



# Business & Skills Plan

## Annual Report

2025

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**ACHIEVE IN**  
**B&NES**

Bath & North East  
Somerset Council

Improving People's Lives

**INVEST IN**  
**B&NES**

# 1. Summary

In 2024, B&NES Business and Skills produced the Business and Skills plan to draw on evidence at a local and regional level from key sources, plans and strategies, in order to understand strengths, opportunities and challenges within B&NES. From this we identified and established the set of objectives and projects to drive business and skills opportunities, and has been the focus of delivery over the past 12 months. In this time the landscape nationally, regionally, and locally has changed, with new opportunities and challenges emerging, however the underlying themes that were identified in 2024 still remain a priority. This report provides an overview of our progress against objectives set out, the change and landscape and what this means for delivery, as well as new areas of focus coming to the forefront of Business and Skills delivery.

## Then and Now

In the past year there has been a major shift in the economic landscape both nationally and locally. Within B&NES we see both signs of Labour Market Recovery, and also of increasing Economic uncertainty. While we have shown resilience, there are a number of significant challenges that are shaping our priorities moving into 2025/26. A high-level comparison of the latest data from ONS provides a snapshot of the economic context, showing the progress we have made, but also persisting and even deepening

## Employment & Wages

- Employment in B&NES improved significantly from 2024 to 2025, with employment rate rising from 74.8% to 80.2%, reflecting a strong labour market recovery.
- Median weekly pay increased from £744.50 to £766.10, maintaining B&NES's position above regional and national averages.
- The claimant count fell by 6.4%, dropping from approximately 2,650 to 2,480 people, reinforcing the area's low unemployment profile.

## Business Activity

- Business birth data from 2023 showed 855 new companies, but Q4 2024 saw a sharp decline in new startups, reflecting economic caution, higher operating costs, and tight financing conditions.
- Despite a short-term dip, business closures remain only modestly up, with early 2025 suggesting moderate resilience overall.

## **Skills & Workforce**

- The percentage of residents qualified to NVQ Level 4+ (degree-equivalent) rose slightly from 53% to 54%, one of the highest in the South West.
- Skills shortages persist in health & social care, hospitality, construction, and digital sectors, mirroring national trends.

## **Housing & Affordability**

- House prices remained stable, falling marginally from £407,000 to £404,000.
- In contrast, private rents increased by 12.2%, from £1,552 to £1,742 per month. This rent inflation highlights increasing affordability pressures, especially for younger and lower-income residents.

Despite what can be considered overall economic improvements, it is important to recognise that not all communities or demographic groups are benefitting equally, with several indicators show that inequality in B&NES continues to be a persistent challenge

- Residents on lower incomes continue to face pressures, with housing and utility costs rising faster than wages or benefits.
- Deprivation is still concentrated in specific wards such as Twerton and Southdown, where:
  - Claimant rates remain higher than average
  - Educational attainment is lower
  - Life expectancy and health outcomes are poorer
- While a high proportion of residents hold NVQ4+ qualifications, graduates and professionals are concentrated in the city of Bath, and wealthier rural areas
- Skills gaps and low qualification levels persist in more deprived communities
- Young people from lower-income backgrounds face greater barriers to skills including, transport, digital skills, and higher education.
- Inequality in mental health and wellbeing access is becoming more visible post-COVID.

As such, reducing inequality continues to be a primary focus for delivery in 2025/26, with key measures already being taken, and a strong foundation for addressing this challenge being established in Year 1 of delivery against the Business and Skills Plan.



## **2024/25 Delivery Overview**

Throughout 2024/25 the Business and Skills Team has continued to build on and progress major projects and services in our area. This has allowed us successfully work towards the objectives adopted within the Business and Skills Plan, as well as towards objectives that we support across a variety of other plans and strategic documents.

To date we have completed or adopted now as BAU, 18 of the original 47 objectives set out in the Business and Skills Plan, accounting for roughly 40% objective completion in Year 1 – with Economic Strategy objectives set over a 10 year period and 3 years for Business and Skills Plan additional objectives. In addition to this a further 20 objectives have been started and/or are ongoing. It's important to note, with restructuring taking place within the council, and various other changes to projects/scope as well as operational handover, 5 objectives have now been, or will be from 2025, assigned to a new lead team/person. If we ignore these objectives, then we can determine that B&NES Business and Skills Team is currently progressing or has completed and/or adopted as BAU 90% of the objectives adopted 12 months ago.

Looking specifically at short term goals, of which there are a total of 21, we have currently completed, or adopted as BAU activities 8 objectives, with a further 10 started and ongoing. The remaining 3 short term objectives have been/will be handed over to a new objective lead (team) - no short term objectives are not started/stalled.

In addition to this existing work, throughout the year we have been able to take on new contracts and opportunities. This has led to the remit of the team growing, and we have therefor been able to expand our work around digital and NEET, increasing investment in the area and supporting the wider B&NES economy.

