



Centre for the New Midlands

'Skills to Success' Roundtable Report

Hosted at Marco Pierre White Steakhouse
16 April 2026



Sponsored by:



Overview

The Centre for the New Midlands convened a high-level roundtable on 16 April 2026, bringing together 20 senior leaders from business, regional government, education, and the third sector. The session, sponsored by Talent Today and chaired by Ian Harrison, focused on addressing regional skills challenges and strengthening education-to-employment pathways.

The discussion centred on improving youth employability, closing skills gaps, enhancing workforce productivity, and fostering stronger collaboration between employers and education providers. Participants shared sector-specific insights, highlighted best practices, and explored practical solutions to systemic challenges.

About the Employability and Skills Board

The newly formed Employability and Skills Board, at the Centre for the New Midlands, will focus on four broad areas of interest:

- employability - primarily focused on young people
- upskilling the current workforce to ensure the region has a future proof workforce
- highlighting best practise in the region
- The regional productivity challenge through the lens of leadership

Those are deliberately broad and the goal of the Board is to narrow each of those down with the view to identifying specific areas in which we can usefully contribute to the regional conversation and ultimately policy. The conversation outlined above is the first step on that journey.



Chris Smith – Founder and CEO, Centre for the New Midlands

We are delighted to present our latest report “Skills to Success”, which reflects our strong commitment to bringing together leaders, from across the region and from different sectors, to explore the region’s most pressing skills and productivity challenges.

This report captures not just the scale of the issue, but the collective insight and momentum needed to drive meaningful, system-wide change. A huge thank you to all of our delegates for joining us and I do hope that you will enjoy reading the report.



Gary Wills – CEO, Talent Today (Event Sponsor)

As a business leader working at the forefront of talent and workforce development, I see daily the disconnect between potential and opportunity.

We were delighted to be able to sponsor this roundtable which was about convening honest, practical conversations with employers and educators alike – this report highlights the real barriers businesses face to recruit but also the challenges facing young people in securing the opportunities that they, and our society, need to be able to take advantage of.



Ian Harrison – Director, Growhouse Growth Business and Chair, Employability and Skills Board

It was a pleasure to chair this discussion which reinforced the urgency – and opportunity – of aligning employers, educators, and policymakers around a shared agenda.

This report marks the starting point for the Employability and Skills Board’s work, setting out the key themes we must now turn into focused action to improve outcomes for young people and strengthen the region’s workforce. Please do get in touch with me if you would like to get involved with our work to help shape an even ‘better’ region.

Key Themes and Insights

1. Regional Skills Challenges and Labour Market Context

The roundtable underscored the urgency of addressing structural skills issues across the region.

With unemployment standing at just over 6% (national average: 4%) and approximately 12% of young people classified as NEET (not in Education, Employment or Training), participants recognised the economic and social imperative for action. Several of the delegates cited the need for urgent strategic action to create solutions at scale and head off the huge damage that growing levels of youth unemployment could have on social cohesion, health, crime, and the economy.

Skills shortages remain a critical barrier to growth:

- Only 54% of the workforce holds Level 3 qualifications (vs. 61% nationally)
- Significant potential exists to boost regional GDP through targeted interventions

These challenges are compounded by rapid technological change, demographic shifts, and evolving workforce expectations.

2. Employer Perspectives on Skills Gaps

Employers consistently highlighted a mismatch between workforce capabilities and business needs.

Key concerns included:

- Over-reliance on traditional qualifications as a proxy for capability
- Increasing importance of soft skills such as communication and problem-solving
- Rapid advances in AI and automation are reinforcing the importance of equipping people with resilience and the capability to continually reskill, rather than relying on static qualification model

Recruitment challenges are further intensified by:

- Economic uncertainty reducing labour mobility
- High costs associated with hiring and retention
- Large volumes of low-quality or generic applications

There was a strong call to recognise non-traditional talent pathways, including migrant talent and candidates with unconventional experience.



3. Youth Employability and Work Readiness

A central theme was the need to better prepare young people for the realities of work.

