



## **Essex Skills Board**

**held at Essex and Suffolk Water, Sandon Valley House, Canon Barnes Road,  
Chelmsford, Essex, CM3 8BD  
Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2025 2pm – 4pm**

### **Attendees**

Joanne Giles – Essex Chambers of Commerce  
Ann Scott – FSB  
Brian Warrens – The Backstage Centre  
Helen Clements – Morgan Sindall  
Cllr Tony Ball – Essex County Council  
David Warnes – Chelmsford College  
Denise Brown – South Essex Colleges Group  
Hyla Grimwade – Greater Essex Careers Hub  
Janis Gibson – CAVS  
Jonathan Cuthbertson – Essex County Council  
Justine Addison – Ground Control  
Katie McGovern – Essex & Suffolk Water  
Kate Kozlova-Boran – Thurrock Council  
Lisa Collins – Essex Chambers of Commerce  
Lucy Spencer-Lawrence – Southend City Council  
Natalie Bonnick – Lower Thames Crossing  
Paula Hornett – EPN  
Lauren Philips – DWP  
Robert Walker – University of Essex  
Tom Broome – Constellation Marketing  
Will Allanson – Harlow College  
Ian Tompkins – West Essex Anchor Group NHS via Teams  
Karris Rowbotham – DP World via Teams  
Ann Scott – FSB via Teams

### **1. Welcome and apologies**

- JG welcomes all Board members to the meeting.



## Apologies

Dave Cope – DWP, Lauren Philips attended in place

Stuart Rimmer – Thames Freeport

Nick Brown – Southend City Council

## 2. Minutes & actions arising from previous meeting 21<sup>st</sup> January 2025

- Approved by Board

## 3. Introductions and welcome to new employer members

- All Board Members introduce themselves.
- JG introduces Helen Clements to the Board.

## 4. LSIP – status and activity

- We've been having discussions around changing the shape of what we do around this Board table, particularly with Devolution and local government reforms. We feel this Board has a real opportunity to help shape the skills agenda.
- We are currently writing the annual LSIP update which is due for publication in June 2025.
- The current plan duration ends in August 2026.
- From October 2025 we commence research and development of the 2026 Local Skills Improvement Plan.
- Our current funding is to September 2025.
- Skills England will release a new envelope of funding for October 25 – March 26. From April 2026 new funding will be approved, details will only be released after the CSR. This should be long term funding to cover the 3-year LSIP.
- From October 2025, there will be 39 LSIP areas. Essex will be known as Greater Essex.
- We are aware there is a significant amount of movement since the publication of the last report and action plan, we can see a lot of the priority areas there's activity that's been completed or is well underway. We have next year to complete the priorities we



have set out. Thank you to all of the partners that we are working with, we are starting to see differences in the priorities.

- The timelines for Devolution and the production of the new plan are slightly misaligned. We will have a Mayor in place by May 2026. The following year, the strategic authority will assume responsibility for the adult skills budget. However, preparation for the plan and its publication will take place before Devolution legislation is enacted.
- Once we become a devolved county, the process will involve the strategic authority—alongside the combined authorities—developing a Growth and Skills Plan. In response to this, the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) will be produced. Both plans will be approved by the strategic authority and the Employer Representative Body (ERB) and then submitted to Skills England for approval.
- Skills England will continue to monitor the strategic authority's commissioning activity to ensure it aligns with the LSIP. Our work will be subject to the same level of monitoring as before.
- We are aware that a shadow Growth Plan is currently being developed. We will aim to mirror its approach as closely as possible, despite the absence of formal legislation, to ensure the next three-year plan remains aligned with what we expect the Growth Plan to become.
- Over the past two years, we've had a group of individuals around the table who understand our needs. Now, with greater control over shaping the voice of the commissioning authority, it's crucial that we dive into the granular detail during our Board discussions to clearly articulate where we believe the gaps lie. Through this Board—and the reports we produce—we must effectively communicate those requirements. We've recently added new Board members, but we still require strong representation from both the voluntary and agricultural sectors.
- We need to ensure our influence is felt through both the LSIP Board and the GEBB. It's important that we avoid duplicating activities and instead focus on contributing to the GEBB through effective knowledge transfer, so that we can maximise the impact and opportunities for each employer represented at the table.



