealistic expectations from employers who want “job-ready” candidates. Many also report minimal careers support in schools and feel disadvantaged by competition from high numbers of semi-retired workers looking for part-time and flexible roles. Structural barriers like high transport costs, low pay, limited access to vocational training, and stigma faced by young people from marginalised backgrounds further compound these challenges.

Older workers in West Sussex face unique barriers to employment, including age-related bias, declining physical health (with retirement age older than healthy working age), and limited opportunities for retraining or upskilling. With the region’s ageing population and shrinking workforce, stakeholders highlighted the need for age-inclusive recruitment practices, flexible working options, and targeted reskilling support to help older adults remain economically active in meaningful and fulfilling employment.

Young jobseeker

“Not for the lack of trying, but I haven’t found work beyond volunteering, that’s the best I’ve been able to get really.”



Younger jobseekers in West Sussex, who often have a lack of paid experience, face limited access to entry-level roles, and unrealistic expectations from employers who want “job-ready” candidates.

In addition to commonly cited barriers, several stakeholders described how **multiple complex challenges, such as housing instability, mental ill-health, and financial insecurity, interact** to severely limit access to training and work. These layered difficulties often require holistic, sustained support rather than isolated interventions.

Voluntary Sector Support Practitioner

“If someone has poor mental health and unstable housing, they’re not going to prioritise work, they need support first.”

Logistics employer

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

Local Government officer

“Young people are often drawn to larger cities. More could be done to retain young people in county, working with FE and HE to promote local opportunities.”

Understanding Labour Market Needs

Employer Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Employers across sectors report persistent difficulties in filling roles. Challenges are particularly acute for entry-level jobs requiring non-standard hours e.g. in care, hospitality, logistics, engineering and manufacturing and construction, and specialist roles with long qualification times and skills gaps. Employers also report high churn and difficulties attracting and retaining staff due to lack of holistic support structures, transport limitations, lack of affordable housing, and competition from larger employment hubs and remote working opportunities.

Care provider

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

Supply and Demand Issues in the Labour Market

The Future Skills Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan (2024) noted ongoing misalignment between skills supply and employer demand. Care, green construction, digital, and early years education are growth areas but often lack accessible progression pathways.

Stakeholder insights highlight a growing mismatch between the skills employers' need and those available in the local workforce, particularly in sectors where specialist skills are required like digital, land-based industries, and advanced manufacturing. While many jobseekers struggle to access sustained work, employers report that hiring remains high-risk and that they often can't find candidates with the right blend of technical and soft skills, exacerbating local recruitment gaps. They emphasised the need for more vocational pathways, stronger partnerships with education and training providers, and integration with employment services. Volunteering, work experience, and supported internships, were seen as underused but potentially transformative tools.

Employment support practitioner

“People need real experience, not just classroom learning. It gives them confidence and a sense of belonging.”

Education provider

“Colleges are trying, but we need employers to shape what’s taught.”

Best practice examples include the Skills Bootcamp programme currently being commissioned by WSCC in partnership with local employers and training providers. Also highlighted was the dental apprenticeship pathway developed by Chichester College Group in support of Brighton & Sussex Medical School as a promising employer co-investment model in a high-cost, high-need sector. This programme was noted for aligning training provision with workforce gaps in dentistry – an area where the cost of equipment and clinical space presents a major barrier to local training delivery. It reflects how collaboration between FE providers and healthcare institutions can drive targeted pathways into skilled professions where local recruitment is challenging. Also, the supported internships programme run between Chichester College and Rolls Royce successfully helped young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) gain meaningful work experience and employment. It showcases how collaboration between FE providers and major employers can open doors for learners, particularly those with additional needs.

