

Essex County Council

SKILLS FOR ESSEX 2021-23

Our skills and employment response to the Covid-19 pandemic

1. Purpose of Report

The Essex economy, and consequently the skills and employment landscape, has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting the way we work and learn in an unprecedented manner. Communities across Essex are being negatively impacted in sectors that are key to the Essex economy. This is being evidenced through dramatic reductions in GDP and an unprecedented surge in unemployment levels across the county, including places that are traditionally economically prosperous.

Essex County Council wants to support all our residents, particularly those who become unemployed or under-employed because of Covid-19, to quickly find another job. We are working with partners to ensure the right help and advice is available. This includes helping people transfer to new sectors and gain where new skills where needed, especially for sectors that have vacancies (e.g. logistics, health and care), are likely to bounce back (construction and hospitality) and growth sectors of the future (green technology).

Yet the underlying structural changes and challenges we previously identified for Essex - such as the productivity gap and increased automation and digitisation creating shortages in highly-skilled occupations – remain and may even be accelerated by the impact of Covid-19. We will therefore support residents to gain skills that will benefit them in the longer-term as well as the immediate crisis.

This Skills for Essex Strategy and the accompanying Skills for Essex Action Plan set out how we will do this, as both an urgent and immediate response to the pandemic and an essential investment in the economic prosperity of future generations. Both will be regularly reviewed as the economic circumstances change, including with the end of the Government's furlough and self-employed income support schemes.

2. The Challenge

Communities across Essex are being significantly impacted by the profound economic shock created by Covid-19 and particularly in sectors that are key to the Essex economy.

Labour market impacts

- An unprecedented surge in unemployment in Essex, rising from 21,720 in March 2020 to 50,765 in December 2020.
- In October 2020, 51,500 jobs were furloughed. The average payment of £320/month was closer to a part-time wage than a full-time wage. In addition, 61,300 residents claimed the self-employment income support scheme. The average value per claim (=80% of quarterly profit) was £2,800.
- Young people have experienced the greatest economic impact of Covid. A fifth of unemployment claimants are aged 16-24. This age group has been disproportionately impacted by unemployment and furlough.
- People with low skills levels and/or undertaking poorly paid work have been adversely impacted by Covid restrictions.
- Areas in deprivation are proving less resilient to economic shocks, but Covid-19 is impacting all parts of the county, even those previously well known for their economic prosperity. Four districts within Essex (Harlow, Braintree, Epping Forest and Tendring) are among the local authorities with the highest proportion of furloughed workers in England. In these cases, those with low skills levels have been most adversely impacted.
- Recruitment and job availability have fallen significantly. In addition, there has been a significant decline in businesses offering apprenticeships, work experience and volunteering opportunities.

- Colleges, training providers and universities are reducing the number of learners on campus and whilst all are adapting to online teaching methods, there remains a risk that those that are not digitally competent will be left behind
- The end of furlough and other job related Covid support in April 2021 threatens to be a cliff edge that could result in another significant increase in unemployment. Higher levels of joblessness will create a surge in demand for support to access employment and will require local workers to retrain to enable them to adapt their skills towards more Covid-secure sectors. The range of support available is incomplete, but what is there is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate around for businesses and individuals. Poor careers education, information, advice and guidance exacerbates these issues.

Economic impacts

- Dramatic reductions in GDP and record falls in national output for production and services were reported during the first lockdown. Increasing restrictions and lockdown since the autumn have curtailed economic recovery.
- It is difficult to predict Essex's economic future, but sectors that are key to the Essex economy have been significantly impacted. Travel, hospitality, retail, and leisure sectors generate between 15-40% GVA and have reported major falls in output. The table below illustrates the sectors that furloughed the most staff during the first lockdown.

Essex's top sectors for furloughed workers	%	Jobs by sector		Jobs furloughed by sector	
	East	Essex	Greater Essex	Essex	Greater Essex
Wholesale and retail, repair of motor vehicles	38%	102,000	129,000	38,760	49,020
Accommodation and food services	73%	40,000	49,500	29,200	36,135
Construction	56%	41,000	48,000	22,960	26,880
Manufacturing	35%	40,000	47,000	14,000	16,450
Administration and support services	28%	47,000	57,500	13,160	16,100
Transport and Storage	26%	35,000	47,750	9,100	12,415
Arts, entertainment, recreation and other services	66%	15,000	18,400	9,900	12,144

- The risk of economic scarring is a challenge with significant numbers of businesses within these sectors predicting that their turnover will still be lower in 3 years' time. In addition, these challenges will be further compounded by Brexit which is likely to impact manufacturing, transport and professional services that had avoided the worst impacts of Covid-19 lockdown

Economic adaptation to Covid restrictions

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the number of businesses and employees who have had to use digital technology and skills to carry out their work. This has highlighted the importance of digital technology for businesses, but also the training and skills required to use that technology effectively.

