

**HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
ECONOMY AND SKILLS TEAM, HAMPSHIRE 2050**

BRIEFING NOTE

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Title:	Post-16 education and skills white paper
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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The **Post-16 education and skills white paper**¹ sets out a major reform agenda to create a world-leading skills system that meets employer needs, supports economic growth, and improves opportunities for all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It introduces significant changes to qualifications, funding, and governance, with implications for employers, providers, learners, and local authorities.
- 1.2. The white paper responds to persistent skills gaps, fragmented provision, and the need for stronger alignment between education and business. It builds on previous reforms and positions skills as central to the government's Industrial Strategy and growth agenda.
- 1.3. Objectives and priorities focus on an employer-led skills system with stronger employer engagement and co-investment from businesses; a strengthened further education (FE) sector with investments in curriculum and estates, linked to priority sectors; a strengthened higher education (HE) sector with emphasis on specialisation, collaboration and flexible courses and quality-linked funding.
- 1.4. Key proposals attempt to align provision with Industrial Strategy sectors through major reforms including new Technical Excellence Colleges, V Levels as the main Level 3 vocational route, modular learning with Lifelong Learning Entitlement, and Growth and Skills Levy flexibility for employers. HE changes include inflation-linked tuition fees, reintroduced maintenance grants, and funding tied to priority sectors.
- 1.5. The reforms align closely with local priorities and this briefing note considers implications for employers, providers, learners and non-learners.

2. Contextual information

2.1. Background

¹ Post-16 education and skills white paper: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-skills-white-paper>

- 2.1.1. Published in October 2025, the Post-16 education and skills white paper represents a major policy reset for England's education and skills system. It was introduced to tackle persistent challenges in aligning skills training with economic needs and to deliver on the government's growth agenda.
- 2.1.2. It is interesting to note that the paper has been signed by three Secretaries of State (Education, Work & Pensions and Science, Innovation & Technology) – perhaps an indication Government is trying to design skills policies across departments rather than in silos.
- 2.1.3. The white paper was published at a time when England faces significant skills gaps (especially in technical and at higher levels) that hinder economic growth and, although previous reforms (e.g. Skills for jobs²; Post-16 Skills Plan³) have made some progress, the current skills system is fragmented, complex and difficult for employers and learners to navigate (and/or maintain engagement with). Learners – particularly younger learners – feel let down by a system that doesn't (currently) break down barriers to opportunities.

2.2. Policy context

- 2.2.1. The reforms are closely tied to the government's **Industrial Strategy**⁴ and **Plan for Change**⁵. This is significant as it positions skills as central to productivity, innovation and regional growth.
- 2.2.2. **Skills England**⁶ (now sitting with Department for Work and Pensions⁷) will lead on data-driven planning and act as an authoritative voice on current and future skills needs, ensuring national and regional alignment.
- 2.2.3. Reference also made to **Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)**⁸, **Local Growth Plans**⁹ and **Get Britain Working Plans**¹⁰.

2.3. Main objectives and priorities

- 2.3.1. The white paper sets out a plan to build a world-leading skills system that meets the needs of employers, supports innovation, research and development, and improves people's lives.

² Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>

³ Post-16 skills plan and independent report on technical education:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>

⁴ Industrial Strategy: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy>

⁵ Plan for Change: <https://www.gov.uk/missions>

⁶ Skills England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/skills-england>

⁷ Machinery of Government – Skills: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-09-16/hcws930>

⁸ Local Skills Improvement Plans and Employer Representative Bodies:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-employer-representative-bodies>

⁹ Local Growth Plans: England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-growth-plans-england>

¹⁰ Guidance for Developing local Get Britain Working plans (England):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-developing-local-get-britain-working-plans-england/guidance-for-developing-local-get-britain-working-plans-england>

- 2.3.2. The white paper is structured around four pillars:
- 2.3.3. *Working with employers to drive growth and opportunity through education and training*: This is about joining up the skills and employment systems for better coordination; using data-driven planning to match provision to employer needs and boosting employer engagement and investment in training and workforce development. A clear focus on supporting young people – especially those with SEND and/or not in education, employment or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET.
- 2.3.4. *A specialist and prestigious further education system that delivers high-quality education and training for all*: This looks to raise standards in FE through investment in teaching (recruitment and retention) and curriculum reform, including new Technical Excellence Colleges linked to priority sectors (another push for specialisation). FE will also provide clear pathways into high-quality jobs and lifelong learning through deeper partnerships with employers and work collaboratively to deliver regional impact (aligned to LSIPs, Local Growth Plans and local Get Britain Working plans) to help promote inward investment.
- 2.3.5. *Strengthening our world-leading higher education system*: A focus on improving quality and sustainability of higher education provision through specialisation and collaboration (including with FE) in teaching and research. Funding and tuition fee uplifts linked to quality thresholds. Confirmation of the **Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)** for modular, flexible study [see also **Growth and Skills Levy**¹¹] and enhancements to support access and participation, including targeted support for disadvantaged learners.
- 2.3.6. *Measuring success*: The white paper establishes clear metrics for outcomes including participation in higher-level learning, employer satisfaction and regional impact. Skills England will (continue to) act as an authoritative voice on current and future skills needs – ensuring national and regional alignment.