- We intend to write to the Chair of the GEBB to confirm our commitment to working collaboratively and moving forward in a way that promotes a supportive, non-duplicative environment. This approach is especially critical given the nature of the funding expected over the coming years.
- Ian Tompkins convened a workforce development group, which highlighted that much more needs to be done around inclusive employment. Given that the NHS is the largest employer in the county, discussions around local government reform brought attention to the need for greater investment in leadership and management training for individuals within this sector.
- As we move through the process of local government reform, it's essential to ensure we have the right people in place—individuals equipped with the appropriate skills to meet the demands of the new local government structure. Equally important is securing the necessary funding to support these individuals, enabling them to carry out their roles effectively.
- As the larger infrastructure project group continues to take shape, it's important that we bring this conversation into the group to help define the requirements for the adult skills budget.
- As we advance the action plan—particularly in support of inclusivity in light of upcoming local government reforms—it's essential that we foster an ecosystem where employers can create more opportunities for work experience and apprenticeships.
- A key challenge is how to better engage with SMEs. While it's encouraging to have large employers at the table, we believe their supply chains offer an important opportunity to extend our reach. By leveraging these networks, we can broaden participation and increase our impact.
- We'll be exploring what that looks like in practice and how to expand these activities to ensure we are truly supporting inclusivity across the board.
- We need to ensure our local authority colleagues are actively involved in the conversation and that we're aligning those discussions here. Our current focus is on the drop in funding and the upcoming changes to the levy.



- It's vital that we broaden our approach to engage more effectively with SMEs—linking this to customer feedback and connecting it to available funding and major infrastructure projects. By doing so, we can create a seamless, joined-up conversation that begins to drive meaningful change.
- DW – The only new money for skills that has been announced is for construction, in terms of lobbying for that money to come to this region what's the role of this group in trying to make sure that our region is the focus.

JG – We have to put a proposal forward. If that's what we want for the region and it's identified as a priority area there is our group, the major infrastructure group, we will all be lobbying to say we want it in this region.

DW – I don't think there's an issue around timing, some of the things will be responsive and quick to deliver, providers generally work on a year's cycle ahead, if we are talking about publishing the plan in September 2026, it will be September 2027 in terms of delivery.

JG – We weave that into the plan, hopefully we will have all of the ILR data over to the colleges by the end of April so that gives you an indication of what's in the county and not just being delivered by the colleges, that will give us the gap.

## 5. DWP Update LP– collaborative working.

- This is about us at DWP being more open with the information that we have about our customers and how we are strategically planning in the hope that by sharing a bit more information, it will allow more opportunities for collaborative working.
- We've had two important white papers that have been released in the last few months, Get Britain Working and the Devolution paper. What we are starting to see in operations is that filtering down to the strategy moving forward. Over the past two months we have been putting that strategy together and the updates I'll give you today very much link to two really important areas in that strategy.
- Firstly, we're going to have a clearer focus on how we segment customers at job centres. We are looking at a job ready group, for those that just need matching into the employment market. We



estimate this is going to be 10–15% of our customer group. The rest of them are likely need some kind of skills development in order to move them into the marketplace. Now we are number crunching, it's starting to crystallise how important the adult skills funding and the skills provision that we have known is really important in terms of moving people away from benefits and allowing them to move into the marketplace.

- We're becoming more interested in the high growth sector because this is where the opportunities are and at the same time the DfE are cutting the adult skills funding, the expectations are increasing at DWP in terms of number of participants we have in these skill-based programmes and that's a real challenge. I will share with you the numbers that we had on the sector-based work academy programmes in Essex last year, it's quite a significant increase. Previously DWP have spent too much time focusing on the number of referrals and the number of people starting these programmes, we need to stop being obsessive about who's starting and look at what that progression is. That's were joined up working is important.
- We've done a deep dive into the quality of the SWAP that were delivered in the first 6 months of last year so that we can compare what we're planning now to what we delivered last year. We delivered 170 SWAP programmes across 13 different sectors, and we had 1201 people start on those programmes. It was very similar in the second half of the year, in DWP in Essex we put 2400 customers onto SWAP programmes across the district.
- There is a huge variation in terms of which SWAP developed a more effective outcome then others. The ones with the strongest job outcomes are those where it meets all the criteria for a sector-based work academy programme.
- The SWAP that has an employer linked and who has been involved is where we are seeing the strongest into work.
- LP shows a slide showing the percentage in which SWAP sectors have been most effective in terms of job outcomes.
- We are thinking more carefully about our entering processes and how we can put that forward. I'm hoping what is starting to filter



down to all of the colleges and providers is that we are planning ahead. We need to be responsive to the job market.

