DRAFT WOKINGHAM BOROUGH EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS STRATEGY

2026 – 2031

ASPIRING FOR A FAIRER AND INCLUSIVE LABOUR MARKET WHERE EVERYONE WHO WANTS TO WORK IS SUPPORTED TO DO SO.

INTRODUCTION

Wokingham Borough's Employment and Skills Strategy sets out how we will respond to changing economic conditions and ensure that residents and employers can access the skills and training they need.

As the Borough continues to grow and change, it is increasingly important to have a coordinated and locally responsive skills system that meets the needs of both residents and businesses.

This strategy explains how Wokingham Borough Council will take a leading role in bringing the local employment and skills system together and reflects the priorities set out in Alan Milburn's work on social mobility and youth opportunity. There will be particular focus on breaking down barriers to work and ensuring that background does not determine future outcomes.

We will work closely with businesses, training providers, colleges, community organisations and public services to design support that reflects the real needs of our residents and local economy.

By working in partnership and joining up services, we will create a simpler, more coordinated system that helps residents access opportunities and supports business growth.

This approach will also help ensure Wokingham Borough is well prepared for future economic change and prevent missed opportunities for:

- External funding
- Residents to access support
- Duplication or gaps in support for residents

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SHAPING SKILLS IN WOKINGHAM BOROUGH

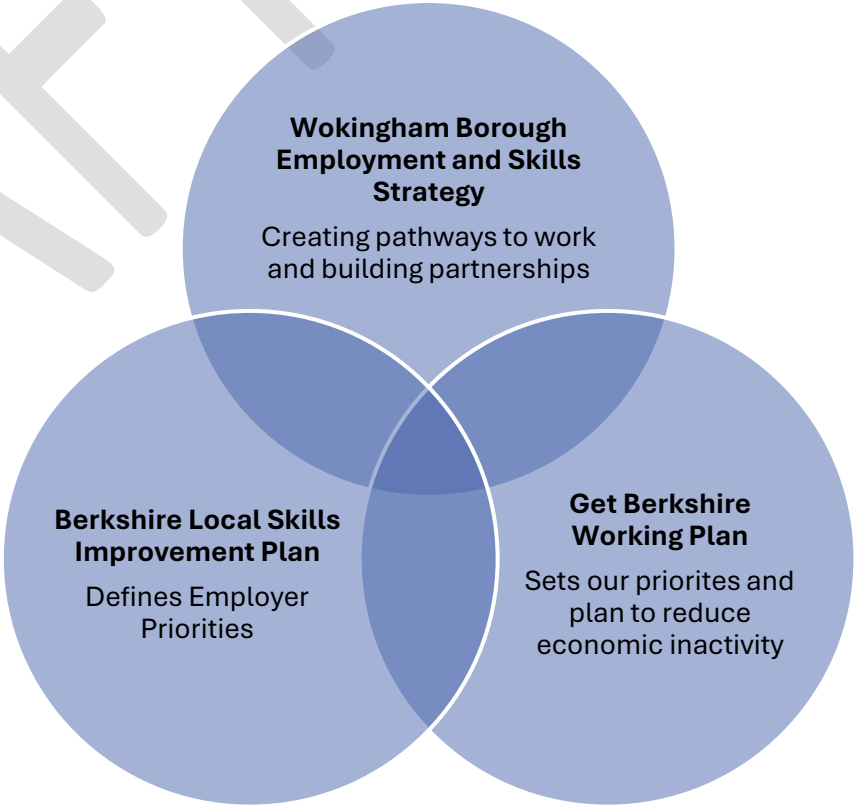
Wokingham Borough's Employment and Skills Strategy will help us equip our residents with the skills, confidence and opportunities needed to share in our economic success. The strategy aligns with the ambitions of the Council and our local communities.

- The Communities Vision for 2035 sets out ambitions for fair opportunities for everyone in the borough, and for economic success that everyone is part of.
- Our Council Plan mission is to ensure everyone has the opportunity to thrive; being able to start well, live well, and age well in Wokingham Borough. This strategy delivers against the priorities of fair employment, good jobs, and access to education, skills and services: all key building blocks that people need to thrive.
- To achieve our ambition to reduce unfair and avoidable differences in people's wellbeing and their opportunities to thrive, we have adopted the evidence-based 'Marmot Approach'. One of the eight Marmot Principles for reducing inequalities is 'To create fair employment and good work for all'. This strategy directly aligns to this principle.

The Berkshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) brings together employers, training providers, universities and local partners to create a shared framework addressing workforce challenges and Post-16 technical training. The LSIP has identified several priority sectors where skills development and workforce planning are particularly important for the Berkshire economy.

The Get Berkshire Working Plan provides a framework for the region to create pathways for people to move into work. At its core, the plan is about inclusive growth, ensuring that opportunity reaches those that are often left behind such as women, carers, disabled people and those with fewer qualifications or limited access to opportunity.

Together these three strategies create robust evidence base and provide the mechanisms to enable us to support our residents and businesses, maintaining Wokingham Borough's status as a high performing borough.



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WOKINGHAM SKILLS AND LABOUR MARKET OVERVIEW

Wokingham is seen as a well-off area with a strong economy, detailed in our Economic Development Strategy. However, we know that not all residents feel these benefits equally, with pockets of deprivation and groups that require extra support.