Reaching and Supporting Priority Groups

Across the stakeholder insights, several **priority cohorts consistently emerged** as needing targeted support to enter or remain in employment or training in West Sussex. These include:

- **Young people**, especially those not in education, employment or training (NEET), care leavers, and young people with SEND or poor mental health.
- **Older workers**, falling out of the workforce and facing age-related bias, health challenges, and limited upskilling opportunities.
- **Disabled individuals and neurodivergent people**, often affected by employer uncertainty around reasonable adjustments and systemic access barriers.
- **Parents and unpaid carers**, particularly impacted by high childcare costs and a lack of flexible working opportunities.
- **Refugees and ESOL learners**, many of whom are highly qualified but face language, recognition and access challenges.
- **People with poor mental health, addiction recovery needs, or long-term health conditions**, who require personalised, integrated support to rebuild confidence and return to work.
- **Rural residents** affected by poor transport links and digital exclusion.
- **Low-income adults** in insecure work or facing benefit-related disincentives to progression.

These groups were frequently highlighted in both strategic discussions and lived experience accounts, suggesting a need for tailored, wraparound interventions that recognise overlapping vulnerabilities.

Gaps in provision

Young people, especially those who are NEET, care leavers and those with an EHCP, face multiple entry barriers. Their feedback highlighted a gap in targeted support during the transition phase, with few structured pathways available to guide progression into work or further learning. These perspectives were echoed by youth-focused organisations, who stressed the need for real-world work placements and mentor-led approaches.

Young jobseeker

“You leave school and it’s like, now what? No one really prepares you for work.”

Stakeholders cited inconsistent career guidance, lack of employer connections, and limited confidence.

Youth support worker

“We need more employers willing to take a chance and provide real, supportive placements.”

