Get South Midlands Working Plan

Final Report – November 2025

Insight

South Midlands Authorities

Department for Work & Pensions

Insight
Powered by the Growth Company

Report completed/submitted by:	[Project Manager]
Proof check completed by:	
Date:	
Report reviewed by:	[Company Director]
Date:	

Contents

Foreword

Local Authorities

Get South Midlands Working Plan: Unlocking Opportunity for All

We, the six local authorities of the South Midlands, are united in our mission to transform lives through the **Get South Midlands Working Plan**. This is more than a policy—it's a promise to our communities: to open doors, drive inclusive growth, and ensure every resident can access meaningful, rewarding employment.

We know that a good job can change everything. It brings dignity, stability, and hope. While our region boasts above-average employment rates, these numbers hide stark inequalities. In some areas, employment lags far behind national averages, and certain groups—young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), those facing ill health, and disadvantaged inclusion groups—face even greater barriers.

Yet, the South Midlands is brimming with potential. Major investments like East-West Rail, Universal Destinations and Experiences UK in Bedford, the revitalisation of Luton and Northampton town centres, and the planned expansion of Luton Airport are set to create thousands of new opportunities. Our plan is about making sure local people are first in line to benefit.

The Get South Midlands Working Plan lays out a bold new approach to employment support. By working together—across six local authorities, in partnership with the DWP, Integrated Care Boards, employers, educators, and the voluntary sector—we will tackle economic inactivity and create real pathways to prosperity.

This first phase focuses on boosting participation in the labour market, targeting tailored support for those facing the greatest challenges, and forging stronger collaboration across work, health, and skills systems.

But this is just the beginning. Achieving our ambitions will demand sustained investment, relentless collaboration, and unwavering determination. Together, we can break down barriers, tackle inequality, and build a South Midlands where everyone has the chance to thrive.

Cllr Peter Marland and Cllr Jim Weir, co-chairs, South Midlands Authorities Board

DWP

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is pleased to stand alongside our partners in delivering the Get South Midlands Working Plan. This initiative reflects our shared ambition: to reduce economic inactivity and boost employment opportunities for those who need it most.

This plan is rooted in collaboration. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is committed to playing a central role within the South Midlands employment network, not only in terms of delivering key services but acting as a strategic partner alongside the six local authorities, health services and other stakeholders.

We are working hand in hand to build a system that truly puts people first – one that connects communities with opportunity and that supports every individual to succeed. We will continue to invest in personalised advice and support to help people find and retain employment. We will work with partners to continue to review and improve our services in line with national policy, creating a labour market that works for everyone – helping people into good jobs and unlocking talent.

The Get South Midlands Working Plan builds on our learning and experience to date and sets out our collective Strategic Missions and Priority Actions to achieve our vision. We look forward to continuing to work with our partners to deliver a stronger, fairer society where work transforms lives and communities. Together, with local authorities, employers, and education providers, we will make this vision a reality.

Laura Moig, Group Director, Central Midlands, DWP

Integrated Care Boards (BLMK and Northamptonshire)

As the two Integrated Care Boards serving the South Midlands, we are proud to support the **Get South Midlands Working Plan**. Good health and good work go hand in hand. This plan aims to strengthen the connections between work, health and skills so that economic growth is more inclusive, productivity improves, and people are prevented from leaving work due to ill-health or a lack of support.

Individuals experiencing **ill health** are a key priority cohort for this plan. This encompasses those with long-term health conditions, disabilities or those experiencing an episode of planned or unplanned care. We know that too many people in our region are prevented from working due to poor health and that all too often people are not being supported to stay well at work.

NHS partners through the Integrated Care Board (ICB) have already committed to the issues around work and health as illustrated by the production of the **BLMK Work & Health Strategy** and another is proposed for Northamptonshire. The integration of these approaches, alongside the findings from the recent Mayfield Review are central to supporting the development of healthy workplaces across the South Midlands.

Our commitment is clear: to work collaboratively with local authorities, employers, and partners to ensure that health is never a barrier to opportunity. Together, we can create a South Midlands where every person has the opportunity to work, contribute to society, live well and prosper.

Maria Wogan Chief of System Assurance and Corporate Services, BLMK ICB and Louise Young Deputy Chief Officer on behalf of Northamptonshire ICB

Executive Summary

Vision and Purpose

The **Get South Midlands Working (GSMW) Plan** sets out a coordinated, partnership-led response to labour-market challenges across **Bedford**, **Central Bedfordshire**, **Luton**, **Milton Keynes**, **North Northamptonshire** and **West Northamptonshire**.

The Plan's purpose is to **increase labour-market participation** amongst those furthest from the labour market, support people into **good jobs**, and strengthen the connections between work, health and skills so that economic growth is more inclusive, productivity improves, and people are prevented from leaving work due to ill-health or a lack of support.

The Plan aligns with the Government's *Plan for Change* and the *Get Britain Working White Paper*, which aspires to raise the national employment rate to **80%**. It also reflects the ambitions around the recent *Mayfield Review* identifying the need to create a new integrated employment support system that **supports workplace health**.

The Plan is **iterative**: it reflects the current reality of a fragmented and atomised system where good practice is inhibited, and it will adapt as policy, integration and delivery evolve locally. This will be driven by our partners taking steps to align current services and move towards service integration, pooled budgets and a shared outcomes framework that will create a new employment support system for the South Midlands.

Issues and Opportunities in the South Midlands

Key Issues

The South Midlands overall boasts a **higher-than-average employment rate of 76.8%** for residents aged 16–64, surpassing the national average of 75.5%. However, significant local variations persist, with Luton's employment rate notably lower at 66.6%. This indicates that while the region as a whole is progressing towards the 80% employment target, certain areas face greater barriers to labour market participation. At the time of writing, achieving an overall employment rate of 80% would require the South Midlands to support 34,140 people back into work.

Economic inactivity across the South Midlands stands at 20.1%, lower than the national average of 21.3%, amounting to over 216,600 residents. Yet, this regional figure masks local disparities, with Luton and North Northamptonshire both exhibiting higher inactivity rates. Ward-level data further reveals pockets of particularly high inactivity, especially around Luton, north of Bedford, and Oundle. Since June 2023, economic inactivity has been trending upwards, largely driven by health conditions and complex needs.

Long-term sickness, particularly musculoskeletal problems, mental health, and cardiometabolic conditions, **accounts for 25.6% of inactivity in the area**. There has also been an increase in early retirement among the working-age population, now at 17% compared with 11.8% nationally. This shift, which has grown since June 2022, may be due to changing health, personal circumstances, or lifestyle priorities. In addition, there are notable disability employment gaps, particularly in North Northamptonshire (38.2%) and Luton (36.7%). Systemic issues such as long waiting times for musculoskeletal (MSK) and mental health services, as well as fit-note practices, further exacerbate these barriers and increase service pressures on the NHS.

The **claimant count** for unemployment benefits is also **on the rise**, with a regional rate of 4.7% (versus a 4.1% national average). Variations are stark: Central Bedfordshire reports a low of 2.8%, while Luton faces a high of 8.1%, highlighting unequal access to employment and resilience across localities.

Differences in employment outcomes are influenced by sex, age, and disability status. Men have a higher employment rate (81.1%) than women (72.6%), and the employment rate for people with disabilities is significantly lower at 55.5%, resulting in a 21.3 percentage point gap compared to the general population. This gap is particularly pronounced in North Northamptonshire and Luton.

Household incomes in the South Midlands are **consistently below national levels**. Average real disposable income is £24,000 compared to the national level of £26,800, with Luton recording the lowest at £20,000. For all locations except Milton Keynes, all local authorities experienced a decrease in gross disposable income between 2021 and 2022, reflecting ongoing economic challenges.

For young people, **NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) rates** are **lower than the national average**, with 2.5% of 16–17-year-olds affected compared to 2.9% nationally. Nonetheless, regional disparities remain for example Central Bedfordshire has a higher NEET rate of 3.0%. Addressing NEET rates will require collaborative interventions across education, support services, and community programmes.

Skills and opportunities for progression remain limited in several areas. The proportion of residents with Level 4+ qualifications is below the national average, while there are higher numbers of people with no qualifications. As the demand for higher-level skills increases, those with lower qualifications find it increasingly difficult to progress.

Access to work and training is also restricted by housing and transport issues. High housing affordability ratios combined with poor rural connectivity and problems with cross-boundary public transport, all limit opportunities for resident. This is a particular issue in Central Bedfordshire and Bedford where average house prices are 9.55 and 8.98 times median annual gross earnings respectively. Crucially, the affordability ratio can impact on people's ability to move to find work, limiting the labour market flexibilities which can help address inactivity.

Productivity across the region lags behind the UK average. GVA per hour stands at £34.30 for the South Midlands, compared to £36.50 nationally, with marked differences within the region. GVA per hour in Milton Keynes is above average at £45.10, while North Northamptonshire records the lowest productivity rates at £28.90.

Key Opportunities and Assets

Growth and investment in the South Midlands are being propelled by a range of recent and forthcoming projects. Initiatives such as East–West Rail, the proposed Universal Studios in Bedford, the regeneration of Luton and Northampton town centres, and the planned expansion of Luton Airport (amongst others) are all anticipated to generate new construction and operational jobs. These schemes are also expected to stimulate wider opportunities across supply chains, benefitting local businesses and communities.

The region boasts strengths in several key sectors and transport and storage, stands out as a significant employer and sector for the region. Other important sectors include health, accommodation and food services, and professional services, all of which offer a diverse range of roles suited to varying skill levels. Looking ahead to 2034, employment projections indicate growing demand in health, education, and retail, highlighting areas where job opportunities are set to expand.

Anchor institutions, such as the NHS and local authorities, alongside further and higher education providers are well placed to champion inclusive recruitment practices and supported employment and the creation of a new focus on Workplace Health. This includes Cranfield University, the University of Northampton, the University of Bedfordshire, and the Open University. These organisations play a vital role in developing pathways to employment and delivering social value across the region.

Crucially, the NHS partners through the Integrated Care Board (ICB) have already committed to the issues around Work & Health as illustrated by the production of the **BLMK Work & Health Strategy** (with another proposed for Northamptonshire). The integration of these approaches, alongside the findings from the recent Mayfield Review will be central to supporting the development of Healthy Workplaces across the South Midlands.

What the Plan will Do

Target Groups

This Plan specifically addresses the needs of several **priority groups** who face persistent barriers to employment and participation. Key target cohorts include the following:

- Young people who are **not in education, employment, or training (NEET),** with particular attention paid **to care leavers** who may lack the necessary support networks to transition successfully into work or further study. With over 4,600 individuals aged 16–24 currently NEET across the South Midlands, this group faces long-term risks including reduced lifetime earnings and limited career progression.
- Individuals experiencing **ill health** are also a central focus, encompassing those with long-term health conditions, disabilities or those experiencing an episode of planned or unplanned care. In the South Midlands, more than 550,000 individuals aged 16 and over are living with health conditions or illnesses that have lasted more than 12 months. These long-term conditions can include mental health issues and musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions such as back ache and arthritis. This group often encounters systemic obstacles to securing and sustaining employment.
- People who are **long-term unemployed** and may require tailored interventions to re-enter the labour market. Long-term unemployment remains a persistent and complex issue in the South Midlands. While granular data is limited, one striking indicator is that 25% of the region's 16+ population has "never worked", a figure that, while inclusive of those in statutory education, still points to a substantial cohort disengaged from the labour market. This group often overlaps with other vulnerable populations, including those with health conditions, NEETs, and individuals facing generational unemployment. The barriers they face are typically deep-rooted, ranging from low skills and qualifications to limited access to transport, digital exclusion, and a lack of tailored employment support.
- Inclusion groups facing multiple, overlapping **disadvantages**. For the purpose of the plan, this cohort specifically focuses on the following: those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds; those where age is a barrier to employment, those who are marginalised because of their ethnicity, religious beliefs or cultural differences and those who are digitally excluded. These groups often face overlapping barriers to employment, including discrimination and bias in recruitment and progression, limited access to flexible or inclusive working arrangements and reduced visibility in mainstream employment support programmes.

Strategic missions (the "how we will work")

Our strategic missions articulate how we will create a future employment system for the South Midlands that can support people into work and improve workplace health. It will be a process focused on the use of system leadership that first and foremost aligns our efforts across the South

Midlands, identifies gaps in provision and opportunities aligned to our purpose and agrees steps that will support service delivery and transformation in the future.

The strategic missions establish the long-term decisions and processes which will create the system that our residents need:

1. **Strengthen governance, capacity and delivery** – establish effective partnership structures, enable responsible data-sharing, and use asset-based reviews of current delivery to prioritise investment and continuous improvement.

2. **Enhance employer, VCFSE and community engagement** – create forums for shared learning and inclusive job design, embed lived experience in decision-making, and build commissioning capacity with community partners.

3. **Deliver person-centred, integrated service approaches** – test multi-disciplinary/ multi-agency models, improve access points (e.g. GP surgeries, Jobcentres, libraries, community hubs) and upskill staff to deliver new models.

Priority actions (the "what we will prioritise now")

Recognising that the long-term creation of a new employment support system will not happen quickly, our plan also identifies a set of initial priority actions where we can quickly align and develop our current support systems:

- **Support participation** by tackling practical barriers to participation (transport, housing) and widening access to training and employment.
- **Enable participation** by joining up health and employment support, promoting healthy workplaces (especially among SMEs), improving careers support, and encouraging inclusive recruitment (e.g. use of *Access to Work* and *Disability Confident*).
- **Targeted interventions** for those facing the greatest barriers, including neighbourhood-level support, inclusive bootcamps and anchor-led entry pathways.

Partners explicitly recognise the need for **place-sensitive delivery**, reflecting substantial variation across localities (e.g. strong performance in **Central Bedfordshire** versus lower economic participation in **Luton**).

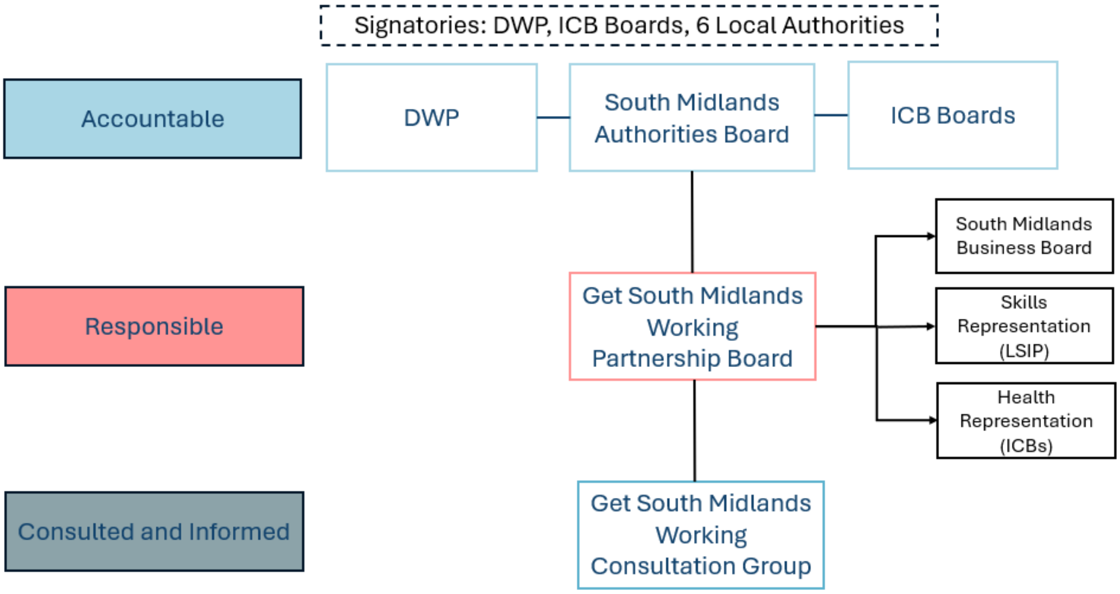
Over the **next two years**, we will prioritise the following actions:

- **Tackle practical barriers** to participation (e.g. transport access to employment and services; housing affordability signals into policy and planning) (priority action 1).
- **Align health and work**: test and deliver integrated models such as **Connect to Work** across all six authorities, embed wellness checks in programmes, encourage employer uptake of *Access to Work* and healthy-workplace schemes, and focus on reasonable adjustments (priority action 2).
- **Strengthen careers and skills support**: improve all-age careers access points, define essential skills, commission confidence/resilience building for those furthest from work, and expand inclusive training (including bootcamps) suited to carers and those with long-term conditions (priority action 2).
- **Develop Neighbourhood-level interventions**: deploy multi-agency teams and community hubs to reach priority places with high inactivity or deprivation; leverage anchors for accessible entry pathways and social value (priority action 3).
- **Secure stronger employer engagement**: use the **South Midlands Growth Business Board** and Chambers/LSIP structures to co-design inclusive recruitment, healthy workplaces and entry-level progression pathways (with SMEs supported to recruit/retain people with additional needs) (priority action 2).

How It Will Work

Governance and Partnership Arrangements

The current proposed Governance Model is designed to be streamlined and inclusive. It will adhere to a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) framework as summarised below. The Governance arrangements will evolve over time as the Plan is embedded locally and as the exact structures are agreed.



West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) is the main **Accountable Body** representing the six Local Authorities in the South Midlands. The South Midlands Authorities Board represents these local authorities and along with the Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and DWP are the main signatories for the Get South Midlands Working Plan.

A **Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board** will provide operational leadership and will be influenced and informed by the South Midlands Business Board, health (via the ICBs) and skills representation (aligning with the LSIP). Task and finish groups will be established to take projects forward and a Consultation group will engage with employers and communities.

What Success Looks Like

Proposed Outcomes

An outcomes framework has been developed which has been designed to support the Government's ambition of achieving an 80% national employment rate. Currently this would equate to 34,140 people which partners are supporting to get back into work. The outcomes framework is set out under the three plan priority actions, with a final cross-cutting action highlighting outcomes that cut across all objectives.

- **Priority Action 1: Interventions that Support Participation**: outcome measures include: improved access to housing and services; improved access to employment and uptake of employment opportunities as well as improved perceptions on improving barriers to employment.

- **Priority Action 2: Enabling Participation (Access to Services)**: the focus will be on nationally reported GBW outcomes such as reduced health-related economic inactivity, increased employment rate of women and reduced disability employment gap. In addition, specific outcomes relevant to the South Midlands will include a reduction in unfit for work fit notes, an increase in wellness checks being incorporated into employment programmes or SMEs engaging in healthy workplace schemes.
- **Priority Action 3: Targeted Interventions to Help People Participate in the Labour Market**: as well as reporting on national GBW outcomes, the South Midlands will aim to encourage an increased number of neighbourhood-level interventions; improved retention rates for people with additional needs; and an increase in entry level job placements.
- **Priority Action 4: Cross-Cutting Actions**: a key outcome will be the achievement of an 80% employment rate across all six local authorities, narrowing intra-regional disparities. In addition, increased household incomes, decreases in the proportion of households with no working adult as well as reductions in young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) will be assessed.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In the first 24 months of operation, performance will be reviewed on a monthly basis by the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board. Progress will be shared with wider partners (such as the South Midlands Authorities Board and the Get South Midlands Working Consulting Panel) on a quarterly basis.