Skills and Qualifications

- Overall, 62.4% of working age residents are qualified to Level 4 or above compared to 47.2% nationally
- High performing schools. In 2025 73% of our pupils achieved grade 9-5 in English GCSE compared to 54% nationally
- In 2024/25 there were1040 apprenticeship starts, an increase from 850 recorded in 2020/21. This represents 905 per 100,000 population, slightly lower than the median average of 981 per 100,000 population across all local authorities
- 62% of children at KS2 from disadvantaged backgrounds do not achieve expected standards compared to 53% nationally

Economic Inactivity

- Wokingham Borough economic inactivity rates stand at 17.4% compared to 21% nationally
- Nationally the main reason for economical inactivity is long-term illness at 27.8%. In Wokingham, however, this is 12.4%.
- The Borough's largest groups are students, representing 34.2% and people who have retired, representing 22.2%
- Inactivity for 20- 24 yr olds is increasing and stands at 31.2% - higher than the national average
- There are more economically inactive women that want to work than men (19.3% for women and compared to 11.2% for men)

Population Change

- The Borough has an aging population. The population of people aged 65+ has increased by 28.2% (latest census in 2011)
- The Borough also has a higher proportion of children and young people than England as a whole
- By around 2035, the proportion of working age people (aged 16 – 64), will begin to decline
- We are home to just under 5,000 Hong Kong British Nationals – the highest number in the South-East

Employment, Unemployment and Pay

- Median weekly pay for workers in Wokingham Borough is higher than the national average at £953.7 compared to £766.6 nationally However, 8.7% of people in Wokingham Borough are in low paid employment (below £12.60 per hour)
- The employment rate is 79.9%, higher than the national average of 75.5% but below the stated government aim of 80%
- Unemployment Claimant Count is 2% and is lower than the national average of 3.9%
- Men who work full time earn £230.80 more per week on average than women
- Women are under-employed in Wokingham with a 12.2% gap between the male and female rate of employment, compared to the national figure of 6.2%

What this tells us

Despite strong educational outcomes, we have evidence of some inequality in achievement for young people

We have hidden groups of people that need support, in particular women and young people

Critical services will see increase in demand. People may need to work longer therefore lifelong learning is important

We have a highly paid work force but a gender imbalance and people on low paid and insecure work

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WOKINGHAM BUSINESSES - SKILLS GAPS AND FUTURE DEMAND

The Council's **Economic Development Strategy** and the **Berkshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LISP)** set out which industries are expected to grow across the Borough and the wider Berkshire area. The sectors below are ones that are struggling to find staff or are sectors we need to support in order to meet future demands.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology has been an important part of Wokingham Borough's economy for many years, as it has across Berkshire. The area benefits from having a highly skilled workforce, a strong cluster of tech businesses, and its close location to London, which provides good digital infrastructure. However, The Institute of Engineering and Technology reported in 2025 that 76% of engineering and tech employers in the UK struggle to recruit for AI, data analysts, cyber security and cloud engineers. These challenges can be worse in areas like Wokingham due to high competition for talent and the prevalence of remote working.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its application in work applies to almost every job sector and it will reshape how jobs are done, not just create new ones. Whilst there is a recognition that entry level jobs will be impacted this doesn't mean they will be replaced by AI rather that those applying for these roles need to have a basic understanding of how to use AI. Employers in the Levelling the playing field report highlighted the need for workers to be resilient, adaptable to change, team working, communication and the ability to receive and implement feedback. With the speed of changing technology and job roles, employers need people who are able to work in this fast paced environment.

The opportunity: To ensure we are equipping residents and employees with practical AI enabled skills to apply for jobs, improve productivity, and support service transformation. AI also presents an opportunity to widen access to work, supporting those with language and literacy skills as well an increase in assistive technology for those with disabilities.

CONSTRUCTION

Whilst construction is not considered a growth sector for Wokingham, there is large scale building taking place in the borough that represents a significant opportunity for employment and training for our residents. Wokingham Borough Local Plan sets out plans for approximately 10,000 new homes to be built across a range of sites including Lodden Valley Garden Village, South Wokingham and several smaller sites supporting local communities. This combined with new commercial builds has created a pipeline of jobs for residents. Local growth, however, is hindered by a shortage of engineers, site managers and trades such as bricklayers.

Whilst the sector is supported by construction training through colleges in Berkshire, some training such as civil engineering is even further away, creating barriers in finding Wokingham residents to take up apprenticeships.

What businesses locally have told us

They want more support in helping them recruit people with barriers to employment

Resilience and communication are the work skills that are missing from applicants

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Commercial building also presents an opportunity for employment generated through the occupation of these sites. New industrial units at Shinfield Park, storage facilities for Natural History Museum and proposals for the full or partial relocation of the Royal Berkshire Hospital are among some of the new employment spaces being created locally.

The opportunity: Ensuring that through our use of S106 Employment and Skills Plan we continue to maximise opportunities for training and local jobs within the build phase and the occupation phase.

LIFE SCIENCES

Life sciences is a big and well-established part of Wokingham Borough's economy. Several global pharmaceutical companies are based in the area, supported by research from the University of Reading. There are many highly specialised and well-paid roles in areas such as biopharmaceuticals and medical technology. However, these jobs can be hard to fill. This is because they often require very specific skills and high-level qualifications, which many local residents may not have. In medical technology in particular, this is a wider issue across the UK, not just in Wokingham Borough. Currently there are shortages of engineers nationally, meaning companies often have to recruit from overseas to fill these roles.

The opportunity: To increase our work with the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) and key businesses based at Thames Valley Science Park to create local training and engagement opportunities to inspire our next generation of scientists.

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Berkshire is the fastest growing location for film and high-end television in the UK and with the development of Shinfield Studios, an 18-stage studio built in Wokingham Borough, there are significant opportunities for local employment. At full capacity the studio is estimated to generate 1,500 direct jobs and 1,500 indirect jobs. The sector's growth is hindered by skills gaps in production technicians and postproduction specialists, lighting and sound systems, editing software and AI and its ethical use. Those working in this industry are often freelance and therefore supporting new entrants to manage self-employment and develop strong networking and communication skills is vital.

Screen Berkshire, officially launched in October 2023 and is the BFI Berkshire Skills for Screen Cluster, was designed to connect and support the local film and TV industry. The cluster is comprised of Resource Productions CIC, The University of Reading, Shinfield Studios, Bedlam Film Productions, Amazon MGM Studios and the Berkshire Film Office, representing the Berkshire Councils. Screen Berkshire focuses on identifying skills gaps, providing training and developing clear pathways to employment with the film and television industries.

The opportunity: Through our strong relationship with Shinfield Studios and Screen Berkshire raise awareness of opportunities and ensuring targeted training and engagement takes place locally.

