

**Mayor of the
West Midlands**

West Midlands Works

Jobs for Everyone



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**

Executive Summary

West Midlands Works – the region's Get Britain Working Plan – is our blueprint for tackling economic inactivity, closing employment gaps and unlocking inclusive growth. It responds directly to the national Get Britain Working White Paper, but goes further: setting out how, through devolution, partnership and innovation, the West Midlands can build the most ambitious integration of employment, skills and health support attempted in the UK.

Our starting point is one of strength. The West Midlands is home to the second largest, fastest-growing, youngest and most diverse population of any UK city-region outside London. Unlike many parts of the country, our working-age population will continue to grow in the coming decade – a unique demographic dividend. Harnessed effectively, the ingenuity and skill of our young and diverse residents can power both regional and national prosperity. Employers will be central to unlocking this potential by embedding their voice in integrated service delivery and driving joined-up workforce development. Through an enhanced Business Growth West Midlands offer, a Good Work Charter, and a new Artificial Intelligence (AI) training guarantee, they will help ensure that opportunity and inclusion go hand in hand.

The West Midlands Growth Plan shows what this could mean. Closing our participation and productivity gaps would

add £12 billion to the regional economy, while achieving our 2% annual growth ambition would expand the economy by £17.4 billion by 2035. Our bold investments in major infrastructure – from the new Sports Quarter to our Investment Zones – are already creating economic assets that can be engines of aspiration. But to translate these opportunities into outcomes, we must build the support system that enables all residents to thrive.

The challenge is significant. Nearly 600,000 working-age residents – almost a third of our population – are out of the workforce. Ill health is the single largest driver of economic inactivity, rising faster here than nationally. Women face an employment gap nearly double the national rate. Disabled residents face a 25-point gap compared to non-disabled peers. Racialised communities also face persistent employment gaps, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents among those most acutely affected. At the same time, employers report unmet demand, with around 25,000 vacancies advertised monthly. This is not only a question of labour supply – the regional economy itself must grow and evolve to absorb more people into Good Work.

Youth unemployment is a particular challenge. In some areas, this rate is twice the UK average. Weak transitions from education to the labour market, coupled

with high Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), risk entrenching disadvantage across another generation unless tackled decisively.

This Plan sets out how we will achieve change. By 2035, we will raise our employment rate by five percentage points, supporting 93,000 more residents into work and contributing to the national employment rate target of 80%. We will do this by transforming Jobcentres into multi-agency neighbourhood hubs, eradicating health and wider barriers, working with employers to make Good Work the norm, and embedding prevention and innovation for future generations.

West Midlands Works is not just a plan for jobs – it is a plan to unlock the full potential of our people and our economy, creating a fairer, healthier, and more prosperous region for the decade ahead.



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Foreword - Mayor

Every day across the West Midlands, I meet people with talent, creativity and ambition. People who care deeply about their families, their communities and their futures. Ours is a young and diverse region full of potential.

But too many people tell me they feel shut out of opportunity. People who want to work, contribute and build better lives - but who face barriers that hold them back.

Nearly 600,000 people of working age across our region are out of work. That's a challenge not just for those people, but for all of us. Joblessness is both a moral and an economic issue. Because every person who's locked out of opportunity is a person whose talent our economy is missing.

West Midlands Works is our plan to change that. It's about creating a region where everyone who can work, can find good, secure, well-paid jobs. Where work brings pride and purpose, not just a payslip.

This plan is personal to me. It's about giving every person the chance to get on in life, wherever they live. It sits alongside our West Midlands Growth Plan, which brings in investment and creates jobs. Together, they're two halves of the same mission - building an economy that works for everyone.

We've already shown what's possible. Coventry Job Shop. Wolves at Work. Thrive at Work. WorkWell. These are national success stories built here in our region - proof that when we design services around people, not systems, we change lives.

This plan takes that success further. It brings together employment support, health and skills in local neighbourhood hubs. It builds stronger links between wellbeing and work. It puts “Good Work” - fair pay, security and progression - at the heart of our ambition. And it invests in the next generation, so that every young person can see a future for themselves here.

Devolution gives us the power to do things differently. But it also gives us a responsibility - to prove that local leadership delivers for local people.

By 2035, we’ll have helped thousands more people into work. We’ll have closed long-standing gaps in opportunity. And we’ll have built a system that’s inclusive, preventative and ready for the future.

Because this isn’t only about jobs. It’s about a simple belief - that every person, in every community, deserves the same chance to succeed.

That’s what drives me. And with West Midlands Works, that belief becomes action.

Richard Parker
Mayor of the West Midlands
October 2025



Foreword - Stakeholder



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The link between health and employment has always been deeply personal to me — it's the reason I joined my first NHS board. I've seen how a good job can transform a person's health and sense of purpose, and how poor health or insecure work can hold people back. West Midlands Works recognises that connection and responds with action, bringing health, skills and employment together so that work becomes part of how we help people live well, not a barrier to it.

Danielle Oum, Chair, NHS Birmingham, Black Country & Solihull Integrated Care Board Cluster

“

Across the DWP, we are on a journey of transformation — to make our services more responsive, more human and more joined-up. West Midlands Works gives us a great opportunity to journey towards that aspiration, working hand-in-hand with local partners to design services around people, not systems. This region has the ambition, collaboration and innovation to show how national reform can truly work at a local level.

Kate Glasby, Regional Director, Department for Work and Pensions (Midlands)





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West Midlands Works is codesigned and owned by the people and organisations who understand our region best. It reflects our shared belief that growth and inclusion go hand in hand, and that every resident in the region deserves the chance to participate in, and benefit from, a thriving economy. Together, we are building a model that can show the country what devolution can achieve when it's driven by purpose and collaboration.

**Ed Cox, Chief Executive,
West Midlands Combined Authority**

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Local government is where the impact of national policy becomes real for residents — and this plan recognises that. West Midlands Works gives councils and local partners the tools to tailor support to the needs of our communities, joining up employment, health and skills so people can move forward with confidence. It's about turning potential into opportunity, one neighbourhood at a time.

**Joanne Roney CBE, Managing Director,
Birmingham City Council**



Acknowledgements

This report is the result of wide-ranging collaboration across the West Midlands, drawing on the knowledge, experience and commitment of partners from many sectors. It reflects our shared ambition to create a region where good work, good health and opportunity are accessible to all.

We are deeply grateful to all who took part in our anchor event on 15th May 2025, and to Institute for Employment Studies for facilitating, which brought together stakeholders from across local government, health, business, and the VCFSE sectors. Their expertise and collective energy helped to define the priorities and pathways set out in this report. The subsequent programme of engagement sessions with individual sectors provided further depth and ensured that perspectives too often missing from policy conversations were included and valued. We are grateful to Matthew Thompson for early support in compiling the feedback.

Particular appreciation is extended to our Task and Finish Group, whose commitment, thoughtful challenge and responsiveness – often under considerable time pressure – were instrumental in shaping and refining the report. Their insight and generosity of time exemplify the collaborative spirit that underpins this work.

We also recognise the many other contributions that strengthened our thinking along the way – from informal feedback shared through ongoing partnerships to targeted initiatives such as our new Office of Public Service Innovation's design sprint groupwork and the Mayor's Jobs Taskforce, which helped to test ideas and surface fresh perspectives.

We thank senior leaders from across the region for their encouragement, constructive critique and final endorsement, with a special thanks to Clare Hatton from Coventry City Council, helping to establish the shared purpose and collaborative tone that will guide delivery.

Within the WMCA, we recognise the dedication of our officer working group. Particular thanks go to Dr Mubasshir Ajaz, who provided strategic direction, authorship and oversight; Dr Tatum Matharu, for her analytical insights and as principal author of the report; Dr Richard Smith, for his leadership on data and evidence; David Gaughan, for his system insights; and Julie Orrey, for guiding stakeholder engagement throughout.

Together, these contributions embody the collective resolve and shared commitment that define our region—and will continue to drive progress towards a fairer, healthier and more prosperous West Midlands for all.

Helene Dearn OBE
Interim Executive Director
Employment, Skills, Health & Communities





Our purpose is clear: close the gap with the national employment rate as it stands today, enabling 93,000 more residents to be in work by 2035

Introduction

This Plan, West Midlands Works, is the region's response to one of the most urgent challenges facing the country: how to raise labour market participation, tackle economic inactivity, and ensure inclusive growth. Building on the national Get Britain Working White Paper, the West Midlands Growth Plan and local strategies across our constituent local authorities, as well as strategies from across our changing health leadership landscape, this Plan provides a coherent regional framework for change, which we will drive forwards over the next 10 years.

Nearly a third of the working-age population are currently out of the workforce

Today, almost 600,000 residents – nearly a third of the working-age population – are currently out of the workforce. Ill health is the single biggest driver of economic inactivity, with long-term sickness rising faster here than the national average. Youth unemployment in parts of the region is more than double the UK average. Women, who in reality still bear the greater share of caring responsibilities, face an employment gap nearly twice the national rate, and disabled residents face an employment gap of 25 percentage points. At the same time, employers report unmet demand, with around 25,000 vacancies advertised monthly. Place-based inequalities persist: a resident in Solihull is 15% more likely to be in work than a resident in Wolverhampton. And a national pattern of employment variation by ethnicity is also reflected locally, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities facing the largest gaps.

While the WMCA area represents 5.1% of the working-age population in England, we have 9.7% of the country's unemployment total. To meet the national 80% employment rate ambition, the West Midlands must raise its employment rate by five percentage points. So, our purpose is clear: it is to close the gap with the national employment rate as it stands today, enabling 93,000 more residents to be in work by 2035.

We will ensure this rise is inclusive. Based on our current labour market profile, we project at least 47,000 more women, 24,000 more disabled people, and 12,000 more young people being included in our regional workforce. We will achieve this by addressing the structural weaknesses of the

current system – its fragmentation, siloes and its failure to support those who want to work but face barriers. At the same time, we will build on our strengths: trusted local delivery models, pioneering employment, skills and health integration, and strong employer partnerships.

The Impetus: A National Call to Action

In late 2024, the UK Government published the Get Britain Working White Paper – a decisive intervention to tackle one of the country's most pressing socio-economic challenges: economic inactivity. The White Paper sets a headline ambition to lift the UK employment rate to 80%, a figure not seen in modern times, by mobilising people left on the margins of the labour market. Nearly nine million working-age adults across Britain are currently not in work, with over 2.8 million citing long-term sickness as the primary reason. Rising economic inactivity, youth unemployment, and skills shortages threaten not only national productivity and living standards but also the cohesion and wellbeing of communities.

The White Paper is not simply about filling vacancies. It recognises the health benefits of work, identifies economic inactivity – especially driven by ill health – as a major barrier to prosperity, and commits to supporting people into Good Work through integrated employment, skills and health reforms. Its measures go beyond conventional labour market levers: integrating employment advice into NHS primary care, piloting youth guarantees in trailblazer regions, reshaping Jobcentre

Plus into a locally responsive service, and incentivising employers to create inclusive, health-enabling jobs.

The WMCA is at the forefront of this paradigm shift. Chosen as one of the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer areas with devolved powers to design and test new approaches, the region has an opportunity to be radically future-focused and demonstrate how integrated employment, skills and health can have a generational impact. Our Plan is therefore both a regional response to a national challenge and a platform for innovation, providing a blueprint to respond to Government's employment mission and positioning our region as a leader in recognising economic inactivity as a public health harm, work as healthful, and Good Work as a cornerstone of inclusive prosperity.



Regional Momentum: Growth for Everyone

This Plan does not exist in isolation. It is deliberately designed to interlock with the West Midlands Growth Plan – the region's roadmap for economic transformation to 2035. That Growth Plan sets out an ambitious vision: to increase residents' living standards in all parts of the region. It explains the four, long-term changes needed in order to realise it:

- Empowering the people of the West Midlands to get on in life;
- Enabling the businesses of the West Midlands to become more productive and provide good jobs, by strengthening our high growth clusters and innovation ecosystem, business productivity and investment and the everyday economy;
- Making the places of the West Midlands more prosperous and resilient; and
- Telling the West Midlands' story and strengthening its partnerships.

The Growth Plan backs the high-potential clusters that the West Midlands has distinctive strengths and comparative advantages in – advanced engineering, light electric vehicles and batteries; clean tech and smart energy systems; health and medical devices, diagnostics and associated digital healthcare; digital, tech and creative; and next generation services – which have the potential to create 100,000 jobs over the coming decade. In addition, the Growth Plan also recognises the everyday economy as a critical foundation of prosperity.

The Everyday Economy report commissioned by the WMCA made clear that jobs in retail, hospitality, social care, transport and logistics and other everyday sectors are the backbone of our regional labour market, and likely relatively resilient

to technological changes from AI. Together, they employ far more people than our high-tech clusters and are essential to the daily functioning of communities. Yet too often, they are undervalued, underpaid, underinvested, and too often populated with women, the young and those who are already experiencing inequality.