- From this point we need to be looking at this quarterly, you should find that the cluster-based colleagues at the DWP are meeting with our SWAP providers to talk about what we do going forward. I hope that will allow us as a Board to look at the forecasts and see how that matches to the LSIP growth sectors.
- LP talks through the forecast slide for Q1.
- The most obvious thing is the agriculture sector, we know in the next 3 months the growing season is coming but we don't have any swats in the agriculture sector, we are desperately trying to get one up and running.
- An insight from a college this week, there are certain sectors where employers are looking for people with Level 4 & 5 skills qualification to go into that sector – my question is where are the opportunities here? A great deal of our job centre customers are looking at an entry level SWAP. Are there any opportunities where we could work collaboratively to support those sectors with our job centre customers and get additional SWAP up and running to bridge some of those gaps that seem to be appearing from the survey that we've done.
- What is crucial in terms of effectiveness, but also satisfying the criteria of the SWAP is the employer involvement. The language they use in the policy is guaranteed job interview. If there is a vacancy and an inclusive employment policy, then we understand they may not be able to guarantee a job interview.
- We are trying to work with the guidance we've got; we don't want to weaken any partnerships; we just want to build. It is valuable if there is that employer led approach.
- As part of the forecasting, we looked at how close we are to the criteria currently. If an employer is linked to the SWAP, out of 55 they are forecasting 41 has an employer attached so we are challenging the ones with no employer attached. It impacts the funding so we're asking what support DWP can offer to get all employers on board and to make it a more effective swat.



- HC – From an employer’s point of view, we would like to know the outcome of the SWAP. We might not have the opportunity, but knowing we have helped them into employment is a huge thing for us, complete social value. We would want to know the outcomes.
- JG – Through our supply chains there is a real strength and power of that communication. If we are able to identify those long-term plans, we can start to look at how through supply chains can we start to target SMEs and convene those small employers through the lens of a larger employer to help organisations reach those individuals get into opportunities.
- DB – There is an issue about capacity in terms of funding available. The great majority of our adult skills funding goes towards workforce development. My concern is there isn’t enough adult skills funding in Essex to meet the needs. There is no growth model in adult skills funding, we just deliver what we can deliver. There is no expressed volume of what that demand is and maybe the DWP have more of an insight. We could absorb another £2million of adult funding, given the volume of unemployed people. I’m concerned we have expectations about commissioning and being able to do things, but the funding pot is tiny.

## 6. LTC – NB

- LTC is the most ambitious road project in 35 years, since the M25 was delivered. We’ve appointed our three contractors Balfour Beatty, Bouygues & Murphy, Skanska. It’s about a 14-mile link connecting the A2, the M2 with the A12 and M25. It’s doubling capacity across Thames, east of London. We’re taking over 13 million vehicles of the Dartford Crossing and approaching roads each year.
- We did receive our DCO approval in March, next steps are around funding. The funding decision sits with Treasury, so we are impartial, we have put forward a paper outlining three potential funding routes. One is totally public finance; another is a regulated private entity and the last is design build and financial operation model. We are looking to find out in the coming months which financial route the Treasury will decide for LTC. We know that public purse does not



stretch far, and this is around a £10million project so we do anticipate there will be an element of private finance as part of the scene which we are in favour of.