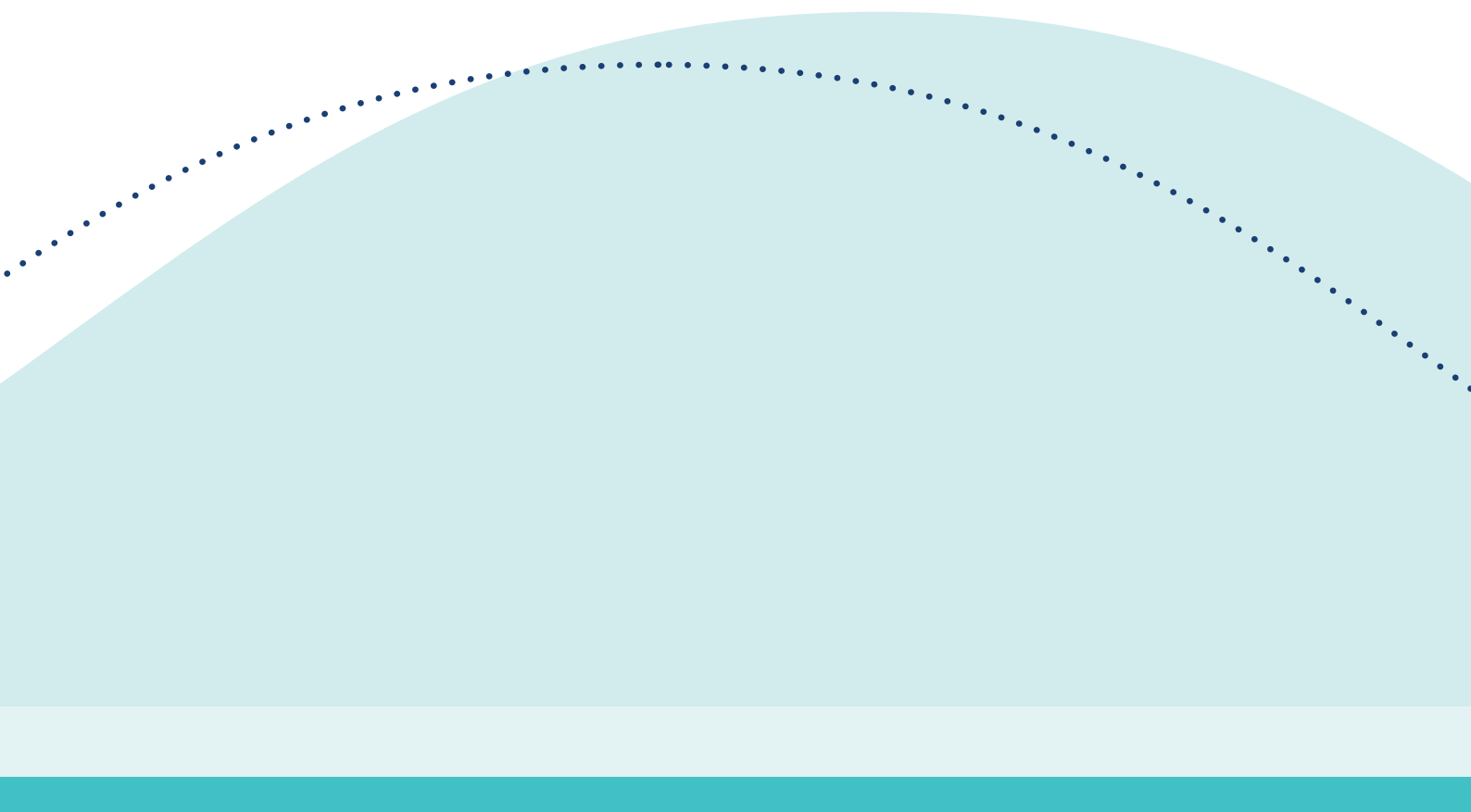
Youth support worker

“The system isn’t designed for people who learn differently or need more time.”

Older workers, particularly those over 50, can experience health-related limitations, age discrimination, and outdated skills, and many would benefit from tailored support to stay in meaningful work.

Older jobseeker

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





Stakeholders advocated for community-based person-centred support, such as co-location hubs offering multi-agency wraparound support and signposting through embedded and trusted organisations.

Economic inactivity due to health and care responsibilities remains high,

particularly among older adults and lone/low paid parents. Those with caring responsibilities face inflexible work schedules and limited understanding from employers. Individuals with physical or mental health conditions struggle to access consistent, holistic support. Updated West Sussex Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (2025) confirm a high prevalence of long-term conditions and unpaid care responsibilities. Stakeholders suggested proactive outreach, employer education on reasonable adjustments, and hybrid/remote work models to re-engage this cohort.

Health-related benefit claimant

“The support has to come to us – not expect us to travel or know where to start.”

Single parent

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

Unpaid carer

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

Other underserved groups were given to be refugees and ESOL learners, disabled individuals and neurodivergent people.

Adult learning provider

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

Local Authority officer

“Employers lack the knowledge and skills to employ the disabled. Even those signed up to the ‘Disability Confident scheme’ [are] not necessarily employing. Support to do so, especially for SMEs, could have an impact.”

Strategies for Inclusivity and Tailored Provision

Stakeholders advocated for community-based person-centred support, such as co-location hubs offering multi-agency wraparound support and signposting through embedded and trusted organisations. Tailored coaching, flexible learning, and ongoing in-work support were identified as essential.

Participant with lived experience

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

Mentored jobseeker

“Just being listened to made a difference. It felt like someone was finally on my side.”

Best practice examples included Making Theatre Gaining Skills in Bognor Regis, and WorkAid delivered by the Aldingbourne Trust. Both programmes were recognised for offering specialist, practical, confidence-building steps towards employment.

Several stakeholders highlighted the **practical challenges and emotional toll of navigating fragmented support systems**. The absence of coordinated guidance or advocacy was repeatedly identified as a barrier, especially for individuals without strong personal networks and facing complex challenges. This feedback reflects a desire for more relational, person-centred models, particularly among those with additional support needs.

Young service user

“People are bounced between services; it’s exhausting and confusing.”

Voluntary sector support worker

“We need navigators who understand the system and the person – not just hand-outs and leaflets.”