In addition to these sectors, construction will be pivotal in creating new jobs across the region, with the WMCA acting as a major investor in capital projects worth £2.7 billion through the Growth Plan. Spanning transport, housing, and retrofit, this offers opportunities to build skills, drive inclusive employment, and shape the physical infrastructure of our future economy. The Growth Plan is explicit that inclusive prosperity cannot be delivered without raising the quality, pay, and productivity of these roles.

West Midlands Works is the social twin of the Growth Plan: while the Growth Plan sets out how the region will generate economic opportunity, this Plan sets out how we will ensure our people can access, progress and thrive in that opportunity. It is the bridge between growth sectors and communities, ensuring the dividends of economic transformation are shared widely and equitably.



Aligning the Growth Plan and the West Midlands Works Plan

This Plan is the workforce and inclusion twin of the Growth Plan. We align where it matters – sectors, places, and pipelines – while delivering distinct people-focused actions.

Growth Plan priority	West Midlands Works mechanism / pathway	Outcomes delivery
Integrated Employment & Skills System	Pathway A: Multi-agency hubs; devolved funding & accountability; accessible digital referrals	More people supported into sustained work; trust rebuilt; +5pp employment rate
Guarantee for young people	Pathway D: Youth Guarantee; Future Generations Programme; all-age careers service	More young people in employment or training; reduced NEET/ unknown rates
Post-16 College Compact / stronger technical skills	Pathways C & D: Employer co-designed FE curricula; Growth & Skills Levy; Post-16 Plan	More people with higher-level skills for the jobs of the future
Get West Midlands Working Plan	This document – delivering employment, skills & health integration	Distinctive workforce and inclusion strand of Growth Plan
Targeted Skills Action Plans	Pathways C & D: AI, green, construction, health sectors; FE Compact	Employer demand creating pathways to work
£30m local skills innovation	Pathway C & D: Employer-led partnerships, Future Generations Programme pilots; prevention demonstrator	Early intervention; reduced long-term disadvantage
Cluster plans (five key clusters)	Pathway C: sector-based skills pipelines; employer engagement	Closing sectoral skills gaps; higher productivity



Growth Plan priority	West Midlands Works mechanism / pathway	Outcomes delivery
AI Acceleration Plan	Pathway C: WM AI Acceleration Plan; AI Academy spokes; digital skills bootcamps	More people with AI/digital skills; reduced in-work poverty
West Midlands Good Work Charter	Pathway C: Charter + Thrive at Work 'double guarantee'	More people in good quality jobs; reduced exits from work due to ill health
West Midlands Social Value Statement	Pathway C: embedding in procurement & supply chains	Tackling in-work poverty; fairer access to opportunity
Care sector pilot	Pathway C: everyday economy pilot; job quality interventions	Better retention; sustainable workforce in foundational sectors
Enhanced Social Economy Support Programme	Pathway C: inclusive business models, VCSFE capacity	More inclusive growth; resilient local economies
MoreThanWM5G & Smart City Region	Pathways A & B: digital triage; tech-enabled diagnostics; accessible design	Digital transformation accessible to all, including low-literacy groups
Focusing devolved budgets / Integrated Settlement	Pathways A & D: pooled funding, joint accountability, Future Generations pillar	More people supported to work; sustained system reform
Mayoral Taskforces	Crosscutting: Partnership governance; Works Partnership Board	Stronger accountability; employer and resident voice in delivery

The Journey So Far: Foundations for Change

In working towards employment, skills and health integration, the West Midlands is not starting from scratch. Since the devolution of the Adult Education Budget to the WMCA in 2019, the region has been steadily building an employment and skills system that is more agile and responsive to local labour market needs. Funding has been strategically deployed to strengthen the link between training and employer demand, simplifying resident journeys to employment and working with education providers to enable stability, innovation and flexibility to adapt to economic shocks. This shift has been critical in moving skills and employment closer together, laying the groundwork for a more coherent, integrated system.

More recently, and accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the WMCA has made health and wellbeing a central focus of its devolution and inclusive growth agenda. A Health in All Policies approach has been applied across devolved levers, including skills and employment, recognising that economic participation is both a determinant of health and a route to reducing health inequalities. The Health of the Region reports in 2020 and 2024 have tracked and reaffirmed this agenda, demonstrating the deep links between health, skills, work and inclusive growth.

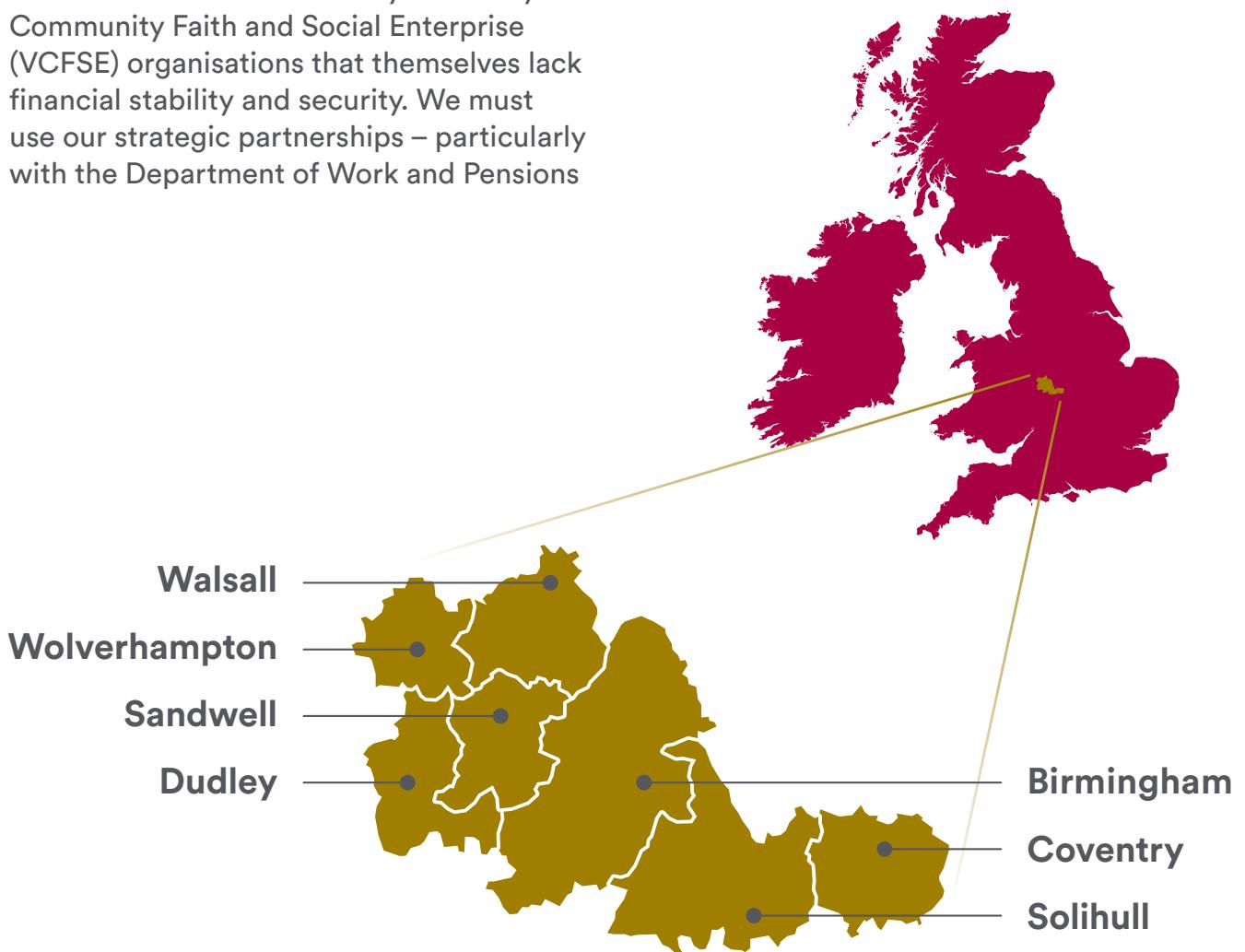
In parallel, our constituent local authorities have also positioned employment at the heart of public health. Birmingham's Creating a Bolder, Healthier City strategy frames youth employment as a determinant of health. Coventry's Health & Wellbeing Strategy and Citywide Skills Strategy

emphasise closing skills gaps as a means of tackling inequality. Dudley embeds prevention and inclusion across its wellbeing priorities, while Sandwell's Better Mental Health Strategy focuses on workplace wellbeing. Solihull links employment explicitly to transport and skills in its Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy, and Walsall and Wolverhampton tie participation and productivity to wider health outcomes. Place-Based Strategies are now reinforcing these agendas at localised levels, providing a framework for aligning employment, skills and health delivery with priority needs.

This convergence has been brought to life through flagship developments that demonstrate what integration looks like in practice. Structurally, Coventry's Job Shop, Walsall's The Link and Wolverhampton's Wolves at Work each bring together and demonstrate the impact of integrated, holistic provision in trusted community settings. At programme level, Thrive at Work has set new standards for employer-led workforce wellbeing, Thrive into Work pioneered evidence-based Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for people with health conditions, and Thrive at College has extended an integrated support approach into further education for young people struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. The West Midlands is also at the forefront of national pilots, as demonstrated through WorkWell, a low intensity support service that also acts as a single 'front door' to other supporting services or more intensive offers (e.g. IPS - Individual Placement and Support) – with three of the first 15 vanguard sites located in the region's Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

As evidenced, our system has developed important strengths. Where fragmentation remains – much of which stems from the silos of Whitehall, multitudes of initiatives and short-term investment – economic outcomes for residents will continue to fall short. Residents, employers and service providers face a landscape that is hard to navigate, with overlapping programmes and insufficient alignment to local labour market needs. For too many, this results in confusion, duplication and poor outcomes. Consolidation and efficiency gains will also be essential to strengthen the frontline, much of which is delivered by Voluntary Community Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations that themselves lack financial stability and security. We must use our strategic partnerships – particularly with the Department of Work and Pensions

(DWP) – to test new innovations, build on what works, and be prepared to cull what does not. Our system map (From Fragmentation to Opportunity, overleaf), co-produced by our stakeholders for this Plan, presents the scope of opportunity to reshape integrated employment, skills and health services around the whole-person, enabling them to secure, progress and thrive in good jobs. Our developments to date show what is possible here: preventative, inclusive and community-based approaches that build trust and deliver results.



From Fragmentation to Opportunity



for childcare,
and transport

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learning

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National Careers
Service

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Adult Skills Fund
(ASF)

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programmes

nal value, recruitment practices



Inclusive employment

Economically
inactive

Unemployed

Employed

Self-
employed

Restart

Jobcentre
Plus

SWAPS



Health, wellbeing, and disability

IPS

Thrive at
Work

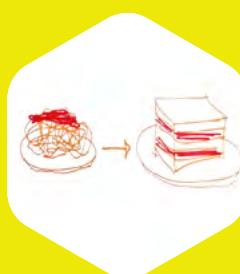
EAs in NHS

Access to
Work

Work Well

Connect at
work

Fit note



“From messy, complicated spaghetti to lasagne with layers working together to create something good.”

Stakeholder Anchor
Event Participant

Labour Market Overview

Key Demographic Challenges

Young population

Over 40% of Birmingham's residents are under 25

giving the WMCA the youngest age profile in the UK outside London – but youth unemployment is double the national average in some areas¹.

Why this matters

Without effective transitions to work, this region cannot take advantage of its demographic strength.

NEET and 'unknowns'

Around 10–12% of 16–24s are NEET

and a further 6–7% are 'unknowns' i.e. not captured in education, employment or training data².

Why this matters

A large group of young people risk slipping entirely off the system's radar.

Gender inequalities

Women's inactivity is 32.7% vs 21.7% for men

nearly double the national gap⁵. The lack of good quality, affordable childcare is a major factor.

Why this matters

Barriers to women's participation are a drag on growth and reinforce household poverty.

1 ONS, Census 2021.

2 DfE, NEET and Participation Statistics, 2024.

5 APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024.

Inequalities across racialised groups

In Birmingham, over 40% of residents are from racialised backgrounds

Across the West Midlands, employment gaps persist for Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black communities³. Black residents earn 11.9% less than White peers; Mixed ethnicity workers 25.1% less⁴.

Why this matters

Persistent ethnicity pay and employment gaps undermine inclusive growth and entrench disadvantage.

Ageing workforce

Our 50–64 age group is the fastest growing

One in three older residents are not in work, with chronic illness a key driver⁶.

Why this matters

Shorter healthy life expectancy risks further shrinking the labour supply.

