



Recommendations Report:

Responding to changes in the
future labour market to support
workers at greatest risk

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National Foundation for Educational Research

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Executive Summary

The labour market is changing. New technologies, coupled with major demographic and environmental changes, will continue to disrupt the labour market, changing the jobs that exist and the skills needed to do those jobs. These changes will present opportunities to improve living standards for workers that can successfully transition from declining occupations into growing, predominantly professional, occupations, which typically offer better wages. However, they also carry a threat for workers that do not have the skills and qualifications to successfully transition between careers.

There is a very significant threat to the economy and society because of the large number of workers in declining occupations, who are at greatest risk of being adversely affected. The most recent report from [The Skills Imperative 2035 - Shifting Sands: Anticipating changes in the future labour market and supporting the workers at greatest risk](#) - indicates that around 12 million people in England work in occupations that are projected to decline between now and 2035, with more than a million jobs potentially disappearing in the coming decade. Whilst some new opportunities will be created in these occupations, displaced workers will increasingly need to consider alternative, growing occupations to remain in work.

Our analysis suggests that mismatches between the skills and qualifications of workers in high-risk occupations and the job demands of growing occupations are likely to pose significant barriers to changing career. Substantial reductions in public and private sector employer investment in adult skills provision over the past decade have increasingly left workers with the choice of either shouldering more of the financial burden for skills development themselves or not developing their skills. For many workers in high-risk occupations, the time and costs of reskilling or upskilling will be too great.

Furthermore, other factors are likely to compound the effects of skills and qualification mismatches.

For example:

On the employee side:

Many workers in high-risk occupations may not know which occupations are projected to grow, the skills and qualifications typically required to enter these jobs, what existing entitlements they can access to help them reskill and change careers, or how to self-assess and demonstrate their existing skills to prospective employers. Workers' personal identities are often tied up with their current career and can pose barriers to them envisioning changing career, identifying alternative occupations that are compatible with their values and skills, and having the confidence to move into these areas. Geographical barriers can also pose significant restrictions to making successful transitions and poor transport connections can sometimes prevent these barriers being easily overcome.

On the employer side:

Whilst many employers plan based on an expectation of how their people and skills requirements may change in coming years, others do this to a more limited extent. This can result in some employers making headcount decisions at short notice, without the time needed to support workers to upskill / reskill and successfully transition into higher demand areas of the organisation. Many managers and leaders also lack formal training, and, consequently, lack the capability to support affected workers to develop new skills and, where necessary, to change careers.

On 15 October 2024¹, NFER convened a roundtable of experts - from across the civil service, combined authorities, policy and research organisations, and membership organisations representing education providers and employers - to discuss these barriers and the potential solutions to overcoming them. Experts agreed that government needs to prioritise reinvigorating adult education and skills; this was seen as key to achieving the five missions for national renewal. The government should be active in setting a framework within which employers make their choices so as to funnel more support towards workers in high-risk occupations. Experts also agreed that employers should invest more in developing the skills of their own workforces, particularly those workers in declining occupations. Whilst government needs to create the conditions to encourage this investment, employers ultimately decide how much to invest in adult skills. Achieving the optimal balance between public and private investment is likely to require a mix of solutions, including explicit encouragement from government for employers to invest more,

giving employers greater flexibility over how they spend the funds in their Apprenticeship Levy accounts, recognising those employers already investing heavily in developing the skills of their workforce, and direct incentives to encourage employers to invest more of their own resources in reskilling workers in declining occupations.

The benefits of this investment will also depend on other broader factors, including: transport connectivity; awareness of entitlements to financial support for reskilling and upskilling; the availability of careers advice that can help workers in high-risk occupations to identify alternative job roles; employers' consideration to how their people and skills requirements will change in coming years; the quantity and quality of FE teachers in the workforce; and the success of organising vehicles that bring together employers, regional and local government and education providers. Government needs to be explicit about the scale of the challenge and the collective response needed to successfully address it.

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¹ Readers should note that this was around two weeks before the Autumn Budget. Consequently, there is, for example, speculation as to how employers would perceive rises in Apprenticeship levy rates in the event that their NI contributions were increased, which was a tax change announced in the Autumn Budget.

Based on the perspectives of experts, we make the following recommendations to government, employers and education providers.

Government should:



1. Prioritise the reinvigoration of adult education and skills, including by increasing real-terms public investment close to the levels of the early 2010s.



2. Explicitly encourage employers to invest more in adult skills and recognise organisations that are already investing heavily in this area.



3. Strengthen the Right to Request Time Off so that people can remain employed while retraining during an unpaid career break.



4. Ensure housing and transport policy reflect current and future local skills needs and gaps and support workers to take up jobs in growth occupations.



5. Simplify and raise awareness of the existing financial support available to workers to retrain and change careers, and for the employers willing to support them, so as to increase uptake by employers and employees.



6. Increase access to adult-orientated careers and training guidance and advice.



7. Provide additional funding to the FE sector to increase FE teacher pay, in order to attract and retain a high-quality FE teaching workforce by reducing pay disparities with industry and schools.

Employers should:



8. Where possible, invest more in developing the skills of their own workforces, particularly the skills of workers in declining occupations.



9. Where possible, invest more in management training and continue to strengthen their strategic workforce planning capabilities.

Education providers should:



10. Create training courses and qualifications that are tailored to meet the needs of working adults and enable them, where necessary, to learn whilst working.



Introduction

The labour market is changing. Previous research for The Skills Imperative 2035 showed that new technologies, coupled with major demographic and environmental changes, will continue to disrupt the labour market, changing the jobs that exist (Wilson et al., 2022). These changes offer opportunities to improve living standards by moving capital and labour into more productive occupations, which typically offer workers better wages. However, they also carry threats, particularly for workers in occupations that are projected to decline and who lack the skills and qualifications to move into growing, more highly skilled occupations.

The latest report from The Skills Imperative 2035, called [Shifting Sands: Anticipating changes in the future labour market and supporting the workers at greatest risk](#), indicated that over one million jobs could be lost from declining occupations by 2035, even after taking account of the job openings created when people in these occupations leave the workforce (Scott, Bocock and Hillary, 2024). We highlighted that around 40 per cent of occupations are expected to decline. 12 million people work in these 'High-Risk Occupations', as shown in Figure 1 below. They include workers in administrative and secretarial work, elementary work and some sales jobs, particularly in retail. These workers tend to be the lowest paid, least qualified and least well positioned to change careers.

