

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
HELD ON THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2024 AT MEETING ROOM 1,
WELLINGTON HOUSE, WELLINGTON STREET, LEEDS LS1 1DE**

Present:

Councillor Cathy Scott (Chair)	Kirklees Council
Professor Shirley Congdon (Deputy Chair)	Private Sector (West Yorkshire Business Board)
Councillor Eleanor Thomson	Leeds Council
Councillor Jo Hepworth	Wakefield Council
Dr Milton Brown	Private Sector Representative
Tim Craven	Private Sector Representative
Claire Paxman	Private Sector Representative
Colin Booth	Advisory Representative (Further Education)
Phillip Day	Advisory Representative (TUC)
Natasha Babar-Evans	Advisory Representative (Voluntary and Community Sector)
Tim Thornton	Advisory Representative (West Yorkshire Skills Partnership)
Sharon Riding	Advisory Representative (Department for Work and Pensions)

In attendance:

Michelle Burton	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Peter Glover	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Myles Larrington	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Sonya Midgley	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Phillipa Syers	West Yorkshire Combined Authority

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Silvia Dacre (Calderdale Council), Councillor Imran Khan (Bradford Council), Councillor Peter Kilbane (York Council), Advisory Representatives, Nikki Davis (West Yorkshire Skills Partnership), Martin Hathaway (Mid Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce), and Dr Peter O'Brien (Higher Education).

2. Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests at the meeting.

3. Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no agenda items present on the agenda which required the exclusion of the public and press.

4. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 13 July 2023

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Employment and Skills Committee held on 13 July 2023 be approved as a correct record.

5. Chair's Update

The Chair, Councillor Scott, opened the meeting by extending a warm welcome to all members of the Employment and Skills Committee. The Chair explained that she was the leader of Kirklees Council and the new Chair of the Committee. Before proceeding to the formal business, the Chair referred to a number of highlights.

The Chair announced that the deadline for submissions for the UK SPF pillar 3; people and skills bids had passed on 12 January 2024, with a substantial number of applications received. Currently, those applications were undergoing assessment, with further details to be shared imminently.

The Chair had informed the Committee that, in late 2023, the government had published the level 4 devolution framework, emphasising a deeper commitment to a decentralised adult skills system. The Chair then asked the Head of Employment and Skills about the latest developments on this.

The Head of Employment and Skills explained that the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) and the five local authorities (LAs) within the region collaborated closely to comprehend the ramifications of this framework. By the end of January, they had submitted a letter of application to the government, advocating for advancement in all areas of devolution outlined in the framework, including a plea for complete devolution of the employment, careers, and adult skills system. The Head of Employment and Skills also referred to central career provisions, with additional information contingent on developments relating to trailblazer devolution deals in other regions.

Lastly, the Chair observed that collaborative efforts had led to an application for the WorkWell program in West Yorkshire, aiming to aid those facing unemployment due to health issues. If successful, the program would start immediately, with full delivery planned from September to April 2026. Progress updates were expected by early April, and if West Yorkshire secured a pilot position, implementation would begin promptly. Additionally, a survey targeting employers' engagement with education for workforce development was ongoing as part of the All Age Careers Blueprint.

6. Economic and Sector Reporting

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture, aiming to update on the labour market and skills situation in West Yorkshire.

Officers introduced the report, outlining a new monitoring approach approved by the Employment and Skills Committee in October 2021. Key regional indicators were identified, focusing on employment rate, quality work, apprenticeship take-up, and more.

The report highlighted challenges such as inclusivity in employment and the proportion of NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training), with specific attention to job quality and qualifications. Despite steady improvements in qualifications over the past two decades, disparities persist compared to national averages. Additionally, the report noted stagnation in apprenticeship starts post-pandemic and signs of a cooling labour market, with indications of plateauing employment growth, levelling median pay, and moderate growth in unemployment.