A survey by the OU¹ found that as businesses continue to adjust to ongoing challenges of this new world, 40% of respondents expect to rely on their digital capabilities much more. However, different wage groups have had different experiences. The OECD Employment Outlook study also found that sectors with workers in the top earnings quartile were on average twice as likely to work from home than those in the bottom quartile, who, conversely, were three times more likely to have stopped working. An ONS report² found that in April 2020 47% of people in employment did some work at home. Of those who did, 86% did so because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, people aged 16-24 years were less likely to do some work from home compared to those in older age groups. Finally, occupations requiring higher qualifications and more experience were more likely to provide homeworking opportunities than elementary or manual occupations.

¹ How Investment in skills is inspiring confidence in business recovery
<http://www.open.ac.uk/business/apprenticeships/blog/business-recovery>

² Covid-19 and homeworking in the UK: April 2020

As technological changes transform the world of work, they represent enormous potential for skills development but also challenges for the labour market. There is an evident trend seen in many countries over the past two decades whereby large numbers of semi-skilled jobs have disappeared whilst opportunities at the low skills and the higher skills ends continue to grow; this is referred to as a 'hollowing out' of the labour market. In the UK we've seen increases in both the number of highly-paid jobs requiring more skilled workers and less well-paid roles requiring low-level skills³. With this national trend, we are only just starting to see this dynamic being mirrored in Essex with a 5% drop in middle occupations since 2004. The Local Government Association / Learning and Work Institute did a calculation of what the skills gap (between supply in the workforce and business demand) would be for Essex at low, intermediate and high skills. It showed a surplus of workers at low skills levels, and a shortfall at intermediate (NVQ 3/4) and particularly at higher levels 5 and above. It is also predicted that the digital revolution will continue to transform workplaces with some forecasts suggesting that more than 10 million jobs could be at risk of being replaced by automation over the next fifteen years⁴. This is already happening in areas such as self-service check-outs and robotics in use in health and care.

The report 'The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030' published by Pearson and NESTA⁵ explores how employment is likely to change and the possible implications for skills. Its key findings include:

- i. Around one-tenth of the workforce are in occupations that are likely to grow as a percentage of the workforce, and around one-fifth are in occupations that will likely shrink.
- ii. Many of the jobs likely to experience a fall in employment are low- or medium-skilled in nature, though the impact is likely to vary. It is possible that occupations in non-tradable services, like food preparation, elementary services and hospitality could grow in importance as although these occupations have lower skills requirements, they are associated with differentiated products, which consumers increasingly value.
- iii. Education, healthcare, and wider public sector occupations are likely to grow, consistent with an ageing population and increasing demand for lifelong learning.
- iv. Demand for some, but not all, professional occupations, is expected to remain buoyant, reflecting the continued growth of service industries. There is also expected to be a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills, higher-order cognitive skills and systems skills.

Notwithstanding Covid-19, and the challenges that come with that, economic growth in Essex has historically been below the UK average. Latest ONS data tells us that the gap between the wealthiest and most deprived places in the county remains wide, with economic inactivity remaining particularly high in Tendring (27) and Maldon (25%) compared to Essex as a whole (19.8%). The county also has disproportionately fewer local jobs relative to the size of its population, and which is most acute in parts of South Essex and in coastal areas. Essex also lags behind in terms of qualification levels; only 31% of residents are qualified to at least Level 4 compared to 38% nationally, whilst just under 7% of residents in Essex have no qualifications. In addition, there is still a demonstrable need to improve literacy and numeracy levels in the county - 127,600 adults in Essex have literacy skills either at or below the level expected of 9-11 year olds and 415,000 adults have numeracy skills either at or below this level.

2. Our Response and Vision

Our ambition is ensuring Essex residents who are made unemployed have access to the right support so they can transfer quickly to jobs in other sectors, particularly those that are expanding now and are likely to grow in the future, from care and construction to life sciences and green energy.