These insights emphasise the need for responsive, coordinated, empathetic employment support systems that recognise and respond to the diversity of challenges faced by the economically inactive.

Employer Engagement and Workforce Inclusion

Perspectives on Employer Engagement

Employers across West Sussex expressed a mixed picture regarding their engagement with employment and skills initiatives. **While larger employers often participate in strategic forums and have the capacity to offer placements, smaller businesses, which are most employers in West Sussex, reported struggling to navigate the complexity of training and employment schemes and lacked dedicated HR functions to support inclusive hiring.** The LSIP also highlights similar challenges faced by SMEs in rural and coastal West Sussex around accessing skills and employment support.

Business owner

“We want to help but don’t have a clue where to start or who to talk to.”

SME manager

“There are so many schemes out there – it’s hard to know what’s still running or worth our time.”

Stakeholders also noted that business engagement is strongest when intermediaries, such as local councils, or Employer Representative Bodies, act as trusted brokers, reduce administrative burden and provide specialist support for jobseekers and learners with additional needs.

Further education provider

“We’re not best placed to lead employer engagement – others do it better.”

There is a clear **demand for simplified, practical guidance for inclusive recruitment**, including toolkits and training for line managers, perhaps provided by those in the health and community sectors working directly with those with lived experience. Employers also called for more direct support in navigating funding and incentive schemes.

Support Needed to Diversify and Expand Hiring Practices

There is appetite among West Sussex employers to diversify recruitment, but many lack the confidence, tools, and resources to do so effectively. Employers called for more user-friendly guides, local case studies, and bite-sized training for line managers on inclusive practices. Stakeholders also suggested the development of peer networks for businesses to share good practice.

Care provider

“We’d love to be more inclusive, but I worry about doing the wrong thing.”

Retail employer

“It’s not just policies – it’s understanding how to make adjustments that actually work for people.”

In practice, a gap remains between employer intent and inclusive recruitment delivery. Several providers and advocates stressed that many employers, while willing, lack the practical knowledge to support individuals with learning difficulties or mental health conditions.

SEND support specialist

“Employers say they want to help but aren’t equipped to support someone with learning difficulties.”

Compounding this is that employers, particularly SMEs, described hiring as a significant financial and operational risk, often citing the cost of onboarding, uncertainty around candidate job-readiness, and limited support with retention as major deterrents. This perception contributes to cautious recruitment and a reluctance to engage with formal employment programmes without stronger wraparound support.

Local employer

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

Employer Appetite for Work Experience, Apprenticeships, and Flexible Vocational Training

While many employers supported the idea of offering apprenticeships and work experience, especially to young people and those with additional needs, practical barriers such as supervision time, administrative burden, and lack of awareness of funding deter uptake.

Feedback highlights **several challenges around apprenticeship schemes from the employer perspective, especially among small and medium-sized businesses** in West Sussex. Key concerns include administrative complexity, challenges around the 20% off-the-job training requirement, which they felt was hard to accommodate in smaller, customer-facing teams; low flexibility and labour market fit, unclear return on investment, and unclear/inadequate support or incentives, without which many employers felt unable to take the risk.

There was a call for more **locally brokered solutions and simplified vocational pathways**, especially to support inclusion of young people, those with additional needs, and adult career changers.

Best practice examples: WSCC are seeing great success with their apprenticeship scheme, as an entry route to council careers. Although it was noted that the end of Level 7 apprenticeships will compound Local Authority challenges in recruiting to specialist roles. Chichester College’s T-Levels are seeing near 100% placement success. WSCC’s Public Health Team recently received a Local Government Chronicle ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Employer’ award, highlighting innovative approaches to recruiting staff from diverse backgrounds. The award demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity that strengthens the council’s workforce, enhances effective public services and shows the potential for large anchor employers to apply best practice learning to encourage others.