As there will be fewer jobs in these declining occupations in future, many workers who are displaced or who are at risk of losing their jobs may need to change careers. In our last report, we outlined two types of successful transition - 'lateral moves' into Lower Paid Growing Occupations and 'upgrades' into Better Paid Growing Occupations. Whilst some Lower Paid Growing Occupations, such as care work, are anticipated to grow (as shown in Figure 1 below), most of the job growth expected between now and 2035 is anticipated to be in Better Paid Growing Occupations, including managerial and professional roles such as teaching and IT. These occupations typically require specific skills and higher-level qualifications.

Mismatches between the skills and qualifications of workers in high-risk occupations and the job demands of growing occupations are likely to pose significant barriers to successful transitions. This is because growing occupations typically require higher overall skill levels, higher levels of 'Essential Employment Skills'² (EES) specifically, and higher levels of qualifications, compared to jobs in high-risk occupations. More specifically:

Lateral Moves

To move into alternative Lower Paid Growing Occupations, workers in high-risk occupations may typically need to re-train. These occupations typically utilise higher levels of EES and have higher average qualification levels.

Upgrades

The skills and qualification barriers to moving into Better Paid Growing Occupations are even bigger. Workers in 'high-risk' occupations do not tend to have the EES or qualifications required by jobs in Better Paid Growing Occupations. Our research suggests that, in the past, the workers that have been able to move out of high risk occupations into these jobs have tended to be the minority with higher qualifications (Scott, Bocock and Hillary, 2024). Earlier evidence from The Skills Imperative 2035 does, however, provide some cause for optimism; many workers in lower-skilled occupations may have EES that they are not utilising in their current jobs (Bocock, Del Pozo Segura and Hillary, 2024). Workers who can successfully demonstrate these skills to prospective employers may find themselves better able to transition.

Setting people up to work in growth areas in a rapidly changing labour market is likely to involve supporting more adults in high-risk occupations to change careers. The consequence of inaction is likely to be that more workers in high-risk occupations fall out of the labour market and employers in growing areas of the economy continue to struggle with skills shortages. Helping more workers upskill and move into relatively more productive sectors and firms who produce and sell high-value services and products would also improve overall productivity.

A collective response is required - from across government, employers, the education system and beyond - to support more workers in high-risk occupations to change careers, either via 'lateral moves' or 'upgrades' into growing occupations. What this collective response needs to involve was discussed at a Roundtable event convened by NFER on 15 October 2024.

Attendees included CEOs, Directors and Policy leads from a broad range of organisations in the skills system, including from across the civil service, combined authorities, policy and research organisations, and membership organisations representing education providers and employers. Attendees identified the main barriers to successful transitions and generated ideas about how best to overcome these barriers.

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² The Essential Employment Skills are: communication; collaboration; problem-solving and decision-making; planning, organising and prioritising; creative thinking; and information literacy.

Figure 1 – Higher Risk Occupation, Lower Paid Growing Occupations and Better Paid Growing Occupations (England)



Source: Employment numbers and qualifications from analysis using The Skills Imperative 2035 labour market projections (see Working Paper 2). Qualifications uses data for 2021. Hourly wages from analysis using Annual Population Survey (APS) 2021/22.



Barriers

Experts identified seven main barriers to making successful transitions:



1. Workers' time and money

Time and money are likely to be significant barriers to reskilling or upskilling for many of the workers in high-risk occupations who lack the skills and/or qualifications typically required to move into growing, predominantly professional, occupations. This includes the earnings penalty associated with any necessary reduction in working hours as well as the direct costs of accessing training.



2. Government and employer investment

Substantial reductions in public and private sector employer investment in adult skills over the past decade have effectively left workers with the choice of either shouldering more of the financial burden for skills development themselves or not developing their skills. This makes it harder for individuals to overcome time and money barriers to retraining.



3. Information and awareness

Many workers in high-risk groups may not be aware that jobs in their occupation are likely to decline. Nor may they know which occupations are projected to grow, the skills and qualifications typically required to enter these jobs, what existing entitlements they can access to help them reskill, or how to self-assess and demonstrate their existing skills to prospective employers in growth occupations. These barriers are exacerbated by the current complexity and fragmentation of the skills system and the lack of access to careers guidance for those already in work.



4. Psychological barriers to reskilling and changing careers

Workers' personal identities are often tied up with their current career and can pose barriers to them envisioning changing career, identifying alternative occupations that are compatible with their values and skills, and having the confidence to transition. Employers' perspectives might also present barriers; whilst many employers are deeply committed to reskilling and upskilling their employees, others may be reluctant because they calculate that the short-term costs of training outweigh the costs of making redundancies and hiring new people into higher-demand occupations when needed.



5. Geography (connections between work and home)

Transport and housing, as well as the availability of flexible working, play important roles in enabling workers in high-risk occupations to transition into professional and service sectors. Geographical barriers can pose significant restrictions to making successful transitions and poor transport connections can sometimes prevent these barriers being easily overcome.



6. Employers' limited strategic workforce planning

Not all employers give full consideration to how their people and skills requirements may change in coming years, which results in some employers making headcount decisions at short notice, without the time and space needed to support workers to upskill / reskill and successfully transition into high-demand areas of the organisation.



7. Management capability and training

Many managers and leaders lack formal training. Consequently, some also lack the capability to accurately assess their workers' skills, fully utilise these skills, and help those in declining areas to develop new skills to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and, where necessary, to change careers.

Solutions



Experts acknowledged many existing government initiatives and policies that have the potential to reduce the barriers listed above, including, for example, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), the Growth and Skills Levy and Local Growth Plans. However, they also identified opportunities to raise awareness of existing entitlements and build on existing policy commitments.

Their suggestions fell into nine **solution areas**:



1. Employer investment in adult skills

Government plays a key role in encouraging employers to support workers in high-risk occupations to reskill and change roles, including by; (a) promoting 'role model' employers to build a "coalition of the willing", (b) mandating that employers do more to support reskilling and upskilling, (c) increasing the costs for employers of not supporting employees to reskill or upskill by strengthening workers' rights and consequently also increasing the costs of making people redundant, (d) subsidising the costs for employers of supporting employees to reskill or upskill.