After the first year of implementation, the accountable body will conduct a light-touch review. Following two years of delivery, a formal external evaluation will be carried out to assess the Plans impact.

Next Steps

The Get South Midlands Working Plan introduces a first phase of actions aimed at boosting participation in the labour market, targeting support for groups with specific challenges, and enhancing collaboration across the work, health, and skills system.

Immediate next steps have been identified to progress the Plan including the following:

- Q4 2025 – Q1 2026: Establish Governance and Partnership Structures
- Q4 2025: Develop engagement plan
- Q4 2025 – Q1 2026: Raise awareness of the GSMW Plan
- Q4 2025 – Q1 2026: System Leadership & transformation approach & roadmap
- Q4 2025 – Q1 2026: Undertake further research /specific projects
- Q1-Q3 2026: Facilitate Quarterly Integration Development Sessions
- Q1 2026: Develop Forward Plan

Our Plan

Key Issues and Drivers

Key Issues

In November 2025, partners are seeking to get **34,140 people back into work** to achieve **80% employment rate**

Above average employment rates mask **local variations** (66.6% in Luton)

Employment rates for men (81.1%) higher than women (72.6%)

Disability employment gap (28.1%) above national levels (26.1%)

4,600 individuals aged 16–24 currently **NEET**

Real disposable household income (£24,000) **below** national levels (£26,800)

Key Challenges

Limited **job availability** (job density below national average)

Increasing **health** demands e.g. mental health issues, MSK,

Lack of **affordable housing**, with house price to earnings ratios above national averages

Poor access to **public transport in rural areas**

Below average **qualification levels** (11.7% with no qualifications)

Lower levels of **productivity**, with GVA per hour worked (£34.3) below national levels

Priority Cohorts

- NEETs and young people, including care leavers
- Those in ill health
  long term health conditions, disabilities or those experiencing an episode of planned or unplanned care
- Long term unemployed
- Disadvantaged groups

Strategic Missions

Sets out how the partnership will work together to create a new system of employment support in the South Midlands.

1. Strengthen Governance, Capacity and Delivery
2. Enhance Employer, VCFSE, and Community Engagement
3. Deliver Person-Centred, Integrated Service Approaches

Priority Actions

These focus on what can be achieved in the next two years to support progress towards realising the strategic missions.

1. Wider interventions to support participation
Tackling challenges such as transport and housing, and improving access to opportunities to foster greater inclusion and engagement within the local workforce.

2. Interventions to enable participation (and improve access to services)
Making workplaces and support services more accessible and inclusive.

3. Targeted interventions to help participation in the labour market
Targeting those who face the greatest challenges to entering or progressing within the workforce.

1 Introduction

The South Midlands is a dynamic and fast-growing economy, built on a strong foundation of innovation and enterprise. With a young and expanding population, alongside its strategic position at the heart of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor, the South Midlands is well-placed to seize future opportunities and build a strong and inclusive economy.

The South Midlands area covers the local authority areas of Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes, North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire. It is centrally located within the UK and offers strong transport links to London, the Midlands and other parts of the UK.

Figure 1. Location and Coverage of the South Midlands

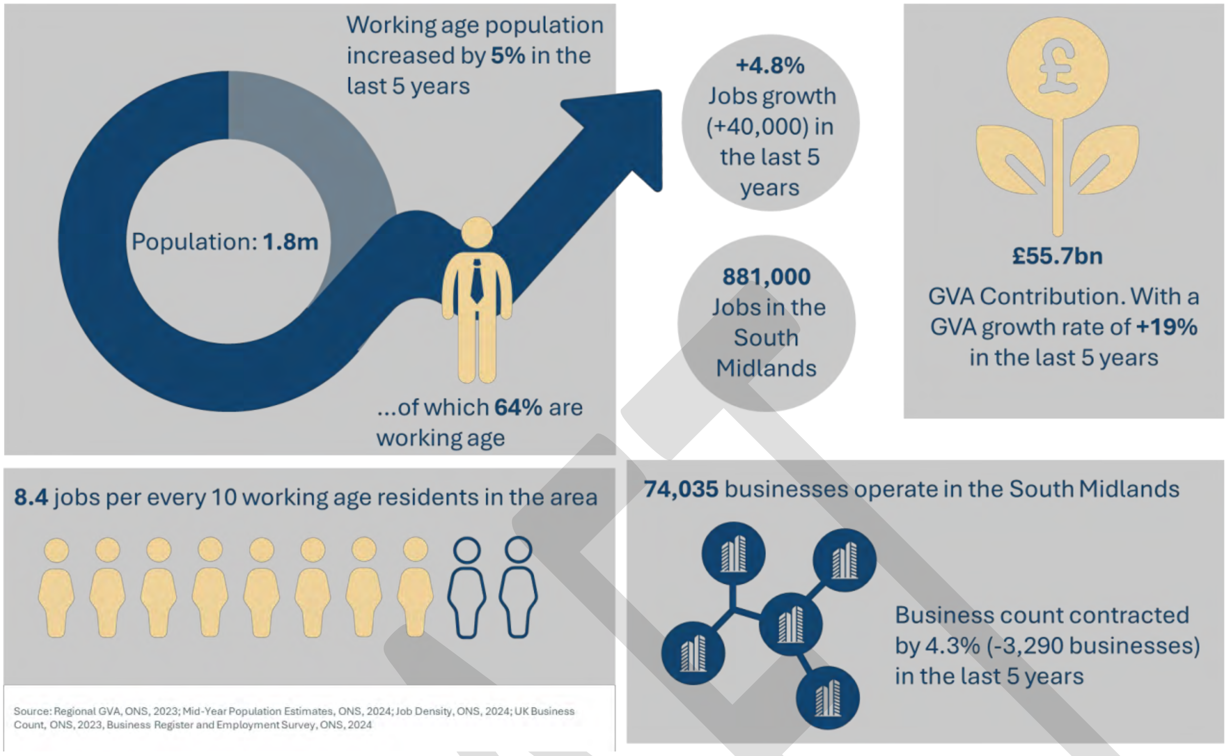
Map Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2025

South Midlands is home to a varied mix of urban centres, market towns and rural communities, with a population totalling 1.8m[1] which is growing.

The area supports 881,000 jobs and this has grown by 5% in the last 5 years. It has a £56bn economy which has witnessed significant growth in recent years (19%). The area demonstrates established strengths in sectors including advanced manufacturing, logistics, health and social care, construction, and professional services, alongside emerging opportunities in low-carbon industries, particularly around net-zero transport.

[1] Mid-Year Population Estimates, ONS, 2023

Figure 2 Overview of the South Midlands Economy



Despite these strengths and assets, there are barriers to realising the economic potential of the region. The emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy highlights the productivity challenges facing the area. The South Midlands area has a productivity gap when compared to England of 4.6% (though some areas – notably Milton Keynes are more productive than the national average). This means workers in the South Midlands produce 4.6% less output per hour worked than the national average. While this is not a significant gap, it is important to acknowledge that the gap has been increasing in recent years. In 2017 the productivity gap was only 2.4%.

Productivity issues evident across the South Midlands are made worse by problems around housing affordability which is driven by high housing costs and low earnings. In part, issues around low earnings relate to the sectoral make-up of the area, and the emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy recognises the importance of encouraging investment in higher value sectors. It also recognises that the skills profile plays its part in tackling productivity issues. Fewer residents hold degree-level qualifications, and a higher proportion of residents have no qualifications overall across the South Midlands. This varies across the region, with some individual boroughs performing well against national benchmarks.

The emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy highlights the fact that the labour market is becoming tighter. The potential labour pool in the South Midlands is the lowest it has been over the past decade. As a result, South Midlands businesses who want to expand are now having to look further afield and rely on in-commuting labour to fill new roles.

linked to these are the array of health challenges which impact on people's ability to work. The increase in musculoskeletal disorders, mental health and an increase in the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are placing additional pressures on the health system which is already under increased pressure for its services. Linked to this, has been an increase in health-related challenges which has seen an increase in the numbers of people 'no requirement to report' to the Job Centre. Taken together, the significant health drivers, as well as the associated health inequalities, form a significant part of the picture of the 'why' around economic inactivity and, with a focus on the health drivers, form a key part of understanding how we support people back into work as well as delay exits from the labour market, including those people with health conditions, their carers/support networks

To address these challenges, the South Midlands area needs to boost the working age population to meet the needs of a growing economy, including the attraction and retention of workers, and the upskilling of the existing workforce. This requires investment to unlock the potential of residents and workers to support them to progress into good quality jobs and sustain employment, helping to build a more productive workforce and support inclusive growth. This needs to align with the Government's UK Modern Industrial Strategy and the IS-8 sectors[2] as well as the priority sectors identified in the emerging South Midlands Economic growth Strategy.

The South Midlands has an above average employment rate at 76.8% relative to 75.5% in England. Nevertheless, an estimated 217k residents are classified as economically inactive, accounting for 20.1% of its working age population[3]. Furthermore, some localities such as Oundle (North Northamptonshire), Sharnbrook (Bedford) and Luton's central ward (Luton) exhibit concentrated issues which may include higher levels of inactivity, deprivation, health inequalities, and skills gaps that limit access to employment. Housing affordability and the distribution of opportunities across the geography also present challenges for residents seeking work.

The **Get South Midlands Working Plan** sets out a coordinated response to these labour market issues. The plan has been developed in partnership with local authorities, employment support bodies, health and wellbeing specialists, skills and training providers, employers and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector. The plan is aligned with the government's **Plan for Change** to kickstart economic growth and raise living standards in every part of the UK, with more people in good jobs and improved employment prospects, skills and productivity, and the **Get Britain Working White Paper** and its ambition to raise the national employment rate to 80%[4].

Working between Local Authorities, the Integrated Care Boards, and the DWP across the South Midlands, a key part of the development of this plan will be the challenges of ensuring that the partnership, governance and system leadership has the capacity to address the array of challenges, complexities and transformation challenges which will be required to deliver the ambitions around this national policy agenda and form the basis for a more integrated system of employment support.

The Get South Midlands Working Plan reflects the different needs and circumstances across the area, drawing on local data, intelligence and lived experience. The plan sets out an initial set of actions to improve labour market participation, support key groups facing specific challenges, and strengthen connections between work, health and skills systems. It is a plan that is expected to adapt and change over time, reflecting the development of policy, integration and service delivery within the South Midlands,

---

[2] Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Energy Industries, Creative Industries, Defence, Digital and Technologies, Financial Services, Life Sciences, Professional and Business Services

[3] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

[4] Get Britain Working Outcomes, Department for Work and Pensions available at: [Get Britain Working outcomes - GOV.UK]

and is therefore presented as an iterative process that could lead towards service integrations, pooled budgets and shared outcomes frameworks should the partnership wish to move in that direction.

2 Strategic Context

Labour Market Analysis

Partners in the South Midlands have a clear understanding of the area's demographics, labour market, and wider economy, supported by a range of local evidence and analysis. This includes economic and skills strategies prepared at local authority level, labour market insight and health and inclusion data. The area faces a range of challenges like those found in other mixed urban–rural regions, including an ageing workforce, skills shortages in key sectors, health-related barriers to work, and pockets of deprivation that contribute to persistent economic inactivity and present barriers to labour market participation. A comprehensive baseline analysis established in a bespoke dashboard considers the South Midlands performance against the Get Britain Working Outcome Metrics and a range of supporting contextual indicators.

The Get Britain Working White Paper aims to significantly increase the UK's employment rate and reduce economic inactivity by focusing on skills, health-related barriers, and providing personalised support. The ambition to raise the employment rate to 80% recognises that there are many inter-related components of a sustained improvement to the workforce. The performance of the region against the key government outcome metrics supports appreciation of the multi-faceted challenges that exist. A RAG rating has been conducted and is summarised in Table 1.1 overleaf, with the following scoring:

- Red: Worse than national average
- Amber: Similar to national average
- Green: Better than national average

Figure 3 Relative performance against Get Britain Working Indicators across the South Midlands

Reported GBW Indicator (Approx GBW Indicator)	Bedford Borough	Central Bedfordshire	Luton	Milton Keynes	North Northamptonshire	West Northamptonshire	South Midlands	England
Employment rate - % aged 16-64	78.1	82.8	66.6	79.4	76.7	77.5	77.8	75.5
Gross disposable household income (GDHI) per head, adjusted into real terms using GDP deflators	£24,919	£26,215	£19,950	£24,826	£22,935	£25,098	£23,991	£26,787
Economically inactive due to being long-term sick rate - % inactive	35.2	24.3	29.0	21.7	28.3	19.2	25.6	26.8
Disability employment rate gap	24.0	28.1	36.7	18.9	38.2	20.4	28.1	26.1
Female employment rate - % female aged 16-64	70.4	78.0	58.7	74.3	73.0	75.0	72.6	72.3
Parental Employment Gap	1.06	1.05	1.06	1.06	1.05	1.04	1.05	1.05
Young People Not in Education, Employment or training - % 16-17 (18-24)	2.2	3.0	2.7	2.7	2.1	1.9	2.5	2.9

Source: Annual Population Survey, April 2024 to March 2025, ONS; Regional Gross Disposable Household Income: Local Authorities by ITL1 Region, ONS, 2022.; Annual Population Survey, April 2024 to March 2025, ONS; Inspira/NCCIS, May 2025.

Key Issues

The following metrics illustrate the context within which the Get South Midlands Working Plan has been developed, summarising the key issues for the area.

Above average employment rate masks local variation

The overall employment rate (16–64-year-olds) for the South Midlands is 76.8%, above the national average of 75.5%, although this masks notable local variation. In Luton, the employment rate for those aged 16–64 is 66.6%[5], highlighting the scale of localised challenges.

Table 2-1 Employment Rate: South Midlands and South Midlands Local Authorities, March 2025

Local Authority	Current Employment Rate
Bedford	78.1%
Central Bedfordshire	80.8%
Luton	66.6%
Milton Keynes	79.3%
North Northamptonshire	76.7%
West Northamptonshire	77.5%
South Midlands	76.8%
England	75.5%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

This regional average suggests that South Midlands is making strong progress towards the 80% employment rate target. However, participation differs significantly by location, and demographic as well as issues such as long-term health conditions and disability issues which informs the case for change in this plan.

The 80% target reflects international best practice, aligning the UK with high-performing economies such as Sweden and the Netherlands. Achieving this would bring over 2 million additional people into work nationally, expanding labour supply, easing skills shortages (provided correct training), and boosting the UK's productive capacity. It also supports fiscal sustainability by increasing tax revenues and reducing welfare costs, while addressing structural challenges such as long-term sickness, early retirement, and caring responsibilities.

Concentrations of economic inactivity within parts of the South Midlands

The working age economic inactivity rate in March 2025 stands at 20.1%[6] across the South Midlands, equating to over 216,600 residents. This is 1.7 percentage points lower than the national average. While

[5] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025
[6] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

lower than the national rate as a combined region, specific local outliers persist with higher inactivity rates such as Luton and North Northamptonshire.

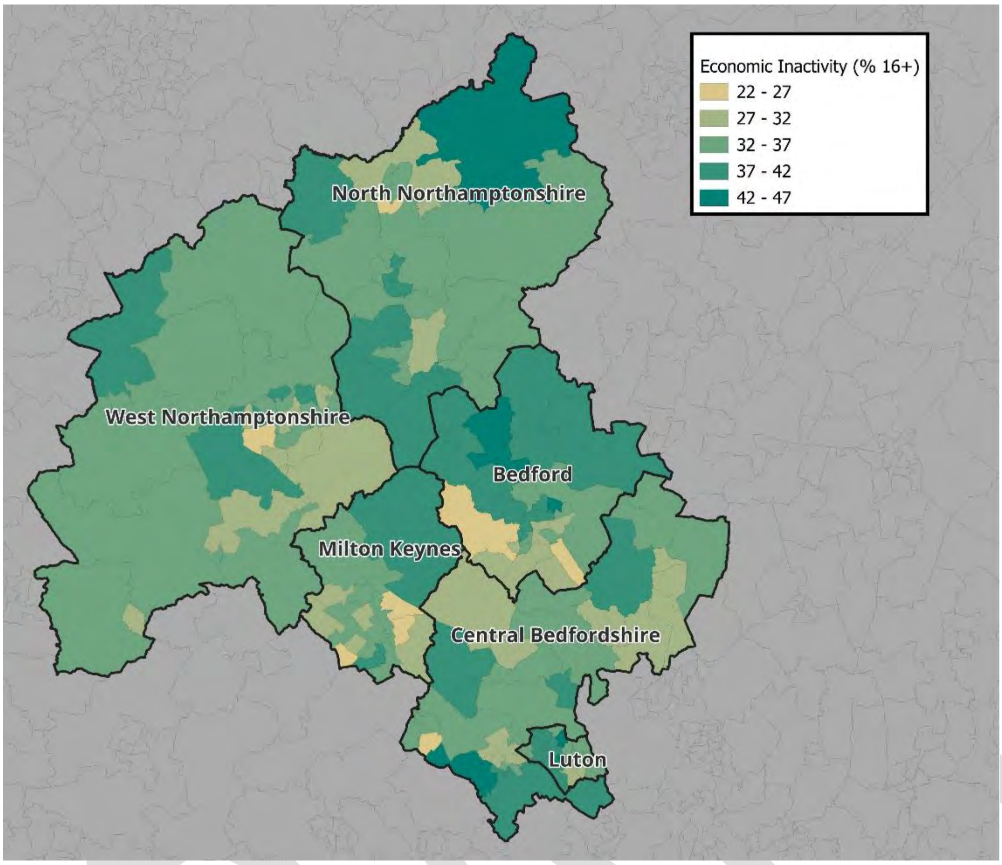
Table 2-2. Economic Inactivity Rate: South Midlands and South Midlands Local Authorities, March 2025

Local Authority	Current Inactivity Rate (16-64))
Bedford	18.5%
Central Bedfordshire	16.4%
Luton	28.3%
Milton Keynes	17.6%
North Northamptonshire	22.5%
West Northamptonshire	18.7%
South Midlands	20.1%
England	21.3%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

Ward level mapping of economic inactivity shows there are localised areas of challenges as illustrated below. The gold shading highlights concentrations around Luton and north of Bedford. It should be noted this data is for 16+ as this is the only ward level data accessible and as such will also include retired people who have retired out of the labour market.