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ADULT SOCIAL CARE

Wokingham Borough has an aging population and therefore demands within the care sector is expected to grow. This combined with a sector that is struggling to recruit and retain staff puts additional pressure on an already overstretched service.

In 2024/25 the adult social care workforce in Wokingham Borough was estimated to be 5,400 with the majority of the provision delivered by independent care companies. The sector in Wokingham Borough has an estimated staff turnover of 21.2% - lower than the national average of 25.2%, with over half of starters (59%) recruited from within the sector, resulting in skills being retained.

Workers aged over 55 represent 26% of the workforce and leading to estimates of 1,200 people retiring in the next 10 years, this combined with under 25-year-olds making up only 6% of the workforce demonstrates the need to attract new entrants to the sector.

The challenge: Ensuring that we attract and retain a skilled workforce to support our aging population in future years.

RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY

As our town and centres transition into places centred around experiential activities and build on an established food and drink sector (approximately 20% of our businesses across our main centres of Wokingham, Woodley and Twyford), we need to ensure our businesses have the people and skills they need to grow.

Retail and Hospitality is often seen as a stop gap job rather than a long-term career, as a result many young people and job seekers enter these sectors without recognising the clear progression routes available, leading to a mismatch between jobs available and jobs people want. Within the retail and hospitality in Wokingham Borough there were 19,000 jobs recorded (2024). However, only 7,800 of our residents reported working in leisure, sales, customer service and other services occupations, demonstrating a mismatch between available jobs and local workforce preferences and skills.

To add to the difficulties, as a sector that has relied on part time and often young workers the recent increase in NI and rise in minimum wage from £10.00 to £10.85 has resulted in a reduction nationally of entry level jobs.

The challenge: To work with industry to raise people's awareness of careers and create clear pathways for progression.

GREEN SKILLS

The transition to net zero is creating a large, cross-sector employment opportunity. Whilst Wokingham Borough does not host large-scale green infrastructure or energy sites such as the Harwell Science Complex in Oxford, it benefits from being within Thames Valley where green jobs are growing across multiple sectors. Within Wokingham Borough there is opportunity for growth in the housing retrofit and green construction sectors. The government Warm Homes Plan and Local Power Plan, together detail a commitment for funding for home retrofit worth 15 billion and local energy of 1 billion across the UK, leading to an increase of home upgrades and renewable energy installation, which in turn present significant opportunities for growth for local SME's. There is strong demand for:

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- Energy efficiency upgrades (insulation, ventilation)
- Low-carbon heating systems (e.g heat pumps)
- Retrofit assessment and coordination roles
- Domestic solar and battery installation

Local low carbon transport and infrastructure also provide opportunities for SME installers, engineering consultancies and transport operates, with key employers including EV charging and renewable installation companies, these organisations are critical to delivering electric vehicle infrastructure and sustainable transport networks across Wokingham Borough.

These roles are supported locally by regional Skills Bootcamps and college provision focusing on retrofit and energy assessment.

The opportunity: Most new jobs will come from the wider region or by adapting existing roles, particularly in environmental services and construction. The opportunity for Wokingham Borough is to ensure residents have access to reskilling and are linked to the wider Thames Valley labour market.

CROSS CUTTING SKILLS GAPS

In addition to the above the following skills gaps exist across many sectors in Wokingham Borough:

- Support for first line management who would benefit from additional training, which would help with staff retention
- Lack of awareness in young people who do not always see some sectors as offering career paths and opportunities for promotion such as those in care and construction
- Funding – navigating the different funding streams can be complex
- Difficulties in accessing advice and support for taking on staff with differing needs

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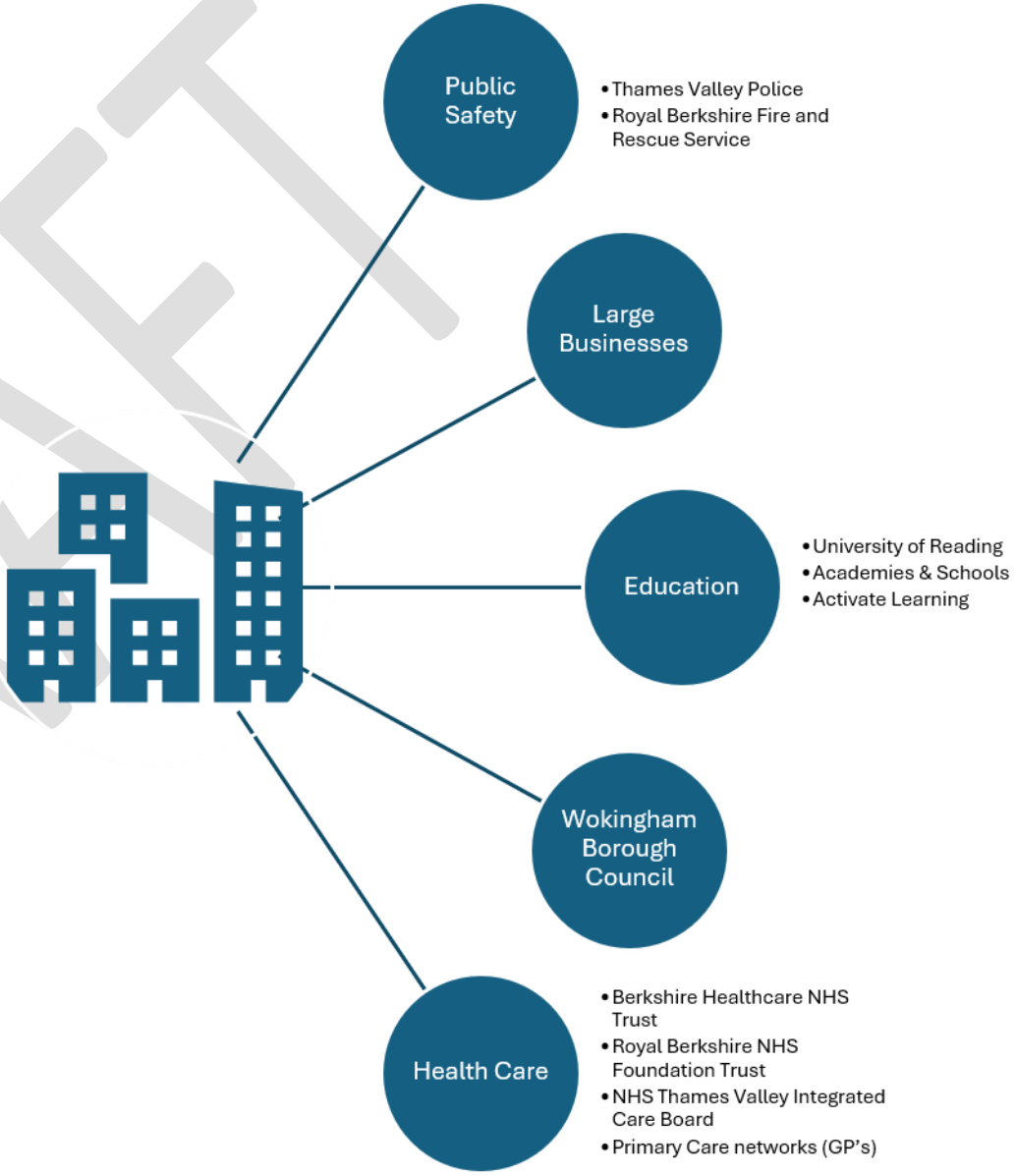
THE ROLE OF THE ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