2. Government investment in adult skills

Government also plays a key role in incentivising both employers and employees to invest more of their own resources in training and education. This includes; (a) reducing the costs of studying for adults in high-risk occupations, (b) reducing the earnings penalty associated with a reduction in working hours from returning to education or pursuing training outside work, and (c) making it easier for workers to learn whilst earning. It is also important that adult skills provision and training develops workers' EES as well as their technical skills and knowledge, given earlier research in The Skills Imperative 2035 has identified a set of transferable skills - referred to as 'Essential Employment Skills' (EES) - that will be in particularly high demand across the labour market in 2035³.



3. Individuals' investment in adult skills

Individuals can also be encouraged to invest more of their own resources in developing their skills, including by differentiating the offer and branding of courses for adults from courses for young people, and by stimulating the supply of flexible, modular courses that make it easier for people to learn whilst earning.



4. Tailored careers advice and support

Widening access to personalised careers advice and support can help workers to; (a) raise awareness of existing entitlements to free courses and financial support, (b) help more workers in high-risk occupations identify alternative job roles that align with their values and identities, and (c) support these workers to recognise, accurately self-assess and demonstrate their skills to prospective employers in growth occupations.



5. Connecting homes and work (transport and housing)

Efforts to expand the housing stock and improve transport links play important roles in better connecting workers in high-risk occupations to jobs in alternative, growing occupations.

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³ These Essential Employment Skills (EES) are: Communication, Collaboration, Problem-solving, Organizing, planning, and prioritizing work, Creative thinking, and Information literacy.



6. Strategic skills-based workforce planning and recruitment

More firms, particularly SMEs, can continue to build their capacity for longer-term strategic workforce planning, which can create the time and space to proactively support workers in declining occupations to reskill or upskill and move into alternative high-demand areas. More employers might also want to rethink their hiring practices to place greater emphasis on assessing skills and potential and reduce their (over) reliance on qualifications.



7. Management training and development

Employers should invest more in management training and development, particularly for new managers. This should focus not just on managers' ability to develop workers' skills to meet evolving job demands, but also on their ability to assess and fully utilise their workers' existing skills, and their ability to support workers in declining occupations to reskill or upskill such that they could move into higher-demand areas. Government also plays an important role in influencing employers' investment in management training by determining what courses employers can spend their Apprenticeship Levy funds on.



8. Trust, collaboration and multi-agency working

Key organising vehicles, such as Local Growth Plans, play important roles in bringing together regional and local government, education providers and employers to shape local skills ecosystems, coordinate resources, strengthen careers guidance and support, and join up local skills support with work and health support.



9. Investment in the FE workforce

The FE workforce plays a crucial role in enabling the success of initiatives in many of the above areas. Increasing FE teacher salaries has the potential to alleviate FE teacher recruitment and retention challenges by reducing pay disparities with schools and industry. This can help enable the success of collective efforts to reskill and upskill workers in high-risk occupations.



Recommendations

Setting people up to thrive in a rapidly changing labour market will involve supporting more adults in high-risk occupations to change careers. This has the potential to generate both productivity gains for employers and wage returns for workers. Inaction is likely to result in more workers in high-risk occupations falling out of the labour market and more employers in growth areas continuing to struggle with skills shortages.

Mismatches between the skills and qualifications of workers in high-risk occupations and the job demands of growing occupations pose significant barriers to successful transitions. These barriers can be overcome, but doing so will require a collective and sustained effort from government, employers, education providers, unions and wider civil society.

Statutory local growth plans are a key organising vehicle that can bring together these actors. Supporting workers in high-risk occupations to reskill and successfully transition into higher-productivity, growing areas of the economy should be a key objective in these plans. When aggregated at the national level, these plans need to connect to the government's national industrial strategy and post-16 skills strategy.

Based on expert perspectives shared at our roundtable event, we recommend:

Government, at all levels, should:



1. Prioritise the reinvigoration of adult education and skills, including by increasing real-terms public investment close to the levels of the early 2010s

The reinvigoration of adult skills should be an explicit policy objective, including within the Industrial Strategy, the Skills and Growth Levy, the work of Skills England and Local Growth Plans. The government plays a key role in preventing market failure by incentivising employers and employees to invest more of their own resources. Left to their own devices, employers and employees face financial constraints to accessing skills provision and are unlikely to factor in the full societal benefits of skills development.

Investing more in adult skills is not easy in the current fiscal context; it is likely to mean the government spending less on other things, borrowing more or increasing taxes. Government should weigh up the relative costs and benefits of different options for incentivising workers and/or employers to invest more of their own resources in skills development, funnelling incentives towards workers in high-risk occupations and employers in the eight sectors prioritised by the Industrial Strategy. This should include carefully considering the extent to which different options stimulate the uptake of training and qualifications that are productive (i.e. increase workers' wages and organisation's profits), additional (i.e. lead to education and skills provision that would not have otherwise happened) and targeted (i.e. support more workers in high-risk groups to successfully transition into growing occupations). Skills England can play a crucial role in helping the government to identify the most cost-effective investment options.





2. Explicitly encourage employers to invest more in adult skills and recognise organisations that are already investing heavily in this area

The government needs to make it clear that it is seeking to influence employers to invest more of their own resources in developing the skills of their own workforces. This may require a mix of activities, including explicit encouragement for employers to invest more, giving employers greater flexibility over how they spend the funds in their Apprenticeship Levy accounts, recognising employers already investing heavily in adult skills development, and direct incentives for employers to invest more. Government should carefully consider the optimal balance of these activities.



3. Strengthen the Right to Request Time Off so that people can remain employed while retraining during an unpaid career break

Government should strengthen the Right to Request Time Off so that people can remain employed while retraining during an unpaid career break, with access to a maintenance loan to support living costs. This would be in line with similar schemes in Austria, Germany and France that help support people to maintain their incomes whilst retraining.



4. Ensure housing and transport policy reflect current and future local skills needs and gaps and support workers to take up jobs in growth occupations

Improvements in public transport connectivity and expansions of the housing stock, particularly in city centres, have the potential to help more workers in high-risk occupations overcome the geographic barriers to successfully transitioning into growing occupations, which are predominantly in professional and service-sector occupations and therefore more likely to be based nearer city centres.