The following graphic provides some brief project highlights from 24/25

## Business & Skills Delivery Highlights April 2024-2025

### Digital

**£171k** secured for digital investment as part of WoE digital office

**97.8%** properties in B&NES to be able to access super fast broadband



### Future Bright

**412** - Referrals

**195** - B&NES residents supported

**144** - Residents report improvement in tangible work outcomes



### Progressive Routes

**73** - Participants receiving support:

**7** - Support referred to volunteering, employability services, training.

**35** - achieved employment progression outcomes



### Skills Connect

**142** - Referrals

**51** - Support referred to volunteering, employability services, training.

**39** - Residents now in employment.

**17** - Supported into employment earning at least the real living wage.



**3758** –

Website visitors

**97** - Instagram followers (started January 2025)

**302** - LinkedIn followers

### B&NES Business Support Service

**3189** - Hours of support provided to businesses

**666** - Businesses receiving at least 1hr of support.

**21.43** - Full-time equivalent jobs created.

**2715** - Business interactions.



### Constructing B&NES

**101** - Site visits delivered

**58** - Work placements delivered

**61** - Learners attended an Industry Insight talk with a developer



### We Work for Everyone

**80** – Enrolments from various backgrounds

**143** – Outcomes achieved



## 2. Change in Context and Focus

### Change in Government

#### Skills

Following the Labour government's coming to power in 2024 there has been significant effects on business support, employment, and skills development across England, and naturally impacting the West of England. As part of their work of since being elected, they have invested in the establishment of Skills England, the introduction of the Growth and Skills Levy, and increased investment in regional training programs. These developments aim to address skills shortages, reduce reliance on immigration, and enhance local economic growth. The implication of this locally on local government likely meaning delivery in future will be required to align with new funding structures and strategic priorities and likely mean a greater focus on Collaboration with Skills England, as well as more intensive work with educational institutions and businesses to co-design training (with the Levy being a focal point).

While this will present challenges, if we prioritise engagement and collaboration among stakeholders to deliver targeted skills support, this change can also provide the region an opportunity to enhance its economic resilience and provide residents with meaningful employment opportunities.

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### Employment Law Reforms

The UK is undergoing significant employment law reforms in 2025, driven by the Employment Rights Bill and other legislative initiatives aimed at enhancing worker protections and modernising workplace practices. Key Changes include:

- **Day One Rights:** introduces basic employment rights from the first day of work, including paternity, parental, and bereavement leave, as well as protection from unfair dismissal.
- **Ending Exploitative Contracts:** aims to ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, ensuring workers have guaranteed hours and reasonable notice of shifts.
- **Abolishing "Fire and Rehire":** aims to end "fire and rehire" practices, which involve employers dismissing workers and re-hiring them on unfavourable terms
- **Flexible Working:** makes flexible working the default where practical, allowing employees to request flexible arrangements from the start of their employment.
- **Statutory Sick Pay:** strengthens statutory sick pay by removing the lower earnings limit and reducing the waiting period.

- **Gender and Menopause Action Plans:** Large employers will be required to create action plans to address gender pay gaps and support employees through menopause.
- **Protection from Redundancy:** strengthens protections for pregnant women and new mothers against redundancy.
- **Right to Request Flexible Working:** The right to request flexible working is now a "day-one" right, meaning employees don't need to work for 26 weeks before making a formal request.

While these changes present a great opportunity to support the creation, promotion and general culture of Good Work in our area, it should be recognised that, along with existing uncertainty, businesses may experience added pressure regarding the future policies affecting employment and training, which may deter investment in workforce development and expansion plans.

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## **Business and the Economy**

### **National Policy - (NI, Infrastructure Investment, Growth Plans)**

The announcement of increase in National Insurance has led to heightened concerns among local enterprises regarding operational costs and financial sustainability. The NI rate increase has increased the financial burden on employers. This is particularly challenging for sectors with large workforces, such as hospitality and retail, which makes for a large proportion of the economy in B&NES. It is reported that due to this many businesses are responding by freezing recruitment, delaying pay raises, and reconsidering investment plans. It is also important to recognise that Non-profit entities are also likely to feel the pressure from these economic challenges. The NI contribution increase is likely to compel businesses in the West of England region to reassess their financial strategies, with many implementing cost-saving measures that could affect employment and service delivery. The long-term implications may include reduced investment, slower job growth, and challenges in productivity.

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## Digital

Since the creation of the Business and Skills Plan one year ago, which is largely informed by the B&NES Economic Strategy, and West of England Combined Authority Employment and Skills Plan, we have taken the opportunity to reflect and revise our priorities and objectives. One key area that we are looking to develop which was only included at a high level in the Business and Skills plan is Digital.

With the digital divide becoming an increasingly prominent issue in B&NES as new technologies emerge and are adopted, we are required to take a deeper look at the Digital element. While we have already begun work supporting and leading on various workstreams (such as supporting the Digital Divide Collective, investing in and developing digital infrastructure, and starting to pilot digital hubs), it is critical to formalise a strategic approach to support delivery. To do this we have utilised data from sources such as the WoE Digital Plan and local intelligence, and in doing this, we have created a number of additional objectives that focus on the critical facets of our digital projects – Skills, Infrastructure and Business.

### Digital Skills

A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge impact on a person's life. People on the wrong side of the digital divide are more likely to:

- Experience poorer health outcomes
- Suffer increased social isolation and loneliness
- Find it harder to access jobs and education
- Pay more for services and bills and experience financial exclusion
- Lack a voice or visibility in the modern world as government services and democracy move online

Furthermore, digital exclusion is higher amongst existing disadvantaged groups such as older people, people on low incomes, people from lower socio-economic groups, people not working and people with a disability – which further exacerbates existing inequalities. As well as being an important tool for addressing digital exclusion, improving digital skills (at all levels) can help our residents to find and secure work, progress in work and benefit from digital jobs. Equally, improving digital skills in our workforce will benefit our businesses, who are facing skills gaps which affect their productivity and ability to grow. Looking to the future, people in education today will enter a labour market that is likely to have been significantly re-shaped by emerging technologies. The UK Industrial Strategy Council predicts that, unless action is taken, in 2030 the most widespread under-skilling will be in basic digital skills.