Anchor Institutions are large organisations that provide key services and have strong links to the location. They employ large numbers of local people and procure services from other local organisations. Wokingham Borough Council is a key anchor institution for the area employing approximately 1,500 people. In addition, the council spends approximately £152 million a year on goods and services, enabling it to have a significant impact in the local economy.

Wokingham Council have established partnerships with other anchor institutions such as the University of Reading who employ approximately 4,000 people and spend £127 million on goods and services. Through our Strategic Partnership Board we will work together to ensure we are supporting local recruitment and breaking down barriers to work.

There is an opportunity for wider partnership working with other anchor organisations, collectively we employ large numbers of local residents and are a significant contributor to the local economy through our procurement of goods and services. By working together to establish a Wokingham Borough Charter we can:

- Develop/ strengthen social value commitments
- Make a difference to young people, women and economically inactive residents
- Share our knowledge and resources to support smaller SME's to recruit new staff



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UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITY IN WOKINGHAM BOROUGH

Wokingham Borough is an affluent area, where many people have good jobs, earn high wages, and are thriving. But this is not the case for everyone, and overall figures do not tell the full story. As highlighted in the Marmot Review of inequalities in England, people's wellbeing and their life chances are shaped by factors like education, income, and access to opportunities. These are important building blocks that we all need to thrive. Despite the overall affluence of the borough, there are many people who do not have these blocks securely in place.

To fully understand local need, we must look at what is hidden behind the averages. Whilst schools perform well and the local economy is strong, over 5,000 residents are unemployed or not working, but would like to work. This includes many young people, women, and individuals with additional needs, each facing distinct barriers to employment.

Because Wokingham Borough is – overall – successful compared to other areas, it can sometimes be overlooked for extra support and funding, but stark inequalities exist. These are often hidden in the data for the borough, and people who need support are often less visible.

In Wokingham Borough, this creates practical challenges. Opportunities are not always easy to find or access, and services are sometimes outside the borough or harder to bring in at scale.

There is also a cultural challenge. In a more affluent area, people may be less likely to ask for help when they need it. They might not know what support is available or they may feel uncomfortable seeking it. We know that many residents who are struggling feel stigma because of this, and that this acts as a significant barrier to them accessing support.

All of this means that for those who do need help, including young people at the start of their careers, women seeking flexible employment, and economically inactive residents looking to re-enter the workforce, it can be harder to get started and stay in work. It's important that we recognise this "hidden need" so that all residents have a fair chance to get the support they need and access good job and skills development opportunities.

Our aim is to create a fairer system where everyone has the chance to thrive. This means making sure support is easy to access, improving links with education and training providers, and focusing help on those who need it most. By doing this, we want to create a place where everyone can build their skills, find good work, and thrive.

Inequalities in Wokingham Borough

In our most deprived neighbourhoods' people are dying 5 years earlier than people in our lest deprived neighbourhoods

In our most deprived neighbourhoods 19% of children are living in low-income families compared to 4% in our least deprived neighbourhoods

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WHO NEEDS SUPPORT – OUR TARGET GROUPS

The groups identified below have been identified based on the evidence set out in the previous sections and the data included in the Appendix, highlighting that although Wokingham Borough is a high performing and economically strong area, not all residents benefit equally. Our analysis shows that inequality in outcomes, hidden need and barriers to opportunity exist across the borough and whilst this can impact anyone, for us these inequalities are often concentrated within particular groups.

DATA-LED AND EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

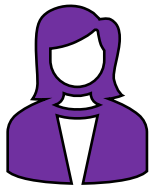
We have drawn on:

- Local labour market and economic data
- Education and skills attainment data
- Feedback from residents, young people, community groups and businesses
- Regional evidence from the Berkshire Local Skills Improvement Plan and the Get Berkshire Working Plan
- Current studies such as the Alan Milburn Young People and Work Report

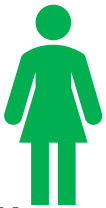
TOGETHER THIS EVIDENCE HIGHLIGHTS CLEAR PATTERNS:

- Gaps in educational attainment and progression, particularly for disadvantaged young people and those with additional needs
- Economic inactivity driven by many factors, including, health, caring responsibilities, age and confidence
- Gender inequalities in employment, pay and progression
- A growing number of residents who are out of work but would like to work, representing untapped potential in the local labour market
- Mismatch of qualifications and job market demands

OUR TARGET GROUPS



Young People



Women

Economically inactive that want to work

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YOUNG PEOPLE

Even though schools in Wokingham Borough generally perform well, some groups of young people do not do as well as others. These gaps affect their future chances and increase the risk of them becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). Evidence locally and nationally also shows that young people with additional needs face poorer outcomes. In Wokingham Borough, those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are much more likely to become NEET. This reflects the extra challenges they face in finding and staying in work. In Wokingham Borough we are seeing an increase in numbers of young people obtaining an EHCP (10.9% increase in 2026). If this trend continues, we will see more adults needing additional support as they enter the workforce.

