



Hampshire Skills Partnership Working Group report

Compiled by Jamie Mackay, Strategic Skills Lead
June 2026

Executive summary

On Thursday 26 March 2026, 17 representatives from different stakeholders across the local skills system, took part in this workshop at University Campus Sparsholt, as part of the work of the Hampshire Skills Partnership. Led by Jamie Mackay, Strategic Skills Lead at Hampshire County Council, the workshop had three aims:

1. *To outline the challenges faced in employer engagement activity from different perspectives.*
2. *To identify what sort of engagement activities actually work (again, from different perspectives).*
3. *Identify and agree some common approaches to reduce duplication and maximise engagement with employers.*

As with the two, previous workshops, this session was designed to create a collaborative environment where attendees could share ideas, provide feedback and make collective recommendations. Across six activities, the group worked towards addressing the aims, above, either collectively or in four smaller groups.

In line with the aims, the group were able to outline the main challenges faced in employer engagement activity with different types of organisations as well as the sorts of engagement activities that work with different types of organisations.

The group also put forward seven recommendations that could be adopted to reduce duplication and maximise engagement with different organisations:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Start with who you know and build from there:** Building up a database of leads should start with ‘*Who do you know? Who do they know, who you should know?*’ Existing networks can help grow the database but be mindful on *how* these contacts are shared / introduced.
2. **Data / intelligence sharing processes:** While GDPR sensitivities remain, appropriate processes enable data sharing to support warm leads and referrals.
3. **Identify the challenges faced:** Acknowledging challenges at the outset helps drive better solutions and outcomes.
4. **Present a unified offer:** Where organisations come together and present a unified offer, this will help reduce confusion for employers and deliver consistent messaging.
5. **A regional plan of activity:** Similarly, a clear, coordinated schedule of related activities helps employers plan and take part more effectively.
6. **Be mindful the same approach doesn’t work for every organisation:** Different types of organisations can often respond better to different engagement approaches.
7. **Co-delivered events and activities:** Explore and agree collaborative activities to reduce duplication, share resources and demonstrate genuine strength in local partnership working.

Aims of the workshop

The following three aims were shared in advance with the group:

1. **To outline the challenges faced in employer engagement activity from different perspectives.**
2. **To identify what sort of engagement activities actually work (again, from different perspectives).**
3. **Identify and agree some common approaches to reduce duplication and maximise engagement with employers.**

Attendees

17 representatives from business, education and training providers, voluntary sector and public sector took part in this workshop. The attendees, shown in **Table 1**, below, were split into four groups for the workshop; trying to get a good mix in each.

First name	Surname	Job title	Organisation
Andy	Sherman	Partnership Manager	DWP
Carla	Modley	Trade & Investment Manager	Solent Freeport
Carla	Toomer	Strategic Skills Programme Manager	Southampton City Council
Chris	Gingell	Senior Partnership Manager	CITB
David	O'Neill	Director of Skills & Employability	Brockenhurst College
Ed	Gould	Creative Director	Carswell Gould Ltd
Emma	Hobbs	Assistant Principal Partnerships and Progression	The Farnborough Sixth Form
James	Maw	Economic Development Manager	Havant Borough Council
Justine	Clements	Head of Business Development	University of Winchester
Naomi	Smith	Director - LSIF (Projects)	South Hampshire College Group
Orla	Wilson	Business Engagement Manager	Hampshire Chamber of Commerce
Sally	Thompson	Strategic Funding Manager	Hampshire County Council
Sophie	King	Head of Partnerships	Motiv8
Stephen	Cowling	Deputy Principal (Stakeholders, Systems & Services)	Peter Symonds College
Steve	Curtis	Funding Manager	Portsmouth City Council
Suzanne	Grant	Chief Operating Officer	Sparsholt College Group
Teresa	Hogsbjerg	Strategic Economy Lead	Hampshire County Council

Table 1: Workshop attendees.

Activity 1: Helium Stick

Aim: To demonstrate the necessity of teamwork, communication, and collective problem-solving to achieve a shared goal.

This activity was an initial ice-breaker – a practical demonstration of connection, attention and behaviour response in real time. The key message for the group was that we will only be successful by focusing on ourselves as well as an awareness and support for others.