## **Infrastructure**

Our people require fast and reliable digital infrastructure to support all aspects of their life and be able to respond to the cost-of living crisis. Digital connectivity matters and for many people it is now considered a fourth utility, especially in areas with little or no public transport. We need to ensure our residents are well-connected in all respects. Similarly, our businesses expect world leading digital infrastructure so they can adopt cutting-edge digital technologies to make them more productive and competitive. Nationally, research indicates that many small businesses consider that their broadband speeds are insufficient, and that poor connectivity is a barrier to growth. Digital technologies and data also provide us with opportunities to tackle the big challenges of our time including climate change, transport and caring for the elderly. Our digital infrastructure will need to be resilient to a changing climate (such as flooding or overheating) and can play a role in helping us adapt. Digital connectivity is a foundation of our economy and underpins our wider ambitions – without the right infrastructure we risk being left behind in a digital world.

## **Business**

Evidence shows that businesses which adopt digital technologies are more productive than those that do not. Therefore, ensuring all our businesses are digitally capable is vital to securing our regional prosperity and creating decent jobs for our residents. Research conducted by Sage shows that technology has become fundamental to the survival, resilience and growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Their research shows that 8 out of 10 SMEs depend on tech to start, survive and grow. Over the past year, SMEs have increased their use of tech across all aspects of their business, to improve relationships with customers, employees and suppliers. Their research suggests that technology is driving performance of SMEs in new ways and is directly contributing £216bn to the UK economy.

However, large gaps in digitalisation remain, caused by challenges in adopting tech and points of friction in using new tech well. The biggest factors stopping SMEs from investing more in tech are:

- Fears over returns on investment, especially during the current cash flow crunch
- Lack of awareness of the right solutions

Once tech is adopted, there are still points of friction such as:

- Problems learning new skills
- Issues integrating digital tools together

Locally, our businesses have ambitious technology and change programmes, but these can be affected by systemic challenges, including lack of leadership support, limited budgets, talent and skills gap, and integration with existing legacy systems. If these adoption challenges were overcome, tech could help SMEs remain resilient in the face of challenges ahead. The report also highlighted that 30% of SMEs do not understand data protection regulations and 1 in 5 report concerns regarding cyber security as a significant barrier to adopting new technology. With nearly 40% of UK businesses and 30% charities reporting having cyber security breaches or attacks in the last 12 months, this could be a significant threat to the region. The Sage research identified data as the single most important area of untapped potential for SMEs. Accelerated by the pandemic, many areas of technology which generate data, such as websites (80%), social media accounts (73%), accountancy software (76%) and HR software (48%) have been adopted widely by SMEs – across sectors – and continue to see high levels of investment.

## **Current Challenges in Digital Delivery**

### **Skills**

- Lack of necessary funding (duration, capital, etc.)
- Capacity to deliver
- Speed of technological change

### **Infrastructure**

- Public Perception
- Topography of B&NES – in particular complexity or delivery in rural areas
- World-heritage status for the City of Bath
- Upskilling required to make most of infrastructure

### **Business**

- Cost of software and hardware
  - Access to high speed mobile and broadband services
  - Time commitment to training
  - Awareness of emerging technologies
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## NEET

The Bath & North East Somerset Council Business & Skills plan 2024 highlights a number of current challenges B&NES faced in the local region. One of which was NEETs. One year on we have seen a growth in NEET projects, addressing the NEET challenge within the area.

Thus far the team have three major projects operating this year, with the aims to connect providers, produce opportunities for NEET young people and increase employability to those in need.

*In 2025, there were 987,000 young people in the UK who were NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), representing a significant increase of 110,000 from the previous year and 13.4% of all 16-24 year olds (Office for National statistics).*

### **Transport to support Young NEET People within B&NES**

The City of Bath is accessible via a range of transportation methods, including buses, trains, bikes, e-scooters and by foot. On the other hand, the more rural areas of B&NES do not benefit from the same transport infrastructure. Issues such as irregular or unreliable transport can leave young people living in rural villages with barriers to education, employment or training, resulting in the inability to get or maintain meaningful employment.

The Youth Guarantee Trailblazer is tasked with reducing these barriers. Through partnership work with local providers and existing transport options we hope to reduce the barriers to transport for all residents in B&NES allowing young people more security to gain and maintain employment, helping to work towards improving people's lives.

### **Infrastructure – Youth Hubs**

B&NES is host to a number of youth hubs and clubs, in rural areas where premises cannot be utilised youth buses have been set up to ensure that all residents are able to access the opportunity to meet with others and get support. Youth Hubs are safe inclusive spaces for young people to spend time with peers and trusted adults, these hubs offer the opportunity for young people to access personal or professional development support.

B&NES has 41 youth clubs, situated primarily in Bath, Keynsham and Radstock. Youth Clubs offer the ability for young people to meet with other young people and professionals. Additional funding will support with staffing a chosen youth club as well as contributing to some with funding speakers, and activities for young people to do when attending the clubs. Proposals have been submitted to support with engagement and

running of youth hubs throughout the region. The aim is to deliver support across B&NES via partners such as Bath Radio and Bath Mind.

### **Networks- Partnerships, working relationships and regular meetings**

Creating partnership networks allows for significant growth in supporting NEET residents within B&NES. Through a number of projects, working with Key partners including Curo, Little Lost Robot and Bath Rugby Foundation we have seen a number of initiatives develop.

