



Board Meeting (Agenda Item 7)

Date: 19 March 2025

Title: Adult Skills Update

Director: Keri Denton, Director of Performance and Partnerships at Devon County Council

Please note that this report is provided for information only.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 That the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority ('DTCCA') Board note the attached update on the DTCCA Skills Programme, including:
- Its ongoing work towards the development of a refreshed Local Skills Strategy,
 - the progress being made on the Adult Skills Fund, and
 - the wider activity underway on skills matters on the DTCCA's behalf.

2. Purpose

- 2.1 This report outlines progress on the DTCCA's emerging skills programme over the past month. It seeks to provide Authority Board members with a brief view of the position of the DTCCA area around skills performance; the activity that is now being taken forward on devolved skills programmes; and an initial update on wider programmes and projects that will become a focus for the DTCCA over the next year.

3. Background

- 3.1 As part of the original devolution business case prepared by Devon and Torbay in 2021/22, partners were keen to highlight the ongoing challenges faced across the local area around educational, skills and employment outcomes.
- 3.2 Though the Devon and Torbay area at the time benefitted from occupational skill levels (i.e. those holding NVQ Level 2 and 3) broadly in line with national averages, and average

employment levels actually above comparator localities, the position around specific skills metrics linked to productivity and local prosperity were far more mixed, with:

- around 8% fewer people in Devon and Torbay holding a degree then the UK average in 2021,
- around 3% more working adults in Devon and Torbay having no formal qualifications when compared to the national position,
- around 3% fewer young people leaving secondary education were likely to have achieved 5 good GCSEs,
- Around 10% more adults with a disability outside of work than comparator areas nationally; and
- levels of young people across the County not in education, employment or training were around 1-2% higher on average than would have been expected for an area of Devon and Torbay's make up.

3.3 Of particular concern, however, was a broadening picture of intra area challenges and differentials around skills. The number of individuals holding a degree equivalent qualification in Torridge in 2021 for example was roughly 20% less than within South Hams or Exeter, whilst the number of residents who held a level 2 qualification in Torbay as their highest educational achievement was around 3% higher than in East Devon. Such differentials were particularly acute within rural and coastal communities, with parts of Torbay, Mid and Northern Devon featuring in the bottom 20% of wards nationally around skills outcomes.

3.4 In response, Devon and Torbay placed a strong emphasis on the need for the devolution of skills activity as part of its emerging devolution case in 2022. At the heart of the argument made was that, for the Devon and Torbay area to truly realise its potential, local partners and providers needed additional flexibility and scope to shape and direct resources to meet the need of individual resident and communities, with improved skills outcomes offering a pathway to enhancing the prosperity of the entire area.

Current Position

3.5 As the DTCCA meets for the first time, overall skills performance across the Devon and Torbay area remains broadly aligned with the position in 2021/22. Economic activity rates for the Combined Authority area remain in line with the national average at 78% (Sept 2024), with the local claimant around 1% below the national average (Jan 2025). Elsewhere, the number of adults across the area with a higher-level qualification (Level 4 and above) continued to be around 7% lower than the national average (Dec 2024), whilst the number of young people leaving education with 5 good GCSEs was around 2% lower than the national average.

3.6 As in 2021 however, significant differences continue across the area in terms of individual outcomes and performance, with a 10% difference in achievement at Key Stage 4 between the best performing and worst performing areas of the DTCCA in 2024. Similarly, a 18% difference continued between the best performing area of the DTCCA for those holding degree equivalency (South Hams) and the worst (Mid Devon). Of note however, was that considerable change has occurred across the area in the past three years, with the position of Torridge improving by 6-7% on average, whilst other rural and coastal area (West Devon / Mid Devon/ Torbay) appearing to be heavily impacted by post COVID changes.

- 3.7 The past three years has however also seen significant development across the skills policy landscape in Devon and Torbay, with the creation of the Local Skills Improvement Plan in 2022 providing an enhanced mechanisms for joint working and strategy alignment for the local area.
- 3.8 The plan, whose development was led by Devon and Plymouth Chamber on behalf of Government, provides an employer led prioritisation of skills activity across the Devon and Torbay area, with a focus on 20 discrete priorities. These include ensuring an alignment of strategic governance and intelligence across the area; ensuring provision is led by employer demand and suitably flexible; that careers activity is prioritised; and that higher level and technical skills and innovation opportunities are maximised.
- 3.9 The devolution of skills activity to the DTCCA now offers considerable opportunities for the local area to contribute towards addressing the skills challenges outlined, working together through the Skills and Employment Advisory Group and with the Local Skills Improvement Partnership / Employer Representative Board. In support of this, the balance of this paper provides a brief update on progress to date on the devolved skills programme.