Young people from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave school with lower qualifications, which makes it harder for them to move into further education, training or secure long-term jobs. While this is a national issue, what stands out in Wokingham Borough is the size of the gap between those who do well at school and those who do not. Overall, we have a strong education picture, with GCSE results above the national average. However, this positive picture is not experienced equally by all children. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to reach expected standards at Key Stage 2 in Wokingham Borough than in other areas of the country.

This suggests that while there are strong foundations in place, not all children are benefiting in the same way. Some groups face additional challenges that affect their outcomes and progress. If these gaps are not addressed, young people who fall behind at school are more likely to:

- Not take part in education, training or work
- Experience long-term unemployment
- Be economically inactive
- Miss out on opportunities to improve their life chances

Wokingham Borough does not have a dedicated Further Educational College and whilst there is a good range of sixth form colleges, they focus almost entirely on A-levels. 35% of Wokingham Borough school leavers undertake vocational training, but they are required to travel outside the borough to access suitable courses. For those from lower-income families or with special educational needs or disabilities the cost of travel, accessibility issues, or lack of confidence can prevent them from taking part; further widening the gap.

Young people with care experience (211 care leavers aged 18-25, February 2026), including unaccompanied asylum seekers (89 aged 18-25, Oct 2025), often face additional challenges such as language barriers and the effects of trauma. It is now widely recognised that the impact of being in care can last well beyond the age of 25 and many people continue to need support into adulthood.

Overall, these issues mean that young people do not all start on a level playing field. Without joined-up action to improve pathways into training and work for those most at risk, economic inequality in Wokingham Borough is likely to deepen further.

Young People told us

58%

Want more opportunities to meet employers

99%

Felt communication skills are important for work but only **52%** felt they were learning these

(Based on 93 Yr 10 & Yr 11 students completing a survey)

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WOMEN

Many women in the borough find it hard to stay in work or move forward in their careers, especially after taking time out, for example to care for others. This has led to big differences between women and men in how much they work and how much they are paid. Although this is a problem across the country, it is worse in Wokingham Borough. Men who work full time are paid £230.80 more per week on average than women.

Women in the borough are also more than twice as likely as men to not be working at all. There are many reasons for this, but one important factor is caring responsibilities. 2,200 women are economically inactive for the reason of looking after family/ home. In addition, 59% of those delivering unpaid care in the borough are women.

Women's health also plays a significant role in shaping their working lives. Health experiences such as pregnancy and maternity, menopause and long-term cyclical conditions can affect confidence and the ability to work consistently or at full capacity.

Women who take time out of work can lose confidence, fall out of touch with professional networks and feel their digital skills are out of date. Even when they have strong skills and experience, these challenges can make it harder to get back into the right kind of work. As a result, women may:

- Struggle to get jobs that match their skills and experience
- Take short-term or insecure work, or stop working altogether

This doesn't just affect individual women – it affects the local economy too. When women cannot return to work properly or move forward in roles that match their skills and experience, employers miss out on talent, ideas and productivity. This is a lost opportunity, especially at a time when many industries are struggling to find people with the right skills. Because women are more likely to be single parents, providing targeted support can help reduce child poverty and create stronger, more stable communities.

Women told us

Data to follow

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ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE WHO WANT TO WORK

In Wokingham Borough, there are certain groups of people who face barriers to finding and staying in work. Although overall levels of people economically inactive is lower than the national average, some challenges are still clear.

Who are Wokingham Borough's economically inactive residents?

Young People - Wokingham Borough has high numbers of economically inactive 20-24 yr olds - 31.2% compared to 26.4% nationally. What is particularly concerning is that this number is rising locally, whereas across England and the Southeast it has remained stable. Whilst we can't say for certain why this is, being an affluent borough could result in one of two scenarios:

- Wokingham Borough could have more 20-24 yr olds still in education. 18-year-olds are financially supported by family to take gap years and delay going to university and/or choosing to extend their education by undertaking Master's Degrees
- Recent graduates cannot find work but instead of signing on with the Job Centre they are being supported financially by family members

The second scenario is more concerning as this indicates we have a growing population of young people who are detached and are not accessing support. We need to increase awareness and reduce stigma around claiming benefits. Whilst the financial support gained is vital for many, the access to DWP programmes and training is also important in helping people move into work.

People aged over fifty - Our second largest age group is people aged over fifty indicating that those at either end of the age range are more affected by changes in the job market and need extra support to help them move into work.

Carers - Caring responsibilities are a major reason why people are economically inactive. Over 12,000 residents provide between 9 and 50+ hours of unpaid care each week, which often makes it difficult for them to work or increase their hours.

New migrant communities- People from new migrant communities, including recent arrivals from Hong Kong, often have skills and qualifications that are not recognised in the UK. Language difficulties and challenges settling into the community can also make it harder for them to find work.

Disability – In Wokingham Borough, 28.5% of people with a disability are economically inactive. Although this is lower than the national average of 38%, it is still a large group who need extra support and more flexible job opportunities.

We know that not everyone who is economically inactive wants to work - many choose to retire early or focus on family commitments out of choice. It is, however, important to recognise that this is not the case for all. Around 3,000 economically inactive residents in Wokingham Borough say they do want to work. With the right support, this group could move into employment, offering a valuable and currently untapped source of workers for the local labour market.