Over the past year we have worked hard to explore and maintain relationships with providers and youth organisations within B&NES. This has supported with the development of a NEET Panel, Youth Voice Panel and ongoing planning meetings to support with projects like the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer and progressive pathways

### **Panels – Youth and YP Voice**

It is essential for our young people to have access to empowering and inclusive support to achieve their personal aspirations. Multi-agency support matters to many young people in B&NES and can be pivotal to their experience. B&NES is home to numerous dedicated professionals who working tirelessly to provide, employment, personal development and mental health support to those facing various barriers.

This year, the team has collaborated closely with partners to establish a Youth Panel; by commissioning the work to Bath Rugby Foundation, the Business and Skills team have supported professionals to discuss current issues faced by young people and work towards effective solutions.

Young people are at the heart of our aims to reduce barriers to their development, they are the driving force of their future and should have

Feedback from professionals has also driven the creation of a Youth Voice Panel, currently in the planning stages, we hope to build a pool of young people to promote the thoughts, feelings and views of young people we are working to support.

### **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Feedback from the Youth Panel, partners and youth voice panel has indicated a strong link between barriers to sustainable employment and mental health. Young people are experiencing issues with accessing support and managing their mental health, thus impacting their ability to gain or sustain employment. When young people have access to mental health services they are able to enjoy different opportunities that support with their development.

Mental health services are currently operating with long waiting lists, which can present as a barrier to young residents of B&NES. There is worth in promoting activities which address wellbeing to support whilst waiting to access mental health support.

Organisations like Bath College, Bath City Farm and Youth Connect South West have well being groups for different age groups to access.

*We need to connect these services and offers (Multi -agency approach to support the overall development of our younger generation.) It is important that we don't simply focus on one developmental need but the whole picture. It is possible to support each individual but not all in one go, we need to get to know our NEETs/YP to understand the barriers they are facing.*



### 3. Progress on Objectives

	Started/Ongoing Activity
	Completed/Now BAU Workstream
	New Lead on Objective/Objective Handing Over
	Upcoming/Stalled





Employment & Skills (Pillar 2)	Timing
<b>Champion good work practices</b>	
Encourage partners and local businesses to sign up to WECA Good Employment Charter.	Short
Promote the Real Living Wage to increase local adoption and look to become a living wage borough.	Short
Work with the West of England Combined Authority to deliver the Thrive at Work programme.	Medium
Promote the Disability Confident Employer scheme to encourage local employers to enhance the recruitment, retain and develop residents with disabilities.	Short
Collaborate as B&NES anchor institutions (and major employers) to review and adopt good work practices.	Long
<b>Increase inclusive pathways into work</b>	
Create and deliver an inclusive employment and skills plan for Bath and North East Somerset, ensuring UKSPF supports B&NES requirements.	Medium
Promote Future Bright to increase uptake of careers coaching and support for residents already in work.	Short
Use Midlife MOT to increase employment opportunities and retention of older adults.	Short
Engage with the Southwest Social Mobility Commission to identify local social cold spots and ways to address them.	Long
Prioritise projects to address barriers to employment for young people, including care leavers and those with SEND.	Medium
Increase our Targeted Recruitment and Training requirements from developers to ensure that the benefits of new developments are shared.	Short

Additional Good Work Objectives	
<b>Champion good work practices</b>	
B&NES Council become a disability confident leader.	Medium
Increase opportunities within B&NES Council for placements, apprenticeships, bootcamps etc.	Medium
Support delivery of training and skills with pathways to real job opportunities.	Long
<b>Increase inclusive pathways into work</b>	
Support unemployment, upskilling and career change for 45+ cohort.	Short
Develop a NEET strategy to support our young people cohorts.	Medium
Promote alternative routes to work (apprenticeships, bootcamps, SWAPs), and set an example as the local authority.	Short
Support delivery of new/unique modular training.	Medium
Develop supported internship opportunities to support those with EHCP's age 16-25 years access employment.	Medium
Develop Information, guidance and support for parents, carers and professionals supporting young people with EHCP's moving towards employment.	Medium
<b>Developing the Employment and Skills Landscape</b>	
Embedding of critical, digital, and green skills across employment and skills provision.	Medium
Develop resource and knowledge base, through the Achieve in B&NES brand and Skills Connect.	Medium
Address skills gaps in sectors struggling to recruit.	Medium

<b>Business &amp; Digital (Pillar 3, 4 &amp; 5)</b>	<b>Timing</b>
<b>Resilient Businesses</b>	
<b>Support local businesses to stay and scale in B&amp;NES</b>	
Promote new and emerging developments for start-ups and scale-ups (Bath Quays and Somer Valley Enterprise Zone).	Medium
Increase uptake of Invest in Bath and WECA funded management and leadership training for SMEs.	Short
Increase local participation in regional business growth programmes.	Short
Build local business networks and events to connect B&NES sectors and firms.	Medium
Work with the Bath BID to share insight on emerging business needs and promotion of local business offer.	Short
Work with the Regeneration team on the business focused elements of the Milsom Quarter, Fashion Museum, Creative Corridor and Locksbrook developments are strengthened.	Short
<b>Invest in the infrastructure businesses need</b>	
Understand and plan for future employment space demand (industrial, office and retail) through the local plan process.	Long
<b>Promote alternative business models and community-led action</b>	
Work with 3SG to showcase charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups working across B&NES.	Short
Engage with local community groups to encourage volunteering targeted to local issues.	Medium
Work with partners to provide targeted support for community-led and voluntary & community sector organisations.	Medium
Promote business support aimed at alternative business models, for example from Co-operatives UK and B Lab UK.	Short
Create a local peer support network to connect existing alternative model businesses with those who are interested in changing their business model.	Medium