5. Simplify and raise awareness of the existing financial support available to workers to retrain and change careers, and for the employers willing to support them, so as to increase uptake by employers and employees

National, regional and local government should promote awareness of existing entitlements to free courses (for example, through Free courses for jobs) and to loans and grants (for example, through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement) for adults interested in retraining so as to better position themselves to successfully transition into a growth area of the labour market. Many workers in high-risk occupations may not be fully aware of existing entitlements. This could, for example, involve running a campaign to raise awareness of existing entitlements for career changers.



6. Increase access to adult-orientated careers and training guidance and advice

Working adults are more likely to access careers guidance and support that is free and explicitly targeted at, and tailored to the needs of, career changers, rather than for young people or the unemployed. The government should seize the opportunity created by the merger of the National Careers Service with job centres across the country to make tailored careers information, advice and guidance more accessible for adults in high-risk occupations, as they have indicated they will do in the Get Britain Working White Paper. This could help more people to identify alternative careers in growing occupations that fit their values, to access support to develop their skills, and to demonstrate their skills to prospective employers in growing sectors prioritised in the Industrial Strategy. There are various models through which this could be achieved, for example by bringing the management of benefits claims largely online to refocus staff in jobcentres on providing careers advice and support, or by creating a “digital front door” for anyone seeking job or careers advice to access support online, as has been recommended by Demos (Phillips, 2024). Plans to reform incapacity benefits can also make it easier for people to try a job without the risk of losing benefits if it does not work out.



7. Provide additional funding to the FE sector to increase FE teacher pay, in order to attract and retain a high-quality FE teaching workforce by reducing pay disparities with industry and schools

The FE sector and workforce play a pivotal role in retraining and upskilling workers in high-risk occupations. Research suggests that pay disparities with industry and other education sectors are likely to be an important part of existing recruitment and retention challenges across the FE workforce and this needs to be addressed.



Employers should:



8. Where possible, invest more in developing the skills of their own workforces, particularly the skills of workers in declining occupations

Whilst it is true that employers need better economic growth and certainty to invest more in adult skills, employers are ultimately the ones at the wheel when it comes to their own investment decisions. Employers' involvement in shaping the publicly funded skills system has been an increasing focus over the past decade, but more attention is needed on employer investment. Research is urgently needed into how employers can be effectively encouraged and incentivised to invest more in developing the skills of their workforce. There is also a good case for setting local skills investment plans the task of increasing employer investment in training as well as setting priorities for public funding.

Furthermore, employers should direct a significant share of their investment towards supporting workers in declining occupations to reskill or upskill and transition into higher-demand areas. A pre-requisite for this may be effective strategic workforce planning - anticipating how their people and skills requirements are likely to change in the coming years helps create the time and space for employers to consider how best to support workers in declining areas to retrain and to put programmes in place.



9. Where possible, invest more in management training and continue to strengthen their strategic workforce planning capabilities

Many managers and leaders lack formal training. Employers should consider management training and development a core part of their skills provision and focus on further developing managers' capability to accurately assess their workers' skills, fully utilise these skills, and help those in declining areas to develop their skills to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and, where necessary, to change careers. For senior leaders, training should also include a focus on projecting how their people and skills requirements are likely to change, and how they can support people to transition into areas of growing demand.

Education providers should:



10. Create training courses and qualifications that are tailored to meet the needs of working adults and enable them, where necessary, to learn whilst working

Adults will engage more readily with skills provision that is designed for them, which recognises the skills they have acquired in work and which enables them to fit training around their work. This might, for example, involve developing flexible, modular qualifications; offering a greater variety of short, online courses; and developing flexible validation pathways to higher qualifications that exempt programme credits for adults with relevant skills gained through work. The government may also need to consider how to encourage more education providers to do this, for example by offering targeted incentives for awarding bodies to develop flexible, modular qualifications and submit them for approval.

Appendix

In this section, we contextualise and describe in more detail each of the barriers and solutions identified and discussed by experts that attended the Roundtable event.

Barriers

Workers' time and money

Roundtable attendees thought that differences between the skills and qualification requirements of high-risk occupations and the job demands of growing occupations are likely to be significant obstacles for most 'lateral moves' or 'upgrades'. This reflects the findings from previous analysis for The Skills Imperative 2035, which also shows that workers' qualification levels are strongly predictive of their ability to successfully transition from a declining occupation into a growing area of the economy (Scott, Bocock and Hillary, 2024). Attendees noted that this could be down to the skills that qualifications are perceived to develop, or, alternatively, because many employers' perceive qualifications to be signals of an individual's underlying ability and work effort. The main barriers workers face in developing their skills are, oftentimes, time and money, both in terms of the direct costs of accessing training and the earnings penalty associated with reducing their working hours where this was necessary. This is reflected in the existing research, which shows that financial and time constraints make it difficult for individuals to invest in developing their skills and qualifications (Tahir, 2023), and reluctance to invest (particularly where this involves taking on debt) is greater amongst adults than younger people (Callender and Thompson, 2018).

Government and employer investment

Roundtable attendees commented on the effects that declining public and private investment in adult education and training have had on the number of adults developing their skills. Between 2011 and 2022, the average number of training days per employee in England declined by 19% and employers' average training investment per employee fell by approximately the same amount (in real terms) over the same period (Tahir, 2023). This decline was not mirrored across most of Europe.

It was suggested that the government could do more to influence employers to invest in developing their workers' skills. References were made to the decline in adults studying

government-funded classroom-based qualifications over the past decade. Between 2004/05 and 2020/21 the number of publicly funded qualifications started by adults declined from 5.5 million qualifications to 1.5 million, corresponding with a period of significant real terms cuts in public funding (Tahir, 2023). Coupled with the reduction in private investment, this has effectively left workers with the choice of either shouldering more of the financial burden for skills development themselves or not developing their skills.