Deprivation

The WMCA has some of the most deprived communities in England

Over 1 in 3 neighbourhoods are in the 20% most deprived nationally⁷.

Why this matters

Place-based inequalities lock residents out of opportunity.

³ APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024 (ethnicity breakdown).

⁴ ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2023.

⁶ APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024 (50–64 inactivity).

⁷ MHCLG, Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), 2019.

Key Health Challenges

Health-related economic inactivity

7.4% of working-age residents (approximately 160,000 people) are inactive

due to long-term sickness, vs 6.1% nationally⁵.

Why this matters

Ill health is the single biggest driver of inactivity.

Prevalent conditions

Mental health (depression, anxiety) and musculoskeletal issues are the leading causes of work-limiting illness⁸.

Why this matters

These are conditions where timely support can keep people in work.

Life expectancy

West Midlands life expectancy is 0.6 years lower for women and 0.7 for men than nationally⁹.

Healthy life expectancy is declining.

Why this matters

More years are lived in poor health, limiting economic participation.

⁵ APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024.

⁸ NHS Digital; WMCA Health of the Region 2024.

⁹ ONS, Health State Life Expectancy, 2023.

Mental health

Six of seven local authorities report above-average prevalence of common mental illness issues (anxiety, depression).

Young adults face worsening mental health, linked to poor school, college and employment outcomes.

Why this matters

Poor mental health is a leading cause of worklessness; without early and integrated support, more young people risk becoming long-term economically inactive – hugely significant in the UK's youngest region.

Physical health

Only 64% of adults are physically active (below England's 67.1%)

while obesity among reception-age children is the highest of any region at 10.9%¹⁰.

Why this matters

Poor physical health not only affects life expectancy but also employability and productivity.



Key Employment and Employment Support Challenges

Unemployment

Regional unemployment is 1.5–2pp above the UK average

youth unemployment is more than double in some localities¹¹.

Why this matters

Persistent unemployment undermines resilience and growth.

Employment gaps

Our disability gap is ≈29.6% (≈130,000 people)

Gender gap ≈11pp (≈200,000 people)

Ethnicity gap ≈15pp in some groups⁵

youth unemployment is more than double in some localities¹¹.

Why this matters

Tens of thousands of residents are excluded due to systemic barriers.

Insecure work

Around 1 in 5 working-age residents are in low-paid or insecure jobs

in everyday economy sectors (care, retail, hospitality)¹⁴.

Why this matters

Work is not always a route out of poverty if pay and security is lacking.

Employment rate

69.5% vs 75.1% nationally

approximately 600,000 working-age residents are out of work⁵

Why this matters

Closing the gap could add £12bn to the regional economy.

⁵ APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024.

⁵ APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024.

¹¹ ONS, Labour Force Survey / APS Jan–Dec 2024.

¹¹ ONS, Labour Force Survey / APS Jan–Dec 2024.

¹⁴ ONS, ASHE Low Pay and Insecure Work Tables, 2024.

Recruitment and retention barriers

Disabled people face inaccessible recruitment processes, limited workplace adjustments, and persistent stigma

Employers often lack confidence in supporting disabled workers. Some racialised groups experience longer periods of unemployment compared to white peers and higher rates of underemployment.

Why this matters

Persistent unemployment undermines resilience and growth.

Structural barriers

Unaffordable and unreliable childcare, transport costs, and housing insecurity make moving into work risky and unattractive.

Why this matters

Without addressing these barriers, employment support alone will not raise participation, particularly among women, carers and low-income households.

Pay and job quality

Gender pay gap: 9.5% in WMCA vs 14.1% nationally¹².

Disability pay gap: 17.7% in West Midlands vs 13.8% nationally¹³.

Ethnicity pay gap: Black –11.9%; Mixed –25.1%; Asian +1.7% vs White (UK)⁴.

Why this matters

Inequalities persist even for those in work, driving in-work poverty.

Skills mismatch

20–25,000 vacancies are advertised monthly, but shortages in engineering, digital, health/care, construction persist.

Only 56% of working-age adults in the WMCA area hold qualifications at Level 3 or above, compared with 62% nationally⁵.

Why this matters

Persistent mismatches mean vacancies stay unfilled while residents remain unemployed or underemployed, holding back both growth and inclusion.

4 ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2023.

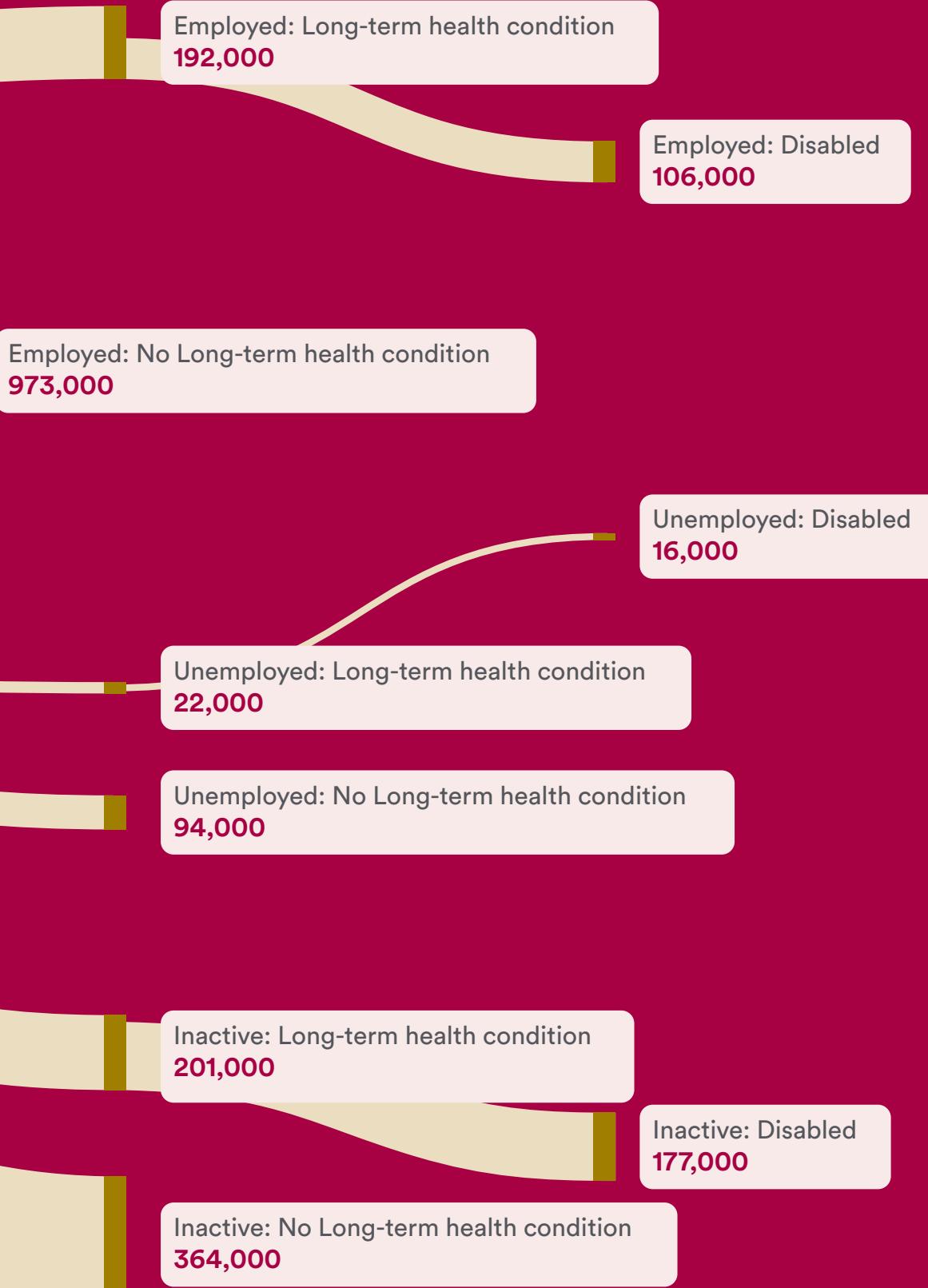
5 APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024.

12 ONS, ASHE Gender Pay Gap Tables 2023.

13 ONS, ASHE Disability Pay Gap, 2023; WMCA Exemplary Region for Disabled People, 2024.

Economic Profile of the WMCA Population





The West Midlands Get Britain Working Scorecard

WMCA and Local Authority data for the metrics proposed by UK Government for Get Britain Working plans.

	Birmingham	Coventry	Dudley	Sandwell	Solihull	Walsall	Wolverhampton	WMCA	National
Employment Rate (%)	66.9	74.7	71.8	67.3	78.5	73.0	63.0	69.5	75.1
Gross disposable household income (all ages)	£16,950	£17,772	£17,644	£15,305	£24,228	£16,853	£16,987	Not available	£22,789
Local variation in employment rates (16-64)	-2.6%	+5.2%	+2.3%	-2.2%	+9.0%	+3.5%	-6.5%	-	-
Health-related economic inactivity rate (16-64) (%)	6.6%	5.8%	7.4%	12.8%	5.9%	4.3%	11.3%	7.4%	6.1%
Disability employment rate gap (%)	23.7%	31.1%	28.7%	39.0%	25.6%	34.1%	34.9%	29.6%	25.6%
Proportion of 16-17 year-olds who are NEET (%)	2.90%	3%	2.5%	2.1%	4.1%	2%	2.6%	2.7%	3.2%
Female employment rate (16-64) (%)	62.2	71.3	68.5	65.7	76.0%	71.4	56.9	65.8	72.2

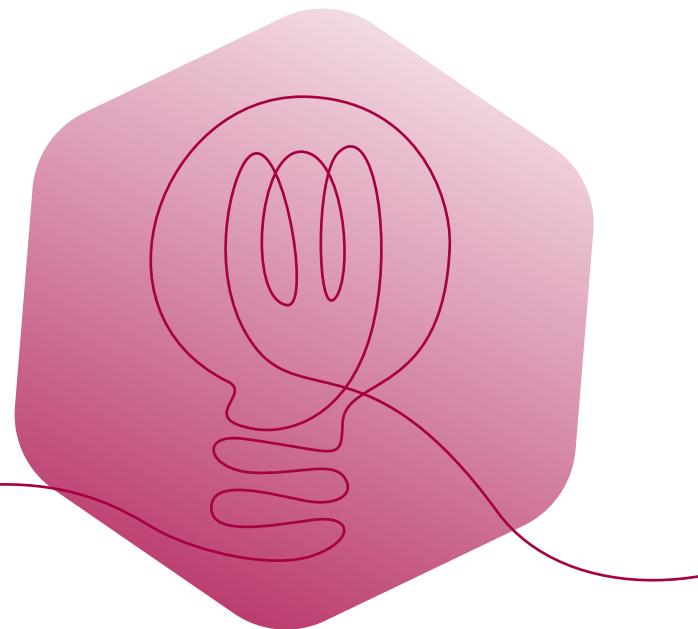
Data for Employment rate amongst parents (18-66) not available.



**Around 1 in 5
working-age
residents are
in low-paid or
insecure jobs**

Complexity: Intersectionality and the Interaction of Challenges

- Youth + mental health: Poor mental health is compounding NEET risk, with young people reporting record levels of anxiety and depression². These individuals need personalised, continuous support through education-to-work transitions.
- Disability + work barriers: Disabled residents face a 'triple penalty' of health, stigma and progression limits, with the regional disability pay gap at 17.7%¹³.
- Caring + gender: Approximately 111,000 unpaid carers, mostly women, are out of the labour market; this compounds the region's gender employment and pay gaps¹⁵.
- Ethnicity + place: Residents from racialised backgrounds, particularly Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black communities, face compounded barriers – high unemployment, worse health outcomes, concentration in low-paid sectors, and spatial overlap with deprivation. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black residents in deprived urban areas face particularly high unemployment and low pay rates^{3, 7}.
- Ageing workforce + health challenges: Rising economic inactivity among older workers is driven by chronic illness.
- Intergenerational worklessness: Children in workless households are disproportionately likely to become NEET, reinforcing cycles of exclusion¹⁶.
- Spatial divides: Areas with the worst health outcomes also have the weakest labour market participation.
- Employer demand vs supply mismatch: Thousands of vacancies exist, yet people furthest from the labour market are not job-ready due to health, skills, and support gaps.



2 DfE, NEET and Participation Statistics, 2024.

3 APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024 (ethnicity breakdown).

7 MHCLG, Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), 2019. 13. ONS, ASHE Disability Pay Gap, 2023; WMCA Exemplary Region for Disabled People, 2024.