Flexible employment models, including job sharing, supported internships, and hybrid roles, were viewed favourably, but stakeholders emphasised the need for coordination and clarity around employer responsibilities. These findings align with national insights set out in DWP’s Transforming Support: The Health and Disability white paper (2023) which underlined the importance of clear guidance and funding flexibility in expanding employer participation.

Construction SME

“I’d offer placements if someone could guide us through it.”



There is appetite among West Sussex employers to diversify recruitment, but many lack the confidence, tools, and resources to do so effectively.

Hospitality employer

“Flexible working helps us attract staff, but we need clearer guidance to make it work for different needs.”

Programmes such as Access to Work, Disability Confident and the Youth Employment Hub were cited positively, though awareness varied. **Strengthening local brokerage and making existing schemes more visible and accessible** were identified as key steps to improving employer participation in inclusive hiring and development practices.

Logistics employer

“I didn’t even know we could get funding to help adapt a job for someone with health needs.”

Best Practice Examples

One example cited was the West Sussex Careers Hub, which supports employers by brokering relationships with schools and colleges to strengthen local talent pipelines. Employers are engaged as Enterprise Advisors, Industry Champions, or Cornerstone Employers, helping shape careers education and offer real-world insights to young people. This model was praised for giving employers a structured, supported way to influence future workforce development. Another out-of-area example given was a Skills Hub that provides centralised signposting for employers to relevant training and employment support.

Strengthening Local Collaboration, Innovation and Inclusion

Partnership Working in Employment and Skills Delivery

Stakeholders in West Sussex reported that local collaboration in employment and skills delivery is underdeveloped and can lack consistency. There is **a sense that services often operate in silos, with limited awareness of parallel initiatives and missed opportunities for joint working**. This is felt to be compounded by everyone chasing the funding, leading to duplication and missed opportunities. Multi-agency coordination was described as inconsistent, with varying levels of engagement across the county.

Strategic partner

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

Voluntary sector representative

“We hear about projects after they’ve launched – too late to link up or avoid duplication.”

While some isolated examples of collaborative practice were noted – particularly in youth employability and supported employment – **stakeholders overwhelmingly called for more structured, formalised partnerships supported by shared funding and joint accountability mechanisms**.

Education Provider Roles and Curriculum Alignment

Further and Higher Education providers in West Sussex were seen as key partners, especially in delivering vocational skills aligned to local economic need. However, stakeholders noted inconsistencies in how effectively employer demand informs curriculum design and suggested stronger industry-education links to support curriculum agility. Suggestions included developing sector-based advisory panels and employer engagement champions within colleges.

Training provider

“Colleges are trying, but they can’t do it alone – we need real dialogue with employers.”

These concerns are echoed in the Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan, which emphasises the need for more structured and consistent mechanisms to facilitate employer engagement in shaping post-16 and adult education provision, especially in relation to growth sectors such as green technology and digital services.

Health Integration Across Stakeholders

Stigma was a recurring theme in responses from adults with lived experience of mental ill-health or substance misuse. Participants emphasised the need for trauma-informed, consistent and non-judgmental support. Many described how the fear of being misunderstood or dismissed served as a barrier to re-engagement with services or employment.

Stakeholder with experience of providing mental health services

“Co-production should be about power-sharing, not just feedback forms.”

Adult jobseeker with lived experience

Some employment support services: “only focussed on getting the skills to get back to work... None of it was appropriate for me as I was still in the madness, and they did not know how to deal with that.”

Many contributors **emphasised the need for greater integration of health services in employment pathways**. Mental health challenges were frequently cited as employment barriers, and while models such as social prescribing and IPS (Individual Placement and Support) were commended, provision was seen as inconsistent. ONS Annual Population Survey (2024) supports these observations, indicating that 79.6% of the working-age population in West Sussex is economically active, with a notable proportion attributing inactivity to long-term health conditions.