<b>Inclusive Innovation</b>	
<b>Maximise local benefits of our leading innovation assets</b>	
Work with local major manufacturing and engineering base (e.g., around Midsomer Norton) to showcase career opportunities to young people.	Short
Work with the Regeneration team on the business focused elements of the Milsom Quarter, Fashion Museum, Creative Corridor and Locksbrook developments are strengthened.	Short
<b>Promote B&amp;NES as an innovation testbed</b>	
Promote B&NES innovation strengths and opportunities to investors and businesses online and through events.	Short
Grow links to regional innovation partners to ensure that B&NES businesses and entrepreneurs are part of innovation district and ecosystem activity.	Medium
Promote provider innovation assets such as SETsquared Bath and the University of Bath Innovation Centre to local businesses.	Short
Promote regional accelerator programmes DETI and Creative Growth Programme.	Short
<b>Ensure all sectors and businesses are supported to innovate</b>	
Prioritise the foundational economy in innovation support, working with partners to draw from good practice to create new programmes and support.	Medium

<b>Stronger Places</b>	
<b>Promote economy in rural areas as a driver of economic growth</b>	
Increase representation of rural businesses in Council structures and local networks.	Short
Continue the development of employment space in the Somer Valley.	Medium
Use business support to support rural diversification and the adoption of green technologies as an economic growth opportunity.	Long
<b>Improve connectivity to and between all parts of B&amp;NES</b>	
Accelerate digital infrastructure rollout, including gigabit, superfast broadband and 5G.	Medium
<b>Support local food supply chains and food security</b>	
Develop Local Food Strategy, including B&NES Menu to showcase local food production, sourcing and hospitality.	Short

	Short	Medium	Long	Total
 <b>Started/Ongoing Activity</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>
 <b>Completed/Now BAU Workstream</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>
 <b>New Lead on Objective/Objective Handing Over</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>
 <b>Upcoming/Stalled</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>



## Key Updates on Objectives

### Youth Guarantee Trailblazer – New Funding

The Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Project aims to support 18-21-year-olds in the B&NES area who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) or at risk of becoming NEET. The project will facilitate access to education, employment, and training opportunities, enabling these young individuals to achieve their personal aspirations and goals. Special emphasis will be placed on assisting rural residents who face significant barriers to accessing opportunities due to inadequate or unreliable transportation options.

By collaborating closely with local providers and organisations, we will identify eligible young people in the area and determine the support they require. The flow chart below (*See appendix for visual*) illustrates a visual image of the journey of a young person accessing the service.

Referrals will be sourced from three main channels: Higher/Further Education providers, self or family referrals, and providers working with young people. Upon receiving referrals, we will assess whether the individuals are NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) or at risk of becoming NEET. If a young person is identified as being at risk, we will work with the referrer to determine if they are high risk or low risk. High-risk individuals will be referred for support, while low-risk individuals will be monitored by the referral party and referred for support if their risk level increases.

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### Connect to Work – New Funding

Led by the West of England CA, the Connect to Work programme is a targeted employment support initiative designed to help individuals furthest from the labour market access job opportunities primarily facing health and wellbeing barriers through tailored interventions. Delivered in partnership with regional employment services, local employers, and training providers, the programme focuses on moving eligible residents into work within 4-5 weeks.

The additional investment allows for the enhancement of existing services, and deeper engagement with employers to secure sustainable job outcomes for service users. This initial phase of Connect to Work aligns with broader economic recovery goals and contributes to inclusive growth by equipping residents with the skills and confidence needed to thrive in the evolving job market.

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## **One Word – New Funding**

The project supports the new Council Corporate Strategy and emerging Economic Strategy through boosting connectivity, reducing exclusion and unlocking innovation. The project is roughly £14.5 million in value, of which around £10 million comes from Government funding and includes £773,132.00 for Bath & North East Somerset Council.

The ONE WORD 5G Mobile Network Pilot aims to improve connectivity and boost the local economy as a result of providing a new cutting-edge mobile network directly in the historic centre of Bath. ONE WORD is an 18 month pilot which will be led by mobile telecoms company Telet, in partnership with B&NES Council. Once installed, the project will focus on testing how the network copes with high demand and dense environment in order to provide a blueprint for future deployments in the city, both by the council and commercial mobile network providers.

Whilst the scope of the initial pilot focuses on the City of Bath, there is potential for additional networks to be added to the high streets of Keynsham and Midsomer Norton, increasing the benefits of the improved digital connectivity, coverage and speed across the authority area.

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## **West of England Digital Office – New Funding**

A priority in the [West of England Digital Plan](#), and a focus of our emerging Digital Priorities, the Digital Office is enabling faster, more efficient deployment of digital connectivity infrastructure across the West of England by working closely with telecom providers and local authorities to create optimal conditions for digital infrastructure deployment. The Digital Office:

- Provides tailored support: Provides a targeted programme of support telecoms to investors seeking to deploy connectivity infrastructure in the region.
  - Breaks down barriers: Addressing challenges and facilitating connectivity infrastructure projects through targeted support programmes.
  - Encourages regional investment: Positioning the West of England as a prime destination for telecoms investment, by making deployments faster, easier, and cost-effective for all parties involved.
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## **Annual Events – Key Workstream**

B&NES Business and Skills has now adopted as Business as Usual a number of events which we regularly plan, run, sponsor and/or support, in partnership with various organisations across all of our work streams, these include:

**Midlife Work Review:** This event offers expert advice, guidance, and tools through engaging workshops, brilliant speakers, and a marketplace of resources to help attendees review their career, finances, and wellbeing.