Some attendees emphasised the importance of promoting existing entitlements - for example to tuition fee loans through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) - whilst other attendees emphasised the importance of the government doing more to incentivise (or compel) employers and/or employees to invest more of their own resources in skills development. However, it was also recognised that the current fiscal context makes it challenging for government and employers to invest more in adult skills, given that spending more on this is likely to mean the government spending less on other things, borrowing more or increasing taxes. This means that the benefits of government incentives would need to be carefully weighed against the extent to which the education and skills provision would be productive (i.e. increase workers' wages and organisation's profits), additional (i.e. lead to education and skills provision that would not have otherwise happened) and enable more workers in high-risk groups to successfully transition into growing occupations.

Information and awareness

Many workers in high-risk groups may be unaware of projected job losses in their occupation and may lack a clear understanding of alternative occupations that are projected to grow or the skills and qualifications typically required to enter these growth areas. It was remarked that this may not be helped by the existing complexity, fragmentation and constant change in the qualifications landscape. Some attendees added that many workers may be unaware of existing entitlements, including to free courses and financial support to retrain or upskill, and/or may struggle to effectively

demonstrate their 'latent' skills to prospective employers. It was felt that this was something effective careers advice, guidance and support could help address, but that current access to careers support for people already in work was limited.

Earlier research from The Skills Imperative 2035 supports the view that lack of awareness and careers support may be significant barriers. Our analysis suggests that many workers, particularly those in mid- to low-skill level occupations, have EES that are being under-utilised by their current employers (Bocock, Del Pozo Segura and Hillary, 2024). Amongst some of these workers, information and awareness may be bigger barriers than skills and qualifications.

Psychological barriers to reskilling and changing careers

Psychological barriers were also identified, both to workers reskilling and changing careers, and to employers investing in skills development and supporting workers in 'high risk' occupations to successfully transition into growing occupations. Attendees highlighted that many workers in high-risk occupations may lack the motivation to change careers. Workers' personal identity is often tied to their current career and can pose barriers to them envisioning changing career. This view is reflected in research which suggests workers develop values and capabilities through their work and tend to look for jobs that align with the identity they developed in previous roles (e.g. Wittman, 2022). These psychological barriers may be greatest for older workers, who may have expected to work in the same occupation throughout their working lives.

Another psychological barrier that was highlighted was insecurity. Many workers will be risk-averse about moving into a new occupation because fear of the unknown and the risk of failure could be significant deterrents, particularly given the low (or non-existent) unemployment insurance on offer if things do not work out.

Attendees noted the commitment of many employers to reskilling employees, but some also questioned whether all employers were sufficiently motivated to support workers in high-risk occupations to reskill or upskill and transition into alternative, growing occupations, either within their organisation or beyond it. They suggested that the relatively pronounced decline in employer-funded training over the past decade or more in the UK was evidence of this.

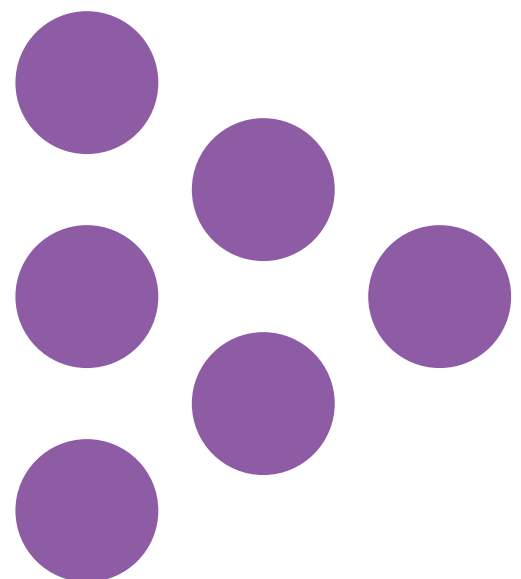
Some attendees attributed this lack of motivation to the relative costs of upskilling or reskilling low-skilled workers compared to

making redundancies. Employers are likely to find it especially difficult to transparently discuss the challenges created by changing skills requirements with their workforce, where this essentially involves them having to share that they expect the need for staff in some areas of the firm to decline.

Geography (connections between work and home)

It was noted that transport and housing play critically important roles in connecting homes and work, and therefore in enabling workers in high-risk occupations to successfully transition into growing, predominantly professional and service-sector, occupations. Many major city centres are distant for a lot of daily commuters and intra-city public transport can be a significant impediment to changing careers. The availability and affordability of homes can also be a major barrier to workers relocating nearer to city centres in order to access jobs in growing professional and service sector occupations. Many major cities, such as Greater Manchester and BUA, have limited housing stocks, low housing densities in urban centres, low rates of home building, and lengthy social housing waiting lists, making relocation harder.

Another dimension of the geographical barrier to successful transitions that was noted was the availability of flexible and hybrid working. Moving to a job located further from home is more feasible where there is the option to work from home (WFH), particularly for older workers with families who are unlikely to relocate.



Employers' limited strategic workforce planning

It was acknowledged that many employers plan for medium- to long-term changes in their people and skills requirements. However, others may make headcount decisions at shorter notice, without regard for how their skills requirements are likely to change, and without the time needed to support workers in declining areas to upskill or reskill and successfully transition into higher-demand areas of the organisation. It was also suggested that a lack of strategic workforce planning can be a barrier to reorientating hiring practices away from degrees and job titles and towards a greater focus on the skills a job requires and that a candidate possesses. It was suggested that qualifications are not always the best measure of individuals' skills. An overreliance on qualifications in employers' hiring practices could be a barrier to supporting more workers in declining occupations - around half of whom are only qualified to the equivalent of GCSEs or below - to successfully transition into growing occupations, which typically have higher median qualification levels.



Management capability and training

Attendees remarked on the crucial role that managers play in assessing workers' skills, fully utilising their existing skills, and helping them develop new skills to meet the evolving needs of the workforce and, where necessary, to change careers. References were made to findings from earlier in The Skills Imperative 2035 programme that suggested many workers in declining occupations have EES that their managers are not fully utilising (Bocock, Del Pozo Segura and Hillary, 2024). A connection was made between these findings and other research by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) that suggests most employers are 'accidental managers' that have not received any formal training or support from their employers. This research also lays out that, whilst a quarter of people in the workforce have management responsibility, four fifths of these people become managers without any formal training, and a third have never received any formal management and leadership training (CMI and YouGov, 2023). The implication was that managers without formal training may be less able to recognise and fully utilise their workers' latent skills, or help their workers develop new skills so that they can transition into a new role within the organisation.