Members made the following observations:

- A member emphasised West Yorkshire's high rate of NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training), particularly in Bradford and Leeds, attributing it to a lack of post-16 places rather than engagement issues.
- A member highlighted struggles within skills organisations, indicating high turnover rates and the depletion of reserves, underscoring the importance of the sector in supporting economically inactive adults.
- A member emphasised the role of local authorities (LAs) as gatekeepers for increasing NEET provision, noting the need for alternative providers due to the lack of additional capacity in colleges.
- Several members discussed challenges in the apprenticeship system, including employer demand, system complexity, and the decline of lower-level apprenticeships.
- A member highlighted challenges with the SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) procurable program, urging for meaningful engagement with businesses rather than solely measuring the number of apprenticeship starts.
- Phil Day mentioned TUC's efforts, supported by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, to advocate for a real living wage increase and emphasised the significance of learning aspects such as negotiation and recognition for workers notwithstanding direct union involvement.
- A member noted that many NEETs are likely below the living wage, emphasising the importance of addressing this issue comprehensively.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee noted the latest intelligence relating to employment and skills in West Yorkshire and the current performance of West Yorkshire against the State of the Region indicators.

7. Skills System Review

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture, aimed at updating on planned work in the context of potential deeper devolution on the Employment and Skills agenda.

Officers introduced the report, highlighting changes since the publication of the Employment and Skills Framework, the Future-Ready Skills Commission, and the AEB Strategy. They emphasised the varying operating models across the region and the need for a review considering the impending devolution. Discussions centred on the need for a more consistent approach to local Employment and Skills Boards and how best to engage with them.

Options included representation of local partnerships' views by elected members or appointing a representative Chair from the Boards to the Employment and Skills Committee. The report also suggested exploring greater consistency in terms of reference, makeup, and remit of the local boards.

Members made the following observations:

- Members expressed support for a more logical and rational structure for boards and committees. They emphasised the importance of standards and consistency across local boards. Concerns were raised about representation, reporting structures, and the varying needs of different authorities.
- Suggestions were made to engage elected members and consider their roles in working with local skills boards. There were discussions about the involvement of councillors, officers, and regional representatives in committees. The need for regularity and standards across the region was highlighted. Some members proposed reviewing terms of reference for skills boards before they were subject to approval.
- The committee's decision-making powers and their relationship with local authorities were questioned. The evolving nature of the committee's remit, particularly regarding work and health, was acknowledged. Implications of district and West Yorkshire Combined Authority relationships were considered. Suggestions were made to align various agendas and establish consistent structures across authorities.

- Requests were made for standard approaches and outline terms of reference.
- The importance of considering local context, such as differences in education providers in different districts, was emphasised.
- Members stressed the need for consistency and best practices in governing partnerships.
- Opportunities to maximise government funding for local authorities were discussed, highlighting the importance of a combined approach between the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and local authority partners.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee endorsed the proposed review of the skills system and indicated how they would like the planned work to proceed.
- iii. That the Committee considered how best to engage with local Employment and Skills Boards where they existed and whether a more consistent approach to how they were constituted and governed may be beneficial.

8. Digital Blueprint and Digital Inclusion

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture, presenting a draft of the new Digital Blueprint and seeking feedback and endorsement.

Officers introduced the report, outlining progress since the launch of the Digital Skills Plan, including the West Yorkshire Digital Inclusion initiative. The Digital Blueprint, evolving from the Skills Plan, received feedback from various stakeholders and underwent public consultation. The Blueprint focuses on horizontals like Place, People and Education, and Business and Organisations, intertwined with seven cultural themes. Pending committee endorsements, it will move forward for approval.

Additionally, the report detailed achievements and initiatives of the Digital Skills Plan over the past year, emphasising progress made in digital skills through the Local Digital Skills Partnership. Furthermore, it highlighted the West Yorkshire Digital Inclusion initiative's objectives and funding allocation to address digital exclusion challenges in the region.

Members made the following observations:

- A member emphasised the importance of ensuring the plan is ambitious enough to raise digital apprenticeship starts. Officers agreed to take forward this point and share it with officers.
- A member raised concerns about the narrow focus on computer science courses and suggested framing a more ambitious agenda to include other digital courses like music technology.
- A member highlighted the need to be ambitious in supporting businesses with high-level skills, especially in areas like AI (artificial intelligence).
- A member questioned whether the outcomes in the plan were already funded or just ideas and where they sit in terms of timescales. Officers explained that the action plan is emerging, consisting of a mixture of ongoing activities, upcoming investments, and partnership goals.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee noted the progress made since the publication of the Digital Skills Plan, particularly on the West Yorkshire Digital Inclusion initiative.
- iii. That the Committee endorsed the Digital Blueprint, with current progress in mind.
- iv. That the Committee delegated endorsement to the Chair, in the case of outstanding feedback from members, ahead of the final design.