³ Source <https://www.kcom.com/connected-thinking/opinion/hollowing-out-professions/>

⁴ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics-policy/insights/the-impact-of-automation-on-jobs.html>

⁵ www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-future-of-skills-employment-in-2030

We've always had an ambitious vision for Skills in Essex that sees the need for a local workforce which is agile and continuously learning. Our long-term strategy and ambition continues to be around Knowledge Economy jobs and higher-level skills for residents and workers. We will deliver this ambition by ensuring that our interventions are informed by robust analysis and a strong evidence base focused on industry needs; this will be the engine to drive inclusive economic growth.

However, we also need to intervene at scale to support those residents who become unemployed over the coming months as a result of the economic shock brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this approach will be focused on the skills needed in sectors of the Essex economy that are currently recruiting and where there is likely to be growth in future, including logistics, distribution, care, construction, life sciences and clean energy (e.g. renewables and retrofitting). Our aim is to add value by opening new opportunities for Essex residents and businesses to upskill, work and prosper.

Our response to the pandemic has two specific themes:

- **Employment (including apprenticeships)** - we know that Essex employers are facing an unprecedented challenge to maintain financial stability and business operations. Current projections are that the economy will not return to pre-Covid-19 levels for a while. A recent survey conducted by the OU⁶ found UK organisations expect it will take **18 months to recover**. This suggests that significant numbers of Essex residents will be unemployed, especially as the furlough scheme ends, so we will support people to quickly find alternative employment.
- **Skills** – we also know that we must promote the skills needed for a post-Covid-19 workforce. We need to work in partnership with businesses and education/training providers in order to ensure that we prioritise skills that our economy needs as it begins to recover from the pandemic. It is important to look ahead so we can prepare for the systemic changes that are inevitably coming; as we navigate our way through the pandemic day to day.

Within this response, we recognise the continued importance of a strong skills system in addressing issues relating to low productivity, business development and economic inclusion. We have a wealth of existing economic evidence, analysis and research available to us and it is this data which underpins the vision, objectives and proposed actions set out in the Skills for Essex Action Plan 2020-22. The recommendations from the Essex Economic Commission (EEC), and the ambitions in the Essex Prosperity and Productivity Plan 2020 have given us a clear call to action, now complemented by the Essex Economic Recovery Programme with a specific response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In setting out the framework for this strategy, we have taken the explicit decision to focus on the skills interventions required for economic recovery, growth, targeted inclusion, and prosperity. The economic inclusion of our residents is of real importance to us. ECC is already supporting this through the Adult Community Learning service; the ongoing targeted work being undertaken through our Education and Adult Social Care functions and through other commissioned services. This strategy will complement, but not duplicate existing strategies and programmes of work being undertaken in other areas of the council. It therefore does not aim to address complex issues of disability, or entrenched social and health challenges, for example, as it is recognised that other areas have the expertise needed to tackle these important issues.

⁶How Investment in skills is inspiring confidence in business recovery
<http://www.open.ac.uk/business/apprenticeships/blog/business-recovery>

3. Our Strategy

We will ensure that residents in Essex who are made unemployed can access the right support to quickly obtain a new job, whilst also laying the foundations for a higher-skill, higher-pay economy for the future.

3.1 Skills for Essex Action Plan 2020-22

Our strategy informs our Action Plan, which identifies how we are aligning activity to new priorities. The Action Plan is therefore based on these principles and ways of working:

Residents

- i. **Helping local people to find gainful employment** - working with DWP, anchor institutions and local employers and developing new systems and services to enable better matching of local people with local job opportunities.
- ii. **Focusing on positive opportunities for young people aged 16-24** who will be the driving force in rebuilding the economy. It is crucial that we support young people to ensure they are motivated and equipped with the skills needed, so they can play an active role in a better future. For example, ECC's Kickstart Gateway will enable 500 young people to secure work with local businesses.
- iii. **Signposting the hardest hit industries and workers with support and information** encouraging retraining, upskilling and diversification. Providing Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance on current growth sectors including care, and green industries. The hardest hit sectors are travel, transport, hospitality, construction and manufacturing⁷.
- iv. **Upskilling those already in employment** and/or those seeking new employment as part of our holistic and lifelong approach to learning. This requires the championing of strategic relationships between our employers and educational establishments.