Health practitioner

“If someone’s struggling with anxiety or trauma, you can’t just give them a job and hope for the best.”

Community health partner

“More joined-up working between employment and primary care would make a big difference.”

Recommendations included co-locating employment advisers within primary care and mental health services, expanding health-focused employment support pilots, and fostering better data sharing between services.

Best Practice and Potential Innovations

Stakeholders shared examples of effective practice, such as in-work progression coaching, local employment hubs, and digital mentoring platforms. Calls were made to pilot more flexible models, such as mobile outreach, co-location of services, and multi-agency case management. There was also interest in adopting models that emphasise early intervention, peer support, and trauma-informed practice.

Local coordinator

“Having services in one place, where people already go, really helps engagement.”

Cross-Sector Collaboration and Suggestions for Improvement

The appetite for shared delivery was clear, but stakeholders expressed frustration with siloed funding and short-term commissioning. Recommendations included pooled budgets, shared outcome frameworks, and joint training across sectors. Participants also advocated for establishing cross-sector working groups with clear mandates and measurable objectives to drive integration.

Strategic lead

“We need to move from competition to collaboration – across local government, NHS, and voluntary services.”

Community organisation

“There’s a lot happening on the ground that doesn’t get heard at a strategic level.”

Transferable Programmes or Models from Other Areas

Stakeholders suggested exploring relevant models that embed employment support within broader systems, focusing on co-location, early intervention, and sustained support. These would need to be carefully adapted to reflect the specific needs and infrastructure of West Sussex.

Monitoring Progress and Driving Improvement

Local Measures of Success

Stakeholders in West Sussex emphasised the need for clear, measurable outcomes to assess the impact of the GSWP. Success was broadly defined as increased employment rates among key groups, particularly young people, older workers, carers, and individuals with long-term health conditions, as well as improvements in sustained job outcomes and progression opportunities.



Stakeholders in West Sussex emphasised the need for clear, measurable outcomes to assess the impact of the GSWP.



Photo by Darren Cool Images

Community employment provider

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

Youth support practitioner

“You need to ask the people using the services what’s working, and act on it – not just report it.”

Voluntary sector leader

“Unless we measure the right things, we’ll keep getting the wrong results.”

Programme evaluator

“We ask the same questions again and again because we’re not always feeding answers back into service design.”

Suggestions included using metrics such as reduction in NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) rates, increased take-up of apprenticeships and supported internships, and enhanced service integration indicators. There was also interest in localising impact measures to reflect district-level priorities.