Update on CCA Skills Programmes

- 3.10 Following the creation of the Combined Authority in February, Government has indicated that three areas of skills and education activity are likely to be devolved to the DTCCA over the next three years. A brief outline of each programme, and the position around each is provided below for information:

a) Adult Skills Fund

- 3.11 Adult Skills Fund Devolution is part of the UK Government's commitment to devolving powers and funding to local areas, enabling them to better address regional skills needs. Since 2019, funding for adult education and training has been transferred to Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and the Greater London Authority (GLA), giving them control over how the Adult Education Budget (AEB) is allocated in their regions.
- 3.12 Devolution allows local authorities to tailor adult skills provision to meet the specific needs of local employers and communities, ensuring that training aligns with labour market demands. This includes funding for basic skills (English, maths, and digital skills), vocational qualifications, and retraining opportunities for those looking to change careers or re-enter the workforce.
- 3.13 As set out to the Board last month, the DTCCA is currently preparing for the devolution of Adult Skills Funding from September 2026. The DTCCA is expected to receive over £52.6m of related funding through to 2030, covering adult education provision such as English and Maths GCSEs, vocational training, community learning, and workforce upskilling. As highlighted however, this process is subject to an intensive readiness process, including the development of an aligned Skills Strategy document, and the preparation of an associated readiness business case.
- 3.14 In response, and as agreed by the Board, the Authority is now actively recruiting for two roles to lead this process, an Adult Skills Lead and Adult education Commissioning and

Evidence Manager. These vacancies went live on 27 February 2025, with interviews due in mid-March 2025.

- 3.15 In addition, DCC has also now formally commissioned the University of Exeter to take forward the preparation of the Skills Strategy document, required to fulfil the evidence and strategy elements of the readiness approach.
- 3.16 Following inception discussions with the University, the development of the Strategy is to be split into two phases over March and April 2025:
- **Phase 1 (February–March 2025):** Focusing on building a robust evidence base for the strategy, including an updated labour market analysis, mapping skills supply and employer demand, and identifying regional workforce challenges such as youth outmigration, aging demographics, and sector-specific skills gaps. This phase will also leverage existing research, including the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), to ensure a data-driven approach to ASF investment.
 - **Phase 2 (March–April 2025):** Focusing on undertaking a related policy review and strategy development, mapping existing skills initiatives, aligning with national policies, and engaging key stakeholders, including employers and training providers. This phase will define priority sectors, funding allocations, and lead to the development of an associated action plan to address workforce needs. The final Skills Strategy Report, to be published in late April, will then outline a long-term vision for ASF delivery, ensuring that training and upskilling opportunities align with regional economic objectives and labour market trends.
- 3.17 In taking forward the development of the Skills Strategy, the University intend to take forward an aligned consultation approach between mid-March and April 2025. This will include interviews with employers, training providers, and local authorities, as well as stakeholder workshops to test findings and refine priorities. A survey of key sectors will also gather additional input on skills demand.
- 3.18 We are currently working closely with the University around the planning for their consultation, as well as seeking to align the approach with the DTCCA’s other ongoing work around the growth strategy, place narrative and wider sector work on offshore wind.

b) Technical Skills Bootcamps

- 3.19 The Department for Education (DfE) introduced Skills Bootcamps as part of the Government’s Lifetime Skills Guarantee in 2020, aimed at helping individuals gain in-demand skills and secure better job opportunities. These flexible training courses, typically lasting up to 16 weeks, are designed to address skills shortages in key sectors such as digital, construction, green industries, and engineering.
- 3.20 Skills Bootcamps are developed in collaboration with employers to ensure they meet industry needs, providing learners with practical, job-relevant training. They are open to adults aged 19 and over, with full funding available for unemployed individuals and co-funding options for employers looking to upskill their workforce. The initiative supports career progression, helps bridge the skills gap, and contributes to economic growth by equipping people with the expertise needed in the modern job market.