Sectors and Businesses

- i. **Simplifying the skills landscape for employers** and reinvigorating our business engagement mechanisms with a view to supporting the development of an employer-led skills ambitions
- ii. **Focusing on digital literacy in the future workforce** to champion flexible working and digital structures which allow people to work from home whilst remaining productive. Though the pandemic compelled a lot of businesses to act in launching or improving digital services, more needs to be done to support digital skills in the workforce.
- iii. **Achieving inclusive growth** through skills interventions that contribute to an enriched and prosperous county for residents and businesses alike.
- iv. **Continuing the Health in All Policies (HiAP)** approach to ensure we collaboratively support wellbeing and healthy behaviour to boost and support local growth.

⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8898/>

Partners

- v. **Working collaboratively** with partners to respond to the immediate challenges of the economic shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic by developing and/or complementing specific skills and employment interventions. Coordinating our response with partners such as District Councils, South East LEP, Success Essex Business Board, business intermediary services such as Institute of Directors, Federation of Small Businesses, Essex Chambers of Commerce; Department for Work and Pensions, Employment and Skills Funding Agency and others is vital.
- vi. **Strengthening the ongoing partnerships** with employers of all sizes and with education and training providers to develop the skilled workforce of the future. We will use our position as leaders to bring all stakeholders within the skills system together, enabling improved alignment of resources, putting employer skills needs at the fore and ensuring that the wider public sector system is providing opportunities for Essex residents and maximising investment into Essex - especially considering the Skills for Jobs, white paper (launched Jan21).

Skills Resources

- i. **Levering private sector funds** into the skills system for our key areas of interest (e.g. through S106 contributions as part of developer commitments).
- ii. **Engaging with levy paying employers** to utilise their levy funds to increase high- quality apprenticeships in our key priority areas and **lobbying national government** on localising expired unspent Apprenticeship Levy collected from Essex employers to deliver a range of locally determined skills initiatives.

Evidence Base

- iii. **Horizon scanning of existing and forthcoming skills resources** linked to our key sector needs (e.g., focusing on digital skills and the Government's National Skills Fund). We will encourage future growth by refocussing our longer-term strategy, capitalising on the rapid shift to digital, green growth and technical innovation.
- iv. **Using the most up to date Evidence Base** which supports our conclusions and Action Plan. This will make sure that our interventions are steered by the most up to date evidence recognising the fluid, changeable nature of our labour markets during and post-Covid-19.

4. How will we achieve our Vision and Objectives?

ECC will continue to provide strategic leadership for the skills system in Essex to ensure our residents and businesses are able to access the support they need, but we will also intervene directly through targeted provision where necessary. Throughout, we will work closely with partners to align our efforts and avoid duplication, ensuring that our work complements that of others and adds maximum value.

4.1 Strategic Leadership, Partnership and Delivery

We are clear that our role in ECC is as a strategic leader within the system and that we will use evidence, future scoping and testing of pilot programmes to direct our opportunities to influence change. Therefore, where it is necessary, we will directly deliver interventions e.g. kickstart. We will directly intervene when we need to ensure residents have access to the employment and skills support, they require during this recession. Our immediate actions will set the foundations for long-term change, and the period between 2020 and 2022 will be a key phase of our response to the Covid-19 economic shock.

The potential job displacement caused by Covid-19, requires a greater focus on job creation and apprenticeships. As industry consolidate experienced staff, new entrants such as young adults are often disproportionately affected and the opportunities for untapped talent becomes harder to find. The need for upskilling and reskilling is therefore paramount to supporting residents into sectors that are able to recruit and we will focus significant effort in this area.

These ambitions will not be achieved in isolation. Engagement and participation with a range of stakeholders will be critical to ECC's success in achieving its ambitions.

The whole-system skills change required will similarly require all stakeholders to be engaged and to buy into the new vision. We therefore aim to ensure that all the following key stakeholders are involved:

- i. Employers, including through the new employer engagement mechanisms and involving representative employer bodies in Essex (Institute of Directors, Federation of Small Businesses, Chambers of Commerce)
- ii. Funders: Government, Shared Prosperity Fund, Employers, South East Local Enterprise Partnership, Education and Skills Funding Agency
- iii. Skills Providers: Higher Education, Further Education institutions (incl. ACL), Schools, Essex Provider Network (EPN),
- iv. Central/Local government and intermediaries: District/Borough/City Councils, LGA, cross-ECC functions (Economy, Public Health, Infrastructure, Education & Social Care), Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport.