Residents told us

55%

Want more information about local opportunities

20%

Felt lack of confidence was their biggest barrier to finding work

(based on a112 completed surveys of attendees at local job fair)

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BARRIERS THAT RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES EXPERIENCE

People in Wokingham face a range of challenges when it comes to finding work, developing skills and progressing in their careers. These challenges often overlap, so individuals may be dealing with more than one issue at the same time. Key barriers identified are:

Access to training and support

For some residents, getting the right support at the right time can be difficult. Personalised help is not always available, and access to training can be limited by transport, local training provision (particularly vocational education), or confidence. Practical issues also play a role - cost and finding suitable childcare can be difficult and people in rural areas may struggle to find local work that fits around family life. Not having digital skills or access to IT equipment to apply for jobs or learn new technologies such as AI can make accessing the right training and support difficult.

Awareness of what exists

Some residents are not fully aware of the support, training and opportunities available locally, or how to access them. If they are not registered with the Job Centre or linked to support organisations, they may not know that help is available. People from new communities may also find it harder to build local connections and understand how the labour market works. Wokingham has a wide range of industries and jobs available, but some young people do not see certain sectors, such as care or construction, as offering long-term career opportunities, which can limit their choices.

Raising aspirations

Aspirations are shaped by both people's experiences and the world around them. Some young people have low aspirations, especially if they have not seen many examples of people in work or different career paths. There are also assumptions about what some people can do - people with disabilities or special educational needs (SEND) are sometimes seen as less able to work. This is not the case as many such people can and do work, but the job or working pattern might need to be different.

Health conditions

A wide range of health conditions can impact someone's ability to work; however, we are seeing a national increase in more young people and adults experiencing mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression, making it harder for them to gain, sustain and progress in work. Many people need roles that can adapt to their needs, whether that is flexible hours, adjustments in the workplace, or a more supportive environment.

Local business recruitment and growth

Employers are increasingly reporting that some people are missing key employability skills such as communication, confidence and resilience, which can make it harder for them to find skilled labour. With a lack of middle management skills being identified (managers promoted without the skills to manage), this can impact on staff retention. Alongside this, the system of funding and advice for recruiting people who may need additional support can be difficult to navigate, making it harder for businesses to access the help they need or feel confident taking on new staff.

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OUR PRIOIRITES AND VISION

Wokingham Borough will:

Aspire for a fairer and inclusive labour market where everyone who wants to work is supported to do so

This vision supports the following:

- Employer-led priorities addressing skills gaps through the LSIP
- National, regional and local priorities
- Reducing inequality in Wokingham Borough
- Reducing barriers that our residents and businesses experience

Priorities

The following priorities will help us shape the work and actions we undertake to support residents and businesses in Wokingham Borough.

Work opportunities for all

Encourage an **inclusive labour market**, where there is a range of employment and locally based education and training opportunities for all

Careers & learning opportunities for all

Raise awareness of different jobs and career pathways in key sectors, whilst promoting lifelong learning and progression at work

Supporting young peoples' ambitions

Ensure **young people are supported** to gain skills and move into work, recognising the challenges they have when moving from school to college and college into work

Skills for local business

Working in **partnership with businesses** to ensure they have the skills for the future and access to a diverse workforce

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WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

What we want:

We want to make sure everyone has the chance to find and stay in work, as this is key to helping all residents thrive. We will support this by making sure there is a wide range of local education and training opportunities that are easy for people to access. By improving access to training and jobs, we aim to reduce inequality and give everyone a fair chance to succeed.

Why this is important

Creating work opportunities for everyone is important as it ensures that all residents can benefit from our local economy. When people are excluded from work, it not only affects their wellbeing and independence but also limits their ability to contribute to the overall community and local economy.

How will we achieve it:

- As a major local employer and buyer of services, we will lead by example - by recruiting in an inclusive way, offering fair and flexible working and developing robust social value systems across our procurement
- Through working with other anchor institutions and large corporations we will establish a Wokingham Business Charter
- We will support those with additional barriers such as health conditions and carers, to access employment support and training

We will:

Create a central on-line resource bringing together information on support and training in one accessible place

Work with employers to prioritise local jobs for local people

Deliver supported employment programmes recognising health as a barrier to work

Deliver support through our community hubs to ensure advice and support is accessible across the borough

Deliver job fairs helping local people meet local employers

Promote and support inclusive and flexible work practices

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CAREERS AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

What we want:
We want to help people keep learning throughout their lives, with chances to build new skills at any age. This will give residents the confidence to shape their own future. We also want to show people the different jobs and careers they can find in the borough, to inspire them and support growth in our key industries.

Why this is important:
People are working for longer and often have more than one career during their lives. While some choose this, others may need to because of the rising cost of living. As the borough has an aging population, it's important to support people to keep learning so they can continue working if they need to. At the same time, people in low-paid or insecure jobs are more likely to face financial difficulties and poor mental health, which highlights the need for better, more stable work opportunities.

How will we achieve it:
- Work with partners through our ACCESS Hub to raise awareness of different training routes and ways to gain skills and confidence
- Support our local employers to make connections with young people and priority groups ensuring opportunities for engagement are not missed
- Work with partners to ensure residents have access to skills needed for future jobs and new technologies

We will:

Provide a range of work focused training to help people gain, sustain & progress in work

Work with partners to create and promote opportunities for future skills such as AI

Deliver in-work support to priority groups to reduce low paid and insecure work

Deliver career fairs and information related to key sectors

Promote volunteering as a way of gaining skills and confidence

Work with businesses to encourage upskilling staff through apprenticeships and skills bootcamps

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SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S AMBITIONS

What we want:

For all young people in the borough to feel confident, supported, and inspired to achieve their ambitions, whatever their starting point or circumstances. Every young person should have access to high-quality education and training as well as clear pathways into meaningful and sustainable employment.

Why this is important:

There are clear gaps in attainment and progression for disadvantaged groups, alongside high levels of economic inactivity in young people. If these gaps are not addressed, inequality will widen and some young people will continue to miss out on opportunities that others can access more easily. Acting early makes a big difference. It reduces the need for long-term support and protects young people from the negative, scarring effects of long-term unemployment. This directly responds to national calls to improve social mobility by ensuring all young people, regardless of background, can access meaningful employment pathways.