Activity 2: Employer engagement challenges

Aim: To outline the challenges faced in employer engagement activity from different perspectives.

For this activity, each group was asked to list the challenges faced in engaging with other organisations, when trying to solve skills issues. With reference to **Table 2**, below, each group was asked to take on the perspective of one type of organisation and then, half way through, asked to switch to another perspective.

Group 1 was asked to take the perspective of SMEs and Charities / Voluntary sector.

Group 2 was asked to take the perspective of Colleges / Universities and Local Government.

Group 3 was asked to take the perspective of Local Government and Colleges / Universities.

Group 4 was asked to take the perspective of Charities / Voluntary sector and SMEs.

Table 2: Organisation type perspectives assigned to each group.

Each group was asked to discuss and capture the challenges they faced (taking on the allocated perspective) in engaging with other organisations. So, for example, Group 1 took the perspective of an SME; Group 2 as a College / University etc. The challenges were noted (see **Appendix 1**) and half way through, the groups changed their perspective (e.g. Group 3 took on the perspective of a College / University; Group 4 took on the perspective of an SME) and added any additional challenges. Each group was then asked to try to highlight up to five top challenges for further consideration, using stickers. **Box 1**, below presents the top challenges identified:

Top challenges faced in employer engagement activity (from SMEs):

1. Overly complex processes that create a barrier to engagement.
2. Resource intensive where time is a particular pressure.
3. Complex messages and 'offers' can create confusion and disengagement.

Top challenges faced in employer engagement activity (from Colleges / Universities):

1. Lack of resource (and time)
2. Service user costs
3. Coordinated approach

Top challenges faced in employer engagement activity (from Local government):

1. Communication systems
2. Adoption of shared systems / processes
3. Knowledge of what local government can offer

Top challenges faced in employer engagement activity (from Voluntary sector / charities):

1. Need funding

2. Engagement blindness
3. Lack of commercial expertise (especially for smaller / micro charities)

It is also important to note 'Differing priorities' across different sectors (e.g. **Public sector** focus on access and inclusion; **Private sector** prioritises commercial needs, productivity and speed and **Voluntary sector** prioritise targeting and supporting specific groups).

Box 1: Top challenges faced in employer engagement.

Activity 3: Quick Draw!

Aim: To demonstrate how easily messages can be misinterpreted and highlight the importance of feedback and clear, precise language.

For this activity, everybody was provided with a piece of paper and a pen and asked to 'Draw a horse'. As expected, everyone drew an image of a 'horse' as an animal and when the facilitator shared an image of a gym horse as the intended request, the group discussions centred around the importance of requests being specific and detailed. (When asked to once again respond to the request using other interpretations, colleagues presented drawings of chess horses, rocking horses, sea horses, clothes horses and more!).

This activity was successful in delivering the above, aim, and stimulating some great discussions about the importance of clear messaging.

Activity 4: What works?

Aim: To identify what sort of engagement activities actually work (again, from different perspectives).

For this activity, each group was asked to list different sorts of engagement activities that actually work. With reference to **Table 3**, below, each group was asked to take on the perspective of one type of organisation and then, half way through, asked to switch to another perspective.

Group 1 was asked to take the perspective of engaging with Charities / Voluntary sector and Colleges / Universities.

Group 2 was asked to take the perspective of engaging with Local Government and SMEs.

Group 3 was asked to take the perspective of engaging with Colleges / Universities and Charities / Voluntary sector.

Group 4 was asked to take the perspective of engaging with SMEs and Local Government.

Table 3: Organisation type perspectives assigned to each group.

The different sorts of engagement activities were noted (see **Appendix 2**). As in Activity 2, each group was then asked to try to highlight up to five top engagement activities for further consideration, using stickers.

Box 2, below presents the top engagement activities that work:

Top engagement activities that work (with SMEs):

1. Meeting / 1-2-1 / networking.
2. Authenticity.
3. Offering something they want.

Top engagement activities that work (with Colleges / Universities):

1. Advisory Boards.
2. Networking events.
3. Open days / careers fairs / reverse recruitment fairs.

Top engagement activities that work (with Local government):

1. Knowing the right person.
2. Alignment of aim or project or policy direction / agenda.
3. Investing time in getting to know the organisation.