13 ONS, ASHE Disability Pay Gap, 2023; WMCA Exemplary Region for Disabled People, 2024.

15 ONS, Census 2021 (unpaid carers).

16 DWP, Intergenerational Worklessness: Evidence Review, 2023.

Our Unique Opportunities

- Young and diverse population: WMCA has the UK's youngest, fastest-growing, most diverse population outside London¹.
- Devolution and our trailblazer status give us the flexibility to test and scale innovative models.
- £12bn growth dividend: Closing participation and productivity gaps could deliver the UK's largest regional uplift, boosting national growth¹⁷.
- Sectoral growth clusters: AI, green industries, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and construction are set to expand rapidly, with major skills demand¹⁷.
- Anchor institutions: NHS, colleges, and local authorities can model inclusive employment and health integration, driving change across sectors¹⁸.
- Employer appetite for change is growing, with strong demand for a clear regional Good Work framework.
- Stakeholder appetite for collaboration provides a strong asset, with engagement to date showing openness and commitment to joint action.
- Proven innovation: Thrive at Work, WorkWell, Coventry Job Shop and Wolves at Work already demonstrate success; scaling these offers a ready route to impact¹⁸.
- Inclusive growth dividend : Tackling gender, ethnicity and disability gaps would not just improve fairness but release tens of thousands of residents into the labour market^{3, 4, 13}.
- Public service reform momentum: Devolution and public service innovation agendas provide a rare window to shift investment into prevention and long-term outcomes¹⁸.

1 ONS, Census 2021.

3 APS, ONS Jan–Dec 2024 (ethnicity breakdown).

4 ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2023.

13 ONS, ASHE Disability Pay Gap, 2023; WMCA Exemplary Region for Disabled People, 2024.

17 WMCA, Growth Plan 2024 (main plan + evidence base).

17 WMCA, Growth Plan 2024 (main plan + evidence base).

18 WMCA, State of the Region 2024–25.

18 WMCA, State of the Region 2024–25.

18 WMCA, State of the Region 2024–25.

From Challenge to Change: Our Pathways Forward

As has been set out, the West Midlands faces some of the most acute labour market challenges in the country, but we also hold some of its greatest opportunities. To raise our employment rate by five percentage points, we need to do more than scale up existing programmes – we need to rewire how the system works. Our theory of change sets out the shifts required: the outcomes we want to achieve and the pathways through which change will happen.

The Change We Want to See

Our ambition is clear: to raise the West Midlands employment rate by five percentage points, aligned to the national target of 80% employment, bringing 93,000 more residents into work and unlocking their potential. To achieve this, we must develop an integrated employment, skills and health ecosystem that is inclusive, preventative, and future-focused, co-produced with service users and employers to ensure it reflects both lived experience and labour market need.

We want to see a region where employment, skills and health support is a holistic all-agency neighbourhood-based service that helps residents overcome the real barriers they face, with the greatest support in those neighbourhoods where economic inequality is most prevalent.

We want to see a region where employment and skills support is not a transactional, one-size-fits-all offer but a holistic neighbourhood-based service that helps residents overcome the real barriers they face. We want the West Midlands to be a place where a health issue is not a reason to leave work, but where Good Work actively supports better health. We want to see employers at the forefront of change, offering high-quality, inclusive jobs with progression, in both our key growth sectors and the everyday economy. And we want to see a public service ecosystem that is responsive and innovative, designed around prevention and our future generations, thereby breaking cycles of generational unemployment and embedding opportunity for all.

To make this vision real, we will pursue four interconnected pathways to change:

- A transform operational delivery** in the region so that holistic support models are embedded into all-agency local sites
- B eradicate health and wider barriers** through integrated employment, skills and health pathways, alongside support for childcare, housing and transport costs
- C keep the West Midlands working – in Good Work** by supporting employers to embed inclusive recruitment, retention and progression as standard practice, and

- D deliver public service innovation** to ensure future generations have better opportunities than the last, with prevention and equity at the core of service design.

We will pursue these pathways with immediate focus on the first three years, while keeping sight of a ten-year horizon for full transformation.

The change we want to see is nothing less than a reconfigured system – one that makes work an achievable, attractive, and sustainable route to prosperity for everyone.



Pathways to Change

Pathway A: Transforming Operational Delivery – To All-Agency Local Hubs

Improving the effectiveness of employment support in the West Midlands requires fundamental reform of how Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and the new Jobs and Careers Service operate. As acknowledged in the Get Britain Working White Paper, JCP is too often experienced as transactional and compliance-driven, with a primary focus on benefit administration. This can undermine trust, damage health, and discourage participation. Regional partners including DWP, local authorities and the WMCA recognise these challenges and are committed to a shared transformation – one that rebalances conditionality in favour of support, builds trust through partnership, adapts to local conditions, and focuses relentlessly on sustainable employment outcomes.

Local examples show what this looks like in practice. Coventry's Job Shop is a trusted, city centre base with high footfall and a strong employer-facing offer. Walsall's The Link provides a co-located, wraparound service that integrates employment, skills and wider support under one roof. Wolverhampton's Wolves at Work demonstrates the value of embedding partnership between DWP and the council, having supported more than 10,000 residents into sustained jobs. These models work because they are accessible, community-based and build trust that mitigates multiple fears and barriers.

The WMCA Employment & Skills Strategy (2024–27) highlights the fault lines within

the current national model: fragmented provision, confusing for residents and employers, and insufficiently aligned to local labour market needs. National procurement of employment support and poor co-design at the point of programme inception with regional-local commissioners misses vital opportunities to align and integrate offers, strengthening local infrastructure and system triage and signposting.

The new Jobs and Careers Service – intended to bring together JCP and the National Careers Service – provides a critical opportunity to do things differently. High quality careers support for struggling residents and those in work could be a turning point. If delivered through regional and local partnerships, it could underpin an all-age careers service and a broader employment support guarantee through which everyone can access careers advice when they need it, with those that are most disadvantaged guaranteed tailored support.

However, we can only go so far without further – and full – devolution of employment support. Even with seamless integration at the local and regional level, we are still only aligning a small proportion of the total spend, which risks being little more than tinkering at the edges. The vast majority of the funding will remain siloed and so system integration will remain partial. Only with full devolution of employment support spend can we achieve transformative change at scale and enable the ecosystem – and our residents – to achieve their full potential.

Hypothesis

If Jobcentre Plus and the Jobs and Careers Service are transformed into trusted, multi-agency neighbourhood hubs, residents will experience a single, supportive route into work – increasing engagement, rebuilding trust, and delivering sustained employment.

Why this is the case

- Nearly 600,000 working-age residents are out of work; almost half say they want to work but cannot access suitable support.
- Fragmented services create duplication and confusion; a single, integrated all-age careers service simplifies access and links advice to real opportunities.
- Local partnership-based models such as Coventry's Job Shop, Walsall's The Link and Wolverhampton's Wolves at Work consistently achieve better outcomes than standard JCP approaches.
- The voluntary and community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector plays a vital frontline role, often reaching people statutory services cannot. Embedding this capacity through co-production with people with lived experience of exclusion is essential to build trust and engagement.



What we are proposing

1

Integrated delivery hubs

By 2027, every local authority will have a multi-agency West Midlands Works hub, co-designed with councils, the WMCA, DWP, NHS, employers and employer representatives, the VCFSE sector, and residents and service users with lived experience, particularly of exclusion. Where strong models already exist, we will expand outreach by embedding JCP staff in trusted community venues such as colleges, family centres and libraries. Digital transformation will underpin this shift, with accessible platforms designed for residents of all abilities, including those with low digital literacy or access barriers. These hubs will benefit from being set apart from JCP and any negative perception issues by operating under a shared West Midlands Works brand – consistent in values and standards, but locally tailored to reflect community identity and need. This first stage will lay the foundation for a fully integrated, all-agency model across the region by 2030.

2

Devolution of employment support

We will seek full devolution of employment support funding and powers through the Integrated Settlement, with a new ‘health equity’ pillar, aligning national priorities with local delivery. This would bring into scope new provision to support the long-term unemployed, the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer, and careers funding for a regional all-age service. Delivery footprints will be aligned across systems – particularly Integrated Care System (ICSs) and JCP contract areas – and underpinned by statutory duties in the forthcoming Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. This will be radical; we will pool accountability and design out funding siloes.

3

A regional all-age careers service

We will create a regional all-age careers service designed to support progression across the life course. Its purpose will be to ensure that residents can access high-quality careers guidance not only at school-leaving age, but at every key transition: from education into work, between jobs, when balancing caring responsibilities, or when retraining later in life. We will foster intergenerational support – encouraging children, young people, parents and grandparents alike to access guidance – enabling the service to help family units move together towards opportunity and stability, aligned to our transformative Future Generations drive through Public Service Innovation (see Pathway D).

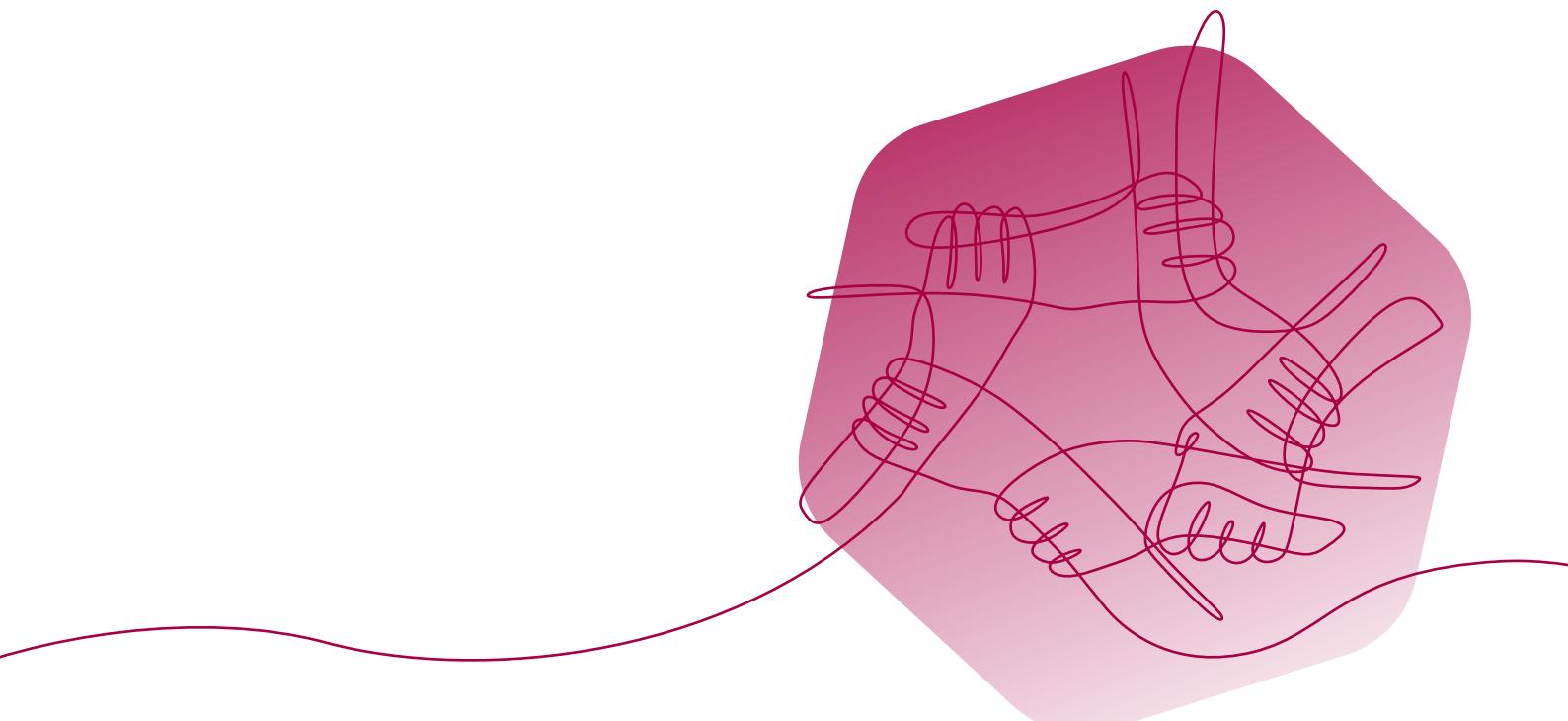


Outputs we will deliver

- Multi-agency hubs operational in all seven local authorities by 2027, with JCP presence in at least 30 trusted community venues.
- A single all-age careers service piloted from 2027 and scaled region-wide by 2030.
- Shared referral and data systems live from 2026, enabling residents to tell their story once and access the right support seamlessly.
- Joint accountability for sustained outcomes embedded by 2027, with regional reporting on six- and twelve-month job retention.