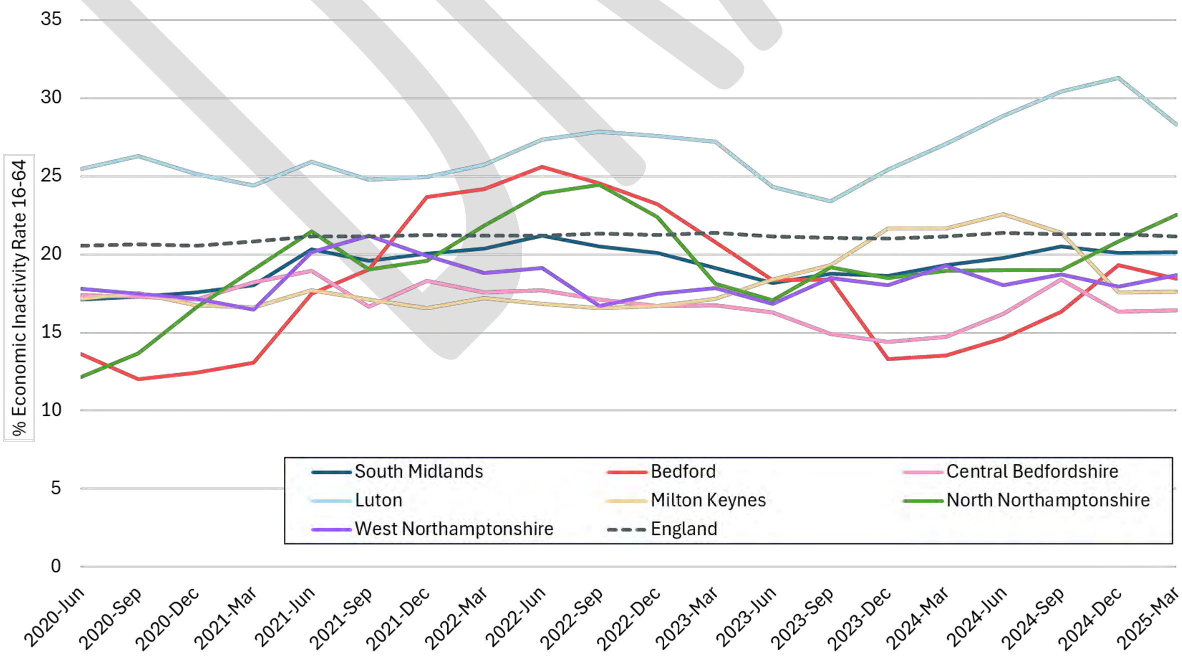
Figure 4 Economic Inactivity Rates within Wards



Source: Census, 2021

Throughout the South Midlands, economic inactivity has been increasing upwards since June 2023 (as illustrated in the chart below), with a growing proportion of individuals disengaged from the labour market due to health conditions and complex needs.

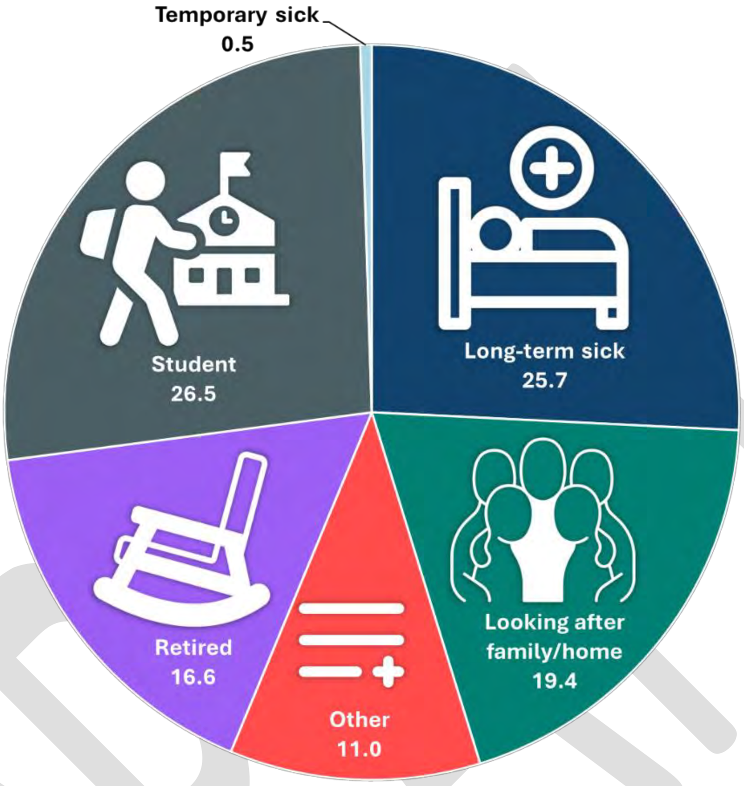
Figure 5. Economic Inactivity 5-Year Trend



Source: Annual Population Survey, 2025

A broad set of reasons for economic inactivity

There are six broad reasons for economic inactivity with South Midland's inactivity being dominated by students and long-term sickness:



Source: Annual Population Survey, Dec 2025

In terms of reasons for economic inactivity, long-term sickness accounts for around 25.7%[7] of all inactivity in the area, with musculoskeletal conditions, mental health issues, and cardiometabolic conditions being the most common causes. There has also been a notable rise in the proportion of 16–64-year-olds who are economically inactive due to retirement, now accounting for 17% of the inactive working-age population (equating to 36,800 people) compared with 11.8% nationally[8]. This proportion has been steadily increasing since June 2022, when it was in line with the national rate. While the reasons for this increase are not captured in the data, possible contributing factors could include health-related limitations, changes in personal circumstances, or shifts in lifestyle priorities.

Rising Claimant Count

The South Midlands is experiencing a notable rise in economic inactivity, as reflected in its claimant count. Among individuals aged 16 to 64, the regional claimant rate stands at 4.7%, exceeding the national average of 4.1%. This figure, however, conceals significant variation across local authorities. Central Bedfordshire reports the lowest rate at just 2.8%, suggesting relatively stronger labour market conditions. In contrast, Luton faces a much higher rate of 8.1%, indicating deeper challenges in employment access

---

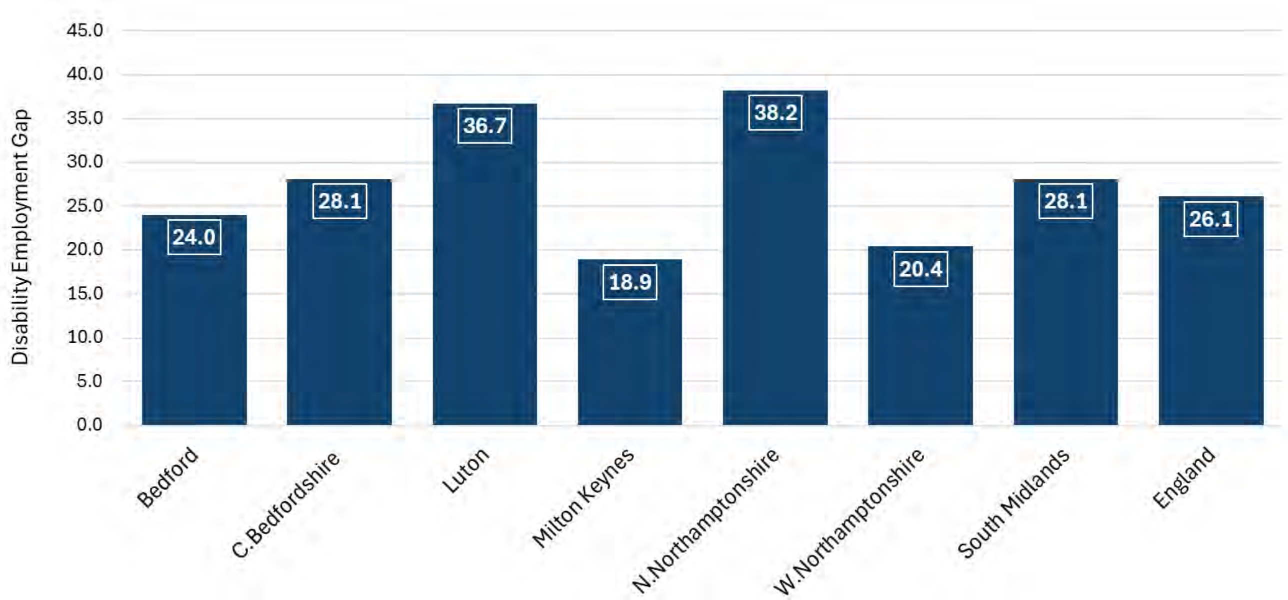
[7] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025
[8] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

and economic resilience. These disparities point to uneven recovery and structural differences within the region's labour market.

Differences in employment outcomes depends on factors such as sex, age and disability

Delving into the data further, it is clear that there are differences in employment outcomes depending on other factors such as people's sex, age and disability. Employment rates for men (81.1%) are higher than for women (72.6%) reflecting national trends. Differences in employment outcomes are also evident between age groups and between those with and without long-term health conditions. For example, the employment rate for people with Equality Act core disabilities in the South Midlands is 55.5%[9] relative to 76.8% for the wider population illustrating a 21.3 percentage point gap. The disability employment gap for local authorities within the South Midlands is illustrated below. The areas with the highest disability employment gap include North Northamptonshire (38.2%) and Luton (36.7%).

Figure 6. Disability Employment Gap, 2025



Source: Annual Population Survey, 2025

Below Average Earnings

Real Disposable Household income levels in the South Midlands are on average £24,000 which is below national levels (£26,800). All local authorities within the sub-region have a lower real disposable income than the national benchmark, with Central Bedfordshire being the only area close to national levels. Luton records the lowest disposable household income at £20,000, while only West Northamptonshire and Central Bedfordshire exceed £25,000.

Between the years 2021-2022, all but one (Milton Keynes) local authority within the South Midlands saw a decrease in their Gross Disposable Household Income (between 0.1-0.5%). Whilst these were below the national average decrease of 0.6%, the downward trend is still a concern.

[9] Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2025

Variations in NEET Rates and Early Disengagement

Alongside youth unemployment, NEET rates are below the national level, with 2.5% of 16–17-year-olds in South Midlands classified as NEET (around 4,660) in 2023 compared to 2.9% on a national scale. Despite this there is evidently regional differences with Central Bedfordshire having 3.0% of 16-17% year olds identified as NEET (1,105). Tackling NEET rates will require focused, multi-agency action, including earlier intervention in schools, improved post-16 pathways, targeted support for at-risk groups, and stronger wraparound services in communities.

Key Drivers and Causes of Labour Market Issues

The South Midland's economy faces various structural challenges which impact upon labour market participation.

Limited Job Availability

Data suggests that on average the South Midlands area has a shortage of job opportunities. In 2023, job density was just 83 jobs per 100 working-age residents, which is 5% below the national average. Central Bedfordshire has the lowest job density of 66 per 100, however, Milton Keynes alongside West Northamptonshire have an above average job density with 106 and 89 jobs per 100. With more competition for available jobs, this disproportionately affects economically inactive groups (e.g. older adults, people with health conditions, single parents) who may need more flexible, part-time, or supportive roles to re-enter the labour market.

Increasing Health Demands

Among individuals with health conditions, the South Midlands has a slightly higher rate of economic inactivity at 48.6%, on par with the national average of 48.2%. However, this regional figure masks more pronounced disparities within specific local authorities. In West Northamptonshire 52.1% of people with health conditions are economically inactive, while the proportion rises to 53.9% in Luton and 54.8% in North Northamptonshire.. These areas significantly exceed the national average, highlighting the uneven impact of health-related economic inactivity across the region. Regarding mental health issues, hospital admissions per 100,000 people for younger people (0-17), are higher than the national benchmark of 84 for four out of the six local authorities. In Central Bedfordshire the rate is close to double (162) followed by Bedford (116), Luton (91) and West Northamptonshire (90). This hints at a possible growing pressure on health services on both a physical and mental health front while also causing structural challenges for increases in economic activity to be made.

Linked to this, while overall life expectancy in the South Midlands is broadly in line with the national average at 80 years[10], there are significant local disparities. The headline figure is influenced by higher-than-average outcomes in certain areas, but 78.7% of middle-layer super output areas (MSOAs) in the South Midlands have a lower life expectancy than the national average.

A key document that summarises these challenges is the BLMK Work and Health Strategy, which is a collaborative, system-wide plan to improve employment, reduce economic inactivity, and tackle health inequalities by 2030. It relies on partnership, innovation, and a strong focus on prevention, inclusion, and community empowerment and a similar strategy is expected to be developed for Northamptonshire.

[10] Life Expectancy, ONS, 2016-2020

Lack of affordable housing

The emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy identifies housing affordability as one of the major challenges for the area. It goes on to state that this is driven by both high housing costs and low earnings and that if left unaddressed, the issue could limit the region's ability to fully realise its potential.

According to ONS housing purchase affordability ratios[11], the South Midlands performed worse between 2023-2024 than the national average overall. Central Bedfordshire records the highest (least affordable) ratio, while North Northamptonshire performs the best within the region and better than the national average (see Table below).

In Central Bedfordshire, the average house price is 9.55 times the median annual gross earnings, closely followed by 8.98 in in Bedford Borough. This indicates that home ownership in these local authorities, and more broadly across the South Midlands, is likely to be unaffordable for many average earners.

Table 2-3. Housing Affordability Ratio, ONS, FYE 2024

Area	Ratio[12]
Central Bedfordshire	9.55
Bedford	8.98
Milton Keynes	8.16
South Midlands (Average)	8.16
England (National Benchmark)	7.90
Luton	7.78
West Northamptonshire	7.39
North Northamptonshire	7.09

Economic inactivity and access to housing are inter-related issues as unaffordable and insecure housing can contribute to inactivity by preventing people from seeking or maintaining work. Economic activity can also limit a person's ability to access stable housing. High housing costs and a lack of affordable accommodation can prevent people from living near job opportunities. In order to help address affordability issues, attract and retain working age residents there is a need to accelerate housing delivery. In addition, supporting f job creation near affordable and social housing will also be beneficial

Access to public transport in rural areas

Whilst there are a number of towns and cities in the South Midlands, including Milton Keynes, Luton, Northampton and Bedford amongst others, large parts of the sub-region are rural in nature. This is particularly the case in Central Bedfordshire and parts of Northamptonshire. This can make travelling to work, particularly by public transport, extremely difficult for some groups. This is especially the case for those living in more deprived areas within the South Midlands. Difficulties accessing public transport can result in significant barriers to employment, education and services. Addressing this challenge will require tailored solutions that balance investment in public transport with support for local job creation and flexible mobility options

[11] The ONS defines housing affordability as the ratio of median house prices to median gross annual workplace-based earnings, with higher ratios indicating lower affordability.
[12] Housing Affordability Ratio, ONS, FYE 2024

Lower Qualification Levels

The South Midlands faces a notable qualification gap compared to national averages. Among the working-age population, 11.7% of working age residents have no formal qualifications, higher than the national benchmark of 10.9%. This suggests a greater proportion of individuals may face barriers to employment or progression due to limited educational attainment. The disparity becomes more pronounced at the higher end of the qualification spectrum: only 35.8% of residents in the South Midlands hold a Level 4 qualification or above, compared to 39.0% nationally (England). This shortfall in advanced qualifications may constrain the region's ability to attract and sustain high value industries and could contribute to lower productivity and earnings potential across the area. There are also links with digital poverty and poor connectivity issues in rural areas, where access to broadband and technology (such as computers, affordability of data) can impact on skills and qualification levels.

Lower levels of Productivity

Whilst productivity issues are not necessarily a cause of labour market issues, they are related, in part because they often relate to the type of jobs available or issues like skills levels. While the UK's average Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked is £36.5, the South Midlands falls short at £34.3, indicating lower labour productivity. This figure, however, conceals significant internal variation: North Northamptonshire reports the lowest productivity at £28.9 per hour, while Milton Keynes exceeds the national benchmark with £45.1. This outlier skews the regional average upward—without Milton Keynes, the remaining five local authorities all fall below the national standard. Removing this exceptional performer would reveal a more pronounced structural challenge across the region.

The emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy highlights the concern that low and worsening levels of productivity can impact on the area's ability to compete. In addition, it may limit working age people and businesses moving into the area.

Local strengths and assets

A growing economy which opens up new employment opportunities

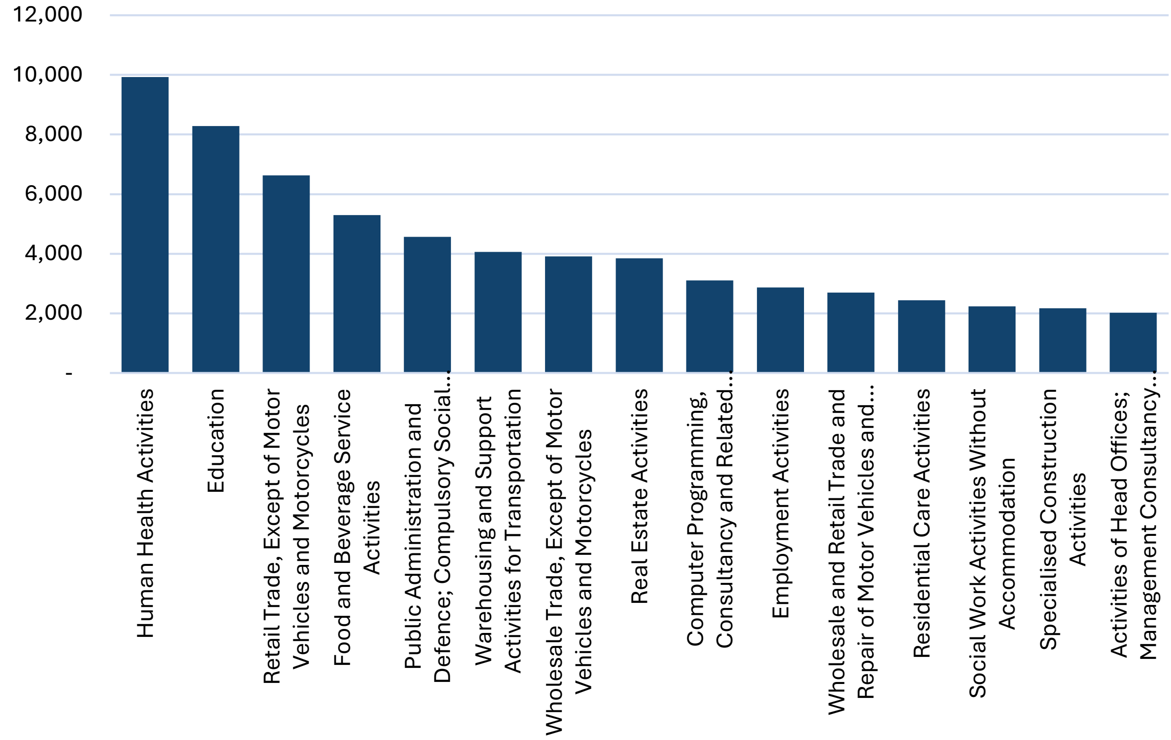
Despite issues around job availability as referenced above in terms of the below average levels of job density, the South Midlands economy has in fact been growing which presents employment opportunities for those looking for work.

According to the emerging South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy, an additional 122,000 jobs were supported across the South Midlands economy between 2014 and 2024. This represents an increase of +14.3% which significantly outpaces national growth over the same period (+10.8%). This demonstrates the region's ability to attract inward investment and create new employment, particularly in key growth sectors.

Economic output has also grown. In 2022 the South Midlands economy collectively generated Gross Value Added (GVA) of £55.7 billion and this has increased by 19% over the last 5 years. A growing economy is positive in the context of delivering the Get South Midlands Working Plan since it suggests that there will continue to be demand for labour as long as supply-side initiatives help people into work.