2.4. Key proposals and funding commitments

- 2.4.1. There is a focus on **education and training aligned to Industrial Strategy growth-driving sectors** (the ‘IS-8’¹²).
- 2.4.2. For FE, the headline is **£1.2 billion additional investment per year by 2028–29** to support 1.3 million FE learners, annually. This includes £375 million **capacity funding** to expand post-16 provision; and £1.7 billion for **estate maintenance** between 2026–27 to 2029–30.
- 2.4.3. The **Skills Mission Fund** creates £200 million for priority sectors and **29 Technical Excellence Colleges** aligned to Advanced Manufacturing

¹¹ The Growth and Skills Levy: <https://find-employer-schemes.education.gov.uk/interim/growth-and-skills-levy>

¹² Industrial Strategy Sector Definitions List: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy/industrial-strategy-sector-definitions-list>

- (4), Clean Energy (5), Construction (10), Defence (5) and Digital & Technologies (5).
- 2.4.4. A **guaranteed college(?) place** for all 16-year-olds and a new **16-19 English and maths preparation for GCSE** level 1 qualification.
 - 2.4.5. Introduction of **V Levels** as the only pathway of level 3 vocational qualification to sit alongside A Levels and T Levels.
 - 2.4.6. An **Industry Exchange programme** to bring workplace skills into the classroom.
 - 2.4.7. **New awarding Higher Technical Qualification powers** for FE colleges delivering higher education.
 - 2.4.8. A focus on **modular learning** and **credit transfer** between FE and HE with funding for higher levels through **Lifelong Learning Entitlement** from January 2027.
 - 2.4.9. From April 2026 employers can use the **Growth and Skills Levy** for short, flexible training courses and “apprenticeship units” in critical skills areas.
 - 2.4.10. **HE tuition fees to rise in line with inflation** from 2026-27 onwards. **Means-tested maintenance grants** will be re-introduced for disadvantaged students, funded by an **International Student Levy**.
 - 2.4.11. Changes to (HE) **Strategic Priorities Grant** to align with the IS-8 and future skills needs, identified by Skills England.
 - 2.4.12. **Skills passports** to set out an individual’s skills and competencies and help secure employment.

3. Implications for Hampshire

- 3.1. When mapping the white paper to local strategic priorities (Hampshire and the Solent area), there are at least four aligning themes:
 - 3.1.1. *Inclusive growth*: Evidence of national and regional priorities to reduce inequalities and improve access to high-quality education and training and sustainable employment.
 - 3.1.2. *An employer-led skills system*: A strong synergy to prioritise employer engagement and a focus on sector-based skills development.
 - 3.1.3. *A future-focused workforce*: Shared emphasis on lifelong learning, technical excellence and digital / green skills to meet future needs.
 - 3.1.4. *Integrated support*: National and regional strategies advocate for a joined-up system linking work, health and skills.
- 3.2. **Potential implications for stakeholders**:
 - 3.2.1. *Employers*: There are opportunities to have a greater influence on local skills planning and provision, with access to the Growth and Skills Levy for apprenticeships *and* short, flexible units, with greater alignment to local skills needs. However, there will be an increased expectation to co-invest in training; to create more opportunities for young people and

engage more actively in local skills processes. With the focus on the IS-8, there is also a danger that other sectors will miss out.

3.2.2. *Providers*: More funding for curricula, estates and facilities to enable specialisation and create prestige. Opportunities for more flexible provision and collaboration between FE and HE with agreed progression pathways that should appeal to employers. But with this comes more accountability and quality thresholds and even more emphasis on employer-led provision and priority sectors. Collaborative employer partnerships and carefully crafted marketing and communications will be crucial.

3.2.3. *Learners*: Insights into, and access to, high-quality pathways that lead to skilled jobs and higher-level learning. Funding will also support these pathways, with additional support for disadvantaged learners. However, this funding will mainly be as loans and the landscape of qualifications will be changing again. A robust, impartial careers education offer will need to underpin this to support and guide.

3.2.4. *Non-learners*: An integrated, local employment and skills system will help reduce barriers to participation. Flexible, modular courses should also make re-entry into education and training easier – especially where the pathways to employment are clearly communicated. However, health also needs to be considered together with digital poverty. And employment support needs to extend into the employment itself (Connect to Work will help with this).

4. Next steps: Three questions for discussion

- 4.1. How do we position Hampshire as a leader in employer-led skills planning?
- 4.2. How do we maximise funding opportunities for FE, HE and lifelong learning in Hampshire?
- 4.3. How do we ensure inclusion and tackle targeted economic inactivity through these reforms?

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