Outcomes we will achieve

- More inactive residents engaged and supported into work.
- Higher trust and engagement with services, replacing transactional compliance with supportive, community-based models.
- Faster, smoother transitions into sustained employment.
- Greater uptake of reskilling and upskilling, especially for low-skilled and returning workers.
- Employers more confident and engaged in an integrated system.
- Contribution to a +5 percentage point uplift in the regional employment rate, meeting the Growth Plan ambition of a fully integrated employment and skills system.





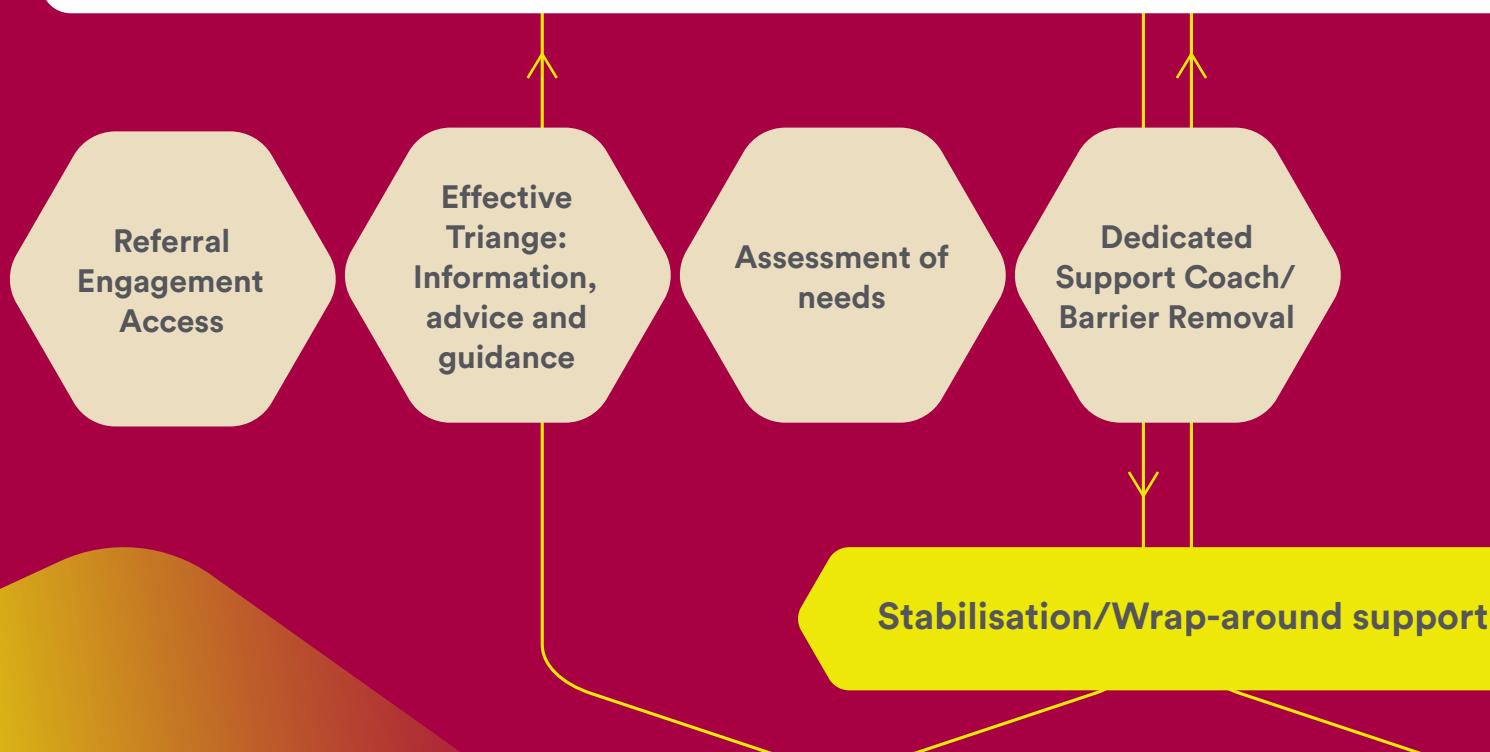
Nearly 600,000 working-age residents are economically inactive; almost half say they want to work but cannot access suitable support

Integrated Support Framework

Our 'no wrong door' approach to integrated support



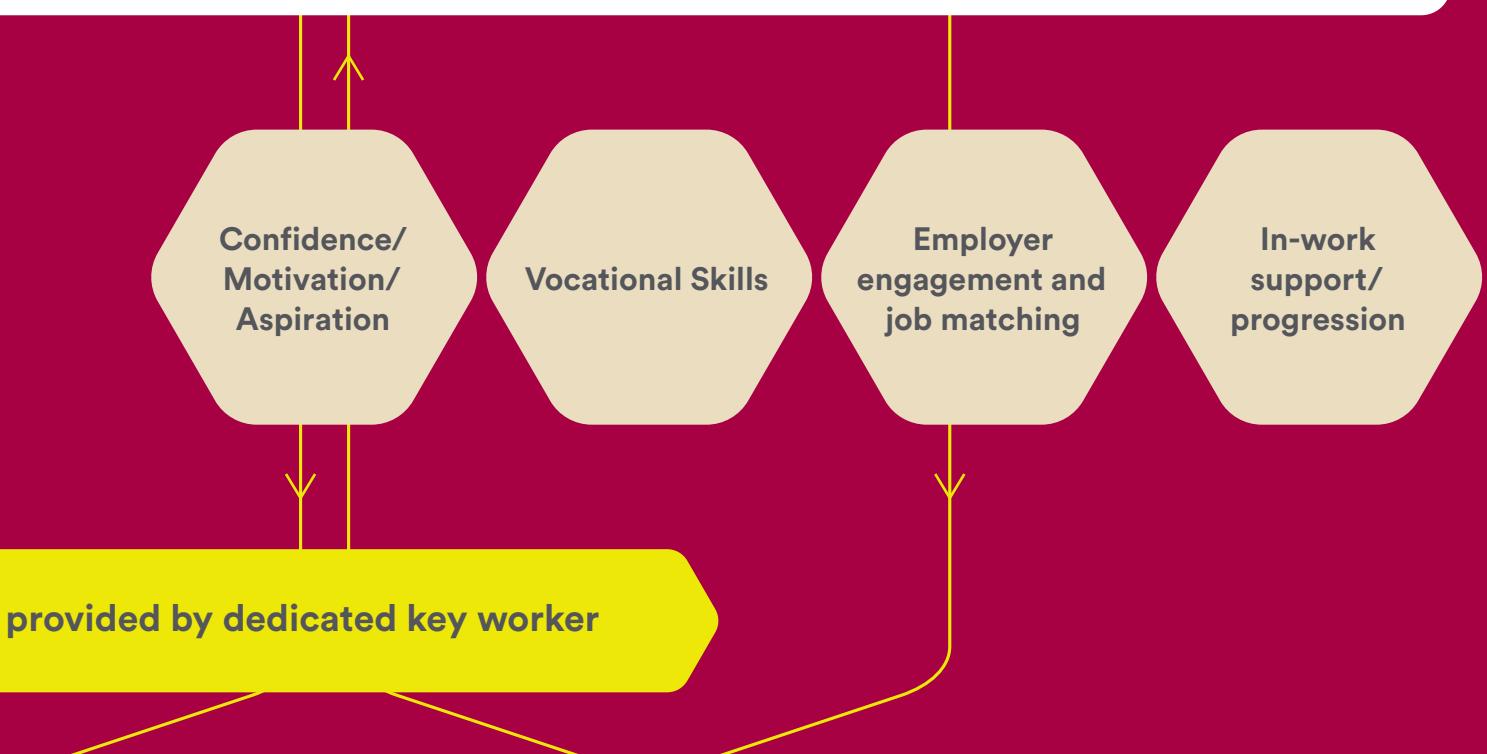
Wider factors and links including schools,



Non-linear journey - residents



health, housing, specialist needs



may access at any point

Pathway B: Eradicating Health and Wider Barriers to Work

The West Midlands cannot close its employment gap without bringing health centre-stage. Ill health is now the single largest driver of economic inactivity, with 7.4% of the working-age population inactive due to long-term sickness – higher than the national average and rising. Disabled residents face an employment gap of around 25–30 percentage points. With the right adjustments, most long-term conditions need not prevent participation. As acknowledged in its 10-year plan, *Fit for the Future*, keeping people in work needs to be an explicit and intended outcome for the NHS. This pathway is about the regional health system ramping up its efforts to make work part of its core mission and embedding cultural change across frontline delivery to recognise employment as beneficial to health.

Barriers, however, extend beyond health. Shortages in affordable childcare, high transport costs, insecure work and the fear of losing income or housing entitlements are decisive factors for many, particularly parents, carers and low-income households. Where services feel overly transactional or compliance-driven, these risks are compounded. A different approach is needed: one that systematically reduces barriers, builds trust, and gives residents confidence that employment is possible, sustainable and good for health.

The links between health, work and inequality are well-evidenced. The WMCA Mental Health Commission and the 2024 Health of the Region report underline how poor health drives exclusion, while the Making the West Midlands an Exemplary Region for Disabled People report highlights the importance of inclusive recruitment and retention.

Our Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) are also advancing this agenda, with initiatives from digital inclusion to equity assessment tools. These moves show a system increasingly committed to tackling inequalities in practice.

The region already demonstrates, in places, how this integration works: Thrive into Work and WorkWell embed employment conversations in health pathways, while Thrive at Work and Thrive at College support wellbeing in workplaces and colleges. The recently announced neighbourhood health centres in Coventry, East Birmingham, Solihull and Walsall signal national confidence in our ability to lead integrated approaches. Designed to bring together health, care and community partners in local hubs, they offer proof and potential: trusted places where prevention, diagnosis and wider support – including employment support – can be aligned to embed the principle that work is healthful. We will draw on the learning from the DWP's Pathways to Work Green Paper to strengthen joint approaches to health and employment integration. Building on this evidence, we will go further – working with NHS and DWP partners to reform processes such as the GP Fit Note and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessments, ensuring health and employment services coordinate support more effectively.

As one of the region's largest employers, the NHS also has a vital role to play, aligned to its 'fourth purpose' to contribute to local social and economic development. NHS anchor employers must champion inclusive recruitment, promote the wellbeing of its workforce, and use its Social Value principles to act as an exemplar of place-based opportunity.

Hypothesis

If the health system takes a central role in enabling work – embedding employment support in clinical pathways – and helping to address wider barriers like childcare and transport, more residents with health conditions or caring responsibilities will be able to enter, remain in and progress through Good Work.

Why this is the case

- Health-related economic inactivity is the main driver of the employment gap: 30.1% of all inactivity in the WMCA area – over 142,000 residents – is due to temporary or long-term sickness.
- Structural barriers such as unaffordable childcare, transport costs and insecure work reinforce each other and negatively impact a person's health; moreover, they disproportionately affect those with health conditions, women, carers, and people with racialised backgrounds.
- Local pilots (e.g. Thrive into Work, WorkWell) show integration of health and employment improves outcomes, but coverage is inconsistent.
- Flexible training and employment opportunities remain inaccessible to many managing health or caring responsibilities.



What we are proposing

1

Integration of health and employment

We will bring the health system centre-stage by embedding employment support in NHS pathways – from primary care and mental health through to musculoskeletal services. This will include an ‘employment on prescription’ approach, and embedding health offers – NHS health checks, biopsychosocial assessments, neurodiversity screening and remote or low-tech diagnostics – within employment and skills programmes in neutral, accessible venues. Expanding diagnostic capacity will reduce the numbers of people on repeat Fit Notes simply waiting for assessments, thereby keeping them in work – potentially with adjustments – and consequently keeping them engaged and active. Frontline staff will be trained to work across boundaries, with health professionals equipped to promote the benefits of Good Work, and employment advisors able to address health barriers confidently.



2

Flexibility in training and work

Health is not binary: many conditions can be managed within work if the right adjustments are in place, and education and employment – in good quality jobs – can actively improve health and wellbeing. With this understanding, we will expand modular, flexible training pathways and promote flexible and part-time work opportunities, so managing a condition or caring role is not a barrier to labour market participation. These approaches will be co-produced with people with lived experience of exclusion, ensuring they are genuinely accessible and inclusive.

3

NHS as exemplar employer

As one of the largest employers in the region, the NHS has a unique role to play. We will work with NHS regional workforce planners, our ICB cluster, provider organisations and neighbourhood health services to support the NHS being a model of inclusive employment: championing recruitment and retention of disabled staff, embedding Social Value principles in workforce planning, and prioritising staff wellbeing. The NHS is therefore positioned as an anchor institution that not only delivers healthcare but also creates opportunity and models best practice.