Using Lightcast employment projections it is estimated there will need to be just over 89k additional people in employment in the South Midlands area to meet the need of the economy in 2034[4]. Employment demand will be spread across a range of sectors. The main sectors across the South Midlands in 2034 are expected to be human health activities, education and retail.

Figure 7. Top 15 Sectors Sectoral Employment - South Midlands, 2034 Projections



Source: Lightcast, 2025

Broad sector strengths to suit a range of skills and experience

While each local authority has its own sectoral specialisms, the area demonstrates particular strengths across a range of sectors. This includes those which are typically associated with more low-skilled opportunities (e.g. transport and logistics, accommodation and food) and those providing employment for people with higher level skills (professional services and property). A summary of the key sectors across the South Midlands in terms of employment growth[13] is provided below:

- **Transport and Storage:** With 87,000 people employed in 2023, this sector saw the largest absolute growth, adding 14,000 jobs, a 19% increase since 2018. The Location Quotient (LQ) of 1.9 highlights a strong regional specialism, nearly double the national average. This reflects the South Midlands' strategic role in national logistics, supported by its proximity to major road and rail infrastructure and distribution centres. The sector is vital for enabling trade, e-commerce, and supply chain resilience.
- **Property:** The property sector saw the fastest percentage growth, expanding by 40% with 6,000 new jobs, bringing total employment to 21,000 in 2023. An LQ of 1.1 suggests a slightly above-average concentration. This surge points to buoyant housing markets, commercial development, and regeneration activity, making property a key enabler of economic growth and spatial transformation.
- **Health:** Employment in health reached 102,000 in 2023, growing by 12,000 jobs a 13% increase in five years. Although the LQ is 0.9, slightly below the level to suggest specialisation, the sector's scale and growth underline its importance. Rising demand for healthcare services, driven by demographic change and investment in NHS and care infrastructure, makes health a cornerstone of both employment and community wellbeing in the region.

[13] We have listed those with the highest per centage change between 2018 to 2023

- **Accommodation and food:** This sector employed 55,000 people in 2023, with an increase of 6,000 jobs, marking a 12% growth between 2018-2023. Despite an LQ of 0.8, the sector plays a key role in supporting the visitor economy, hospitality, and local placemaking. Growth likely reflects post-COVID recovery, increased domestic tourism, and investment in leisure and cultural assets across the South Midlands.
- **Professional, Scientific and Technical Services:** With 68,000 employed in 2023, this high-value sector added 6,000 jobs, a 10% increase. The LQ of 0.8 indicates room for growth in specialisation, but the sector's expansion reflects rising demand for skilled roles in R&D, engineering, legal, and consultancy services. It's central to innovation, productivity, and attracting talent to the region.

Significant development planned

Major investment is taking place within the South Midlands which supports economic growth. This in turn will safeguard and create jobs. The summary below is not an exhaustive list but provides a sense of the type of development planned and the opportunities which will be available. A whole range of opportunities will be created, not least within the construction sector.:

- **Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor**: the Corridor, is the focus of a major government-backed initiative aimed at transforming the region into "Europe's Silicon Valley". The proposals which are expected to boost the UK economy by £78 billion by 2035 span infrastructure, housing, innovation and environmental projects. A new rail project (see below) is at the centre of this.
- **East-West Rail**: the Government has committed to creating a new rail line connecting Oxford and Cambridge, with a new route between Bedford and Cambridge. In June 2025, the Government announced additional funding of £2.5 billion (on top of the existing £6 billion already committed) to support the proposals.
- **Universal Studios**: this development in Bedford will deliver the first Universal-brand theme park in Europe. Construction is expected to begin in 2026 with the park opening in 2031. The project is forecast to generate £50bn in economic impact, creating 20,000 jobs during the construction phase and 8,000 during the operational phase. As well as supporting jobs in construction, it will support hospitality, retail and creative industries jobs.
- **Luton Town Centre regeneration**: will transform the town centre, as part of a £1.7 billion regeneration programme guided by the Luton Town Centre Masterplan. The Luton Town Football Club development will create a new 25,000 seat stadium at Power Court, acting as a catalyst for wider town centre regeneration. The Stage on Bute Street will deliver a £136 million mixed-use regeneration project that will include a performance venue, nearly 300 homes, shops, and public space. There is also a £145 million build-to-rent scheme coming forward on Castle Street.
- **Milton Keynes**: the UK government, following recommendations from the **New Towns Taskforce**, has proposed **12 locations** across England for potential new towns, one of which involves the expansion of the existing urban area of Milton Keynes. If successful, this will result in significant investment in the local area. The MK City Plan sets out an aspiration to deliver 11,000 new homes across Milton Keynes by 2050. The new City Plan is planning for 62,825 new homes.
- **Northampton Town Centre regeneration**: guided by a Town Centre Masterplan and Town investment Plan, the area will be revitalised to enhance public spaces, improve connectivity and create vibrant mixed-use developments. Key projects include the Greyfriars Development (delivering new homes, green spaces and cultural venues), Market Walk/STACK leisure hub (providing a destination for food, music and entertainment) and the Four Waterside Development.
- **Luton Airport expansion**: a transformative infrastructure project that will nearly double the airport's passenger capacity from 18 million to 32 million passengers per year. Approved by the Government in 2025, the development includes the construction of a second terminal, expanded taxiways and aircraft parking as well as an expansion of the Luton DART light rail.

Alongside this, significant housing development is planned at key locations across the South Midlands. Central Bedfordshire for example has plans to deliver 25,500 new homes by 2050. The MK City Plan sets out an aspiration to deliver 11,000 new homes across Milton Keynes by 2050.

All of these developments will provide new employment opportunities. Some of which will be available to people out of work and encouraging social value commitments to facilitate this will be beneficial.

Presence of Anchor Institutions contributing to positive social value

Anchor institutions are large organisations that are deeply rooted in their local communities and unlikely to relocate. As well as public or non-profit organisations, they can include the private sector. Examples include **NHS trusts**, **local authorities**, **colleges**, and **major cultural institutions**. Their importance lies in their ability to influence local economic, social, and environmental outcomes due to their size, stability, and long-term presence. Many local authorities are establishing networks to bring anchor institutions together to work collaboratively on key social and economic challenges for their areas. Examples include the Northamptonshire Anchor Institutions Network (NAIN) which was launched in 2023.

Anchor institutions and related networks have an important role to play in tackling the issues central to the aims of Get Britian Working. Within the South Midlands area, there are numerous anchor institutions which can work collaboratively to help tackle issues around economic inactivity and improve employment outcomes.

A good example of this is the BLMK Work and Health Integration Strategy which explicitly references the Anchor role played by the NHS within its overall approach, including commitments to inclusive recruitment, support employment pathways and the role played by the Integrated Care Board to utilise its resources.

A large network of training and educational providers

There is a strong Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) presence in South Midlands. Together, these assets allow the South Midlands to address skills and qualifications gaps to support individuals into sustainable employment. Key HE institutions include Cranfield University which specialises in science, technology, energy and management. It has a strong research focus and industry links. The University of Northampton specialises in health and social care as well as education and inclusion at its recently built Waterside Campus. The University of Bedfordshire which has campuses in Luton and Bedford offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in business, health, education, arts, and sciences. Furthermore, the Open University which is accessible to all students who want to remain remote have their headquarters in Milton Keynes.

Local Colleges in Bedford, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Luton (Barnfield College) and Moulton as well as campuses across Central Bedfordshire provide a range of vocational and technical courses to support a range of interests and skills levels.

There is range of provision to meet a diverse set of needs. Central to the success of this infrastructure will be ensuring strong communication amongst existing provision and ensuring that individuals and businesses have an awareness of what is available and how to access this.

Alongside FE and HE institutions, other bodies play a key role in supporting learning. This includes a range of independent training providers, the institute of Technology in Milton Keynes (also known as the South central Institute of Technology) amongst other similar organisations that fall beyond traditional FE and HE providers.

Strong Digital Infrastructure

South Midlands is seeing steady improvements in digital connectivity. Towns like Milton Keynes, Northampton and Luton already have 5G coverage from major UK providers including EE, Vodafone, Three, and O2. This supports remote working, digital services, and smart infrastructure development which are all important dimensions (alongside digital skills) to supporting digital inclusion and service integration. Broadband access is also strong across business parks and urban centres, though rural areas may still face gaps.[14][15]

A summary of Geographical Variations

Economic and social outcomes vary significantly across the South Midlands, with notable geographical disparities in labour market outcomes, productivity, and levels of economic inactivity are present across local authority areas. For example, Central Bedfordshire is already meeting or exceeding the government's ambition of 80% employment, and Milton Keynes is not far off. However, other areas such as North Northamptonshire - and most starkly - Luton have much lower rates of employment.

These variations underscore the need for a place-sensitive approach within the South Midlands GBW Plan, ensuring interventions are tailored to the distinct social and economic realities of each local authority. A summary of the key issues for each location is summarised below.

Bedford

Bedford is a diverse urban area with a strong service sector and a growing cultural and visitor economy, most recently expressed by the announcement of a Universal Studios resort to be built in the area. The town benefits from good rail links to London and the Midlands, supporting commuter flows and access to wider labour markets. Employment in sectors such as retail, health and social care, and education is significant, but there is scope to expand opportunities in higher-value sectors. However, there are pockets of deprivation and lower skills attainment in some neighbourhoods, alongside health inequalities that affect participation rates. Bedford contains four LSOAs that are among the 0-10% most deprived areas nationally, with a further ten among the 10-20% most deprived. All of these are located within urban areas in Bedford and Kempston town.

Bedford has less people who are economically inactive compared to the national average. However, a far higher proportion of the population (35.2%) are economically inactive due to being long-term sick compared to the South Midlands (25.6%) and national levels (26.8%).

The long-term unemployment rate is also higher in Bedford. The Borough performs worse than average for fuel poverty, excess winter deaths, long-term claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance, working days lost due to sickness absence, and statutory homelessness[16].

Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire is largely rural with several market towns and growing commuter settlements. It has experienced population growth in recent years, driven by new housing developments and proximity to major road networks such as the M1 and A1. Economic activity rates are relatively high, supported by employment in manufacturing, logistics, and construction. Challenges remain in addressing rural

---

[14] https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/news/2025/next-generation-mobile-network-lands-milton-keynes
[15] https://newsroom.ee.co.uk/millions-get-mobile-network-boost-as-ee-expands-5g-standalone-for-the-uk/
[16] Joint-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy-2024-27.pdf

transport accessibility, pockets of deprivation, and ensuring residents have the skills to access emerging sectors.

Our research has pointed to inequalities in access to employment and skills for children classed as SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities). SEND progression through education into skills and then employment can be easily disrupted. The **Central Bedfordshire Skills for All Strategy** states that local educational providers need to ensure that the required plans and interventions are undertaken so that parents and children feel supported.[17]

Luton

Luton has one of the lowest employment rates in the South Midlands at 66.6%, well below the national average (75.5%). It performs poorly across a large number of the Get Britain Working metric outcomes. The town's economy is strongly influenced by London Luton Airport and related industries, including aviation, logistics, and manufacturing. It faces significant socio-economic challenges, including high levels of deprivation, health inequalities, and a younger demographic with varying skills attainment. Economic inactivity is above average (with the phase 2 report highlighting the fact that cultural factors contribute to this), with long-term health conditions and caring responsibilities being notable factors.

Recent Marmot Town research found that historically, Luton's higher rates of inactivity are due to a greater proportion than average who are looking after the home or the family[18]. This is likely to relate to Luton's relatively low female labour force participation – 67.2% of working-age women are in employment compared with 71.5% for Great Britain. The **Luton Employment Strategy**[19] specifically notes the need to help women from minority ethnic backgrounds into work, through tackling barriers including English language competency, self-confidence and childcare obligations. Adding to this, the **Luton Economic Growth Strategy** notes that there are a lot of young people and others not in formal employment due to language barriers. People living in Luton can also expect to live significantly fewer years in good health compared to the national average[20]. According to **the BLMK Health and Care Strategy,** the number of registered carers has doubled since 2019. Carers are twice as likely to have a mental health problem and are almost three times more likely to have a long-term condition. All of this points to a very complex set of factors contributing to employment rates well below the national average.

Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes is a high-growth urban economy with strong representation in professional services, finance, ICT, and logistics. It is one of the more productive local economies in the South Midlands, benefiting from a strategic location and excellent transport connectivity. The city has a relatively young and diverse population, with above-average employment rates. Key challenges include housing affordability, skills shortages in certain technical and digital roles, and ensuring inclusive access to the area's growth sectors.

Despite fairly high economic activity rates (82.7%) inactivity is mostly driven by the large proportion of full-time students in the area (35% compared to 27.5% nationally)[21].

[17] Skills for All Strategy | Central Bedfordshire Council
[18] Marmot et al (2022), Reducing Health Inequalities in Luton: A Marmot Town
[19] Luton Borough Council (2022) Luton Employment & Skills Strategy 2022-2027
[20] https://blmkhealthandcarepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/BLMK-ICB-Health-Services-Strategy-2024-2040.pdf
[21] Annual Population Survey, 2025

North Northamptonshire

North Northamptonshire combines a mix of historic market towns, rural areas, and growing logistics hubs. The area benefits from proximity to major road and rail corridors, which underpin strong representation in transport, storage, and manufacturing. While overall employment rates are relatively strong, there are localised inequalities, particularly in former industrial areas such as Corby where skills and health outcomes are below average. The area performs poorly across a number of the Get Britain Working metric outcomes. The disability employment rate gap is over 10 percentage points higher than national levels at 36.7% and those who are economically inactive due to being long-term sick is above national levels at 28.3%.

North Northamptonshire also had low levels of economic inactivity (19.6%)[22]. Economic inactivity in this area is driven by two key factors: skills and geography. The **North Northamptonshire Economic Growth Strategy** found that workforce qualifications were significantly lower than the national average (37.7% compared to 47.1%) and that there are imbalances between employer demand and the workforce skills supply[23]. Adding to this, North Northamptonshire's rural geography presents barriers to employment.

West Northamptonshire

West Northamptonshire includes the town of Northampton and surrounding rural communities, with a diverse economy spanning logistics, advanced manufacturing, retail, and financial services. The M1 motorway runs through the area, providing strong connectivity for goods movement and commuting. While the area performs relatively well on employment rates, some communities face higher levels of deprivation, health barriers, and digital exclusion. The area's growing logistics sector presents opportunities but also raises challenges in ensuring good quality, accessible employment.

There are significant levels of health deprivation in West Northamptonshire, which has had a knock-on effect on the labour market. According to the most recent economic growth strategy, 17% of LSOAs feature in the 20% most deprived in England on the health domain, including Northampton Central and Northampton East. Poor health impacts on quality of life and is a barrier to participating in the labour market.

Residents in rural areas have low accessibility to health services, with 32% of LSOAs ranking poorly on the Access to Healthy Assets and Hazards Index[24]. Adding to this, in 2017-2019, the gap in life expectancy between people living in the most and least deprived parts of West Northamptonshire was 8.8 years for males and 7.1 years for females[25].

National Strategic Alignment

Recent changes in national policy, including the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Get Britain Working White Paper, and the Pathways to Work White Paper, are directed toward reforming the welfare system, increasing employment, and providing enhanced support for individuals with health conditions or disabilities. However, detailed information regarding funding allocations and local implementation remains forthcoming.

The Government has committed to investing over £1 billion annually by 2029/30 in employment support programmes, with a particular focus on people with disabilities and those experiencing long-term health conditions. The Connect to Work programme, a central programme in the Get Britain Working White

---

[22] Annual Population Survey, 2025
[23] Economic growth strategy | North Northamptonshire Council
[24] West Northamptonshire Economic Growth Strategy, 2025-2030
[25] West Northamptonshire Council Anti-Poverty Strategy, 2022-2025

Paper, aspires to assist 2,600 individuals across the South Midlands at peak delivery (expected year 27/28). Overall, volumes include total expected starts for the South Midlands being just over 8,100 for the lifetime of the programme. A detailed breakdown of Connect to Work starts by local authority is provided in Appendix 1.1.

Whilst the Connect to Work programme is to be welcomed, the need to address economic inactivity within South Midlands Area necessitates more than the introduction of short-term initiatives; it requires significant systemic investment, sustained support for vulnerable populations. Overall, this will rely upon long-term funding, policy flexibility, and a unified approach to tackling structural inequalities that impede access to employment.

However, regardless of those wider policy needs, the overall reduction in economic inactivity will come from the creation of opportunities for people to work in good jobs.

Inevitably this requires a strong link between the development of a supportive infrastructure (including healthcare) and the wider development of South Midlands Area's economy. With the development of the National Industrial Strategy, the role of Skills England and the production of Local Growth Plans, the need to link these approaches up at a strategic level is critical.

On the health-side there is also significant policy development which have culminated in the Ten-Year NHS Plan. Based on the findings from the Darzi Review in 2024, the NHS Plan is focused around three core areas focused around shifting the NHS approach:

- from hospitals to community care
- From analogue to digital systems
- From treating sickness to preventing illness

The proposals in the NHS Plan aim to fundamentally transform the NHS by 2035 through a focus on patient empowerment, digital innovation, and community-based care. Key measures include expanding the NHS App, reforming workforce structures, integrating advanced technologies such as AI and genomics, and establishing Neighbourhood Health Centres to address local health disparities.

The plan also emphasises enhancing patient voice, trialling feedback-driven funding, and prioritising prevention with targeted interventions for chronic diseases, improved children's health services, and stronger links between health, food, and employment policies.

Through this plan, there is not only significant change to be expected, but also significant scope to use this transformation process to support the wider development of an integrated employment support system. Overtime, this could create the conditions for a wider system focus on addressing worsening health inequalities.

Local Strategic Alignment and Investment Readiness

At the sub-regional level, the South Midlands Area has established a range of strategic policies to address economic inactivity and drive long-term growth. Building on the original South East Midlands LEP Geography the local partnership for the South Midlands is well established in terms of a shared overview of the regional economy as well as established partnership approaches between the local authorities.

The **South Midlands Area Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP)** is a central initiative, aiming to bridge the region's skills gaps by actively engaging with employers and setting clear actions for education providers to better align their technical education and training with local needs. Taking account of the shared economic geography across the area the LSIP particularly addresses pressing recruitment challenges that have intensified in recent years. Further information about these challenges and the LSIP is included in Appendix A1.1 and has informed this Plan throughout.

The emerging **South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy** articulates a long-term vision for the area's development. This strategy targets the following priority areas such as business, skills, investment, town centres and economic infrastructure, based upon cross-cutting themes around social inclusions, health outcomes and sustainability. It outlines a number of labour market issues which have informed our understanding of the key issues underlying this Plan.

At the local authority level, **each of the Councils main corporate strategies/plans** seeks to make their individual areas a desirable place to live and work. The key policy documents at a local level are summarised in Appendix A1.1.

The **BLMK Work & Health Strategy** provides a strategic approach to the delivery of NHS integration around Health and Work. The strategy centres on raising aspiration, promoting good work, and tackling work and health inequalities.