9. Devolved Adult Skills

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture detailing updates on adult skills programmes and seeking guidance on future work.

Officers presented updates on the year 2 performance of the Adult Education Budget (AEB), Skills Bootcamp Wave 5, changes to the residential uplift, and Community Learning allocations. The West Yorkshire AEB, with a fund of £66.8 million for 2023/24, supported learners to enhance skills and access further learning and employment opportunities. Notably, there was substantial growth in starts and learners compared to the previous academic year.

Additionally, progress was made in unlocking progression opportunities, making learning inclusive, supporting key sectors, and enhancing digital skills. Approval was granted for an additional year of funding for the Skills

Bootcamp programme, and plans were outlined to address issues with Community Learning funding allocation.

Members made the following observations:

- A member commended the team on the results and noted that the devolved adult skills budget rollout in West Yorkshire was managed better than in other parts of the country.
- A member enquired about the origin of the diverse audience. Officers explained that learners were recruited mainly from the centres of Leeds and Bradford but also from other areas across West Yorkshire.
- A member emphasised the importance of capturing strategies to entice hard-to-reach learners.
- A member thanked officers for the facilitation of funding for the programs.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee noted the progress of the devolved Adult Education Budget and indicated how performance could have been improved and suggested changes that were needed in the period ahead.

10. Skills Support for Business

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture aimed to update them on the development and delivery of activity supporting employers to create a talent pipeline and encourage investment in skills.

Officers introduced the report, highlighting key points regarding the economic and labour market context, including tight labour markets and high demand for higher-skilled technical roles. They outlined funding secured to support emerging skills, particularly digital and green, through co-investment with businesses until March 2026.

Additionally, the Mayor of West Yorkshire's Fair Work Charter was launched to promote fair work practices, with over 40 businesses already onboard. Strategic engagement with businesses and educational institutions, as well as the continuation of skills advisory support programs, were also discussed, aiming to address skills gaps and enhance workforce development.

Members made the following observations:

- A member suggested capturing support for skills within the Fair Work Charter questionnaire.
- A member highlighted issues with employer reluctance to train due to staff turnover and questioned the framework's consistency across local authorities. Officers noted the entrenched issue of low demand and proposed a piloting approach based on member wishes.
- A member emphasised the importance of work placements and suggested extending opportunities for internships in green and digital fields.
- The Chair raised concerns about potential overlap and positioning of skills bootcamps. She also emphasised the importance of meeting employer needs in training.
- A member advocated for retaining talent through degree apprenticeships and enhancing careers advice for young people.
- A member emphasised the need to align apprenticeships with employer needs and secure more funding regionally and nationally.
- A member suggested proactive engagement with businesses regarding lifelong learning opportunities.
- A member expressed frustration over the lack of clarity on employer needs and suggested better collaboration among stakeholders.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee noted the update on the development and delivery of activity to support employers to recruit a pipeline of talent and to encourage employer investment in skills.
- iii. That the Committee discussed the potential scope of funding to support co-investment by employers in emerging skills.

11. Business Plan summary 2024-25

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Inclusive Economy, Skills and Culture, aiming to share the headline business plan priorities recently agreed by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

Officers introduced the report, outlining an outcome-led approach introduced in 2023/24, where service-area business plans align with multi-year outcomes set by the outcome-Directorates. For the employment and skills agenda, the focus is on ensuring everyone, particularly the most

disadvantaged, can access high-quality support and training to progress in their careers.

The planning process has been directed by setting multi-year outcomes driving each directorate's work focus. A 'plan on a page' for the Inclusive Economy, Skills, and Culture outcome-Directorate was provided for the Committee's attention, highlighting strategic priorities.

Resolved:

- i. That the Committee noted the content of the report and the feedback provided.
- ii. That the Committee noted the plan on a page and outlined suggestions to officers on how to deliver agreed outputs and outcomes.

12. Date of the Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Employment and Skills Committee was scheduled to be held on 14 March 2024.