Outputs we will deliver

- Employment advice embedded in all major NHS pathways by 2027, supporting at least 10,000 residents annually.
- Fit Note reform pilot launched in 2026, with GPs trialling new assessment processes and shared protocols with employment services.
- Routine health offers (health checks, assessments, screening, diagnostics) embedded in employment and skills programmes by 2027.
- Expanded diagnostic capacity piloted from 2026, cutting waiting times and reducing unnecessary long-term sickness certification.
- Flexible training pathways and part-time work opportunities expanded from 2026, targeted at residents with health conditions or caring responsibilities.
- 500 NHS jobs annually ringfenced for inclusive recruitment pilots from 2026, alongside Social Value requirements in NHS contracts.

Outcomes we will achieve

- Reduced health-related economic inactivity and a narrowing of the disability employment gap.
- Higher participation among parents, carers and residents with long-term health conditions.
- Increased retention in work, with fewer health-related exits.
- A cultural shift in frontline delivery, with work recognised as healthful and health embedded as an enabler of work.
- Contribution to a +5 percentage point uplift in the regional employment rate.



What Do We Mean by Employment, Skills and Health Integration?

Integration means a cultural shift at the frontline. Employment and skills must be seen not as peripheral but as integral to health and recovery. Good Work is healthful: it provides stability, purpose, and social connection, and it can be a core part of managing long-term conditions. Equally, the workplace is a vital site for health generation, where issues such as obesity, smoking and poor mental health can be addressed directly.

This requires employment and skills conversations to be built into health pathways – creating a form of ‘employment on prescription’. The model is already set for extension with employment advisors embedded in mental health services (Talking Therapies) to musculoskeletal (MSK) services. Integration also means ensuring workplaces adapt: with inclusive recruitment, flexible support for neurodiversity, and a reformed Access to Work offer that genuinely enables participation.

Fit Note Reform Pilot

The WMCA, Birmingham and Solihull (BSol) ICB and local partners are collaborating on a new Fit Note Reform pilot. In areas with some of the highest levels of Fit Note issuance nationally, a new approach is being piloted within primary care to support people to stay in or return to work wherever appropriate. Rather than GPs issuing Fit Notes by default, patients will see an additional practitioner – for example an Occupational Therapist or Health Coach – embedded in the practice team.

These practitioners will offer personalised, strengths-based conversations with patients, exploring the impact of their health condition on daily functioning, including work, which may include a functional assessment, early advice around staying in work, and signposting or referral to a range of services that can help address wider barriers, including engagement with the patient’s employer to explore simple adjustments that could support a return to work in a timely and sustainable way.

Employment and skills must be seen not as peripheral but as integral to health and recovery

Pathway C: Keeping the West Midlands Working – in Good Work

Employers are central to raising the employment rate and improving job quality in the West Midlands. Too often, residents are excluded from opportunity because too many jobs are insecure, poorly paid, or lack progression. At the same time, employers face persistent shortages in growth sectors such as digital, AI, construction and green industries, while vacancies remain unfilled in foundational sectors like care and logistics. Tackling these dual challenges requires a shift from fragmented, transactional support to a coherent regional framework that helps employers recruit inclusively, retain staff, and invest in Good Work.

Progress has been made. Our innovative programme, Path2Apprenticeship, has been co-designed with employers to support progression for young people not yet ready for apprenticeship, and regional employers have pledged work placements for young people. We have capitalised on workforce plans for the health sciences and care services sector and for construction, establishing skills pathways to jobs. Furthermore, Thrive at Work has helped businesses improve their practices, positively impacting health and wellbeing, and our Job Rotation Programme supports in-work progression and succession planning with employers.

This progress constitutes a strong foundation. But employers consistently report, through our WMCA & Warwickshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), that the support offer feels fragmented and crowded, with too many disconnected initiatives. A simplified, regionally-led framework is needed – one that better

connects the skills system to business needs and ensures we have the capacity in the skills system to respond. This includes enhancing collaboration between Further Education (FE) colleges, universities and training providers, developing targeted ‘people and skills’ products through the enhanced Business Growth West Midlands (BGWM) business support service, and aligning skills investment with high-growth clusters and investment zones through workforce plans. This is especially important in the context of a long-term decline in employer investment in training, which risks undermining productivity and progression. By capturing the employer voice and co-designing bespoke programmes, utilising our Skills Innovation Challenge Fund to stimulate employer investment in training, we can ensure our residents gain in-demand skills and our businesses access the talent they need to grow.

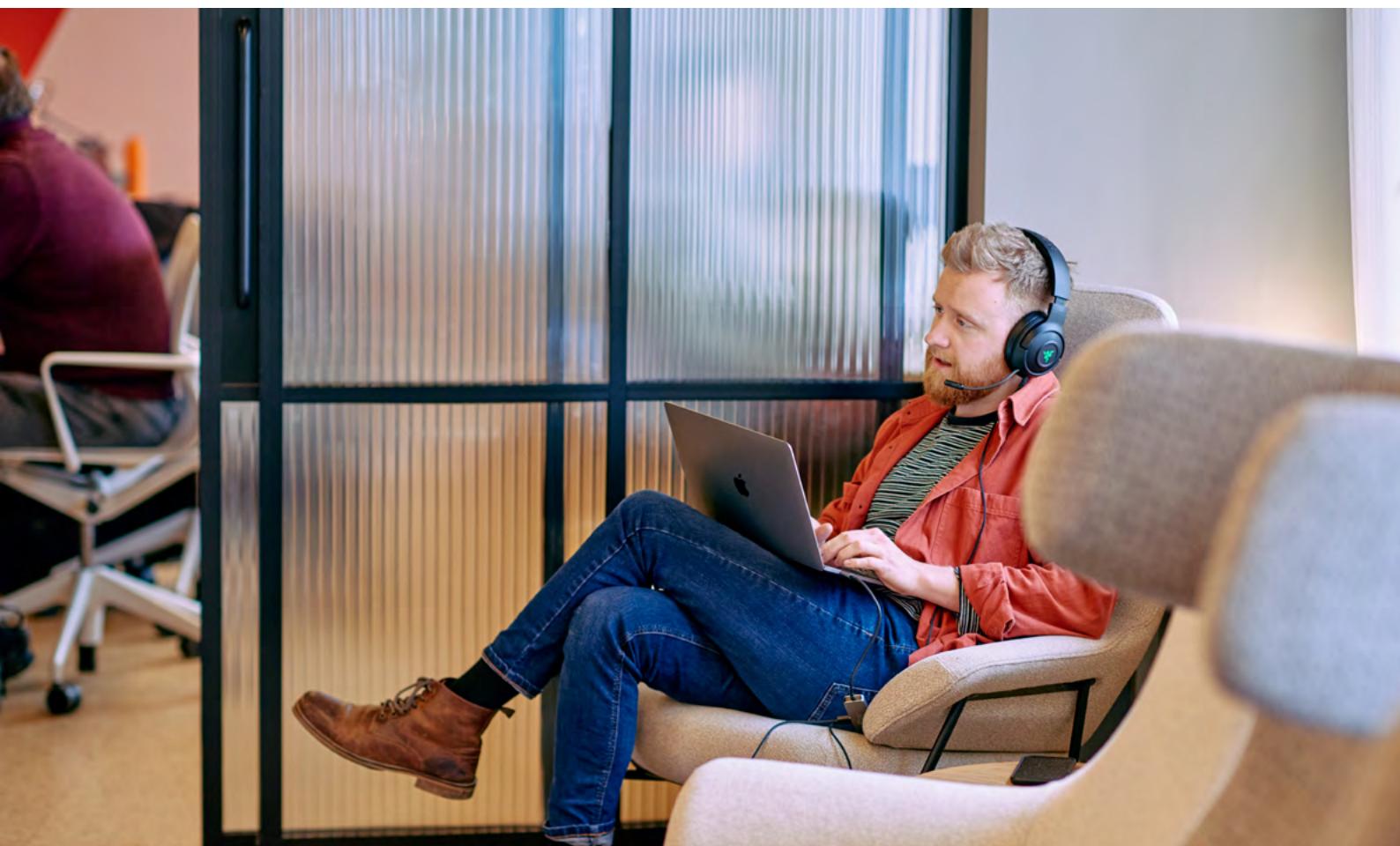
The region is therefore well-placed to respond to national reforms. The forthcoming Employment Rights Bill, with its focus on strengthening rights and raising standards, aligns directly with our ambition to embed Good Work across the region. Likewise, the recommendations of the Sir Charlie Mayfield Keep Britain Working Review will resonate strongly here: our employers and institutions are already piloting many of the approaches such reforms will require. In short, the West Midlands is ahead of the curve – ready to help shape, test and deliver the next generation of employment policy.

Hypothesis

If employers provide more secure, better-quality jobs with inclusive practices and clear progression, residents will not only be motivated to enter the labour market but will also be able to stay and thrive in it. This is central to the region's agreed definition of Inclusive Growth: a more deliberate and socially purposeful model of economic growth - measured not only by how fast or aggressive it is; but also, by how well it is created and shared across the whole population and place, and by the social and environmental outcomes it realises for our people.

Why this is the case

- Poor quality work discourages participation and drives exits from the labour market.
- Inclusive recruitment and retention are vital for under-represented groups, including disabled residents, carers and young people.
- The Growth Plan highlights future demand in AI, green and construction sectors, requiring closer employer–education alignment.
- In-work poverty is persistent: too many residents are employed but still reliant on benefits due to low pay or insecure hours.



What we are proposing

1

A regional Good Work Charter

We will launch a West Midlands Good Work Charter that sets clear regional standards on pay, security, progression and inclusion. This will be explicitly linked to and build upon Thrive at Work, our regional programme supporting employers to prioritise health and wellbeing. Together, they form a double guarantee: raising job standards while preventing ill health, supporting inclusion, and equipping employers to work flexibly with staff who have health conditions or caring responsibilities.

We will make tackling in-work poverty a central part of our employer engagement, encouraging businesses to provide sufficient, stable hours alongside fair pay. This will be embedded in the Social Value framework and supported by the Good Work Charter, ensuring that entering work is a genuine route out of poverty rather than a cycle of insecurity.

Working with employers through our more deeply integrated approach (i.e. interconnected with Pathway A), will mean we can systematically support individuals' smoother and more secure transitions away from Universal Credit (UC) subsidies and into good quality jobs and progression pathways. To support this, we will take advantage of the strength of our strategic relationship with regional DWP to test new and innovative ways to support those currently in low-paid jobs to progress in work through flexible occupational skills training and workplace learning.



2

Delivery of Growth Plan commitments

We will deliver key Growth Plan actions that directly address workforce needs in priority sectors. This includes the FE College Compact, the WM AI Acceleration Plan, and a stronger Social Economy Support Programme. By aligning employers, FE colleges and training providers in growth areas such as AI, green industries, construction and health, we will create the pipelines of skilled workers businesses need and residents can access. This will mitigate against fears of job displacement and ensure just transitions to future-facing growth sectors, whilst also recognising the continued significance of our everyday economy sectors.

To strengthen this, we will support the development of clear workforce plans across key sectors, using occupational maps where available, to help individuals and support services navigate meaningful pathways into good jobs. We will also optimise the development of the region's new Economic Development Vehicle (EDV), leveraging inward investment into future-facing roles, identifying opportunities within high-growth businesses, and using employer insight to sharpen the design and targeting of skills programmes. This will align with the skills missions from the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy across the eight nationally recognised priority sectors (the IS-8), which includes advanced manufacturing and clean tech. Through the WMCA & Warwickshire LSIP, we will deliver modular Level 4 training to drive growth in IS-8 sectors, alongside management training, to help businesses adapt to the opportunities of net zero and tech adoption and to ensure regional delivery is connected to national growth ambitions – inclusively.

3

Strengthening early talent pipelines

Despite high participation in education up to age 18, too many young people experience poor progression into the labour market, with limited access to meaningful work or training. This represents a missed opportunity for employers to shape and access emerging talent. We will work with employers, colleges, and schools to co-design clearer pathways into Good Work, including occupational maps through workforce plans, work experience, and entry-level roles with progression as part of a Post-16 Plan. We will look to broaden the offer at this early pipeline stage to make it more inclusive and aligned to progression, for example by planning for 16-18 vocational apprenticeship places alongside full-time learning T-levels.

Furthermore, we will work with partners to steer apprenticeship reform and we will strengthen our technical training routes beyond apprenticeships, crowding-in employer investment in staff skills development by evolving our successful Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Fund into a broader Growth and Skills Levy Transfer Fund. We will explore mechanisms to incentivise employers to invest in our young and diverse talent pipeline through, for example, taxation innovations such as staff training credits. By aligning employer demand with education provision in this way, we can reduce NEET rates, improve transitions, and ensure that young people are not left behind at the point of labour market entry and beyond.