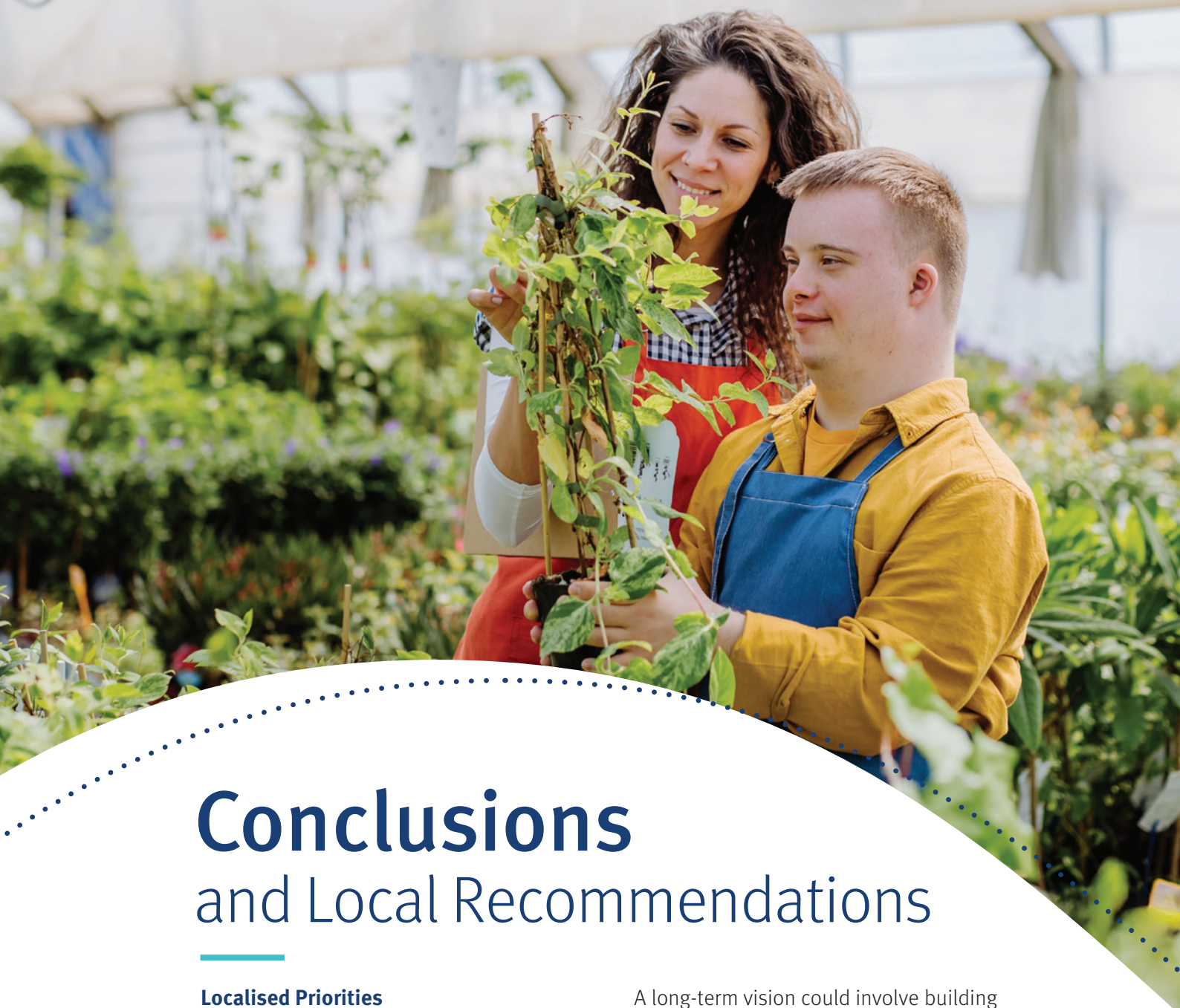
Suggestions for Feedback Mechanisms and Adaptive Planning

Stakeholders called for an iterative approach to delivery, underpinned by regular feedback loops and adaptive planning. Several emphasised the importance of real-time data sharing across agencies, as well as opportunities for lived experience contributors to influence service refinement.

Proposals included short regular surveys, cross-agency review sessions, and standing forums for employer and user voice input. These mechanisms would allow for quicker responses to shifting local needs and emerging gaps in provision, ultimately leading to more responsive, user-centred systems.

Programme evaluator

“There’s no point doing the same thing for five years if it’s not working – we need to adapt.”



Conclusions and Local Recommendations

Localised Priorities

This engagement process has highlighted several strategic priorities for West Sussex. There is a clear need to expand inclusive employment pathways, improve person-centred, holistic support for economically inactive groups, and enhance local collaboration between employment and skills, education, community and health sectors. There is also a need to address structural and systemic barriers including patchy rural transport and digital access, lack of ESOL support in certain geographies, and improving transitions for young people leaving education, while supporting older workers to retain meaningful work.

A long-term vision could involve building resilient partnerships and networks that are not dependent on funded provision, embedding employment support within trusted community and health infrastructures, further strengthening curriculum-employer alignment to create sustainable pipelines for skills aligned to future economic demand, supporting in-work progression in key sectors, and investing in preventative employment support models. These findings align with national insights set out in the DWP and Work and Health Unit's Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability report, while reflecting local need.