Solution areas

Roundtable attendees acknowledged a long list of existing government strategies, policies and policy commitments that had the potential to reduce the above barriers, including, for example, the Industrial Strategy, the LLE, the Growth and Skills Levy and Local Growth Plans. They also identified opportunities to build on these existing commitments; their suggestions fell into the nine solution areas outlined below.

Employer investment in adult skills

Attendees discussed a range of ways to stimulate employer investment in adult skills, in order to reduce the financial barriers for workers, which have increased as a result of declining public and private investment in adult skills provision. It was remarked that EES should be embedded across the training provision that employers fund.

The role of government in reversing the decline in employer-funded education and training was noted. Ideas for increasing the support that employers typically offer workers in high-risk occupations to reskill and change roles involved government playing a bigger role in:

- Promoting ‘role model’ employers to build a “coalition of the willing” (a broad alliance of employers committed to championing investment in adult skills)
- Mandating that employers do more to support reskilling and upskilling
- Increasing the costs for employers of not supporting employees to reskill or upskill
- Subsidising employer costs of supporting employees to reskill or upskill

Several attendees stressed the importance of promoting ‘role model’ employers that actively support workers to reskill and move into new roles in high-demand fields. Examples provided included Amazon’s Career Choice Programme (which pre-pays 95% of tuition for employees to take courses in high-demand fields) and Google’s Career Certificates for transitioning into high-growth career fields. It was also suggested that promoting role models would help to build “a coalition of the willing”, i.e. a broad alliance of employers committed to championing the benefits of investing in adult skills. Employers that were identified as role models did tend, however, to be larger corporates; more effort is needed to identify and recognise good practices in SMEs.

Conversely, other attendees suggested that it may be necessary for government to mandate

that employers spend a greater share of their income on training, with a particular focus on reskilling employees in high-risk occupations and supporting them to transition roles. One example of how this could be done would be to increase the proportion of their wage bill that employers have to pay into their Skills and Growth Levy accounts. They cited the example of Ireland, where the National Training Fund (NTF) levy was increased from 0.7% in 2017 to 1% in 2020. However, it was also noted that this would exacerbate pressures on employers given the government’s intention to increase employers’ national insurance contributions (NICs). Any increases in levy contributions would need to be considered in the context of the overall tax burden on employers, including Corporation Tax, NICs and other business taxes.

Other attendees suggested alternative ways of effectively compelling employers to do more to support their employees to reskill, including strengthening collective bargaining and worker rights, and strengthening the Right to Request Time Off so that people can remain employed while retraining during an unpaid career break, with access to a maintenance loan to support living costs. This would be in line with similar schemes in Austria, Germany and France that help support people to maintain their incomes whilst retraining.

Other attendees highlighted that rational, self-interested employers are likely to weigh up the costs and benefits of reskilling workers and supporting them to change roles against the costs and benefits of reducing headcount in some areas (including, where necessary, through redundancies) and recruiting new people into growth areas. The implication was that employers assess the costs of supporting workers in ‘high risk’ occupations to be greater than the costs of recruiting new staff who already have these skills. Changing this would require the government to change this cost-benefit comparison. One option, therefore, would be to increase the costs to employers of not supporting workers to reskill by strengthening workers’ rights, thereby driving up the costs of redundancies. Conversely, other attendees suggested that government should subsidise the costs employers have to bear when supporting workers to reskill and change roles. This might include a package of government subsidies directed at the eight sectors for growth identified in the UK’s Industrial Strategy. Giving employers greater flexibility over how they use their levy funds could also achieve a similar outcome, if it meant employers could, for example, use these funds to put workers in high-risk occupations through short courses to help them reskill.

Overall, attendees agreed that the government has not made clear the extent to which it is trying to influence employer investment in training or how (both through the levy, and beyond it). However, there were also clear differences of opinion as to how much of the financial burden for adult skills could be borne by the government and how much could be borne by employers or employees.

Government investment in adult skills

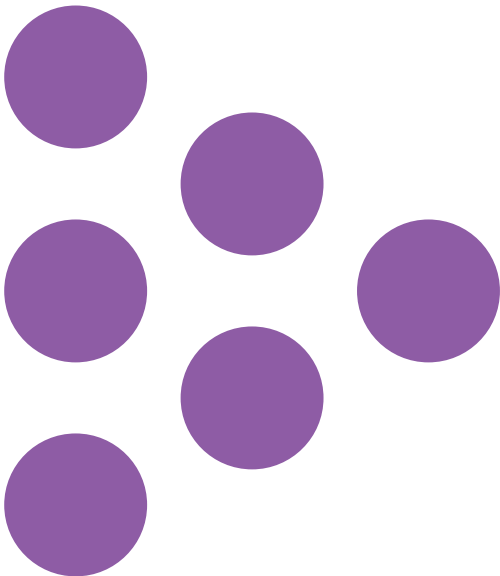
Attendees discussed a range of ways to increase government investment in adult skills, in order to reduce the financial barriers for workers, which have increased over the past decade as a result of declining public and private investment in adult skills provision. EES can be embedded across all of the adult education and training that government invests in.

Some attendees felt that the government plays a key role in incentivising employers and employees to invest more of their own resources, benefitting in return from increased tax revenues. Attendees discussed a range of potential options, including:

- Reducing the costs of study for workers in high-risk occupations
- Reducing the earnings penalty associated with a reduction in working hours to return to education or pursue training outside work
- Making it easier for workers to learn whilst earning

Several attendees cited the LLE in reference to the need to increase awareness of existing loan entitlements⁴. However, it was noted that the LLE does not extend to lower-level courses (below level 4). It was also stressed that it was important to have free access to qualifications at RQF Level 2 (equivalent to GCSEs) and Level 3 (equivalent to A-levels) for workers without qualifications at these levels⁵.

Other attendees suggested alternative ways of reducing the financial barrier posed by course costs for adults in high-risk occupations. One option suggested was the re-establishment of Union Learning Funds, which were government-funded between 1998 and 2021 and gave unions discretion on how best to use funds to support workers in risky positions, without tight eligibility requirements specified by central government. Another suggestion was increasing the range of relatively short, unaccredited free courses that are available (beyond current Bootcamps, the Multiply Programme and Community Learning programmes). Extending the age range of the government’s pledge of a ‘Youth Guarantee’ (which will guarantee access to training, an apprenticeship, or support to find work for all young people aged 18-21) to adult workers in high-risk occupations was also proposed, effectively giving them a right to reskill into new occupations to prevent them from falling out of the labour market. Potentially, this implies a new funding model that involves a combination of demand-led and supply-led funding mechanisms.