Outputs we will deliver

- West Midlands Good Work Charter launched in 2026 and adopted by 1,000 employers by 2028.
- At least 500 new employers signed up to Thrive at Work by 2027.
- Post-16 Plan implemented across all growth sectors by 2026, aligning FE provision with employer demand and strengthening early talent pipelines through co-designed curricula, placements, and progression pathways.
- WM AI Acceleration Plan delivering 5,000 residents annually into digital and AI roles by 2028.
- Regional Social Value Statement applied to all public sector contracts from 2026.
- Pilot projects in foundational sectors (care, retail, logistics) launched by 2026 to address job quality and in-work poverty.
- £10 million Skills Innovation Challenge Fund initiatives to develop employer-led partnerships that improve transitions into work, build capacity in the skills system, and support in-work progression.
- Align national skills mission investment and skills policy areas (e.g. Technical Excellence Colleges, Growth and Skills Offer) to develop regional skills capacity and leverage employer investment to improve attainment at Level 4 and above.
- Deliver WMCA & Warwickshire LSIP commitments on modular Level 4 training and management training to help businesses adapt to the opportunities of net zero and tech adoption.

Outcomes we will achieve

- More residents, particularly under-represented groups, motivated to enter and remain in the labour market.
- Improved job quality and retention, reducing exits from work due to poor conditions or ill health.
- Closing of skills gaps in AI, green, construction and health sectors.
- Reduced rates of in-work poverty, with more residents moving into sustainable Good Work.
- Contribution to the +5 percentage point uplift in the regional employment rate, with higher productivity and fairer growth.

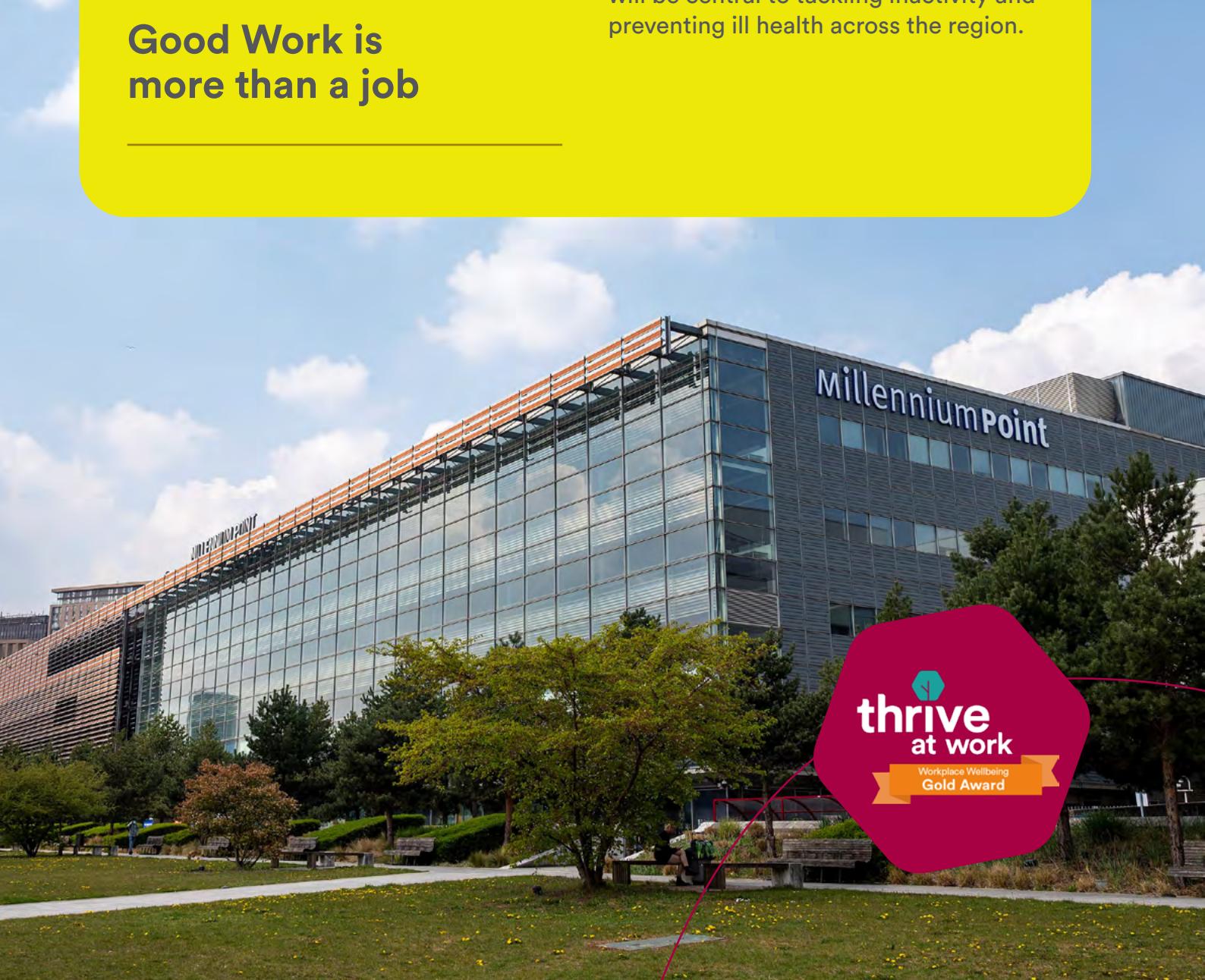


What Do We Mean by Good Work?

Good Work is more than a job. It is work that pays fairly, offers security, supports wellbeing, and provides genuine opportunities to develop and progress. It is work where people feel valued and included, where flexibility is possible, and where conditions enable health rather than harm it.

Good Work is more than a job

The West Midlands Growth Plan proposes a regional Good Work Charter to raise the bar and set a clear standard for what this looks like. We will draw on our learning from Thrive at Work, which has already helped hundreds of employers improve workforce health and wellbeing, to ensure a Charter is practical, ambitious and grounded in real employer experience. In doing so, we will retain the unique strength of Thrive at Work – its proven health and wellbeing focus – while broadening our approach to job quality. Good Work will be central to tackling inactivity and preventing ill health across the region.



Pathway D: Delivering Public Service Innovation for Future Generations

Closing the employment gap also means ensuring future generations have better opportunities than the last. Too often, public services intervene too late, when disadvantage is already entrenched. Public Service Innovation offers a way to change this: re-orienting systems towards prevention and early action, particularly for children, young people and family units. This pathway is distinct from earlier ones: while Pathway A focuses on immediate integration at the frontline, Pathway D is about reshaping the whole system so that prevention, inclusion and opportunity are built in from the start.

Although most young people now remain in education until 18, too many still struggle to move into work, facing fragile transitions and limited routes into meaningful careers. This disconnect fuels rising NEET rates and entrenched disadvantage. Tackling it requires deeper collaboration with schools and colleges so that curricula, careers guidance and employer engagement are consistently aligned with real labour market opportunities.

A preventative approach means investing earlier in the life course – from childcare and early years provision to smoother education-to-work transitions and tailored support for young people at risk of becoming NEET. It also requires targeted interventions for specific cohorts (such as care leavers and racialised groups), stronger Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) identification, enhanced family support and a wider range of technical skills pathways, ensuring no young person is left behind. Embedded within wider system reform, these approaches can break cycles of intergenerational worklessness and create a labour market where every generation has a clearer, fairer route into Good Work.

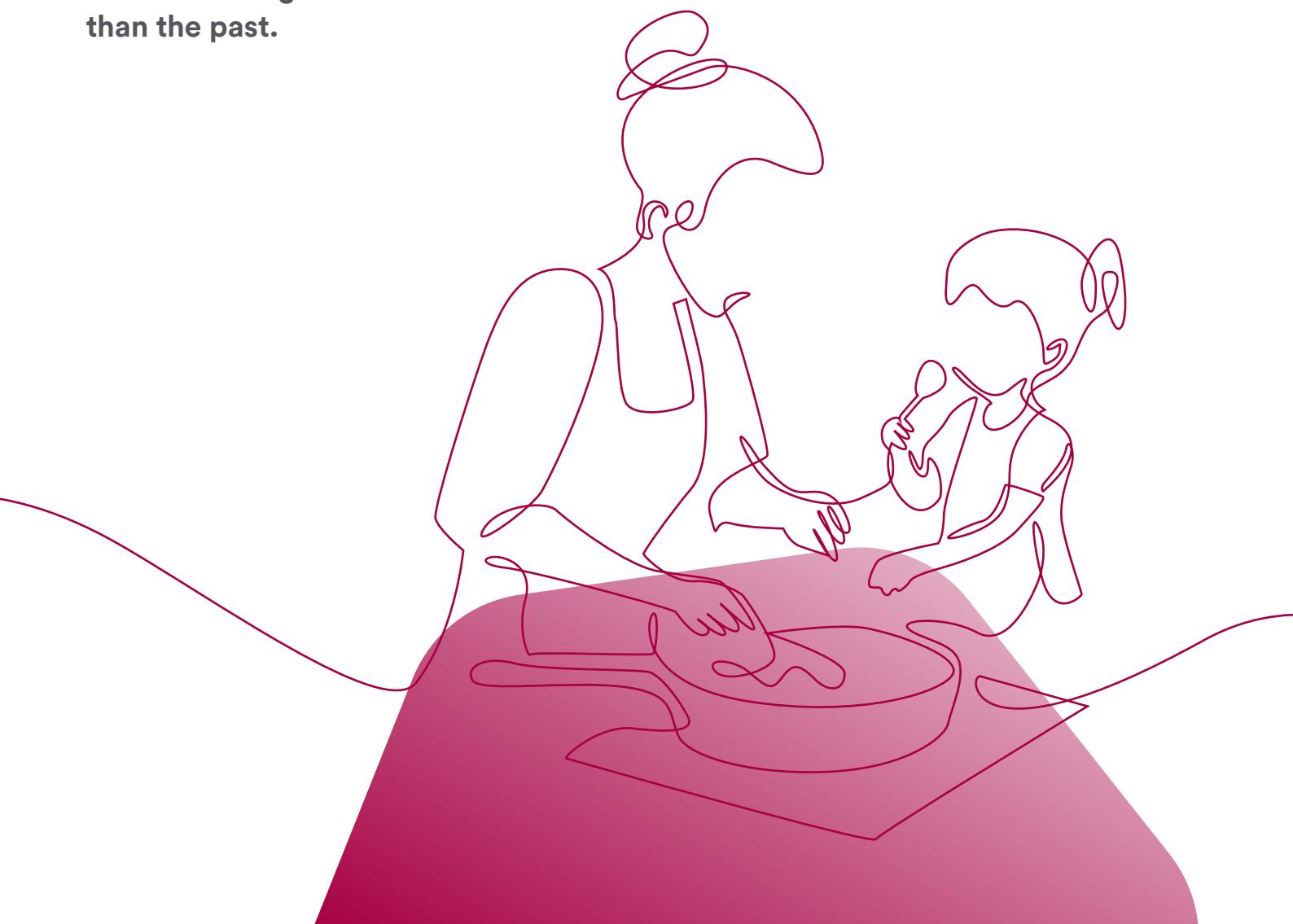
The emerging Public Service Innovation agenda led by WMCA and partners provides the framework for this shift. It embeds prevention in workforce planning, recognises the importance of early years, family support, mental health and youth services, and makes fuller use of data and insight to track unmet need and long-term outcomes. It also seeks accountability mechanisms that reflect lived experience. The Mayor's Youth Plan, the regional Youth Guarantee, the FE College Compact and the AI Acceleration Plan are key enablers of this future-facing approach.

Hypothesis

If investment and accountability are reoriented around prevention and early action, the West Midlands can break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and ensure every young person has a route into Good Work – and all the benefits beyond work that can be unlocked by financial security and a sense of purpose. By embedding innovation in public services, from family support and childcare through to skills and careers, we can align with the Growth Plan's ambition for inclusive, long-term growth and create a labour market that serves future generations better than the past.

Why this is the case

- Current systems are reactive and siloed, intervening too late and at net higher costs.
- Young people from workless households are disproportionately likely to become NEET.
- Employers highlight missed opportunities to shape provision and secure skills pipelines.
- Early identification of SEND and tailored pathways are essential but inconsistent.



What we are proposing

1

A Future Generations Programme and Prevention Demonstrator

We will work with HM Treasury and the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to implement our proposed Future Generations pillar of the Integrated Settlement. This would define a clear policy responsibility for future generations and support a funding settlement to transform outcomes for children, young people and whole family units in the West Midlands. Our ambition is to co-develop with Government a single, flexible, multi-year allocation that brings together fragmented funding streams as agreed upon by our Public Service Innovation partnership. This pillar will include taking further our approach to Cradle to Career, which will strengthen our support to young learners and preparing them for future work as well as our proposed Prevention Demonstrator, which focuses on reducing cardiovascular disease burden – one of the region's biggest health-related barriers to work.