Top engagement activities that work (with Voluntary sector / charities):

1. Activities with mutually beneficial outcomes (ESG).
2. Tailored / individual activities.
3. Shadow boards.

It is also worth noting the importance of thematic and/or sector-based engagement activities. This approach can be co-designed with different partners, bring together similar organisations and recognise the significance of supply chains as well as primes.

Box 2: Top engagement activities that work.

Activity 5: Accountability Ladder

Aim: To recognise the difference between Reactive and Accountable Behaviours from the Accountability Ladder and how to respond to them.

For this activity, the whole group was presented with a number of example responses from potential customers (as part of a business development scenario) to help illustrate the concept of the **Accountability Ladder** (see **Figure 1**, below).

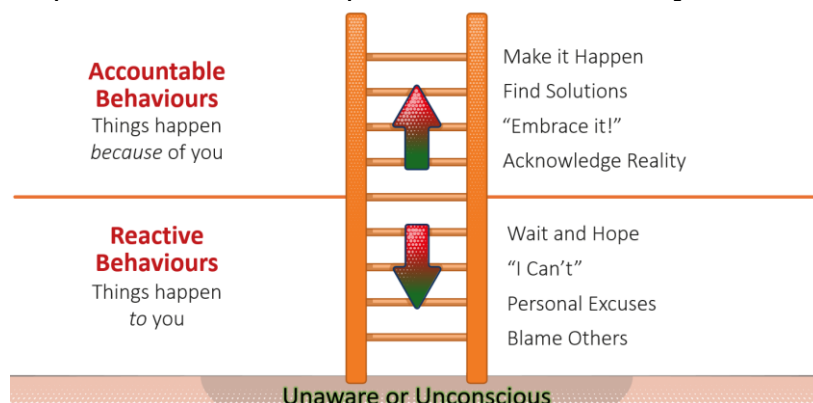


Figure 1: Accountability Ladder. Source: <https://flown.com/blog/deep-work/accountability-ladder>

Each individual group was asked to come up with some other examples of different responses, try to map them to the Accountability Ladder and consider an appropriate response to keep the lead alive.

Activity 6: Recommendations

Aim: Identify and agree some common approaches to reduce duplication and maximise engagement with employers.

For the last activity, the whole group reflected on the mornings' activities and findings and discussed different ways in which employer engagement could be conducted that would involve collaboration, avoid (or at least reduce) duplication and encourage repeat buy-in.

Box 3, below presents seven recommendations from this group for consideration by the Hampshire Skills Partnership and similar initiatives, looking to improve employer engagement / business development activity.

Recommendations:

- 1. Start with who you know and build from there:** Building up a database of leads should start with '*Who do you know? Who do they know, who you should know?*' Existing networks can help grow the database but be mindful on *how* these contacts are shared / introduced.
- 2. Data / intelligence sharing processes:** While GDPR sensitivities remain, appropriate processes (e.g. formal consent via an email; a LinkedIn Group) enable data sharing to support warm leads and referrals.
- 3. Identify the challenges faced:** Acknowledging challenges at the outset helps drive better solutions and outcomes. **Box 1** gives some examples.
- 4. Present a unified offer:** Where organisations come together and present a unified offer (e.g. training pathways across multiple providers), this will help reduce confusion for employers and deliver consistent messaging.
- 5. A regional plan of activity:** Similarly, a clear, coordinated schedule of related activities (e.g. Jobs / Careers fairs) helps employers plan and take part more effectively.
- 6. Be mindful the same approach doesn't work for every organisation:** Different types of organisations can often respond better to different engagement approaches. **Box 2** gives some examples.
- 7. Co-delivered events and activities:** Explore and agree collaborative activities (e.g. work experience programmes) to reduce duplication, share resources and demonstrate genuine strength in local partnership working.

Box 3: Recommendations to improve employer engagement activity.