.....

4 LLE is set to be introduced in 2026 and will give everyone access to free loans for the equivalent of four years of post-18 education (£37,000) and provide access to a maintenance loan for living costs to study full courses at levels 4 to 6 or modules of some higher technical courses at levels 4 to 5.

5 Adults aged 24+ have needed to contribute towards the cost of Level 2 courses since 2013. Whilst entitlement to a first fully funded course at Level 3 in selected subject areas has now been restored, this only extends to those without a prior qualification at this level and those that are earning under the National Living Wage or are unemployed. Adults that have achieved a Level 3 qualification already can apply for an Advanced Learner Loan for the costs of tuition, but these are not common.

As well as the direct costs of reskilling or upskilling, some attendees also highlighted the indirect earnings penalty associated with returning to education or training, where this necessitates a reduction in working hours or time off work. Attendees suggested that the Department for Education (DfE), including Skills England, should assess options that have already been proposed by other policy and research organisations, or which have been delivered successfully at a regional level or in other countries abroad. These might, for example, include:

- Offering means-tested tuition-free study for mature p/t students studying undergraduate qualifications at levels 4-6, in place of a maintenance grant, partially reversing 2012 reforms which abolished means-tested grants and introduced fee loans (and contributed to the number of p/t undergraduate students halving) (Callender and Thompson, 2018).
- Further expanding access to free courses, e.g. by extending eligibility for free Level 3 courses, following the example set by the West Midlands Combined Authority (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2023).
- Incentivising employers to offer more accredited training and apprenticeships for career changers, for example by offering employers in the sectors prioritised in the Industrial Strategy additional cash incentives to hire more adults on intermediate apprenticeships, following the example set by the Australian Boosting Apprenticeships Commencement wage subsidy⁶.
- Allowing employers in priority sectors to deduct more than 100% of the costs of accredited training and apprenticeships from their tax liabilities (as with R&D tax credits), as recommended by Learning and Work Institute (Evans, 2022).

Individuals' investment in adult skills

Attendees discussed a range of ways to encourage individuals to invest more of their own resources in adult skills. Options included branding adult apprenticeships separately from apprenticeships for young people and creating locally differentiated and branded programmes for adult learners. Pure numeracy, literacy (and potentially EES) courses can be off-putting to adults, but it was felt that this can be overcome by integrating these skills into other Level 2 and 3 qualifications and/or community learning

provision, rather than trying to develop these skills on their own.

Another attendee challenged the focus on individuals' investment, remarking that individuals invest significantly more money and time in their learning than government or employers. This claim reflects research findings from Learning and Work Institute (L&W), which suggests individuals invest around £7.3 billion of money and £55.5 billion worth of their time each year in learning, which is substantially more than the government's National Skills Fund and the Apprenticeship Budget combined (Evans, 2023).

Attendees also stressed the need for flexible, modular courses, so as to make it easier for workers to learn without having to reduce their working hours. They suggested that the government assess the options for stimulating the supply of flexible courses.

Tailored careers advice and support

Attendees discussed the importance of government improving access to tailored careers information, advice and support for workers in particular occupations. This might enable more of those workers to (a) access existing entitlements to develop their skills, (b) identify alternative careers they could move into, and (c) self-assess and demonstrate their existing skills to prospective employers in growth occupations. This may enable more workers in high-risk occupations to successfully transition into growth occupations. Several attendees also thought many of these workers may need support to recognise, value, self-assess and demonstrate their latent skills to prospective employers. Other attendees also stressed the role of careers advice in supporting workers to overcome psychological barriers to envisaging changing career.

Additionally, attendees emphasised the potential benefits of changes in the content and delivery of careers support, advocating for a focus on skills rather than occupations and pointing to the potential role for AI. Others called for careers guidance and employment support to be more joined up. The new government's plans to merge Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service were welcomed; the assumption was that this would mean people in high-risk occupations could access support without first having to be made redundant, as indicated in the Get Britain Working White Paper.

6 See <https://www.dewr.gov.au/boosting-apprenticeship-commencements>

Connecting homes and work (transport and housing)

Attendees felt that intra-city public transport improvements would help people to transition into roles in professional and service-sector occupations, which are disproportionately likely to be nearer city centres. The number and location of homes that are built also influences workers' ability to access employment in city centres - the government's commitment to overhauling the planning system to pave the way to deliver 1.5 million more homes was welcomed. This is going to require major public investment in housebuilding, particularly in major cities (Panjwani et al., 2023).

Flexibility to work from home (WFH) is a related consideration. It was remarked that promoting employees' right to flexible working (for example by making it easier for employees to challenge refusals, as reflected in the 2024 Employment Rights Bill) could help enable more workers in high-risk occupations to transition into new occupations that require them to work further from home.

Strategic skills-based workforce planning and recruitment

Several attendees emphasised the need for more firms to build their capacity for 'strategic workforce planning', which would give more employers a long-term view of how they envisage their people and skills requirements changing. This might lead to more employers following the example of 'role model' firms in proactively supporting workers in shrinking occupations to reskill and move into higher demand areas.

Some attendees also advocated for employers adopting skills-based hiring practices, which involves moving beyond degrees and job titles to focus more on the skills a job requires and that a candidate possesses. Employers should rethink their hiring practices to reduce their (over) reliance on qualifications and place greater emphasis on assessing skills, which can be more predictive of job performance. This reflects a view that has gained traction across America (as well as this country) where dozens of companies, including large corporates like Boeing, Walmart and IBM, have signed on to the Rework America Alliance (<https://www.markle.org/alliance/>), the Business Roundtable's Multiple Pathways program (<https://www.businessroundtable.org/workforceskills>), or the campaign to Tear the Paper Ceiling (<https://www.teartheperceiling.org/>), pledging to remove degree requirements from certain job postings and work with other organisations to help workers make upgrades into higher-skilled occupations. It was, however,

acknowledged that the costs and expertise required to project future skills needs may pose bigger barriers for SMEs.