Crucially, in relation to the Get Britain Working Plan, it prioritises support for groups facing greater challenges, including individuals with mental health conditions, neurodivergence, learning disabilities, musculoskeletal issues, women's health needs, and young people. Recognising the same national and local context, it responds to persistently high levels of economic inactivity since the pandemic, driven largely by long-term health conditions. The Strategy also looks at the wider determinants of health, including health inequalities highlighting how social issues such as financial hardship and poor health are closely intertwined, particularly among vulnerable populations such as single parents, ethnic minorities, disabled individuals, and the youth.

To address these challenges, the strategy adopts an integrated approach involving the NHS, local authorities, employers, and the voluntary sector.

It promotes co-design, digital-first solutions, and equitable access to locally relevant, asset-based support. A "common endeavour" is encouraged, where statutory and non-statutory partners, including residents, to collaborate to prevent economic inactivity and health inequalities. The stewardship partnership model brings together diverse voices to co-produce solutions, while the theory of change shifts focus from treatment to prevention, using community assets and social value in commissioning.

The Integrated Care Board plays a central role in leading efforts, fostering inclusive recruitment, and supporting staff wellbeing. Key missions include embedding work and health in all policies, empowering communities, and integrating services. Success depends on system-wide collaboration, place-based focus, multi-sector funding, workforce development, and initiatives such as apprenticeships, youth engagement, and mental health programmes. A similar strategy is expected to be produced in North & West Northamptonshire shortly.

There is strong policy alignment between the Get South Midlands Working Plan and the local, regional and national context. Crucially, the labour participation elements identified across the LSIP as well as the BLMK Work & Health Strategy show that there is significant alignment at a strategic level around the challenges of inactivity. The South Midlands has established infrastructure to support delivery of interventions, with active collaboration across sectors. The Get South Midlands Working Plan will leverage this strong foundation to deliver strategic goals through coordinated action.

Making the Case for Change

This section outlines two primary consequences of economic inactivity that affect both individuals and society: its impact on individual wellbeing and its overall economic cost. Although other compelling reasons for intervention exist, these two represent the most persuasive arguments for change.

Individual Wellbeing

Economic inactivity has significant implications for individual wellbeing, particularly in relation to financial and health outcomes. Individuals who are economically inactive are more likely to experience financial insecurity, which can persist even upon re-entry into the labour market due to a higher likelihood of insecure or low-paid employment. This financial strain increases the risk of food and fuel poverty and can contribute to housing instability. In parallel, economic inactivity is closely associated with poorer mental and physical health. Individuals report higher levels of isolation, reduced confidence, and symptoms of depression, which can further hinder their ability to engage with employment opportunities. These factors are often interdependent and mutually reinforcing, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that address both financial and health-related barriers to participation.

Source: The UK Insecure Work Index 2024

Overall Economic Impact

According to DWP Stat-Xplore data, around 113,214 working-age residents in South Midlands receive worklessness benefits (ESA and JSA)[26]. Although the potential benefits are estimated assuming all these

[26] This includes people on Universal Credit in the conditionality groups of no work requirements, planning for work, and preparing for work; and those in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group and Support Group. The figure excludes 1,270 people claiming any combination of these benefits simultaneously.

residents gain employment, it is unrealistic to expect full re-entry into the labour market. To generate more realistic estimates, we follow an approach similar to Lancashire Skills & Employment Hub[27], which segments the economically inactive population based on how close they are to the labour market:

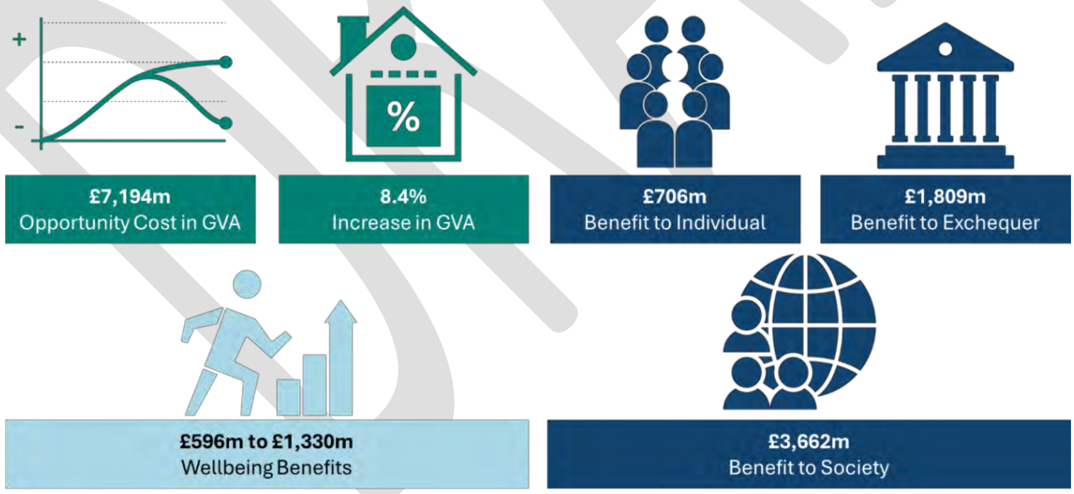
- **Those closer to the labour market** include UC claimants in the 'preparing for work', 'planning for work', and 'no work requirements' conditionality regimes. Although people in the latter group are not currently required to engage in job-seeking activity, they tend to be younger, have spent less time on benefits than ESA recipients[28], and may be more open to re-engagement. Some also move more frequently between inactivity, unemployment, and work.
- **Those further from the labour market** include ESA Support Group claimants and those in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group, who face more complex or long-term barriers to employment. This group includes those who are claiming both UC and ESA.

On average, each job contributes around **£66,000** to the economy. If more people who are close to the labour market were supported into work, the region's overall economic output could grow by around **8%,** equivalent to more than **£7 billion**.

The financial benefits would also be substantial. Individuals would gain from wages and improved living standards, worth around **£700 million**, while the Government and local services would save over **£1.8 billion** through reduced welfare and healthcare costs. In total, society could benefit by almost **£4 billion**.

Beyond money, work brings wider wellbeing benefits. People in employment are more likely to report better mental health, stronger social relationships, and greater independence. These improvements are valued at between **£600 million and £1.3 billion**.

Source: GC Insight using PHE's Movement into Employment tool



In short, reducing economic inactivity would not only boost the economy but also improve lives and strengthen communities across the South Midlands.

A more detailed breakdown is in Appendix A3, highlighting elements of the calculation methods and how health and wellbeing figures have been calculated.

[27] Lancashire Skills & Employment Hub (2023), Economic Inactivity Insight Report

3 Focus on Key Target Groups

Introduction

In order to achieve the ambition of increasing the employment rate to 80% and increasing real earnings amongst non-retired households there is a need to implement targeted interventions that address the underlying causes of economic inactivity and support increased economic participation. In this section, we confirm the key target groups and the issues they face.

This section summarises the research and literature around the drivers of economic inactivity and lower labour participation across four key groups identified as being at most risk of economic inactivity and lower levels of labour market participation. These groups were identified through engagement, desk research and data analysis. Focusing on these key groups enables implementation efforts to be directed where they are most needed and where impact can be greatest to increase employment participation and tackle economic inactivity. These groups face significant barriers and challenges to labour market participation. It is recognised that people can sit in one or more of these groups:

- Young people and NEET, including care leavers
- Those in ill health
- Long term unemployed
- Disadvantaged groups

Labour market challenges in the South Midlands appear to be rooted in long-standing systemic issues. A key concern is persistent long-term unemployment, which in some cases spans generations and manifests itself as high levels of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status. Additionally, health and wellbeing are significant barriers to labour market participation, with both mental and physical health conditions contributing to reduced engagement and employment outcomes.

Understanding Economic Inactivity

A person is considered to be economically inactive if they:

- Are not in employment, and
- Have not been seeking work within the last 4 weeks, and/or
- Are unable to start work within the next 2 weeks.
- This group is distinct from the unemployed, who are actively seeking and available for work. The economically inactive can include those people who are retired, students and those suffering from ill health.

How we think about Economic Inactivity is a key part of how we develop new interventions but also embed them into the current system. Previous sections of this plan have provided an overview of the challenges around economic inactivity and reduced labour participation. This next section provides a mechanism for thinking about the systemic challenges which key groups face, but also about the common structural factors which will impact on them as well.

The policy and literature review (Appendix A2) provides an overview of the research in addition to the insights and trends analysis provided above. The key insights that we can take away from these findings are:

- Barriers are interconnected: For example, poor transport limits access to jobs and services, which in turn affects health and wellbeing.
- Impacts are unequal: Disabled people, carers, young people, and those in rural areas face the greatest barriers.
- Solutions must be multi-level: Addressing economic inactivity requires action on structural (housing, transport), systemic (health, childcare, skills), and programme (targeted support) levels.

This model is closely aligned to the research which DWP has shared into the needs of key groups around employment support.[29] Similarly, the DWP distinguished between areas like housing, health & wellbeing, skills and employment. Building on this, we have mapped out the challenges for key groups that show the need for a multi-level solution:

Table 2-4. Key Groups and Relevant Challenges

Group	Structural Barriers	Systemic Barriers	Impact
NEETs and Young People including Care Leavers	Poor transport, lack of local career advice	Soft and basic skills gaps, uninformed parents and carers	Higher risk of NEET status, long-term "scarring" on earnings and prospects
Those in ill health	Long wait times for mental health and MSK appointments, Rigid benefits system disincentivising work	Employer attitudes	Large employment gap, higher inactivity, worsening health outcomes
Long term unemployed	Language barriers, sectoral change – skills misalignment	Competitive labour market, workplace readiness	Lower employment, higher poverty, interrupted careers
Disadvantaged groups	Digital exclusion	Age discrimination, cultural and societal practices	Groups remain outside of the workforce and unengaged from support

Each one of these groups of people runs the risk of being economically inactive *because* of these factors, but they also represent a set of factors which are a common experience for these groups anyway. A common factor across all groups is a much higher risk of being in insecure employment.

Economically inactive individuals face substantial earnings losses and long-term career impacts when out of work, especially after prolonged unemployment. This is particularly the case for NEETs who can experience a significant impact on their future earnings. Less understood is that upon re-employment, economically inactive people are 1.5 times more likely to be in insecure work with lower quality jobs, less pay and stability. This reflects a general increase in insecure employment across labour markets, but also the overall capacity of the Economically Inactive to access good jobs due to their personal requirements and needs.

[29] GOV.UK. 'What Works to Support Disadvantaged Groups towards Employment? - Research Summary'. 11 August 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-to-support-disadvantaged-groups-towards-employment/what-works-to-support-disadvantaged-groups-towards-employment-research-summary.

Overview of target priority cohorts

Priority Cohort 1: NEETs and Young People, Including Care Leavers

Despite NEET rates being below the national average, with 2.5% of 16-17 year olds in South Midlands classified as NEET in 2024 compared to 2.9% on a national scale, young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) represent a critical cohort for intervention in the South Midlands. With over 4,600 individuals aged 16–24 currently NEET, this group faces long-term risks including reduced lifetime earnings and limited career progression — often referred to as "scarring effects." These outcomes not only affect individuals but also have broader economic and social implications for the region.

As reported in Appendix A2 which looked into drivers and causes of economic participation, the challenges for this group are multifaceted. This reflects their socio-economic backgrounds and lack of access to basic services. Many NEETs struggle with foundational skills such as numeracy, literacy, and soft skills essential for workplace readiness. There is also a clear gap in parental and carer support, compounded by limited access to high-quality local careers advice. This leaves many young people without the guidance needed to navigate education and employment pathways. For some people within this group, the issue is around breaking a cycle of generational unemployment. Some parents need to be challenged and educated on the importance of children succeeding at school.

Care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group within the wider youth population. While the South Midlands has around 1,600 care leavers aged 16–24, it's important to note that not all of them are NEET. However, care leavers are statistically more likely to face barriers to sustained education, employment, or training due to a range of factors including disrupted education, limited family support, and challenges with housing and mental health.

Their experiences often intersects with the broader issues affecting NEETs — such as gaps in soft skills, low confidence, and limited access to tailored careers advice — but are compounded by the transition out of the care system. This makes them a key cohort for targeted interventions, particularly those that offer wraparound support, mentoring, and pathways into stable employment or further education.

Young People and NEET, Including Care Leavers

- If an individual is categorised as NEET there is a chance they will be impacted in the long term with “scarring” on their future earnings and career prospects.
- Challenges lie in soft skills gaps and basic functioning skills – numeracy and language
- A gap exists around parental and carer insight, coupled with insufficient local career advice – many young people lack the career knowledge to avoid becoming NEET

Key Statistics	
Population (16-24)	200,614
Employment Rate (% of 16-24)	50%
% NEET	2.5%
NEET Cohort count	4,663
Claimant Count	7,925
Care Leavers	1,600

Priority Cohort 2: Those in ill health

This priority cohort includes those with long term health conditions, disabilities or those experiencing an episode of planned or unplanned care.

In the South Midlands, more than 550,000 individuals aged 16 and over are living with health conditions or illnesses that have lasted more than 12 months. These long-term conditions can include disabilities, mental health issues and musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions such as back ache and arthritis. This group faces significant barriers to employment, with nearly 49% classed as economically inactive and an unemployment rate of 1.8% among those actively seeking work.

Ill health, both physical and mental, is a major factor limiting labour market participation. The Get South Midlands Working Plan Engagement Report (Appendix A2) highlights that in particular Muscular and Skeletal (MSK) issues as well as mental health issues are currently key barriers to accessing employment. This is worsened by the fact that here are longer waiting times for both mental health and MSK appointments.

The Fit Note System is considered to be part of the problem and is leading to people staying off work for longer than they should. Organisations and employers need access to support and information to make reasonable adjustments and workplace changes that could help prevent individuals going back to the GP for Fit Note extensions. It is recognised that Primary Care capacity and fragmented systems are issues at play here too. The Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme (ARRS) which expands the primary care workforce and improves access to general practice services across England will have a role to play here.

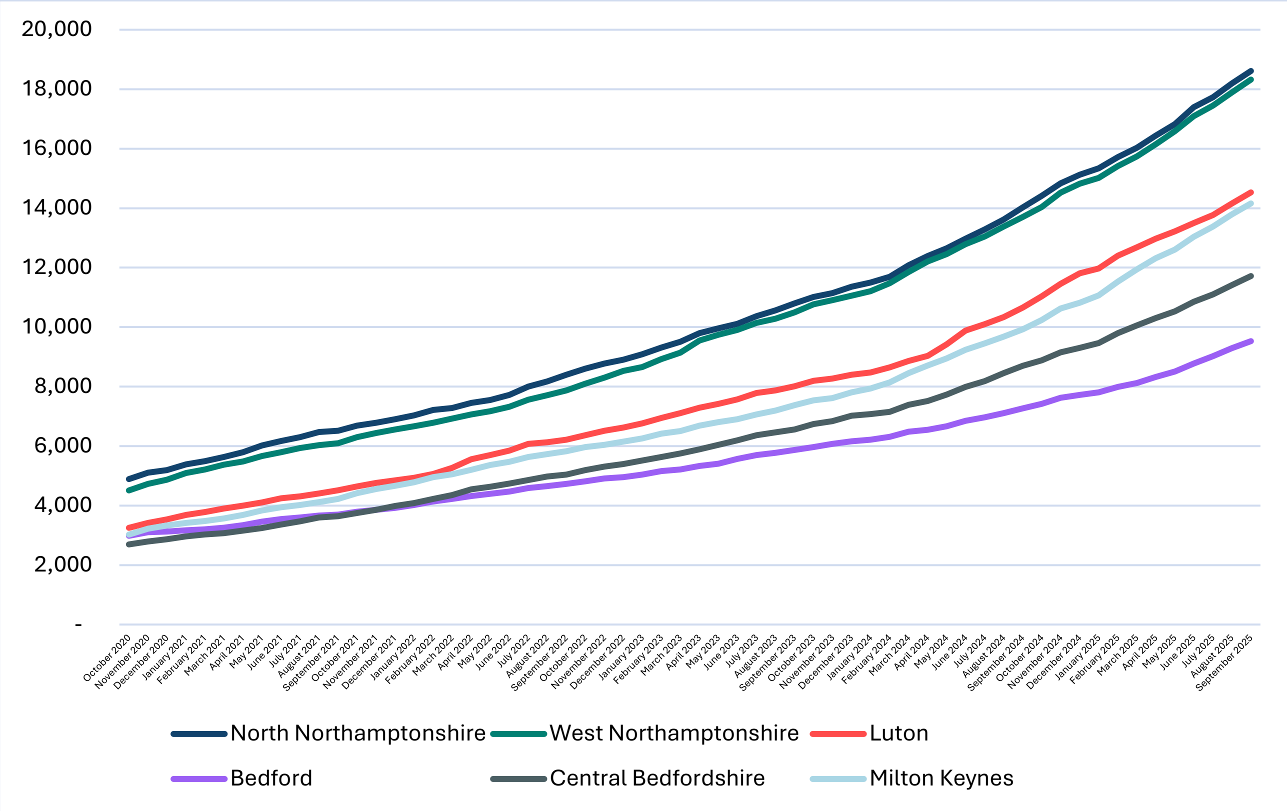
Without appropriate support mechanisms and reasonable adjustments from employers, many individuals are excluded from opportunities that could otherwise be accessible. This not only affects personal wellbeing and financial independence but also contributes to wider economic inactivity across the region.

There are reported to be increasing numbers of people with disabilities, learning difficulties and those who are neurodiverse. As well as these people facing barriers to work, parents of young people facing these issues also struggle and the issues children face will continue into adulthood. The challenges associated with this can prevent parents entering the labour market or can limit the type of jobs they access or hours worked.

Ultimately, health conditions such as long-term sickness or disabilities can impact on the workforce and levels of productivity which can have a wider impact on the economy.

A significant number of those out of work due to ill health are receiving universal credit and are not required to search for work due to their health status. While health status is not the only reason someone can be claiming universal credit and non be required to search for work, it is a significant reason. There has been a substantial rise in this cohort across all South Midlands local authorities since the Covid-19 pandemic as show in the line chart below.

Figure 3.1 – Universal Credit Claimants – No Work Requirements



Source: DWP, 2025

In October 2020 there were 21,353 universal credit claimants in the South Midlands who were not required to search for work, as of September 2025 there are now 86,875 universal credit claimants no required to search for work. This represents an increase of 65,522 or a 307% rise (the equivalent to a monthly compound aggregate growth rate of 5.1%). Whilst there has been a rise nationally too, this rate has been slightly slower with a +288% increase in universal credit claimants not required to search for work nationally.

Table 3.2 – Universal Credit Claimants – No Work Requirements

Area	Sept 2025 UC - not work requirement	Change Oct 2023- Sept 2025	% Change Oct 2023- Sept 2026	Monthly CAGR Oct 2023- Sept 2027
North Northamptonshire	18,613	13,723	281%	4.7%
West Northamptonshire	18,324	13,815	306%	5.1%
Luton	14,531	11,279	347%	5.8%

Bedford	9,529	6,545	219%	3.7%
Central Bedfordshire	11,718	9,024	335%	5.6%
Milton Keynes	14,160	11,136	368%	6.1%
South Midlands	86,875	65,522	307%	5.1%
England	3,306,813	2,454,952	288%	4.8%

Source: DWP, 2025

Those in Ill Health

- Ill health is often a key barrier to individuals accessing employment opportunities.
- Without appropriate support and reasonable employer adjustments, health conditions can present significant barriers to opportunity.