How will we achieve it:

- By strengthening partnerships with education, training, support and employers through our ACCESS Hub we will support young people at every stage of their education/ career journey
- By ensuring there is support for all young people tailored to their specific needs

We will:

- Develop tailored support and employment pathways for young people including care experienced, SEND and NEETs
- Deliver a programme of work and soft skills to increase confidence and employability
- Work with businesses to create more work experience and opportunities to meet with employers
- Ensure young people are supported when moving from school to college and college to work
- Champion apprenticeships and vocational training alongside Higher Education
- Raise confidence and aspiration among young people

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SKILLS FOR LOCAL BUSINESS

What we want:

To help our businesses grow, we want to build a workforce that is ready for the future and has the skills local employers need. By focusing on key sectors, we will help businesses make the most of new technology, develop their existing staff, and find people with the right skills.

Why this is important:

If local business cannot find the skills they need; growth will slow, productivity will be affected, and opportunities for residents will be lost. Building a skilled and adaptable workforce is therefore critical to Wokingham Borough's continued economic success.

How will we achieve it:

To ensure that our businesses have the right skills in our priority sectors we will work closely with the other Local Authorities in Berkshire and partners such as the Skills and Business Hub and the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP). Working together to enable residents and business to gain the skills needed for economic growth and future jobs.

We will:

- Create a central online resource for business to support recruitment of a diverse talent pool
- Represent our businesses needs through engagement with LSIP working groups
- Work with businesses and share labour market insights to help them recruit in a changing environment
- Provide information on available funding and new Government schemes related to skills and employment
- Provide advice and support to employers on apprenticeships, Skills Bootcamps and upskilling of staff
- Develop a Business Award Scheme to celebrate success and share good practice

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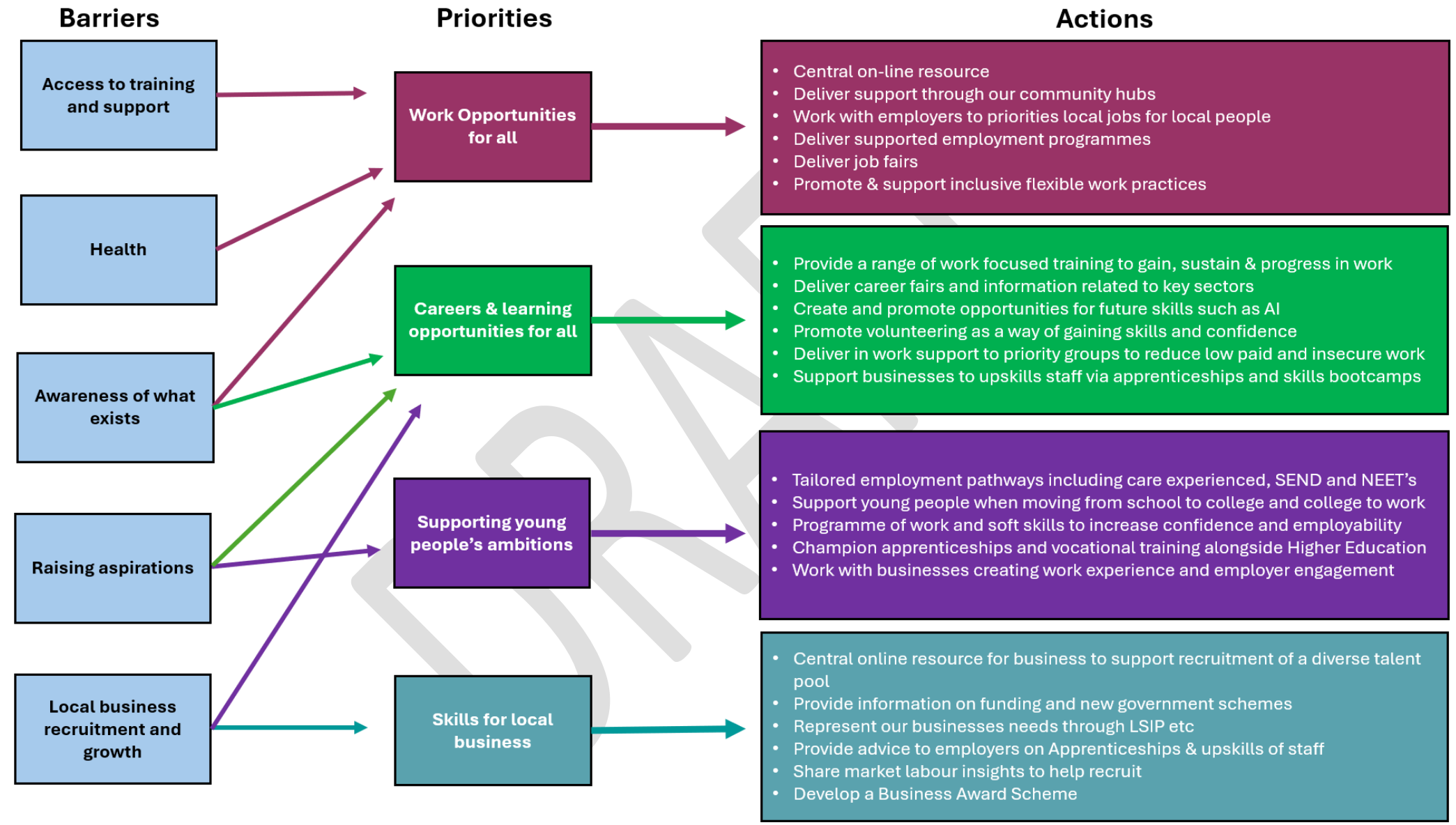
HOW WILL OUR PRIORITIES ADDRESS RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES BARRIERS



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DELIVERY

Wokingham Borough Council will lead the delivery of the Employment and Skills Strategy and co-ordinator delivery through the **ACCESS HUB** working closely with a wide range of partners.