It was also felt that awarding bodies should ensure their qualifications build a broad base of skills and competencies required across an occupation rather than building competence in a narrow domain, as this can mean candidates are qualified for a role but lack the broader skills to progress or change jobs. The narrowness of some existing national occupational standards (NOS), and challenges keeping NOS up to date in sectors subject to a fast pace of change, were noted as barriers. Efforts to simplify and broaden NOS would have to be done in a way that did not compromise the perceived value of qualifications.

Management training and development

Some attendees suggested that more employers could benefit from ensuring their line managers are sufficiently trained and supported. Management training and support should focus not just on the ability to develop workers' skills to meet evolving job demands, but also on their ability to assess and fully utilise their workers' existing skills.

Previous research for the Skills Imperative - Rethinking skills gaps and solutions - called on employers to consider what more they can do to support their line managers to identify and utilise the 'latent' EES of their workers and encouraged employers to consider how they ensure that working conditions and practices promote organisation commitment and engagement and minimise 'skills withdrawal' behaviour by employees (Bocock, Del Pozo Segura and Hillary, 2024).

Research by CMI was highlighted; this research promotes the need for benchmarks of good quality leadership and management and encourages employers to invest in the provision of high-quality management training, for example through leadership academies such as those set up for the NHS and Civil Service. Giving employers greater flexibility to use their levy contributions to fund a broad range of management training may also support employer investment in this area.

Trust, collaboration and multi-agency working

Attendees called on central government to place more trust in local government, education providers and employers to work together to shape regional and local skills ecosystems.

One attendee called for a “citizen-centric” approach to ensuring that local and sector-specific skills ecosystems were joined up from the perspective of workers. The new Labour government’s pledge to give local areas more power to shape and join up work, health and skills support was welcomed, and there was optimism that the new skills planning infrastructure could foster greater collaboration and coherence at the national, sector, regional and local levels. Important roles will be played by Skills England, Local Growth Plans, LSIPs, multi-agency working across DWP and DfE and Sector Skills Councils. Local and regional priorities and plans also need to be coherent with, and complement, national plans for specific sectors, particularly those sectors prioritised in the Industrial Strategy.

Another attendee referenced the Innovation Accelerator pilots led by Innovate UK in Glasgow City Region, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, as an example of how national government can catalyse regional collaboration between further and higher education institutions and employers and attract significant private investment. There were also calls to resolve the inconsistency with which employers, educators and researchers define and measure EES, which currently poses a barrier to developing these skills at scale.

Investment in the FE workforce

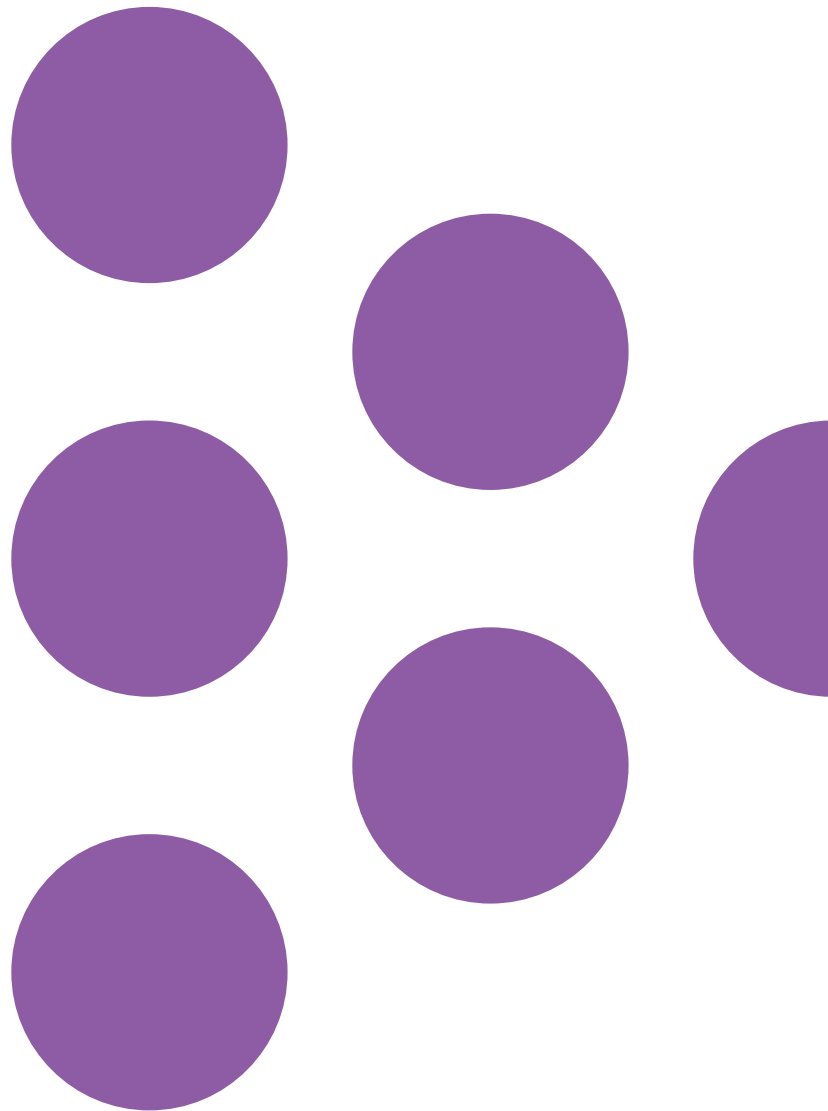
It was suggested that many of the solutions referenced above rely on there being sufficient high-quality FE teachers to reskill and upskill workers in high-risk occupations. Ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining FE teachers are likely to undermine the effectiveness of financial incentives or other policy changes that reduce the barriers to reskilling and changing careers. This view is reinforced by NFER’s research, which suggests that pay disparities with industry and other education providers are an important part of the recruitment and retention challenge, with prospective FE teachers unwilling or unable to take a pay cut to enter FE teaching and limited opportunities for pay progression impacting retention (Flemons et al., 2024). Policies to reduce the financial and practical barriers to reskilling and changing careers need to be supplemented by investment in the FE sector.



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