Key Statistics	
Population (16+) with health conditions or illnesses lasting more than 12 months	554,700
Unemployment Rate (% of 16+ with health conditions or illnesses lasting more than 12 months)	1.8%
Economic Inactivity Rate (% of 16+ with health conditions or illnesses lasting more than 12 months)	48.8%

Priority Cohort 3: Long Term Unemployed

Long-term unemployment remains a persistent and complex issue in the South Midlands. While granular data is limited, one striking indicator is that 25% of the region's 16+ population has "never worked", a figure that, while inclusive of those in statutory education, still points to a substantial cohort disengaged from the labour market.

This group often overlaps with other vulnerable populations, including those with health conditions, NEETs, and individuals facing generational unemployment. The barriers they face are typically deep-rooted, ranging from low skills and qualifications to limited access to transport, digital exclusion, and a lack of tailored employment support.

According to the Phase 2 report, this issue links to multi-generational unemployment where parents and grandparents have remained unemployed for extended periods and it is difficult for their children to then break this cycle. Linked to this, language is a key barrier to employment and can lead to people being out of work for long periods.

Our engagement exercise pointed to a highly competitive labour market, where businesses are receiving a higher number of applicants for any one job than ever before. Individuals need to demonstrate that they have highly relevant skills and experience. In addition, they need to demonstrate interpersonal presentation and workplace readiness skills, which many long-term unemployed do not have.

Long-term unemployment can lead to social isolation, declining mental health, and reduced confidence, further entrenching economic inactivity. The pandemic led to a sharp rise in loneliness, with the number of people feeling chronically lonely increasing from 5% (2.6 million) to 7% (3.7 million) between early 2020 and late 2020/early 2021. [30]Loneliness impacts upon some groups more than others. For example, younger people (16-24) are more likely to report loneliness than older age groups. People with a limiting long-term illness or disability are also more likely to experience loneliness[31]. Further research showed that gay or lesbian people were found to be 2.6 times more likely to be chronically lonely, and bisexual people were 2.3 times more likely, compared to heterosexual people. [32]

For policymakers and practitioners, this cohort represents a critical opportunity for targeted, place-based interventions that combine skills development, personalised support, and employer engagement. Unlocking the potential of this group is essential not only for improving individual outcomes but also for boosting regional productivity and reducing dependency on public services.

Long Term Unemployed

- Long term unemployment can create significant challenges for areas and individuals.
- Being out of the labour market for a long time creates challenges around skills appropriateness, work readiness and reduces individuals' confidence and ability to compete for roles.
- Based on 2021 Census data 25% of 16+ South Midlands resident had "never worked" – though this is inclusive of those in education.

Priority Cohort 4: Inclusion Groups

The South Midlands labour market is shaped by a range of structural inequalities that disproportionately affect inclusions groups which are disadvantaged. This cuts across some of the groups already discussed earlier but for the purpose of this plan, this cohort specifically focuses on the following groups:

- Those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds
- Those where **age** is a barrier to employment
- Those who are marginalised because of their **ethnicity**, religious beliefs or cultural differences
- Those who are digitally excluded

These groups often face overlapping barriers to employment, including:

- Discrimination and bias in recruitment and progression
- Limited access to flexible or inclusive working arrangements
- Reduced visibility in mainstream employment support programmes
- More likely to be working in lower skilled jobs in health, social care or construction which are more at risk to MSK and potentially less likely to make reasonable adjustments
- More likely to be working in jobs with insecure contracts or worse T&Cs

We have reported elsewhere that there are some sections of society who are ethnically diverse which have specific cultural or religious beliefs which can contribute to worklessness. The Phase 2 report pointed towards a lack of appreciation from these groups of the need for a good education to support work or a belief that women should not work or access educational, training and skills development programmes. The Phase 2 report highlights the fact that some of these beliefs are entrenched and there is a need to focus on community engagement and access to services which is supportive rather than stigmatising.

---

[30] Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic - Office for National Statistics
[31] Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England - GOV.UK
[32] Investigating factors associated with loneliness amongst adults in England during the pandemic - GOV.UK

Older workers may struggle with age-related biases and outdated skills. Our engagement exercise heard from many who had faced redundancy for these reasons. This situation has been made worse because of the increased retirement age and people choosing to work longer.

Individuals from deprived areas frequently lack access to networks, transport, and tailored support. They often face a complex set of barriers which makes access employment incredibly difficult. Linked to this, they are quite often the ones who are digitally excluded since they cannot afford laptops or access to data. Older people also suffer from digital exclusion. Given the prevalence of online recruitment, these groups are often excluded.

4 Systems and Support Mechanisms

Introduction

A wide range of programmes are currently in operation across the South Midlands to support individuals with employment, skills development, and access to work. These include both nationally commissioned services and locally delivered initiatives. Many of these services align with key themes of the current employment policy landscape. For example, improving employability and job readiness; enhancing access to skills and training; reducing barriers to work such as travel, health, and childcare; and supporting disadvantaged groups and those furthest from the labour market.

National provision is largely driven by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education, as well as online through skills bootcamps. Delivery is through a mix of public, private, and voluntary sector partners. Local provision complements this with targeted support tailored to the needs of South Midland's communities and labour market. The local Chambers of Commerce also have a role in the delivery of support with the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, leading on the Northamptonshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) in partnership with the Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce and the Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce.

Existing programmes

The South Midlands benefits from a well-established ecosystem of work, health, skills and community support services that provide a strong foundation for delivering the Get South Midlands Working Plan. These programmes demonstrate a clear commitment across the region to support people into work in a variety of sectors, improving health outcomes and reducing poverty and inequalities. Job Centre Plus plays an important role in helping people into work.

Further information about the services delivered through Job Centre Plus is provided below:

Case Study - The Jobcentre Plus Offer
JCP provides a package of personalised advice and support designed to help people find and retain employment. It targets support, helping individuals to move into work as quickly as possible. Work Coaches play a central role, offering tailored, work-focused support to ensure claimants remain close to the labour market. Jobcentres provide targeted support through specialist roles and programmes such as the Youth Offer, Prison Work Coaches, School Advisors, and Disability Employment Advisors. Advanced Customer Senior Leaders provide additional support for vulnerable claimants with complex needs. Support is further enhanced through partnership working with local and national organisations, and through Employer Services teams. Claimants may also be referred to national programmes such as the Restart Scheme and can access funding through the Flexible Support Fund. JCP provides signposting to local services providing support for employment, health, addiction, housing, money and debt advice etc. JobCentre Plus offers a service for disabled workers by providing a work coach who is trained to help individuals find work or to gain new skills for a job. They can also provide preparation, recruitment and interview coaching.

Please see A.4 Existing Programmes for a more detailed account of all services

Planned and Proposed programmes

The Get Britain Working Paper set out the Government's commitment to piloting new approaches and programmes to address economic inactivity, including Economic Inactivity Trailblazers, Youth Trailblazers, and Health & Growth Accelerators.

With the appropriate investment and support, the South Midlands is well placed to deliver additional pilot activity and contribute to learning, having already demonstrated an appetite for innovation and willingness to be a testbed for new approaches.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is currently undergoing a major review of its employment support model through a series of Trailblazer programmes. These are designed to test and refine new approaches for supporting: young people (especially those who are NEET – not in education, employment or training); economically inactive individuals; and people with health conditions or disabilities

The table below outlines future planned or proposed programmes for getting people into work in the South Midlands. All the current and planned programmes are delivered through a mix of local authorities, Jobcentre Plus, national government, education providers, employment and skills providers and the VCFSE sector. This diversity ensures a wide coverage, however this could present challenges around collaboration and duplication, which the Get South Midlands Working Plan should aim to address.

It is worth noting that new programmes are being announced all of the time and that there are a broader set of programmes which are likely to positively impact on goals related to Get Britain Working. This includes programmes announced in the recent Government's Plan for Neighbourhoods Prospectus[33]. The table below therefore focuses on the core programmes.

Table 4-1. Planned and Proposed Programmes and Cohort Groups

Programme	Cohort Group & Objectives	Timescale
Connect to Work (CtW)	Supported employment programme delivered across the South Midlands tailored to jobseekers and business needs. Bridges together support from employment and health professionals and encourages employers to become disability confident leaders, as well as offering coaching to boost staff retention.	October 2025 – 2030
Youth Guarantee	Aims to support young people aged 18-21 years who are NEET, at risk of long-term unemployment or claiming universal credit to access apprenticeships, training and employment support. A total of eight Trailblazer areas have already received funding and full implementation in non-trailblazer areas is expected to begin after 2026.	Post 2026

[33] Plan for Neighbourhoods: prospectus - GOV.UK

Local Work and Health Stewardship Partnerships	The BLMK Local Work and Health Stewardship Partnerships are part of a strategic initiative led by the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board (BLMK ICB). These partnerships aim to improve health outcomes and employment opportunities by aligning health services with local economic and workforce development efforts. A similar Partnership is soon to be launched in Northamptonshire.	BLMK already launched and Northamptonshire (TBC)
Work Well	The WorkWell programme is expanding significantly as part of the UK Government's strategy to reduce health-related economic inactivity and improve access to employment support for people with long-term health conditions or disabilities.	Ongoing
Morton House Skills, Innovation and Business Hub	New skills, innovation and business hub that will support 200 jobs in Luton and improve the employment prospects of more than 1,500 adults every year, announced in February 2025. Delivered by Luton Rising.	February 2025 – Present
National Disability Programme	Supports people with health conditions or disabilities back into work through targeted health interventions and wraparound support such as transport and diagnostic treatment service.	Start date mid 2026
NHS Widening Access and Participation (WAP) Northamptonshire	Pilot programme supporting NEET, care experienced people and SEND people into careers in the NHS in central and north Northamptonshire. It will teach important skills to support a move into the health and care sector and offer vital qualifications to ensure success.	August 2025 – Present
Unity in Diversity – Customised Training and Return to Work (CTRW)	Will help economically inactive adults build confidence and readiness for work through tailored 1:1 coaching, CV support, workshops and wraparound support (transport, childcare etc).	January 2026 – April 2030

Collaborative capacity

The South Midlands benefits from strong relationships between statutory services, employers, and the VCFSE sector. ICBs are increasingly embedding employment as a health outcome. DWP have recently realigned its district boundaries, creating a brand new South Midlands District made up of the components of 3 legacy areas to map those of their key strategic partners, demonstrating its absolute commitment to work on and contribute to this Plan . Community organisations also play a vital role in engaging harder-to-reach groups, offering culturally competent, place-based support. The key vehicles through which this happens is summarised below.

Six local authorities within the South Midlands have come together to drive forward the Get Britain Working Plan. This includes local authorities in **Bedford**, **Central Bedfordshire**, **Luton**, **Milton Keynes City**, **North Northamptonshire**, and **West Northamptonshire**. The **South Midlands Authorities Board** is the formal economic partnership which brings together these authorities to co-ordinate and strengthen cross-boundary working to support economic growth, skills development and employment support. This already oversees regional initiatives such as the **South Midlands Growth Hub** and **Careers Hub**.

Engaging with employers is a critical activity. The **South Midlands Growth Business Board** was formed in 2024 to represent the voice of businesses within the partnership. The Board includes representatives from across the region's business community, including leaders from SMEs, anchor institutions, and major employers such as **London Luton Airport**, **Cosworth**, **Cranfield University**, and the **University of Northampton.** The board advises on economic strategy and supports regional initiatives such as Get Britian Working.

The **Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce** and the **Bedfordshire Chambers of Commerce** play an important role in representing businesses and responding to the skills agenda having prepared the most recent LSIP. They are currently preparing the next LSIP which is expected to be published in Summer 2026. This provides a ready-made governance and engagement mechanism to reach employers.

There are currently two **Integrated Care Boards** (ICBs) covering the sub-region. This includes NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes (BLMK) Integrated Care Board (covering both Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire local authorities alongside Luton and Milton Keynes). It also includes the NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board.

Alongside this there is a vibrant and diverse **voluntary and community sector (VCS)** covering the six local authorities. They play a critical role in supporting local communities, delivering services, and enhancing wellbeing.

All of these bodies have collaborated on preparing this Get Britain Working Plan. This facilitates both the identification and sharing of good practice and learning across a number of partners, organisations, systems and structures.

System Challenges

Based on the research, engagement and feedback received in the development of this plan, the following challenges can be identified which will need to be addressed in part through the development of the employment system and also through the design and implementation of programmes.

Capacity and capability challenges

Advisor development

A significant amount of people's engagement with services requires them to have interactions with different professionals across multiple organisations. Although the ambition is right to create a better system, a fundamental requirement is to ensure that officers within different agencies are informed and trained around areas of support and the key needs of service users. This is more than improving their insights around their own service offer but also includes awareness of other agencies and understanding around the needs of key communities (older workers, NEETs, members from marginalised groups, those with neurodiversity). Developing advisory capacity will be central to creating a better system and meeting the needs of service users.

The capacity and funding within the sector itself is a related barrier which will impact on delivery and the distance which the sector will be able to go to in addressing all of the issues identified in this plan.

Agency service boundaries, offers and target groups

Employment support for the economically inactive can represent multiple elements and issues which can impact on labour participation and progression. Often economic inactivity is as much a symptom of wider challenges and problems impacting on households and individuals.

The boundaries between different parts of the public system make little sense to service users and, whilst some progress has been made on better alignment and co-working, the system retains fixed boundaries between agencies, narrow offers and often overlapping target groups. The creation of a single front door (or no wrong door) principle is correct to offset the risk of people being missed through the development of the Get Britain Working approach. However, the development over the medium-to long-term will require the reduction in the boundaries between agencies, identifying a set of common outcomes and creating the conditions for pooling budgets.

Employer Engagement and Support

Employers are a fundamental part of the solution to economic inactivity. Many employers are already providing significant levels of support to workers, and there is a positive desire among some businesses to help address challenges like economic inactivity as part of a broad social mission within the business community. However, there is little recognition within the system of the challenges, needs and problems faced by employers in terms of their role in addressing issues of labour participation and economic inactivity. To support the delivery of employment support, there is a need to recognise the need to work with employers, identify areas of support for them, and work with partners such as the Chambers of Commerce, as well as engage with larger employers in key areas to develop approaches and new programmes.

Crucially, employers will need support around issues like reasonable adjustments, supporting people returning to work, or working through challenges around schemes like Access to Work. Whilst employers are likely to be positive about such work, they need advice, guidance and potentially resources to support the process and the system design around employment support must recognise that helping people into work may increase business costs.

Place-based, Neighbourhood focused delivery

There is a challenge between the desire to have a place-based and neighbourhood focused approach to economic inactivity, and the current array of programmes, resources and approaches which constitute the system of employment support.

Whilst there are already place-based and community focused programmes in operation across the South Midlands, integrating and aligning those approaches with the wider system leadership and development represents a challenge in terms of the capacity of different agents and partners. Whilst integrated working and better alignment can address some of these challenges the long-term development of a Neighbourhood focused approach will require some significant changes in programme design and delivery.

However, based on the experiences of current service users and the evidence of the value of more intensive levels of support, the development of a such an approach is likely to be key to the long-term capacity of the system to address issues around economic inactivity.

Structural and cultural barriers

System Leadership

The Get Britain Working approach is a valuable opportunity to align provision across multiple agencies. This will require clear accountability, governance and system leadership to develop outcomes, agree trade-offs and priorities and work through a process of continuous improvement and development.

The extent to which this is possible will depend on the ability of partners to make incremental changes and improvements to the current system as part of a long-term agenda to develop a new system of employment support. This is likely to mean that in the short-term, the focus will be on better and consistent delivery rather than major changes in provision.

Data Sharing

Inter-agency data collection, sharing and intelligence is a major challenge around large-scale projects and for Employment Support and Economic Inactivity this is no less a challenge. Data sharing between agencies will be central to the creation of a single system.

Initially, the need to share data among partners involved in direct delivery of programmes to those who are in need of support will be the main challenge, but over time the ambition should be to supply information into the skills system, inform the development of labour market linked strategies such as Local Skills Improvement Plans.

Careers Advice

A common factor in the challenges faced by key groups and cohorts is the lack of careers guidance. Part of the challenge is the different boundaries, and service offers between careers services such as CEC and National Careers Service, as well as other offers within schools, colleges and universities, VCSE provision and local councils.

Another limiting factor is the scale of investment and resources for careers guidance. Developing a better system, moving towards an all-age careers system, will require significant resource committed over the long-term.

Access to employment

A fundamental challenge will be out ability to access suitable employment opportunities that reflect the individuals' specific needs. Aside from the fundamental need for people to have access to work that reflect their circumstances and earning needs, there is also the support required to help people access work which either provides them with progression or at least maintains their previous income.

Currently, the labour market is made up of both a large number of jobs which have limited progression, development or pay improvements; it also contains an increasing number of jobs that require higher levels of qualification and skill, and this includes the need to replace various technical and skilled roles. The mixture of insecure, low-value or paid employment represents a potential disincentive for people to work, especially when they would not be better off financially in the work, or where it would not support wider progression.

Linked to this, the competition for more acceptable employment is highly competitive, especially outside of specificality or highly technical skills are required (where there is also significant demand but constrained supply). Balancing the development of the labour market, with the creation of more entry-level jobs is a key part of addressing the mixture of skills mismatches and gaps which is impacting on people's ability to access employment.

Changes required to facilitate future investment

Foundational system change (short-term priorities – within 2 years)

Recognising the importance of incremental change and in response to the challenges identified above, the wider evidence and stakeholder engagement undertaken there is a need to set out the initial steps which will support the overall delivery of a better aligned system of employment support that can address the challenges around economic inactivity and labour participation across the South Midlands.

Initially, the **development of the governance and partnership arrangements**, to ensure appropriate agency buy-in and commitment to the development of system leadership and future model design. This will include the development and delivery of the Connect to Work, identify opportunities and challenges around **Data Sharing.**

Linked to this this the development of proactive engagement approaches with the **VCSE** sector can provide an opportunity to embed lived experience and direct community engagement into the foundational system working within the communities to ensure that insights, feedback and challenges can be identified, reviewed and addressed. Closely linked to this will be the need for **employer and business community engagement** this will need to be linked in part to the development and delivery of Local Skills Improvement Plans, but also provide an open forum to engage with employers to identify challenges, share best practice and create communities of employers linked to key sectors that can be involved in the development of entry level opportunities, progression pathways, and the creation of healthy work places.

Likewise, the development of person-centred approach will require a **review of current user journeys** through agencies would be additional foundational pieces of work towards the development of a future system. There is also the opportunity to address some of the challenges through enhancements and creating the conditions for the development and testing of new models of delivery, as well as the **training and development need of staff within those agencies.**

A starting point could be to explore the use of Mutli-Disciplinary Teams from across multiple agencies for addressing the needs of key individuals and households with a hyper-local/neighbourhood lens. This and other ideas could be used to test the effectiveness of multi-agency working, could be used to address some of the data sharing challenges and develop an area for identifying areas for further improvement.