Calls to Action from Specific Stakeholder Groups

Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in partnership across education, community sector, employment and health services to address common employment barriers and support inclusive recruitment. • Increase accessible vocational education and training routes that work for business. • Stronger health-employment integration to equip managers to support employees with additional needs. • Provide financial and practical incentives and support for inclusive workplaces.
Education and Training Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support brokerage and broad engagement with employers to better align curricula with local labour market needs. • Improve integration between education and health/ community support, to provide wrap-around services to fully enable residents to thrive in learning and work. • Better enable education and training innovation by providing freedom from funding red tape and administrative burdens. • Work collaboratively to provide specialist support to ensure training is accessible to hard-to-reach groups.
Voluntary and Community Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase recognition of the evidenced role of the voluntary sector as a first step into employment, particularly for those furthest from the labour market. • Scale existing best practice in supported employment, peer mentoring and community-led, person-centred schemes to best serve underrepresented groups. • Tackle benefit related disincentives to work and progression with improved guidance and partnership working to ensure there's 'no wrong door'. • Better utilise the thousands of voluntary routes in West Sussex, through sustained funding for successful initiatives and system-wide commitment.

Health Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better promote health sector career pathways, providing alternative entry routes through partnership initiatives e.g. with Job Centres. • Adopt a whole-system approach to address health inequalities across the county and to ensure employment support is accessible to all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed employment meaningfully in public health and health strategies, and health-related barriers to employment into economy and skills strategies. • Build on existing networks, partnership and best practice and deliver into the gaps.
Local Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate employer engagement efforts to enhance council services. • Continue to develop integration across education and employment, while deepening connections with the health and voluntary sectors to harness greater potential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce constraints of short-term centralised funding to enable innovative local solutions. • Build place-based solutions that boosts existing best practice and delivers into gaps.
Providers of Employment Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve flexibility in the employment support system through multi-agency collaboration, and greater health and employment integration. • Address key skills gaps e.g. ESOL, soft skills, technical skills and maths and English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address structural and systemic barriers to employment e.g. transport, digital exclusion and childcare costs. • Find sustainable models for the delivery of person-centred approaches.
Recipients of Employment Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide accessible support through embedded, trusted community organisations. • Engage employers to reduce practical barriers to employment in the recruitment process, and to enhance entry routes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better signpost to skills and employment support to cut through complexity. • Deliver person-centred, holistic support to those with complex barriers to training and employment.



By working together, partners across West Sussex can deliver on the ambitions of Get Sussex Working, moving beyond fragmented provision to build a coordinated, inclusive system that connects people to meaningful and sustainable work.

Third sector lead

“Let’s not wait for perfect alignment – let’s start with who’s already doing the work.”

Best Practice and Potential Innovation

Good practice was evident in existing pockets of provision such as local employment hubs, co-located services, and digital mentoring/virtual school for NEETs. These initiatives demonstrate the potential for innovation when services are integrated and locally adapted.

Blockers/Challenges to Best Practice

Despite positive developments, barriers persist. Key blockers include siloed commissioning, short-term funding cycles, and limited strategic alignment across education, health, the community sector and employment. Communication breakdowns between agencies and duplication of effort were noted.

Public sector partner

“We all want the same outcome, but we’re not always talking to each other.”

There is also a need to simplify referral pathways, improve digital system compatibility, and ensure equitable access to services across diverse communities.

This report underscores the importance of collective action. By working together, partners across West Sussex can deliver on the ambitions of Get Sussex Working, moving beyond fragmented provision to build a coordinated, inclusive system that connects people to meaningful and sustainable work. These findings should serve as a catalyst for transformation, empowering stakeholders to align efforts, scale innovation, and create long-lasting impact. The collective voices heard through this engagement provide a firm foundation upon which to shape policy, guide investment, and drive forward a shared vision for inclusive growth across West Sussex.

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