**B&NES Business Show:** We support, sponsor and assist in planning this event, ran by County Business Show. The event features business breakfasts, LIVEtalk presentations, specialist clinics, live demonstrations, and networking opportunities for businesses of all sizes. Exhibitors and attendees will have the chance to form valuable connections and develop innovative ideas.

**Bath Digital Festival:** TechSPARK transform Bath into a vibrant hub of innovation and technology with the support of Invest in B&NES. Spanning several days, it offers a variety of interactive workshops, thought-provoking discussions, and engaging panels, inviting everyone from digital innovators to curious learners to explore and celebrate advancements in the digital and tech industries.

**TBE Show:** We support and sponsor this event, ran by The Business Exchange. Individuals and businesses can take part in a variety of interactive workshops, seminars, and a bustling expo. It provides an excellent platform for networking, educational sessions, and exploring new business opportunities. The theme is often centred around critical topics such as business growth, funding, and leveraging technology in business.

**Bath Business Conference:** This event is organised by Bath BID, fostering collaboration among local businesses and offering insights into market trends and strategies. Our team supports the event planning and also sponsors Bath BID to ensure its success.

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## **Economic Strategy Pillars Workshops – Key Workstream**

As part of our delivery against the Economic Strategy pillars, we have developed two working groups to ensure strategic link up with partners, with an overarching aim to collaborate against the objectives set out. The Good Work Workshop and Resilient Business workshop were set up in Spring 2025.

**The Good Work Workshop** is a bi-monthly workshop that brings partners together from a variety of organisations to provide strategic direction and action challenges/opportunities around good and inclusive work, in line with Pillar 2 of the B&NES Economic Strategy. With a key focus on Supporting economically inactive cohorts/residents, as well as how employers work and recruit, we are seeking to address inequality by addressing barriers and creating inclusive pathways to work, through wider collaboration. One key theme this group is focusing on is how do we encourage employers to recruit well, help employees internally, and exit well, in particular with regards to barriers such as health and wellbeing, caring commitments, income challenges, and more.

**The Resilient Business Workshop** is a sub-group to guide and support the delivery of the council's economic strategy, with a particular focus on: - Building a diverse, creative, and sustainable business base, Nurturing emerging sectors and specialisms including culture and creative, Promoting alternative business models and community-led action, and Supporting local businesses to stay and scale in B&NES. This Sub-group

- Advises on the implementation of initiatives to support business resilience and growth.
- Supports the promotion of strategic developments (e.g., Bath Quays, Somer Valley Enterprise Zone).
- Champions sector development in areas such as FinTech, Health Tech, Sustainable Fashion, Life Sciences, and the Creative Industries.
- Ensures business engagement and representation across B&NES.
- Promotes sustainable infrastructure planning and climate adaptation for business environments.
- Advocates for local procurement and responsible business practices.
- Encourage alternatives business models including social enterprises, cooperatives, and community-led ventures.

The resulting outcome will be improved access to employment, industrial / office / retail space across B&NES to meet demand.

## **A Spotlight on Health and Wellbeing Support**

B&NES Business and Skills team recognises that a key challenge effecting residents from accessing and sustaining good inclusive work is Health and Wellbeing. There has been a growing focus over the last year around integrating Health and Wellbeing support with Employability, and we are aiming to expand this in 2025/26.

The B&NES Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy Implementation Plan is a seven-year plan (2023-2030), to reduce inequalities and improve health and wellbeing for all, of which on priority is to improve skills, good work and employment. To ensure we meet this priority and continue to address associated barriers to work, we are working in partnership with internal and external stakeholders to deliver a programme of support.

To develop this area of work and continue to deliver successful work progression outcomes for residents, we will build on the new national programmes of Youth Guarantee Trailblazer and Connect to Work, with the development of a number of local and targeted initiatives. These initiatives, being delivered by key health, wellbeing and employability support providers in partnership with B&NES Business and Skills, are set to launch later in 2025 (subject to successful funding), will focus on bespoke support for residents across a range of ages, but also supporting employers with creating inclusive workplaces – in line with changes to employment law. Through this partnership approach we will ensure that emerging Health and Wellbeing focused Skills provision will complement and enhance the existing offer in the region.

### **Case Study: We Work for Everyone – Charlie**

*I am Charlie. I was referred to WWFE through BASS (Bristol/Bath Autism Services). I met with Nikki from WWFE in March 2024 to talk through enrolling onto the programme as I had been at Bath City Farm and was now ready to look for paid employment. My first thought was that I would like to work in a café.*

*Nikki contacted me to say that there was a Catering Assistant role at a Care Home and would I be interested. So, we went for a look around and I met some of the Managers. We then did the application, and I got an interview. I was successful in getting the job and was offered 15 hours a week as Nikki and I agreed that full time would be too much for me. Nikki attended the interview with me. On my first day Nikki called me before and after my shift. I started this job in February 2025 and the progress I have made is that I am doing really well in my job, I really enjoy my job and the people I work with I also enjoy what I do. I am picking up overtime most months now too. I also did 2 days in head office working with Nikki to complete all of my e-learning.*

*The most important thing that I discovered through WWfe is how good the people who work for them are they will help you find the employment you need. Im hoping to stay in my current job for the near future as I really love my job.*



## **A Spotlight on Business Engagement**

Business Engagement is a primary function of the Business and Skills team which is responsible for delivering against and supporting a variety of our Economic Strategy objectives. The team manages a host of business support packages to help both start-ups and established companies succeed in the area, linking businesses in to a network of advisors, sector specialists and property experts. Not only is this critical for our business growth objectives, but also for ensuring we meet our objectives around skills delivery, ensuring that residents have a pathway to real, inclusive, good work.

