

Time to bridge the skills gap



Essex Chambers of Commerce new Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) Director, Joanne Giles, outlines the exciting and challenging times that lie ahead as the battle to bridge the skills gap across Essex intensifies.

AS an Essex-born daughter of an East End family who came to Basildon in the 1950s, I am only too aware I have benefited from education and employment opportunities within Essex.

All my children have benefited from good quality schools, colleges and high-quality apprenticeships and have started their careers within Essex.

So, I speak as a recipient when I say it is incumbent upon us all to support the system that we benefit from. It is vital we work collaboratively to ensure everyone has the same opportunities and, through collaboration, we continue to create routes to sustainable and skilled employment vital for the economic prosperity of Essex.

Economic prosperity cannot be reached without a skilled workforce. Businesses large and small will not be able to achieve its goals unless it has the right people with the correct skills at the centre of its plans.

The Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) for Essex, Southend and Thurrock, has been produced to provide an employer-led articulation of local skills priorities. Extensive consultation, data analysis and evidence collection were central to its authenticity and creation.



As one of the largest LSIP areas, we have a population of 1.9 million and are home to nearly 81,000 businesses. The county has a diverse geography, with rural, coastal, urban and deprived areas. The employer-led approach will continue to generate ideas about what is needed to deliver the best outcomes for local businesses.

It is critical collaboration remains at the forefront of our activity so we can move the dial on the priorities listed in the report.

Simply put, employers must tell us what they need, and we will do our best to help shape the system, creating better access for all to gain high quality training and a skilled workforce. In return, we will tell employers about the support they can provide to better equip the skills system with up-to-date technical expertise and industry-relevant know-how, so together we create a skills ecosystem that adapts and thrives.

When collegiality is the norm, employers, students, schools, colleges, training providers and local authorities learn together and grow together. The culture becomes infused with learning and the system becomes a setting in which success builds upon itself.

Investing in skills is expensive,

the choice to not invest could be considered shortsighted. ROI is the wisdom that must always be applied when considering any investment. However, investment in the skills system is not always about cold hard cash, it is about participation and feeding into a skills ecosystem that is agile, intelligent, and collaborative. The solutions to our skills needs could be met in other ways that we may not have yet considered.

The Local Skills Improvement Plan is being led by Essex Chambers of Commerce and represents a consensus across a range of local stakeholders. It is an exciting opportunity to address the skills shortages in Essex and to put the structures and resources into place to respond.

The implementation of the plan will be overseen by an employer-led LSIP Board, which includes representatives from key stakeholders such as the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), local authorities and Job Centre Plus along with sector-relevant employers. The plan adopts a new approach to understanding the local skills landscape and sets out how we collectively will bring about change.

Sector specific boards will navigate the changes and work to implement the solutions that

address the priorities set out in the LSIP.

In support of this work, we will continue to provide regular data and intelligence that is vital for planning, in order that resources can be applied where they will have most impact.

Devolution is fast approaching Essex. Devolution is the transfer of powers and funding from national to local government. It is important because it ensures decisions are made closer to the local people, communities, and businesses they affect. It is imperative we work together to shape devolution in Essex as it will have a fundamental impact on how skills for adults (anyone above the age of 19) will be funded. We need to ensure funding is applied in ways that employers need, we need to ensure funding is allocated in a way that does not create disadvantage and we need to ensure it targets the heart of the LSIP and focusses on addressing the priorities.

In conclusion, the skills system in Essex is vibrant and has a willingness to adapt and respond so that schools, colleges, universities, independent training providers and local authorities work together to deliver a workforce with the qualifications and skills employers in Essex need. It must remain employer-led and for that we need employers of all sizes in Essex to participate.

If anyone would like to discuss further, email me at joannegiles@essexchambers.co.uk or phone 01702 560101.