Key issues identified:

- Limited understanding among young people of career pathways and workplace expectations
- Insufficient access to meaningful work experience (particularly in schools)
- A disconnect between education outcomes and employer requirements

Work experience was widely viewed as one of the most effective interventions, with even short placements significantly improving employment outcomes. However, participants noted the burden placed on employers and the need for more coordinated, scalable models.



4. The Role of Education and Training Systems

Participants highlighted systemic fragmentation within the skills and education landscape, with overlapping initiatives creating confusion and limiting impact.

Challenges included:

- Complexity of pathways (e.g. T Levels, vocational routes)
- Frequent policy changes disrupting long-term planning
- Lack of clear, measurable outcomes

Despite this, there were positive examples of innovation:

- Apprenticeships gaining traction in sectors such as law and increasingly within financial services (around 3% of recruitment last financial year)
- Universities embedding AI and industry-relevant skills into curricula
- Emerging models such as “industry skills guarantees” and live project-based learning

There was broad agreement that education providers must work more closely with employers to remain responsive to labour market needs.

6. Employer Engagement in Education

A recurring message was the importance of sustained, meaningful employer engagement throughout the education journey.

Effective approaches include:

- Early engagement with schools and colleges
- Offering real-world projects, mentoring, and guest teaching
- Participating in curriculum design through mechanisms such as Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)
- The system is most effective when employers act as codesigners, not just consultees

5. Sector-Specific Insights

Different sectors reported similar underlying challenges, despite varying contexts:

- Advanced Manufacturing & Automotive: Increasing reliance on digital and AI capabilities
- Professional Services (Law, Insurance): Greater emphasis on communication, commercial awareness, and alternative entry routes
- Construction: Strong demand for talent but limited entry-level opportunities and risk barriers for employers
- Creative Industries: predominantly freelance with differing employment models
- Third Sector and Community Organisations: Key role in supporting underrepresented groups and developing inclusive talent pipelines
- Financial service: Technical skills (particularly digital and data) remain critical, with the sector most exposed to AI driven transformation and skills obsolescence.

Across sectors, there was a shared recognition that vocational pathways remain undervalued and require stronger promotion.

However, barriers remain:

- Limited capacity, particularly among SMEs
 - Difficulty articulating the business case for engagement
 - Mistrust or misalignment between education providers and employers
- Building stronger relationships and “speaking the same language” was seen as critical to progress.

Systemic Challenges Identified

Participants agreed that many current interventions are fragmented and insufficiently coordinated. Key systemic issues include:

- Lack of integration across programmes and stakeholders
- Short-term policy cycles limiting long-term impact
- Insufficient incentives for employer investment in skills
- Persistent youth unemployment despite multiple initiatives

There was a clear consensus that systemic reform – not incremental change – is required.

Emerging Solutions and Opportunities

Several practical opportunities were identified:

- **Scaling Work Experience:** Developing coordinated, repeatable models to reduce employer burden
- **Employer Coalitions:** Sharing insights on skills needs and aligning recruitment pipelines
- **Policy Reform:** Exploring incentives such as National Insurance relief for hiring young people
- **Leveraging Major Projects:** Using infrastructure and social value commitments to create employment pathways
- **Modern Work Experience Models:** Adopting phased, continuous exposure rather than one-off placements
- **Flexible Apprenticeships:** Improving accessibility and responsiveness of funding mechanisms

Several critical questions remain:

- How can work experience be scaled sustainably without overburdening employers?
- What mechanisms will increase employer confidence in hiring non-traditional candidates?
- How can awareness of emerging career pathways be improved among young people?
- What policy reforms are needed to enable greater flexibility and responsiveness in the skills system?



Conclusion

The roundtable highlighted both the scale of the regional skills challenge and the significant opportunity for coordinated action. While many effective initiatives exist, their impact is limited by fragmentation and lack of alignment.

There is strong appetite across sectors to move towards a more integrated, employer-led system that better supports young people and responds to evolving economic needs. Achieving this will require sustained collaboration, clearer incentives, and a shift from short-term interventions to long-term systemic reform.





Centre for the New Midlands

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