### **Case Study: Natural Spa Factory – Ethical Growth and Strategic Engagement**

*Natural Spa Factory Limited, a family-founded business established in 2009 and based near Peasedown St John in Bath and North East Somerset, has grown steadily to employ 25 full-time staff. Specialising in the sourcing and manufacturing of natural spa products, the company supplies verified spas, salons, and hotels across the UK. With a strong ethical foundation, Natural Spa Factory places sustainability and future-proofing at the heart of its operations, ensuring conscientious sourcing and long-term resilience.*

*Following proactive outreach by Richard Burgess, a Business Engagement Officer from the Universal Business Support team, the company initially expressed interest in the Supported Internship scheme. This initiative aligns with their values and offers a pathway to identify employees who are the right fit, while also enhancing their corporate social responsibility profile, deepening market insight, and building disability confidence within the organisation.*

*As part of their ongoing growth strategy, Natural Spa Factory has also registered interest in the Low Carbon Survey and Green Business Grant projects. These programmes will support their ambitions to invest in energy-efficient equipment, reduce carbon emissions, and lower utility costs—further reinforcing their commitment to sustainability. They are now working with the Growth Hub to further their progress.*

*In addition, the business has previously explored two Growth Hub initiatives: Tech for Growth, aimed at enhancing digital presence and productivity, and Made Smarter, which supports digital transformation to reduce inefficiencies and waste. These projects reflect the company's forward-thinking approach and openness to innovation.*

*Looking ahead, Natural Spa Factory has also shown interest in contributing to the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer scheme, potentially by participating in mock interviews to support young people entering the workforce. This engagement highlights their dedication not only to business growth but also to community development and inclusive employment.*

## 4. New Objectives

### **Digital Skills Objectives:**

1. *Address digital exclusion by piloting and testing Digital Hubs in B&NES, with a focus on improving digital skills relating to employability, and supporting areas of deprivation*
2. *Explore opportunities to create a digital academy supporting skills development in key sectors, training residents in emerging industry technology/techniques including, but not limited to 3D/VR/AR/AI*
3. *Support development of networks focused on addressing the digital divide, utilising partnerships to drive projects and strategy in the local area.*

### **Digital Infrastructure Objectives**

1. *Work with partners to map and address “not spots” for broadband coverage, maximising the number of B&NES premises having superfast broadband by 2026 and reducing digital exclusion*
2. *Support telecommunications providers to roll-out 4G and 5G mobile coverage in B&NES, with an emphasis on targeting locations where demand exceeds coverage and capacity*
3. *Maximise opportunities to provide additional social value through delivery of infrastructure, contracts, etc.*

### **Digital Business Objectives**

1. *Promote adoption and utilisation of emerging technologies across B&NES businesses and third sector organisations, harnessing opportunities around AI and standalone 5G to boost economic productivity*
2. *Align digital and economic inclusion to ensure new technologies and cyber security does not act as barrier to entrepreneurship and business growth across all business sectors and residential demographics*

### **NEET Transportation Objectives**

- 1. Address the current transport offer within B&NES with a particular focus on Rural towns and villages, focus on the barriers transport can present to young people and work with existing providers to support with young people accessing employment, Education or Training opportunities,*
- 2. Explore different types of transport to support individuals facing different barriers. E.g. e-bikes for those looking to improve health and live further away from EET opportunities,*
- 3. Support 250 young people in B&NES – especially rural residents- to access items that reduce barriers to transport, e.g. Bus passes.*

### **Youth Hub Objectives**

- 1. Continue to review established youth hubs to gain an understanding of what is working well and where there are areas of improvement.*
- 2. Assess how funding can support with the progression and growth of existing and new youth hubs in B&NES*

### **Network Objectives**

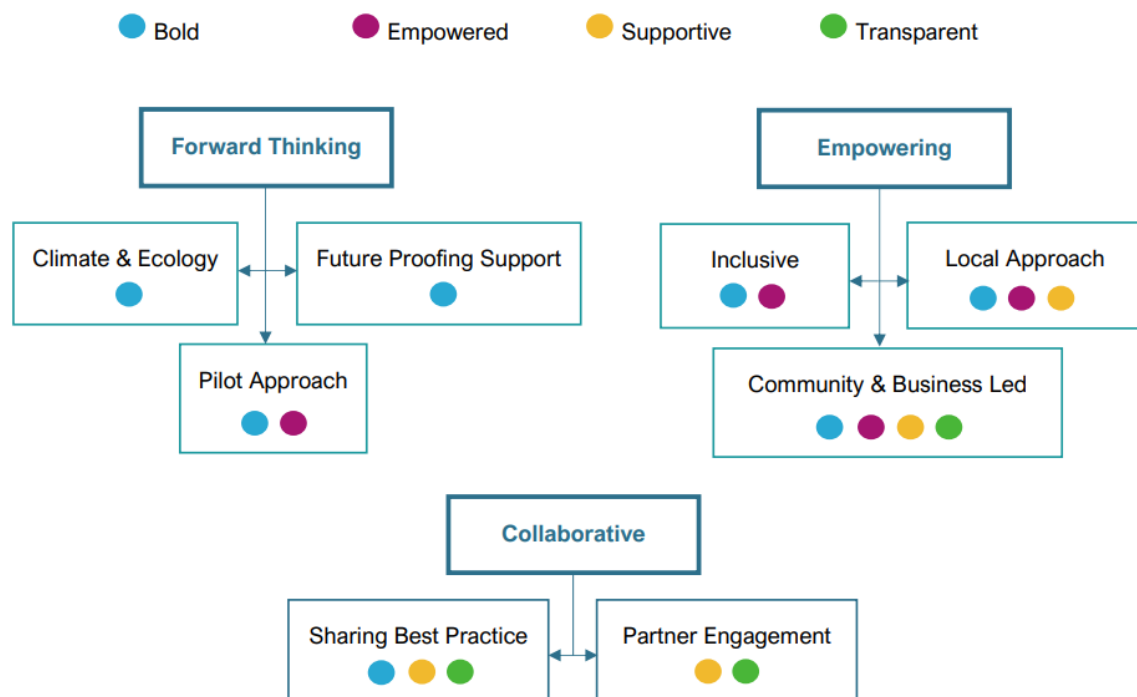
- 1. Explore providers and partners within the area, keeping up to date with any changes that arise through different funding.*
- 2. Understand strong partnerships to continue with the progression of projects. Maintaining strong communication with local providers to contribute to a multi-agency approach for our young residents.*
- 3. Identify gaps in provision in the area and continue to communicate this with partners to continue with the support of young residents*