- Start of works is summer 2026 and is roughly a six-year delivery period, leading to a road opening in around 2032.
- We are a carbon pathfinder project, not just for National Highways but now for the Government. We have already reduced our carbon emissions against industry standards by 50%, as part of the tender process and all our design engineering that's taken place over the last two years and we aim to reduce carbon emissions further, at least 70% of our construction emissions during the delivery. This is the first of its kind across the globe.
- We've got a procurement out for clean hydrogen, that's green hydrogen that will utilize on site, and we're also have a zero emissions policy across all of our sites, so no diesel will be used and zero emissions from next year onwards.
- NB shares presentation on Kickstarter Skills Revolution. All stakeholders here today have a key role to play in helping with that and we want to contribute. We are working with Lord David Blunkett who is advising us on our skills education, employment approach and there's some key initiatives we are currently undergoing. The first around challenging the existing strategy, we published our first skills education employment strategy in October 2022, before we onboarded our main contractors. We are revising that document now and are looking to publish it in June/July 2025. Some people in this room have input into this strategy.
- We are looking around at how we can learn from industry, we are one mega project but what we are trying to achieve has been done before, it's very much around how we deliver and to ensure we are promoting local and doing things in a sustainable manner but the actual delivery of LTC is relatively straight forward.
- This summer we will launch our skills taskforce, which brings together senior stakeholders across the industry, this is to make sure we are held accountable for what we have said, we are delivering against that, and we are remaining cognisant of all your evolving needs and agendas as we progress through the delivery period.



- Some of the headline commitments we've made in the skills space are supply chain spend with SMEs, hundreds of apprenticeships programmes, graduate training programmes, some are already live on the website and LinkedIn. 400,00 additional jobs within an hour's commute of the crossing which is connecting South Essex and North Kent with all of these opportunities.
- We are working with our delivery partners to focus on our priority groups, it's around how we can work with the long term unemployed to really inspire them into a career in the industry on this project and others and how we can facilitate that. We've got huge aspirations around gender targets, better diversity targets for the project.
- I think we can go further, we've been doing a lot of work with Jo and the team about how we can launch skills hub across Essex and Kent. We held a skills hub pilot in October 2025, in Maidstone, it was a huge collaborative exercise. Our ambition is to roll out 4 skills hubs across the Thames Estuary and these are permanent assets. One in Thurrock, another in Gravesham and two existing hubs we are supporting in Dartford and Maidstone.
- There is a huge skills shortage across the construction sector. In Southeast alone, we need 70,800 construction workers by 2027.
- In the Spring statement the chancellor recognised construction skills shortages and the view to upskill 60,000 more workers and the equivalent in millions to support that. I'm having lots of conversations with DfE, Skills England, our Local Authority. It's about linking that up because the size and scale of the project in this location has an opportunity to bring people into the industry and upskill them.
- The key roles we need on LTC, general ops, steel fixers, carpenters, supervisors and engineers, predominately civil engineers. These roles account for about 80% of our construction workforce. We need approx. 5,000 people to construct LTC. We have a commitment that 45% of our workforce must reside within a 20-mile radius of the scheme, and 20% within our majorly impacted boroughs. Workforce will peak in year 3 of construction, and that will demand around 3000 people at peak. Over the full 6 years LTC can support more than 22,000 people due to its wide impact at the economy.



- Our model for skills hub is simple. It's an accessible build, permanent infrastructure that has 2 key audiences, those outside of the industry, people in the workforce that we can upskill. All courses we deliver in the skills hub, we are relying on government funding to deliver those courses, also pastoral care. We recognise in the construction industry there are issues with drug, alcohol abuse, gambling, mental health. We have partnered with about 200 organisations across Essex and Kent to provide that wrap around support for individuals that come through our skills hub. The skills hub will be flexible to respond to the evolving needs of the region when LTC is complete. In terms of timelines, we are looking to secure the land this year and submit our planning application and then commission the skills hub in 2026. We are launching one hub as a temporary facility in the south of the scheme later this year which will be classroom-based training. The two main hubs will go live next year.
- In terms of green skills, the pathfinder projects, our hubs are net zero. Individuals who pass through the training at our hubs are at the forefront of the industry. We are buying kit that hasn't been used anywhere else in the world.
- It's an exciting initiative; we need the support of everyone in the room.
- PH – Asked about the number of hubs in the north.  
NB explained there is one permanent hub in the north and one in the south. There are two existing hubs we are supporting in the south, and we are engaging with colleges in the north. We have had extensive engagement with all of our local colleges to understand what they provide. This is a design, so not to step on the toes of the colleges.
- JG Action – Write a letter to Lord David Blunkett from this group via the LTC, secondly pulling in Jonathan and the Major infrastructure projects group and starting to formalise and bring back the data.
- BW – Something we have developed in partnership is immersive industry experiences. We are filming 360 degrees experiences in the workplace. The construction industry was the first to pick it up, we are



now working with the prison services, military organisations and ex-military personnel.