2

Strengthening transitions – starting from early years

We will work with childcare providers, schools and local authorities to improve access to good quality, affordable childcare – both pre-school and school wraparound / holiday provision – and embed prevention into early years and family support services. This includes collaborating with Department for Education (DfE) on a new Post-16 Plan to support disadvantaged learners and those at risk of becoming NEET, as well as working with our schools and colleges to improve transition pathways from education into work. These measures will simultaneously support parents (and, indeed, grandparents) to participate in the labour market today while equipping children and young people for the jobs of tomorrow.

3

Early years workforce development

We will work with schools, colleges and local authorities to develop a regional workforce plan that identifies the skills needed to support early years provision and improve transitions into work. This includes mapping demand across childcare, education support, and family services, and aligning post-16 pathways to these opportunities. By strengthening the link between education and employment in foundational sectors like early years, we can reduce NEET rates, support parental employment, and build a pipeline of skilled workers for a sector critical to inclusive growth.



Outputs we will deliver

- Future Generations Programme launched by 2027, subject to Government agreement on pooled funding.
- Youth Guarantee embedded by 2028, ensuring every young person has a pathway into education, training or work.
- £30m skills innovation fund established by 2026 to test early intervention and prevention models.
- Regional Early Years Workforce Plan developed by end of 2026, mapping skills demand across childcare, education support and family services, and aligning post-16 pathways to sector needs.
- Post-16 Plan pilot co-designed with DfE by 2027.
- Cradle to Career initiative launched in 6 local communities by 2027.

Outcomes we will achieve

- Reduced NEET and ‘unknown’ rates, with smoother education-to-work transitions.
- Improved access to good quality and affordable childcare, enabling more parents to participate in the labour market.
- Stronger alignment of skills with employer demand, supported by new funding models.
- Family units better supported across generations, with parents and children accessing opportunity together.
- Contribution to the +5 percentage point uplift in the regional employment rate, securing the foundations for long-term inclusive growth.

This theory of change sets out the outcomes we need to achieve and the pathways through which we will get there. But ambition alone is not enough. To realise these changes, we must put in place the governance, data, and accountability frameworks that can sustain transformation at scale. The next chapter sets out how we will turn vision into delivery.



Delivering the Change

Delivery requires more than programmes – it requires the conditions that make change possible. In the West Midlands, that means a governance model rooted in partnership, a shared data framework to drive accountability, and clear measures of success that keep us focused on better outcomes. Together, these strategic enablers will ensure this plan moves from words on a page to tangible change in people's lives.

Partnership: the strategic enabler for governance

At the heart of this Plan lies the belief that only a unified, integrated system can meet our ambition. We need to move beyond pilot-like attempts to bring employment, skills and health conversations together in single intervention areas and build up towards every stakeholder organisation – local authorities, health services, DWP/JCP, employers, training providers and community partners – acting as one accountable collective.

Through stakeholder engagement for this Plan, partners have coalesced around four guiding principles:

- **Prevention:** acting early to stop challenges becoming crises
- **Transparency:** making the system simple, clear and open
- **Collaboration:** working as one team with shared accountability
- **Sustainability:** embedding successful pilots, building capacity, and preparing for the future of work

These principles, rooted in local consensus, provide the common foundation for the next phase: moving from collaboration to full integration across the region.

The West Midlands Works Partnership Board will be the engine that drives this shift, transforming collaboration into action and ensuring shared responsibility, pace and momentum. It will absorb and refresh existing thematic panels, link directly into the Mayor's Jobs and Growth Taskforces, and connect with the emerging Public Service Innovation and Strategic Health Boards.

- **Co-leadership:** Co-chaired by a West Midlands Local Authority Chief Executive and a senior representative from the NHS or DWP, combining political mandate with pooled accountability
- **Membership:** Senior representatives from all seven local authorities, NHS/ICB, DWP/JCP, business (via Chambers and employer bodies), the VCFSE sector, service users with lived experience, and academic advisors to ground decisions in evidence
- **Function:** Quarterly meetings to set direction, align resources, resolve challenges and hold all partners jointly accountable
- **Authority:** Adoption of this Plan by ICBs, DWP/JCP and local council leaders confirms shared ownership from the outset

Supporting this, thematic taskforces and time-limited groups – as per the Board's discretion and direction – will report directly to the Board on key delivery priorities, ensuring that strategy and execution stay tightly aligned. A West Midlands Works Partnership Agreement,

signed by all key partners, will codify shared commitments on roles, accountability, data-sharing and resource alignment. A compact WMCA core team will provide coordination, reporting and administrative support, ensuring the glue that holds the partnership together.

The Board will actively manage risk through a shared register and quarterly reviews, ensuring economic shocks, policy shifts or operational barriers are addressed collectively. It will also oversee resource allocation in a complex and tightening funding landscape, balancing efficiency with ambition. This includes using the full flexibility of devolved budgets and advocating for further devolution – including 16–19 skills, fully devolved employment support, and any resources linked to the forthcoming Health Duty. Introduced by the English Devolution & Community Empowerment Bill, this duty requires Combined Authorities to improve health and reduce inequalities when making decisions, aligning seamlessly with our integrated approach and reinforces our governance priorities.

Our partnership working with central government – in particular DWP, DfE and Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) – will be a critical enabler, ensuring that departmental resources are deployed through regional integration rather than fragmented across separate streams and systems. Through shared leadership, clear principles, aligned investment and mutual accountability, this governance model will evolve with national policy and drive the transformation we need.

Proposed Governance



Data: the strategic enabler for collective accountability

Delivering this Plan will require a step change in how we collect, share and use data – and in how we hold ourselves jointly accountable for outcomes. At present, intelligence is fragmented across agencies and often retrospective. To achieve system-wide impact, we must establish a shared evidence base that is robust, timely and trusted by all partners.

We will introduce joint accountability for labour market outcomes via an Accounting Officer reporting to the West Midlands Works Partnership Board, co-chaired by West Midlands Local Authority Chief Executive and a Senior representative from the NHS or DWP. Sustained outcomes – six and twelve months in work – will be the key measure of success. HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), DWP and local partners will share data to track outcomes, evaluate impact and scale what works, via a strengthened Digital Economy Act as required.

The purpose of this new approach is not more reporting, but sharper delivery. By consolidating employment, skills and health data into a single framework, we can measure outcomes consistently, identify inequalities with precision, and direct interventions where they will make the greatest difference. Leaders will have clearer insight to allocate resources, while frontline staff will be able to act with confidence that the system sees the full picture of an individual's journey.

The centrepiece will be the **West Midlands Works Outcomes Dashboard**. To be developed as an immediate action of the Board, this dashboard will track progress on key measures such as employment and inactivity rates, employment and pay gaps, youth participation and job

quality. Updated regularly and accessible to all partners, it will allow us to monitor performance regionally and locally, and to adjust strategies as required. By exposing geographical disparities and disaggregating local data, it will ensure that targets reflect local realities and that resources are directed with precision. Our approach, which will include intersectional analyses, will emphasise culturally competent, community-informed support so that interventions are sensitive to place and to the different groups most affected by inequalities. A summarised public version will enhance transparency and trust.

In the first instance, we need an agreed set of baseline figures against which to scrutinise progress. Common targets and trajectories for each metric will then provide clear goals for the system to work towards over the next decade. Alongside this, practical data-sharing agreements will enable lawful, secure and fast exchange – allowing us to track individual journeys across the ecosystem and to understand outcomes for continuous improvement. Where AI can enhance this system, it will be used ethically, transparently and inclusively, with safeguards to build confidence among partners and residents alike.

This strategic enabler will also provide the evidence base for future devolution. By demonstrating what works, and why, the West Midlands can make a stronger case for additional flexibilities and funding. Over time, the ambition is to create a self-improving ecosystem where data and evidence are routinely shared, programmes are adapted in real time, and successful approaches are scaled. In short, data will no longer sit at the margins of delivery: it will be the engine of accountability, improvement and trust.

Delivering Success

Delivering change on the scale set out in this plan requires clear measures of progress and a relentless focus on better outcomes. As stated, we will establish a West Midlands Works Outcomes Dashboard – a single place to track the impact of our reforms, hold ourselves accountable, and ensure we are learning and adapting as we go.

The dashboard will combine headline employment outcomes with more granular indicators that reflect the four pathways:

- **Employment rate (18–66)** across the West Midlands, broken down by local authority
- **Economic inactivity rate**, particularly due to long-term sickness, disaggregated by key demographics
- **NEET and ‘unknowns’ rate** alongside 16–21 participation rates, reflecting our focus on improvement for Future Generations focus

- **Employment and pay gaps**, in terms of disability, ethnicity and gender, to ensure inclusive progress
- **Local indicators** such as youth claimant count (as a proxy for youth unemployment), long-term unemployment, and numbers supported through hubs and integrated interventions
- **Job quality metrics**, including median earnings in the bottom 50% of the income distribution and progression trends, to capture not just more jobs, but better jobs i.e. Good Work.
- **Employers engaged** resulting in uptake of employment, health and skills offers including Thrive at Work, apprenticeships, and business support resulting in workforce development and progression.



While this plan sets out a regional ambition to raise the employment rate by five percentage points, we recognise that the challenges vary sharply between localities. To reflect this, we will work with local authorities and system partners to develop disaggregated targets focused on places with the highest levels of economic inactivity or employment inequality. These local targets will be co-designed with stakeholders and reviewed annually by the West Midlands Works Partnership Board, enabling more targeted interventions and supporting resource prioritisation where need is greatest. We will also conduct intersectional analyses to ensure we are addressing multifaceted inequalities, and we will push for critical data where it currently is not available – such as on parental employment gaps – to ensure our problem-solving is not led by data availability.

Recognising that this is a decade-long transformation, the full impact will not be visible overnight. Some changes – like

shifting health-related economic inactivity or narrowing the disability employment gap – require sustained effort over several years, therefore the dashboard will also draw on local data sources and delivery evidence to help us to understand what is working in real time and where adjustments are needed.

To embed accountability and improvement, we will create a cycle of quarterly review workshops, where frontline staff, participants and partners provide feedback on progress. This will ensure that learning from local sites is rapidly shared and scaled across the region.

In short, success will not be measured only by a higher employment rate, but by a fairer, healthier, more inclusive labour market – one where all residents can access holistic support to move into Good Work, employers can recruit and retain the talent they need, and public services operate as a single, integrated system.



Conclusion: A Call to Action

West Midlands Works is not a compliance exercise. It is a commitment to our people and our places: every percentage point shift in the employment rate represents thousands of residents whose lives will be transformed through the dignity, stability and health that Good Work brings. Behind every metric is a person, a family, and a community.

This Plan matters.

It is our opportunity to deliver the most ambitious programme of employment, skills and health integration attempted in the UK. We will reduce economic inactivity, raise participation, and build a healthier, fairer, and more resilient regional economy. Success will depend not on the WMCA alone but on the collective leadership of local authorities, employers, health systems, JCP and Jobs and Careers Service, education and skills provider, and the VCFSE sector. Together, we can turn fragmentation into integration, exclusion into inclusion, and potential into prosperity.

Momentum starts now. In the first six months, we will promote this Plan across every frontline service, establish the governance structures to drive delivery, and launch early actions that show residents and employers change is happening. From new integrated service hubs to employer outreach campaigns, these quick wins will build confidence while laying the structural foundations for lasting reform. By July 2027, we will hold ourselves to account through a mid-point review, making adjustments as necessary, but always staying focused on the ambition: 93,000 more residents in work by 2035.

Together, we will write the next chapter of our proud story – which is that West Midlands Works, and it Works for Everyone

We are asking partners to join us in this mission. That means co-delivering the shared strategic priorities and their enablers, leading thematic taskforces and aligning local offers to create seamless resident journeys. It means committing to a shared outcomes framework, with common data and metrics to measure success. And it means enabling inclusive employment by adopting Good Work standards, opening opportunities for young people, and embedding inclusive recruitment and retention practices.

This is our call to action.

The West Midlands has always been a region of innovation and determination. By enabling everyone who can work into work, we will improve lives, help families, strengthen communities, and grow our economy. Together, we will write the next chapter of our proud story – **which is that West Midlands Works, and it Works for Everyone.**



Supplementary Documents

Labour Market Analysis

(not on web)



West Midlands Growth Plan

growth.wmca.org.uk/



WMCA Employment and Skills Strategy

wmca.org.uk/documents/productivity-skills/employment-and-skills-strategy-2024-2027/



WMCA Health of the Region Report

wmca.org.uk/documents/wellbeing/health-of-the-region-2024/



Exemplary Region for Disabled People Report

wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/health-wellbeing-and-prevention/health-and-disabilities/making-the-west-midlands-an-exemplary-region-for-disabled-people/

Get Britain Working Stakeholder Event Key Directions Report

(not on web)

wmca.org.uk

**Mayor of the
West Midlands**



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**