Structural system change (medium to long-term priorities – 2 years +)

With the long-term objective of creating a person-centred, place-based and neighbourhood focused approach the development of the future system is linked to the development of **detailed action plans** which include **shared, inter-agency outcomes and measures.** This could form the basis for potential discussions around resource pooling between agencies in future. Linked to this and cognisant of the importance of the private sector, Economic development Plans for local authorities can support the objectives of the plan. For example, they may seek to attract higher value inward investment related to the Government's IS-8 sectors.

Linked to this will be the need to support **inter/intra-agency transformation** work to support the development of new delivery programmes and ensuring that user journeys are reflecting in commissioning and procurement approaches at a partnership level. Although the model should rightly be focused on the needs of service users, the deliberate adaptation of agency delivery models will require support and development to be built into plans.

Long-term would be the development of **data and insights** as the basis of informing preventative approaches to economic inactivity. This assumes that progress is made in addressing current cohort needs and that as the new system emerges it can shift towards tackling future demand whereby preventative measures will be as important as remedial measures.

5 Working With Partners

Key Partners and engagement to date

The Get South Midlands Working group has been formed to co-produce the Get South Midlands Working Plan. It is a precursor to a permanent Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board and includes representatives from the following organisations who meet regularly to ensure the plan is delivered collaboratively:

- Bedford Borough Council
- Central Bedfordshire Council
- Luton Borough Council
- Milton Keynes City Council
- North Northamptonshire Council
- West Northamptonshire Council
- Integrated Care Boards for BLMK and Northamptonshire
- BLMK Work and Health Partnership
- DWP
- Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce (as well as the Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire Chambers through the LSIP)
- South Midlands Business Board
- Colleges of the South East Midlands (CoSEM).

Initial briefings about the Get Britain Working plan were delivered to existing forums such as:

- The Fit Note Transformation Project Team in BLMK
- Northamptonshire Anchor Institutions Network (NAIN)
- The local Mental Health Collaborative.
- Place boards and Integrated Neighbourhood teams.

In producing this plan, a range of wider stakeholders have been engaged. Primary evidence has been collated and triangulated from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive assessment of the barriers and challenges that interventions delivered via the Get Britain Working Plan will be hoping to address. Interview and survey approaches have been used to collate evidence from four principal contributory groups. Further information about these and topics discussed are summarised below. Additional detail is provided in Appendix 2.1 including a full list of stakeholders engaged.

Strategic Partners

Discussions were held with strategic partners including representatives from each of the six local authorities covered by the Plan, and individuals representing Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) as well as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

South Midlands Authorities Board

The South Midlands Authorities Board is the formal economic partnership which brings together the six local authorities within the South Midlands. Each of the six local authorities have played an active role in shaping the Get South Midlands Working Plan. The South Midlands Board have had regular updates about the plan, with final approval of the first iteration scheduled for November 2025. Scoping consultations were carried out to explore respondents' aspirations and priorities for the study. This also aimed to obtain views on the key issues and challenges that the research, and the emerging Get South Midlands Working Plan will seek to address.

The following topics were discussed with strategic stakeholders:

- Understanding of economic inactivity and profile of economically inactive residents in each local authority Understanding of economic inactivity and profile of economically inactive residents in each local authority
- Causes of economic inactivity
- Labour market and employment opportunities in each local authority
- Impacts of economic inactivity on communities and on service design and delivery
- Scope and coverage of the proposed research study
- Role of research in influencing policy design and implementation

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
As a key stakeholder, DWP have been actively involved from the early stages of the Plan's development and will continue to contribute through the new Governance Structures. The DWP will play a pivotal role in delivering the Get South Midlands Working Plan and their engagement will help shape local delivery and outreach via the Jobcentre Plus network.

Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)
Both the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board and the Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board have been heavily involved in the preparation of the Get South Midlands Working Plan. Significant nationwide restructuring of the health system is underway, which may impact future delivery of the ICBs. These changes will be closely monitored and assessed to inform future Governance arrangements.

Intermediary Organisations

Scoping consultations were held with organisations that work directly with economically inactive people and those who could be involved with supporting delivery of the Get South Midlands Working Plan. This cohort included voluntary and community organisations, colleges and adult skills providers as well as healthcare professionals. The following topics were discussed:

- Organisation overview and types of residents engaged with.
- Support services offered including any specific employability support.
- Value of employment to individuals and the wider economy.
- Barriers to employment, including local barriers, structural barriers and personal barriers.
- Effectiveness of service coordination, what works well and what could be done differently

The Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector (VCFSE) will act as a key enabler of this Plan. There are positive links between volunteering and wellbeing, plus it can provide a route into work (either through connections or skills development). We are committed to working with the VCFSE sector to help deliver the Plan and recognise their value in supporting the Plan's objectives.

Local Residents

In order to ensure that the views of residents informs the GBW Plan, questionnaires were completed with residents living in each of the six local authority areas. In the main, responses were gathered through in-person surveys at a JCP in each of the local authority areas, but some responses were also gathered through Bedford's Employment and Skills service disseminating the survey by email to residents they worked with.

The purpose of the survey was to explore the reasons for individuals being economically inactive and unemployed, the barriers and challenges faced in securing and retaining employment, and perspectives on the types of employment that would be of most interest. Contact details were obtained from each respondent as a mechanism for confirming participation and, therefore, validating the findings detailed in this report.

We are committed to continuing to engage with local residents throughout the delivery of the plan (as summarised below).

Employers

Employers from all six local authority areas were invited to complete a short, online survey questionnaire, with the South Midlands Growth Hub supporting its dissemination. Specific topics covered included:

- Business profiling information – Geographical coverage; Sector; Numbers employed in the South Midlands
- Recruitment practices, including how employers recruit people who may find it difficult to get work
- How employers support staff who may require extra support, including occupational health support, modified requirements, and training offered to other staff to support reasonable adjustments
- Awareness and use of local or national services that support employers with recruitment and retention of staff with additional support needs.

In addition to the survey, a workshop was also held with members of the South Midlands Business Board to capture qualitative insights.

The South Midlands Business Board

The Business Board includes representatives from across the business community, including leaders from SMEs, anchor institutions and major employers such as London Luton Airport, Cosworth, Cranfield University and the University of Northampton. They have been engaged during this process and will continue to provide a key route to the business community, providing input as the plan progresses and contributing to the implementation of the plan. A draft Plan will be shared with the Board.

Business Intermediaries

The South Midlands Growth Hub has provided an important route to raise awareness of the preparation of the Get South Midlands Working Plan across the South Midlands (with a questionnaire disseminated to all their members). Three Chambers of Commerce cover the sub-region and they have been represented on the Get South Midlands Working group to ensure their input and alignment with the LSIP. They have bee able to review, input and shape the Plan throughout the process. Business intermediary groups such as these will remain important as we refine and implement the Plan, contributing to delivery.

We are committed to working with local businesses throughout the delivery of the plan and this engagement is considered to be an important priority. We will also continue to engage with the South Midlands Business Board and business intermediaries.

Future approach to partnership working

The co-development of the action plan with partners and stakeholders ensures that all parties are actively engaged and jointly accountable for the successful implementation of Get South Midlands Working.

A web page has been developed to keep interested parties involved in the latest and planned activities involved in developing and taking forward the plan: [What is Get Britain Working – South Midlands Authorities].

It is acknowledged that further work with partners and stakeholders needs to be undertaken. We are committed to continuing to work with all of the partners identified above to take forward this plan. This includes the following:

Strategic Partners	Intermediary Organisations	Local Residents	Employers

We plan to:

1. **Continue existing partner meetings.** The existing group covers key sectors and perspectives relevant to the plan and members are enthusiastic and committed to driving the plan forward. These meetings will continue until a Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board is established (further information is provided in the next section).
2. **Establish working groups known as Task and Finish Groups**. These will be responsible for taking forward specific projects within a set timeframe. They will be expected to gather evidence or explore clearly defined issues with a view to developing a set of recommendations which can be taken forward. Each Task and Finish Group will then report to the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board.
3. **Continue engagement with residents**. The primary research highlighted the challenges associated with reaching and engaging residents, particularly those in hard to reach groups. Literacy, language and digital barriers, in addition to low confidence, anxiety and poor mental health make engaging this audience extremely challenging. To really understand the unique challenges that hard-to-reach residents face and identify and develop solutions that will help them get into work, reaching them through existing support organisations is crucial. These organisations will need incentives and / or funding if they are able to give their time and resources to support the plan. In-person engagement by people with lived experience is likely to be most effective in developing trust and building rapport which is essential to really understanding resident needs.
4. **Continue engagement with businesses and business intermediary organisations**. The private sector will be key to the delivery of this Get Britian Working Plan and a plan to engage with this group should be seen as a priority. The primary research highlighted some of the challenges which the private sector faces in terms of supporting and engaging with the priority groups identified in this plan. Further engagement will need to further explore the barriers to recruiting economically inactive groups and work with the private sector to identify ways in which these barriers can be overcome. This should align with LSIP employer task and finish groups and workstreams. It should also include engagement with sector trade bodies.
5. **Continue engagement with other partners:** it is acknowledged that engagement with other organisations will need to take place to finalise the Action Plan and inform the second iteration of the Plan. Linked to the above this will include representatives from the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE), Disability and Mental Health Organisations and Trade Unions amongst others. The priority will be engaging with third parties who work closely with economically inactive groups.

An engagement plan will be developed to set out next steps in terms of engaging with the groups identified above, building on work carried out to date.

6 Strategic Missions & Priority Actions

Strategic Missions

The following strategic missions articulate our ambitions for how the partnership will work together to create a new system of employment support in the South Midlands and what steps are needed to improve system leadership, governance, accountability and engagement.

Strategic Mission 1: Strengthening Governance, Capacity and Delivery

This mission focuses on establishing robust governance and partnership arrangements to drive system leadership, ensure strategic alignment and enable integrated service delivery. It is about building the infrastructure, processes and data-sharing culture necessary for embedding effective collaboration across the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board, associated governance groups, and wider partners.

By regularly reviewing current delivery and adopting an assets-based approach, this mission seeks to identify investment priorities and ensure ongoing improvement in commissioning and service design. The following steps will be required to achieve this mission:

- Develop effective governance and partnership structures to support system leadership and future service models.
- Ensure clear links and oversight between the Partnership Board, Business Board, skills and health representatives and regional Growth Plans.
- Facilitate responsible data sharing to enable joined-up, integrated services.
- Review current delivery using an assets-based approach to inform future priorities and investments.
- Provide recommendations for priority groups and programmes across the region.
- Establish continuous improvement and feedback mechanisms to refine service design and commissioning.
- Map services and review customer journeys to inform ongoing development.

Strategic Mission 2: Enhancing Employer, VCFSE, and Community Engagement

This mission aims to deepen engagement with employers, the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, and local communities to shape the delivery of Employment Support across the South Midlands.

The focus is on creating and building on existing forums which create shared learning, promoting inclusion and working with employers to create healthy workplaces, and ensuring that the lived experience of service users is embedded in decision-making. By supporting the capacity of local partners and integrating their insights, this mission seeks to remove barriers to labour market participation and strengthen community-driven approaches. The following steps will be required to achieve this mission:

- Develop forums for employers and business communities to share challenges, best practice, and foster inclusive workplaces.
- Engage VCFSE providers to gather insight, build commissioning capacity, and promote community-led priorities.
- Ensure lived experience is represented in governance and service design through the establishment of the Get South Midlands Working Consultation Group.
- Integrate service user feedback into continuous improvement processes.

Strategic Mission 3: Delivering Person-Centred, Integrated Service Approaches

This mission centres on adopting person-centred models by integrating services and resources across agencies. It prioritises removing barriers at key engagement points, piloting multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches, and investing in workforce development. The goal is to deliver responsive, locally tailored support that meets the diverse needs of individuals, especially those furthest from the labour market. The following steps will be required to achieve this mission:

- Initiate discussions around resource pooling and collaboration between agencies for integrated support.
- Review and optimise access points (e.g. GP surgeries, job centres, libraries, community hubs) to improve engagement with key cohorts.
- Test and scale multi-agency working to enhance data sharing and service integration.
- Pilot Multi-Disciplinary Teams to address specific local needs.
- Upskill staff to deliver new, person-centred models of service.

Priority Actions

Priority actions are focused on the delivery of actions that can start a wider process of developing solutions and programmes across the South Midlands to tackle the interconnected challenges, barriers and opportunities framing economic participation in the region. It is recognised that wider structural and system challenges related to transport, housing and childcare are beyond the scope of the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board but represent key dependencies that need to be recognised and responded to through effective partnership working, collaboration and influence.

The priority actions focus on what can be achieved in the next two years to support progress towards realising the strategic missions.

Priority Action 1: Interventions that Support Participation

This priority action aims to address the practical barriers that prevent individuals from participating in training, employment, and community activities. By tackling challenges such as transport and housing, and by improving access to opportunities, it seeks to foster greater inclusion and engagement within the local workforce. The following are the key actions identified to date:

- Address key barriers such as transport and housing by ensuring these challenges inform local policy and planning.
- Expand initiatives to improve access to training and employment, such as enhanced transport schemes and childcare reviews.
- Promote effective data sharing among partners to inform programme improvements and strategic decisions.

Priority Action 2: Enabling Participation (Access to Services)

This action focuses on making workplaces and support services more accessible and inclusive. It aims to promote well-being, align health and employment systems, and strengthen career support, ensuring individuals, especially those with additional needs can participate fully in the labour market. The following are the key actions identified to date:

- Implement a healthy workplaces scheme to help employers manage workforce well-being, with a focus on SMEs.
- Collaborate with employee bodies to encourage inclusive recruitment and promote guidance for supporting staff with additional needs.

- Align health and employment support systems, leveraging existing projects and testing new integrated models such as Connect to Work.
- Enhance careers support and commission programmes focused on building confidence and resilience in those furthest from the labour market.
- Define and promote essential skills through targeted training and partnership with providers, linked to local skills priorities (LSIPs).

Priority Action 3: Targeted Interventions to Help People Participate in the Labour Market

This action targets those who face the greatest challenges to entering or progressing within the workforce. By providing tailored training, neighbourhood-level support, and accessible pathways, it aims to foster greater inclusion and sustainable employment outcomes for individuals with additional needs. The following are the key actions identified to date:

- Continue upskilling and training initiatives to support entry and progression in the workforce.
- Develop multi-agency teams to deliver targeted neighbourhood-level support using data to identify areas most in need and pilot approaches i.e. through existing initiatives such as Community Hubs, Family Hubs, Youth Hubs
- Launch Connect to Work, providing employability support to people with disabilities, health conditions or other barriers
- Expand inclusive training options, such as bootcamps for people with additional needs, including those with childcare responsibilities or long-term health conditions.
- Embed essential skills development throughout education, training, and engagement activities from early years onwards, in collaboration with a range of partners.
- Work with anchor institutions to create accessible entry-level employment pathways and embed social value approaches in employment support.
- Support SMEs to recruit and retain people with additional needs by commissioning research and developing practical support programmes.

These priority actions are intended to kickstart a wider process of developing solutions and programmes across the South Midlands.

7 Governance and Local Engagement

Introduction

Partners are committed to working collaboratively to deliver the Get South Midlands Working Plan. This includes the six local authorities, health, DWP/JCP, employers, training and education providers, community partners as well as residents. We recognise the need for shared responsibility, with effective communication between all of the Governance groups. Below we summarise our proposed Governance structures as well as plans for local engagement.

Governance overview

The current proposed Governance Model is designed to be streamlined and inclusive. It will adhere to a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) framework as summarised below.

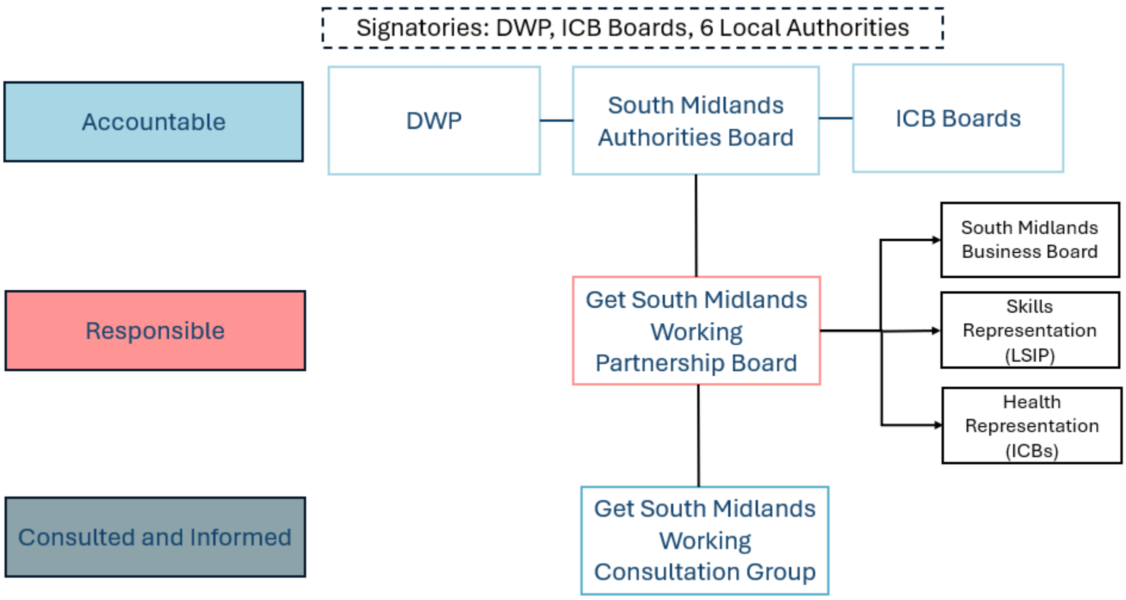


Table 7.2 explains the proposed future governance structure and how it reflects a rigorous RACI approach. It summarises the role of key groups at each level.

Table 7.2: Proposed future governance

RACI	Body	Membership	Role	Reporting
Accountable	South Midlands Authorities Board , Integrated Care Boards covering the South Midlands area and DWP as the three main signatories. West Northamptonshire Council as the Accountable Body on behalf of the six Local Authorities.	South Midlands Authorities Board , Integrated Care Boards covering the South Midlands area and DWP.	The South Midlands Authorities Board alongside the ICBs and DwP is responsible for setting the strategic direction of the Get South Midlands Working Plan. Oversee risk. Overseeing governance and ensuring alignment with other strategies, plans and policy.	Provide progress updates to UK Government, local strategic stakeholders and decision makers.
Responsible	Get South Midlands Working (GSMW) Partnership Board	This is still to be finalised but it will be an evolution of the current working group. It will include involvement from all six Local Authorities identified above. It will also include the ICBs in their future form, Directors of Public Health, Jobcentre Plus (DWP), Chambers of Commerce, FE/HE representation, and Voluntary Sector representation. Membership will change over time. The following will be central to the Partnership, informing and influencing this:	Operational responsibility. Day-to-day decision making. Monitoring and reviewing progress and performance Maintain a risk register with quarterly reviews and reporting to the three main signatories. Individual Task and Finish groups may be established to take specific projects forward. These will be time limited.	Terms of References (TORs) are currently being developed for the Working Group. Reports to the South Midlands Authorities Board and keeps them updated about proposals. Liaise with Consulting body as required. Keep linked Boards updated such as the South Midlands Growth Business Board, as well as health and skills related board.