## 7. Local authority update

### Essex County Council – JC

- We have a new structure in Essex County Council, a business facing skills and growth service that allows us to link business needs with the skills growth agenda we are putting together, we finalise the programme in the next 6 weeks. It's a complex piece of work to change a whole service outcome. It would be geared towards Devolution, supporting the work of this board, supporting the strategy development, which is imperative in the business growth and skills work across the county, we have the connect to work programme that we are commissioning on behalf of Greater Essex, it's a major £32 million programme running over 5 years to get more people back into work that face barriers to employment.
- Essex for the first time has a locally commissioned boot camp programme. The colleges have all worked with us to develop the programmes. We will see the boot camp programmes running in the next two to three weeks in Essex.
- That's the two major, immediate commissioning activities we will be doing. The third is a more strategic piece which is related to all of that work we have talked about, get Essex Working Plans which is designed to reduce the amount of people who are out of work and moving them back into employment or closer to employment.
- We kicked off about a month ago our aspiration of Essex County Council. There is a programme of activity taking place over the next 18 months that's designed to get people connected to workplace through functional and essential skills.

### Thurrock Council – KKB

- All the Local Authorities are in a state of change. Yesterday, our leader resigned so we have a bit of extra pressure. A new leader will be elected 21<sup>st</sup> May.



- With regards to the skills and economic development work we are in the process of restructuring, we are a little behind Essex.
- A lot of our work on skills is dependent on UKSPF funding, we have a core budget for skills work but a lot of it was supplemented by UKSPF, and we've had a 49% reduction.
- We are doing a lot of work around sector skills; we will have 6 sector skills events we will be running with JCP and our latest apprenticeship event back in February saw 500+ residents attend. I'm hoping to grow on that.
- At the community college we will be focusing on early years childcare, health and social care and bootcamps.
- We are doing a deep dive into NEETs which will conclude in Sept/Oct. When the report is finished, I'll bring to the Board to look at the outcomes.

#### **Southend on Sea City Council – LSL**

- We've had our final year of UKSPF funding, we've been reliant on that so we're putting together plans of what we would like to see moving forward.
- A lot of external funding has now come to an end. We're taking a step back to see what we can do moving forward, what is our legacy from all of these projects. We have managed to get a short-term piece of funding for a social care pathways project Halo. We will be having conversations about what other options there might be. It's understanding the legacy of all of our projects and in our service, do we need to take a different approach.
- Within the council there is an education team who has a connections career service, we fall just under the national average for NEETS, I think that's due to the connection service.
- From our perspective in economic growth, we have an economic growth strategy which we are embedding.
- JG asked if there was anything required from this group in regard to funding.



- LS said potentially, there are opportunities for funding some of our existing programmes for partners. We would need those conversations individually.

## 8. Skills activity agree priorities and timelines – JG

- We have Bootcamp funding that is imminent, Jonathan is going to go through a procurement phase, for the county we don't want to lose any opportunities to be able to hit our target areas. It would be helpful to hear everyone's views around what we think we need those bootcamps to target so we don't lose any momentum. We know construction is a big area, are there any other clear areas that evidence is telling us we need to consider that will then help Jonathan and his team for that commissioning of bootcamps.
- JC for a bit off assurance, before we were invited on this boot camp process, we did engage with a lot of partners so hopefully we have captured it. I'm willing to take feedback but for reassurance we have done some of that thinking already and have some strong programmes.
- It was requested that Jonathan shares the plan.
- JC – Focus on construction, early years childminders, aviation, green technology, health and social care are some of our principal focuses.
- WA – It's a good opportunity for us as providers to look at making sure we can bolster up awareness and inadequate ASP.
- JC – This is a boot camp, you get one years' worth of funding for it so we need to look at opportunities for the future years and understanding where we expect some of that funding will come into the devolution space. What's the future long-term programme?
- DW – Asked how flexible ECC procurement rules are.  
JC – Boot Camp is a national provider framework which most of our providers in Essex are on commission from the private sector on that provider framework. One thing we are looking for in the future is developing the Essex Skills Provider framework, which allows us to have all the local smaller providers on that network.
- Adult skills fund – actions required, how to mitigate against 6% reduction?



## 9. AOB

PH – We wrote on behalf of our membership to Jim Mahone and Angela Rayner in support of Devolution and I have received a response, so they've taken on board Essex's opinions.