Appendix 1: Group notes from Activity 2 (Challenges)



Groups 1 & 4: SMEs

- “Cherry on the cake”
 - Huge number of SMEs (1)
 - Challenging to get to / engage
- Hard to access / build relationships in a productive / meaningful way
 - Meeting needs
- Different perspectives of organisations
 - Multiple agencies
 - Multiple offers
- Challenge for all students to have employer engagement (1)
 - Work experience / internships requests hard to support (1)
- Consistency of offer
 - What do employers need?
- Core purpose gets in the way
- **Resource intensive (3)**
- No dedicated individual
- Rising costs
- Time poor (2)
- **Overly complex processes are a barrier (7)**
- Unclear benefits
- **Complex messages (2)**

Groups 2 & 3: Colleges and universities

- **Lack of resource (7)**
 - Industry pays more
- **Lack of time (2)**
- Work experience
 - **Service user costs (2)**
 - Challenges – statutory requirements
 - Willingness
 - Lack of understanding of what the student needs
- Industry advisory boards
 - New members
 - Communicating their existence
- Output focus, not input
- Instil hope in young people
- Mental health challenges
- Soft skills (essential) issues (1)
- Employers need to adapt to young people
- **Coordinated approach (2)**

- Regional brokering?
- Expectations – purposeful
- Framework / case studies

Groups 3 & 2: Local Government

- Lack of coordination (1)
- Needs streamlining
- Needs unified approach (1)
- Adopt shared systems / processes (2)
- Account management required
- Communication systems (6)
- Data sharing agreements
- Consistency needed
- Awareness: Profile
- Funding
- Trust / transparency – barrier (1)
- Self-employed – needing support
- Boundaries (government)
- Relationship building is key
- Knowledge of what local government can offer (2)
- Reaching the unreachable (1)
- Sharing data resources (1)

Groups 4 & 1: Voluntary sector / Charities

- Unstable
 - Funding (1)
 - Roles
 - Relationships
 - Time
- Corporate social responsibility misaligned
- Core purpose
- Need for flexibility
- Identifying mutual benefits
- Need funding (5)
- Charitable aims / articles – single focus
- Resource limitations
 - Time poor (2)
 - People
- Huge time investment for minimal benefit
- Purpose and identity needs to be clear (1)
- Employees
- Not being realistic about intention to fund / support
- Engagement “blindness” (3)
 - Too many opportunities – hard to choose / know which to invest time in
- Lack of commercial expertise (especially for smaller / micro charities) (3)

Appendix 2: Group notes from Activity 4 (What works?)



Groups 1 & 3: Voluntary sector / Charities

- Discovery days
 - Tours, schemes, opportunities
- Skill swaps
- Practical interactions
- Gifting physical items (e.g. 3D printer)
- Offer something more tangible
- Tailored / individual (4)
- What is there at the end of it? Tangible (Destination)
- Scoping the interaction for mutual benefit and outcomes
- Chunking: Supported placements working in a portion of a role
- Mutually beneficial outcomes (ESG) (8)
- Chamber Connects – networking
- Leveraging existing relationships (e.g. Housing associations) (1)
- Fundraising events (local community)
- Shadow Boards (3)
- Employer partnering “adopting” (1)
- Charities “expo” organised by business

Groups 2 & 4: Local Government

- Face to face – invest time (2)
- Knowing the right person (5)
 - Access to decision makers (2)
- Knowing the college / business / organisation (2)
- Relationship building
- Who does what – what department
 - Outward facing
- Social networks
- Communication
- Procurement – barriers
- Responsive
- Alignment of aim or project or policy direction / agenda (4)
- Simple and effective communication (1)

Groups 3 & 1: Colleges and universities

- Key relationship / person (account management)
- Workshops
- Open days / careers fairs / reverse recruitment fairs (3)
- Knowledge transfer network (1)
- Chamber strategy groups
- Higher education Advisory Boards (5)
- Survey
- Social media / media
- STEM / Hackathons
- Local community
- Webinars
- Teams – Remote collaboration
- Round tables
- Network events (5)
- CRM
- Websites
- GOV open source (Not yet running)
- Network (give back)
- Sharing intelligence (2)
- Sabbaticals
- Research capability (primary research scope)
- Brokers (1-to-1) (1)
- Give back
- Key skills development
 - Students → employers

Groups 4 & 2: SMEs

- Offer something they want (2)
- Be different
- Be specific (and tailor to be relevant)
- Be available (1)
 - Go to them (1)
- Be a mirror
- Define engagement journey
 - Not just an outcome
- Referral
- Continued engagement
- Authentic engagement (2)
- Benefit or payoff (1)
- Meeting / 1-2-1 / networking (7)
- Newsletters
 - Tailored
- Giving something back (1)