4.2 Alignment to national and regional influencers

There are a significant number of new interventions and funding streams coming online from partners, and we need to influence the shape of these programmes to ensure Essex residents can benefit. The national government has already redeployed resources in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial resources targeted individuals and employers during lockdown. More recently, these resources have focused on economic recovery, including maintaining and/or growing employment, apprenticeships and skills. These are detailed in the National Plan for Jobs as summarised in Annex A. ECC is well-placed to align these various national initiatives given our existing strategic influencing role and good network of relationships. This will maximize VFM and avoid duplication.

SELEP has announced resources that will be dedicated to Covid-19, including £2m for a Covid-19 skills response fund and £2.4m to support SME's. This is in addition to existing resourcing previously allocated by SELEP. ECC is working closely with SELEP and its Skills Working Group to maximise benefits for Essex employers, providers and residents. We must ensure Essex is ready to bounce back once we are over the initial downturn. We cannot fall further behind in terms of the many challenges the county already faces.

Some traditional sectors which are resilient to the impact of Covid will present new opportunities for residents including construction, logistics & health & social care roles. The public sector in Essex also presents opportunities for stable employment and we should maximize this to our advantage through our roles as anchor institutions.

The steps we will take to deliver this Strategy are set out in the Skills for Essex Action Plan 2020-22. This corresponding Action Plan will allow us to retain flexibility to amend and update our actions as the covid-19 Pandemic situation develops and government support schemes adapt to the emerging economic position.

Annex A

Success Essex's Mission (Prosperity and Productivity Plan 2020)

- i. Create a more productive county, where more people are in **knowledge-intensive, well-paid jobs**, where strong demand for skills drives greater supply.
- ii. **Build our skills-base** to respond to (and drive) demand.
- iii. **Work together with existing institutions and partnerships** to increase the supply of industry-relevant qualifications, encouraging greater specialist provision where it will meet local economic needs.
- iv. Develop **new solutions** to employer participation in the skills system, ensuring that qualifications are relevant to industry needs and are accompanied by the skills for creativity and management that an innovative economy needs.
- v. **Encourage greater employer engagement** at local level with measures such as the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy designed to incentivise employer involvement.
- vi. **Raise awareness of the career and employment opportunities** that are available locally, and which could become available in the future.
- vii. Support those who are **already in the labour market** to access new skills and adapt to changing technologies and working practices.
- viii. Invest in the **low carbon skills-base** and use planned housing growth to promote modern methods of construction and low carbon technologies.

National Plan for Jobs and Regional DWP initiatives

- i. **Job Retention Bonus** - Employers who successfully bring their staff back from furlough leave and retain them in continuous employment until 31 January 2021 will receive a 'Job Retention Bonus' of £1,000 per employee.
- ii. **Kickstart Scheme** - £2 billion has been set aside to fund this scheme that aims to create high-quality six-month work placements aimed at those aged 16-24 who are on Universal Credit and are deemed to be at risk of long-term unemployment.
- iii. **Apprenticeships** - Employers in England will receive a one-off payment of £2,000 for every new apprentice under the age of 25 hired between 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021, and a £1,500 payment for each new apprentice aged over 25 and hired during the same period.
- iv. **Traineeships** - The Government plans to fund 'high quality' work placements and training for those aged 16-24 by providing £1,000 per trainee to employers who provide work experience.
- v. **National Careers Service** - The Government will provide an additional £32 million over the next two years to the National Careers Service, to provide people in England with "personalised advice on training and work".
- vi. **Level 2 and 3 provision** - The government will provide £101 million for the 2020-21 academic year to give all 18-19 year olds in England the opportunity to study targeted high value Level 2 and 3 courses when there are no employment opportunities available to them.
- vii. **Work Coaches** - There are also plans to double the number of work coaches in Jobcentre Plus centres by next spring, at a cost of £895 million. Essex region will get 100 extra Coaches.
- viii. **Talk to Paul** – Launched by the Essex DWP in response to the Covid-19 jobs crisis. This is a virtual service available to all Essex resident claimants.
- ix. **Virtual Job Fairs and Employer Help Website** – JCP have also started to run regular virtual job fairs bringing together employers and job applicants. It has also set up a dedicated online service to help and assist employers.