- 3.21 Within Devon and Torbay, DCC has led the bootcamp programme ('Train4Tomorrow') across the area for the past 5 years. Delivered across Devon, Plymouth, Torbay and Cornwall, the programme has successfully supported around 4,000 learners across the region to access a range of free, flexible technical skills courses in areas of strong employer demand (such as digital, construction, green skills, and health and social care).
- 3.22 In a positive move, the area has recently received notification of an additional £8 million of funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to support Skills Bootcamps across Devon and Cornwall in 2025/26. Procurement and delivery planning are now underway for this new activity, with rollout set to begin in late spring. Funding will expand opportunities for targeted, industry-led training, aligning with regional skills needs.
- 3.23 The DfE has however recently indicated its preference for Bootcamp activity to be devolved / delivered by Combined Authorities moving forward. Officers are currently exploring this issue with the Department, with a strong likelihood that the DTCCA is asked to take on any 2026/27 programme.

c) Devon and Torbay Careers Hub

- 3.24 Careers Hubs, established by the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), are local partnerships that bring together schools, colleges, employers, and careers professionals to improve careers education and guidance.
- 3.25 Launched in 2018 as part of the Government's Careers Strategy and funded through a mixture of LEP and CEC grant funding in the past, Careers Hubs aim to ensure that young people receive high-quality support in preparing for the world of work. As one of the core functions transferred over to the host authorities by the Local Enterprise Partnerships, the Careers Hub has also been indicated as a function due to become part of the DTCCA over the next year.
- 3.26 Hubs are principally tasked with supporting schools and colleges implement the Gatsby Benchmarks, the framework for good career guidance, by providing expert support, employer engagement opportunities, and access to local labour market information. They work closely with Enterprise Advisers—business professionals who help shape careers strategies—ensuring that young people develop the skills and knowledge needed for successful transitions into employment, apprenticeships, or further study.
- 3.27 Within Devon and Torbay, the Careers Hub is currently hosted by DCC on behalf of Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay, working with over 100 schools and Colleges. The Hub is currently funded on an annual basis through a national grant of around £550,000, which is matched against £170,000 of local funds. The DfE has recently indicated that this grant will be awarded again to the Devon and Torbay hub for academic year 2025/26, with the expectation that the Hub will be devolved into the DTCCA as part the process. Work is required however before this is achieved in securing relevant match and ensuring the sustainability of Hub funding into the medium term.

4. Options and alternatives

- 4.1 There are no alternative options. This is an update report on activity for the DTCCA.

5. Financial considerations

- 5.1 There are no specific new financial considerations associated with this update report. It should be noted however, the potential level of funding that the DTCCA will be accountable for going forward and the requirements to deliver a range of adult skills and careers, advice, and guidance.

6. Legal considerations

- 6.1 There are no specific legal considerations associated with this report. A future report will be presented to set out any requirement to novate contracts to the DTCCA at the appropriate time.
- 6.2 The scope of a Service Level Agreement between the DTCCA and DCC setting out a future operational model for the delivery of skills programmes and activity will come to a future DTCCA Board meeting.

7. Environmental impact considerations

- 7.1 There are no specific environmental impact considerations arising from this report. It should be noted that the Skills Boot Camps focus on a variety of green skills.

8. Equality considerations

- 8.1 There are no specific equality considerations involved with this report. However, all activity currently being undertaken through the skills programme places an emphasis upon inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring that all residents have the opportunity to develop relevant skills and access employment.

9. Engagement and consultation

- 9.1 Whilst consultation and codesign are a significant element of all the programmes outlined, with close working with providers and businesses, this report includes a specific update on the University of Exeter's plans to consult upon the emerging Skills Strategy document. This will take place between February and April 2025 and is to include four core elements:
- **Employer and Training Provider Engagement** – Conducting structured interviews and focus groups with key employers, training providers, and industry bodies to assess current skills needs and gaps.
 - **Stakeholder Workshops** – Hosting targeted consultation sessions with local authorities, education providers, and business leaders to test findings and shape strategic priorities.
 - **Survey of Key Sectors** – Distributing an online survey to gather quantitative data from businesses and training organisations on skills demand and provision.
 - **Policy and Initiative Review** – Mapping existing skills programmes and aligning with national policy developments to ensure integration with the Adult Skills Fund (ASF).

9.2 Findings from this consultation will directly inform the final Skills Strategy Report, which is due for submission in April 2025.

10. Associated risks

10.1 There are no associated risks arising from this report.

11. Conclusion

11.1 This report provides DTCCA Board members with a brief update on existing and potential DTCCA skills activity across the area. Officers are currently working closely with DfE and other partners around next steps on these and other emerging potential delivery programmes, seeking to ensure relevant enabling and delivery / procurement work is now completed, as well as prepare the ground for DTCCA integration and delivery moving forward. As skills activity now moves forward, Officers will seek to provide regular updates to both the DTCCA Board and the DTCCA's Skills and Employment Advisory Group.

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

None

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