RACI	Body	Membership	Role	Reporting
		South Midlands Growth Business Board which incorporates the business, education, and voluntary sector. **Skills Representation** this is to be determined but currently the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce produces the LSIP and as such will be important. **Health representation** will include representation from the two ICBs in any future form. This includes NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes (BLMK) Integrated Care Board and the NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board		
Consulted and Informed	Get South Midlands Working Consultation Group This would focus on the following: Employers Communities	Employers Panel • Local employers, particularly focusing on key sectors • SMEs as well as large employers • Employer representative bodies e.g. Chamber, FSB Communities Panel: • Residents and service users linked to GBW • VCFSE organisations	To inform the development and implementation of GBW and help shape it going forward. Challenge, make suggestions and receive feedback on how their input is, and has been used. Engage with target groups to gather feedback.	Report to the South Midlands Working Partnership Board.

It will be important to ensure that the structures identified above align and build on existing structures which exist, including the following:

- Local health and wellbeing boards
- Anchor programmes for BLMK and Northamptonshire
- The BLMK Stewardship Partnership and the Northamptonshire Stewardship Partnership once established

Future Governance

The Governance arrangements will evolve over time as the Plan is embedded locally and as the exact structures are agreed. It is recognised that the local context can change as a result of external (economic and political changes) and internal factors (organisational structures or boundary changes) and that the arrangements may need to adapt as a result. Devolution is one consideration and at the time of writing, South Midlands local authorities are still considering potential options for this, and it remains a long-term prospect.

There may also need to be changes to the Governance Structures to reflect changes to the role of the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board. For example, it could adapt should there be a need to commission and contract services. The involvement of political members also needs to be defined.

8 Measuring Success: Outcomes, Measurement and Evaluation

Introduction

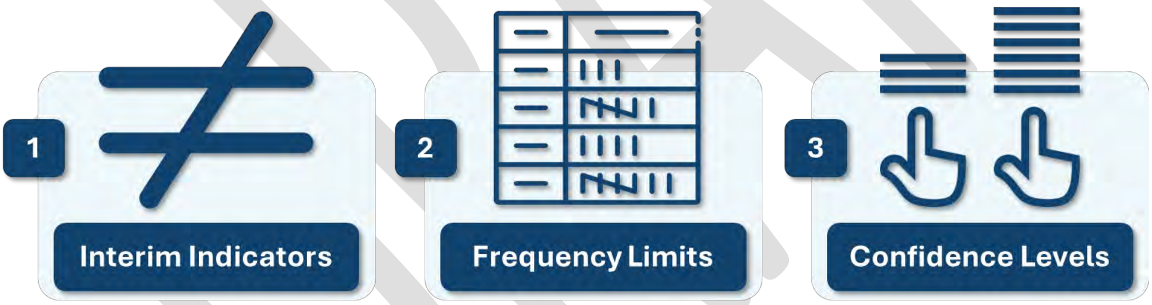
An outcomes framework has been developed which has been designed to support the Government's ambition of achieving an 80% national employment rate. Currently this would equate to 34,140 people which partners are supporting to get into work. While the core Get Britain Working metrics are set nationally and monitored by the DWP, local labour markets require tailored frameworks that reflect their specific context. Our methodology therefore aligns national metrics with local priorities, using robust local evidence to monitor progress on local labour market challenges alongside GBW outcomes.

Setting the Context for a Shared Outcomes Framework

Local Methodology and Evidence Base

The local methodology and evidence base for the South Midlands strengthens decision-making by tailoring monitoring to the area's economic structure, geographies and cohorts. Ward-level diagnostics, partner returns and administrative sources enable more targeted intervention design, earlier signals of change, and clearer lines of accountability aligned to the GBW framework. This also ensure that local impact and value for money can be evidenced.

Gaps when considering localised evidence bases



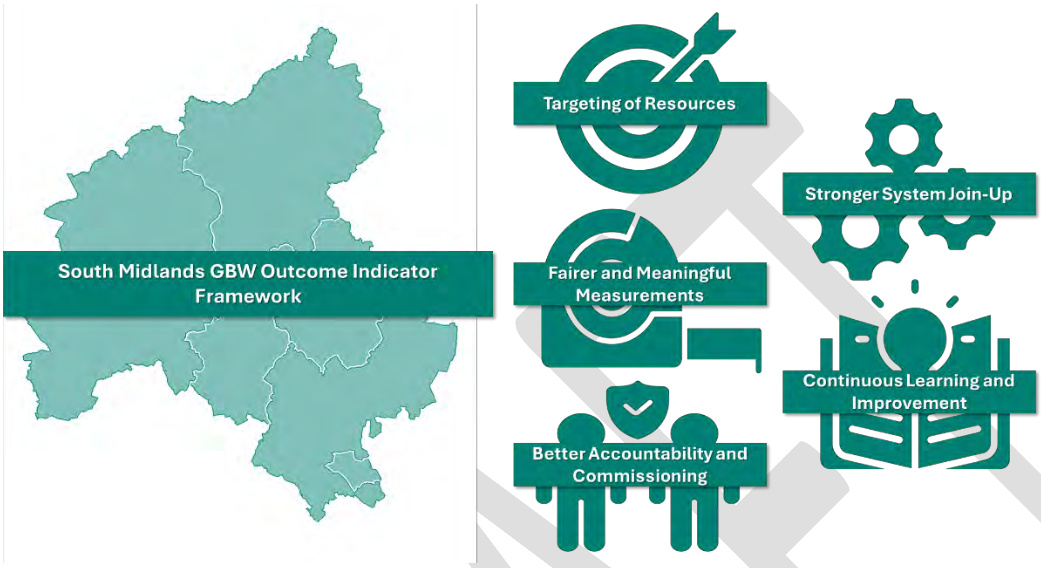
Where gaps exist, interim proxy measures have been identified, however, this means that the measures used here and earlier do not align exactly with the GBW outcome set. Until the planned expansion of data collection is implemented, local monitoring will therefore not fully run in parallel with national GBW reporting. Key divergences include differences in age-cohort coverage. Additionally, several intended outcomes are not yet covered by routine (or readily accessible) data collection within the local area.

A further limitation of the published evidence is the wide confidence intervals in the Annual Population Survey (APS) and related datasets when comparing the South Midlands and its respective local authorities with national benchmarks. For example, although Luton is the only South Midlands area with an annual employment rate below the national average, this fluctuates year to year, and APS confidence intervals mean the apparent underperformance may not be statistically robust. Similarly, Central Bedfordshire's employment rate above 80% should be treated cautiously. Once confidence intervals are considered, the margin may not be significant. Indicators should therefore be interpreted with caution and used primarily to monitor long-term trends rather than short-term movements.

To provide a fuller picture, complementary labour-market measures have been incorporated into the framework, enabling progress to be assessed both against local challenges and GBW outcome metrics.

Implications for the South Midlands Outcomes Framework

Ensuring an shared outcomes framework will result in the following:



Sharper targeting of resources

Individualised outcomes allow commissioners to direct support where it has the greatest marginal impact, reducing spend on low-value activity and focusing on priority cohorts and places.

Fairer, more meaningful measurement

Person-level outcomes (rather than programme averages) capture progress for people with different starting points, improving equity and avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" bias.

Better commissioning and accountability

Clear, individual outcomes align providers, funders and partners around what success looks like, enabling outcome-based specifications, performance management and transparent reporting.

Stronger system join-up

A common outcomes language at an individual level eases data-sharing and case-management across employment, skills, health and housing, reducing duplication and improving continuity of support. Allowing for a more collective and collaborative approach towards Getting South Midlands working.

Continuous learning and improvement

Granular outcome data supports rapid cycle evaluation (what works, for whom, in which contexts), informing adaptive delivery and scaling of effective interventions across the South Midlands.

Proposed Outcomes Framework

The outcome framework is broken down into the three plan priority actions established with a final cross-cutting action, highlighting outcomes that cut across all objectives. **The nationally reported GBW outcomes are highlighted within each priority action**. There are a broad selection of outcomes and measurements to allow for sufficient and detailed data collection.

Priority Action 1: Interventions that Support Participation

Purpose: This **priority focuses on removing practical barriers** to training, employment and community participation. By addressing issues such as transport and housing and improving access to opportunities, it aims to increase inclusion and engagement in the local workforce.

Outcome Measure	How It Will Be Measured	Data Source for Measuring Success
Improved access to housing	Median house price to workplace-based median earnings ratio % of total monthly household income spent on private rent Number of individuals supported with housings solutions	ONS Housing Affordability Ratio ONS Private Rent Affordability Primary Data Collection
Improved access to services	Reduced public transport/walking time to key services Number of individuals supported with transport solutions to services Intermediary providing support Source of referrals to services	DfT Journey Time Statistics Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Improved access to employment	Reduced public transport/walking time to employment Number of individuals supported with solutions to employment	DfT Journey Time Statistics Primary Data Collection
Uptake of employment opportunities	% acceptances of job offers No. of work placements	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Advancing a 'Partner Data Sharing' agreement and process	% of providers signed to shared referral protocol No. agencies on shared directory	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Improves perceptions on removing barriers to employment	Understanding of public view on key barriers to employment Establishing clear pathways/action plans for each Feedback on planned policies Local commissioning of services	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection

Priority Action 2: Enabling Participation (Access to Services)

Purpose: Improve workplace accessibility, adjustments, and support services; join up health and employment systems; and strengthen career support, enabling full participation, especially for people with additional needs.

Outcome Measure	How It Will Be Measured	Data Source for Measuring Success
Reduced health-related economic inactivity	Economic inactivity due to long term sick - % aged 16-64 Proportion of 16-64 years olds in Universal Credit (UC) health journey and/or claiming ESA	Annual Population Survey, ONS DWP Benefit Statistics
Increased employment rate of women	Female employment rate - % aged 16-64	Annual Population Survey, ONS
Reduced disability employment rate gap	Difference between employment rates of disabled (EA core) and non-disabled people	Annual Population Survey, ONS
Increased understanding of work placed needs	No. employers interacted with to understand work placed needs No. employees receiving IAG Sign up and advocacy of Disability Confident Use of Access to Work	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Unfit for work fit notes reduction	No. Not Fit for Work (NFW) notes issued by GP practices % fit notes issued that are NFW by GP Practices	NHS England NHS England
Embed wellness checks into employment programmes	No. wellness checks provided within programmes	Primary Data Collection
Increased inclusive job design	% vacancies advertising salary, flexible/hybrid options, adjustments offered	Primary Data Collection
Increase in apprenticeships	No. apprenticeship starts (by level and characteristic) No. businesses offering degree apprenticeships	Apprenticeships by Level, DfE
Positive service user satisfaction scores	% positive scores from users	Primary Data Collection
SMEs engaging in healthy workplace schemes	No. of SMES engaged in healthy workplace schemes % of uptake to healthy workplace schemes	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection

Priority Action 3: Targeted Interventions to Help People Participate in the Labour Market

Purpose: This action focuses on people facing the greatest barriers to entering or progressing in work. Through tailored training, neighbourhood-based support and accessible pathways, it promotes inclusion and sustainable employment for individuals with additional needs.

Outcome Measure	How It Will Be Measured	Data Source
Increase employment among single-parent households with children	Proportion of children living in working households Number of households on UC with children	Workless households for regions across the UK, ONS DWP Benefit Statistics
Reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training	Proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds who are NEET Claimant count rate among people aged 16-24	Local authority Claimant count, ONS
Better manager awareness and skills related to health and disability	No. attending relevant short courses % completion rate on relevant courses No accessing Disability Confident No using Access to Work offer	Monitoring developed for new short courses Monitoring developed for new short courses Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Entry-level job placements	No. entry-level job postings % education requirement split	Lightcast Lightcast
Inclusive bootcamps	No. attending inclusive bootcamps	Monitoring integrated in the development of bootcamps
Retention rates for people with additional needs	No. SMEs retaining those with additional needs % of people with additional needs retained as a result of relevant schemes/funding/training	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection
Neighbourhood-level interventions	No. neighbourhood-level interventions delivered Geographical coverage of interventions to support priority areas (deprived neighbourhoods or those with high levels of economic inactivity)	Primary Data Collection Primary Data Collection and Mapping

Priority Action 4: Cross-Cutting Actions

Purpose: Some outcomes underpin several priorities simultaneously. Defining and tracking these “cross-cutting” measures help align delivery, avoid siloed activity, and focus on what most improves participation, productivity and inclusion.

Outcome Measure	How It Will Be Measured	Data Source
Increased household incomes	Real gross disposable household income per head	Regional Gross Disposable Households Income, ONS
Decrease in proportion of households with no working adult	Annual household survey data	Annual population survey
Higher Employment Rate	% 16-64 in employment	Annual population survey
Reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training	Proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds who are NEET Claimant count rate among people aged 16-24	Local authority Claimant count, ONS
Reduction in economic inactivity rate (overall and No Work Requirements (NWR) UC Claimants)	% economic inactivity rate % NWR UC Claimants No. NWR UC Claimants	Labour force survey/Annual Population Survey, ONS DWP Stat-Xplore data
Increased proportion who receive job related training	% of all who received job related training in last 4 weeks (female WAP, male WAP)	Annual Population Survey, ONS
Increase in Level 3 and 4+ Qualifications	Qualification split - % with at least level 3	Annual Population Survey, ONS
Achievement of 80% employment rate	% employment rate	Labour force survey, ONS

Data Collection and Monitoring

The **Get South-Midlands Working Partnership** Board will be responsible for collecting, monitoring and reporting on South Midlands Working progress, outputs and outcomes.

Performance will be reviewed quarterly using the GBW Outcomes Indicators. Monitoring of the Get South Midlands Working Plan should, as a minimum, be anchored in the shared outcome framework, which provides a solid baseline aligned to existing data availability and reporting frequency. As data quality and timeliness improve, the framework will be widened to include additional outcomes and finer-grain measurements. Where relevant, reporting will be triangulated with local stakeholder reports, operational dashboards, and additional research and evaluations (commissioned by Get South Midlands Working or its partners), to ensure quantitative trends are interpreted in context.

Reporting on Performance

The Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board will be responsible for the provision of quarterly progress reports to be shared with the South Midlands Authorities Board. Appropriate summaries will be provided to the Get South Midlands Working Consulting Group.

The reports will set out progress against targets along with any risks and mitigating actions. The format and tools for reporting are still be determined but may include a RAG Dashboard and Power BI.

In the first 24 months of operation the Get South Midlands Working Partnership Board will review performance on a monthly basis. Performance will be shared with wider partners (such as the South Midlands Authorities Board and the Get South Midlands Working Consulting Panel) on a quarterly basis.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Developing the Get South Midlands Working Plan has been a joint effort that has fostered and deepened partnerships. After the first year of implementation, the accountable body will conduct a light-touch review. This will consider the evolving context, reassess the Plan's aims and strategic direction, examine its alignment with current policies and needs, and evaluate operational elements to help shape future actions.

Following two years of delivery, a formal external evaluation will be carried out to assess impact. The findings will be published in an Evaluation Report, accompanied by an easily digestible summary.

.

9 Next Steps and Implementation Plan

The Get South Midlands Working Plan introduces a first phase of actions aimed at boosting participation in the labour market, targeting support for groups with specific challenges, and enhancing collaboration across the work, health, and skills system.

The plan recognises the imperative for significant systemic investment and sustained support for key groups to realise ambitions. Achieving these goals will depend on securing sustained funding, policy reform, and taking a coordinated approach to address the structural barriers that limit access to employment, aligned to measures designed to boost the economy and create jobs.

Designed to be flexible, the plan will evolve as policies, integration, and service delivery progress in the South Midlands. This iterative approach allows for future developments such as integrated services, pooled funding, and shared outcomes frameworks.

The strategic missions established in the plan outline our vision for collaborative partnership in building a new employment support system for the South Midlands. The plan also outlines actions required to strengthen leadership, governance, accountability, and engagement across the region. The initial steps involve convening the partnership to review each partner's current service delivery, available resources, and workforce capacity, and to collectively define the transformation journey and clarify the commitments of all involved.

Implementation Plan – Immediate Next Steps

Timescale	Milestone	Description
Q4 2025 – Q1 2026	Establish Governance and Partnership Structures	• Establish the GSMW Partnership Board as the operational body (evolving from the current Working Group). Formalise terms of reference, membership, and decision-making protocols. This will also involve agreeing the roles and remit of associated task and finish groups and the proposed Consultation Group, • Agree frequency of meetings • Finalise monitoring and evaluation arrangements including broad milestones/dates/responsibilities for reporting • Establish and maintain a risk register • Establish clear links between aligned boards (business, skills, health) and strategies.
Q4 2025	Develop engagement plan	• Develop engagement plan for first two years including next steps for engaging with the community and businesses (alongside other stakeholders and partners)
Q4 2025 – Q1 2026	Raise awareness of the GSMW Plan	• Undertake presentations and briefings to raise awareness of the plan within partner organisations and wider stakeholders and highlight the imperative for policy alignment and case making to support realisation.
Q4 2025 – Q1 2026	System Leadership & transformation approach & roadmap	• Through the partnership, map out current provision, resources, workforce and future funding to identify gaps, scale-up opportunities, and service reductions/redirections as part of a wider approach to alignment and integration of services

Timescale	Milestone	Description
		• Develop a roadmap by end of Q1 26 that shows how services will align and outline approach to future integration.
Q1 2026	Undertake further research /specific projects	• Undertake further research / specific projects to deepen appreciation of current delivery, service offer and customer journeys to inform future priorities and investment. This will include establishing a process for integrating service user feedback to support continuous improvement. This could provide an initial focus for task and finish groups.
Q1-Q3 2026	Facilitate Quarterly Integration Development Sessions	• Foster a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and opportunities for collaboration, pooled resources and integrated delivery. • Identify opportunities to pilot activity and test and learn from approaches.
Q1 2026	Develop Forward Plan	• Co-produce a 2-year forward plan establishing the route to delivery for priority actions identified in the GSMW Plan. This will include key milestones and monitoring arrangements with a focus on initial alignment, and then future integration and associated transformation and project management requirements.

To achieve the ambitions of the plan, there are a number of key dependencies including:

- **Robust governance and system leadership** to enable integrated delivery and system change – this requires commitment, willingness to innovate, and shared leadership to drive change.
- **Policy alignment** within a complex landscape, to ensure that the GSMW Plan and other local actions and strategies contribute to, and benefit from, national funding, guidance, and performance metrics to enable change.
- **The availability of sustained and flexible funding** which is essential to maintain and scale interventions, with flexibility in how funds are allocated to allow the partnership to adapt to changing needs and priorities.

In conclusion, the Get South Midlands Working Plan represents a bold, collaborative step toward a more inclusive, dynamic, and resilient regional economy. By focusing on practical interventions, targeted support for those facing the greatest barriers, and stronger integration across work, health, and skills systems, this plan lays the foundation for meaningful change and a stronger future for our region.

Insight