The **ACCESS HUB** reflects Milburn's recommendation for more coordinated, locally accessible support systems that simplify the journey into work and remove barriers between services. The Hub will enable us to deliver our priorities and support our target groups by creating an inclusive employment and skills system that makes it easy for businesses and residents to access the training they need to gain, sustain and progress at work. Support will be available to everyone, but extra help will be focused on people who face the biggest barriers to employment. Our Hub will be a virtual service with outreach across the Borough, ensuring we are meeting residents where they are.

The ACCESS HUB stands for:

A – Accessibility

Encourage an inclusive labour market, where there is a range of employment and locally based education and training opportunities for all

C - Careers Education

Provide high quality careers education for our residents

C – Collaboration

Work in partnership across the borough and with other Berkshire stakeholders

E - Early Intervention

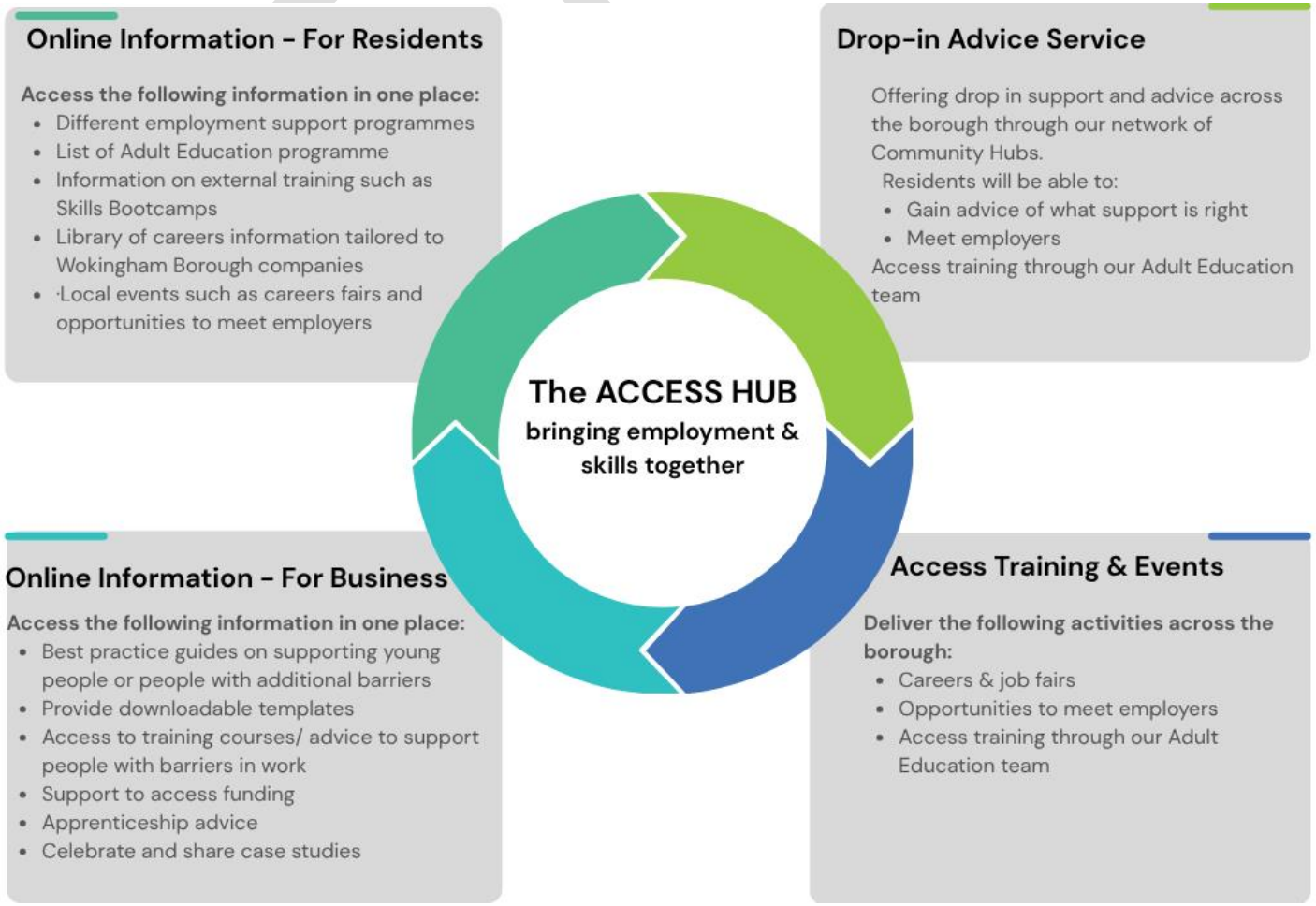
Support young people to transition into training and work

S - Support for Businesses

Providing support to businesses in recognising the vital role they plays

S - Skills for Future Economy

Ensure residents and businesses are equipped with skills needed for the future through training courses



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GOVERANCE AND MEASURING SUCCESS

The Strategy and its Action Plan will be flexible and updated regularly so that they can respond to new challenges and opportunities as they arise. We need a coordinated, joined-up approach that aligns local and regional priorities with national policy priorities such as those set out in the Alan Milburn review Young people and Work. As such, the strategy will share some actions with the LSIP and the Berkshire Get Working Plan.

A formal governance structure is being developed to oversee delivery of the Access Hub, that actions of which will be reported to the Prevent and Demand Board. This will bring together key partners from education, business, health and the voluntary sector, ensuring strong accountability, coordinated delivery and alignment with regional strategies.

We will measure success through quarterly reporting and a yearly review of the Action Plan. Success metrics will be a mix of:

- Number of residents completing training
- Number of projects developed which support target groups
- Number of work placements supported
- Number of new jobs created

Data Sources used in this strategy.

Full data report can be found in the Appendix (still being produced)

Berkshire Observatory – Wokingham – Welcome to the Wokingham Borough Observatory
Labour Market Profile - Nomis - Official Census and Labour Market Statistics
Local authority dashboard | The Health Foundation
Unpaid Care Dashboard | the Centre for Care
Apprenticeships in England
Skills for care workforce summary
Wokingham Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy Appendix
Internal data sources from education departments

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