**Health and Wellbeing Objectives (from B&NES Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy Implementation Plan)**

- 1. Work with education providers and other partners to provide robust and inclusive pathways into work and including for disadvantaged young people*
- 2. Work with local employers to encourage, incentivise and promote good quality work*
- 3. Support the development of and access to an inclusive labour market, focusing on engaging our populations most at risk of inequalities in accessing and maintaining good work*
- 4. Prioritise inclusiveness and social value as employers, purchasers and investors in the local economy*

## 5. Delivery Principles – Case Studies

In the Business and Skills Plan we set out a number of delivery principles aligned with B&NES Corporate Values. We did this too ensure that we deliver successful projects that meet the requirements of our residents, business and the economy overall. These principles are as per below.



We have provided case studies to showcase how we have delivered against each of these principles and the corporate values over the past year.



## Forward Thinking Case Study – FWD

### Corporate Values showcased – Empowered Bold

FWD was conceived as a partnership project involving Bath College, the University of Bath, Bath Spa University and Bath and North East Somerset Council, with the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority as a strategic partner and funder. FWD created a new, unique and innovative model for adult education, bridging learners and businesses to provide a deeply integrated approach to skills and curriculum delivery, and business incubation-based innovation and research to address four interconnected challenges in the West of England:

- Innovation and productivity,
- Inclusive growth,
- The green recovery,
- Local and regional vitality.

It involved two key strands of activity; ‘Skills and Curriculum’ (led by Bath Spa University and Bath College) and ‘Innovation and Research’ (led by the University of Bath), aiming to provide upskilling and retraining opportunities to residents, including those in hard-to-reach groups, as well as business support mechanisms, that all seek to drive high-quality employment and growth in the region.

The activities delivered throughout the Phase 0 pilot accomplished a variety of positive results and benefits across the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority region (to e/o December 2024), with impacts expected to continue to be realised for some time. Highlights of outputs/outcomes from FWD include -

- 18.1 direct jobs created as a result of the FWD programme, along with 18 additional company jobs and 7 enhanced employment roles,
- 133 residents enrolled in a FWD short course across the sectors of Health, Digital and Creative, Sustainability and Enterprise,
- 68 businesses supported/incubated in FWD’s ‘Health’ Business Accelerator Hub
- £1,321,500 of investment attracted by FWD businesses,

Following the Phase 0 Pilot, no further funding/investment was secured for FWD, and as such the project is now considered closed. Despite this, one key outcome that has resulted from the close collaborative nature of the FWD partners, is the growth of the relationships between institutions. It was acknowledged in the workshop to continue commitment towards the growth of partnerships between the institutions, which was underpinned by the creation of the Bath ‘Future Ambition Civic Agreement’ within which FWD is one case study of a successful collaborative project.

## Empowering Case Study – Bridges Electrical

**Corporate Values showcased –** ● Supportive ● Empowered ● Bold ● Transparent

Bridges Electrical Engineers, based on the Westfield Industrial Estate, were struggling to find the right employees to meet workload and needed additional training support. Bridges provide Mechanical & Electrical engineering services, primarily to the UK water industry.

Through the council's Business and Skills Team the company secured Skills Bootcamp funding from the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority. Bridges has been able to access Skills Bootcamp funding to provide training in a key skills needed for a greener economy, as well business support including Carbon Surveys, IP for Growth, and Business Growth and Adaptions Grant funding

The funding so far has seen more than 70 existing staff upskilled and 36 unemployed learners have also been able to attend the bootcamps, with 14 of those unemployed learners going on to gain long-term employment with the company. It has allowed Bridges to create an in-house training facility delivering training in mechanical and electrical installation, hazardous area working, off-site manufacturing and assembly, authentic leadership, mechanical design dual-skilling, electrical design dual-skilling and project management.

Steve Spencer, Safety, Health, Environment & Quality Director at Bridges said: "We sought support from the council's Business and Skills team. They worked with us to find the right funding and how to apply for it. Skills Bootcamp has been an extremely effective way of upskilling staff and move people into higher paid work, releasing entry-level jobs for new recruits. We are very pleased with the outcome."

## Collaborative Case Study – B&NES NEET Panel

**Corporate Values showcased –** ● Supportive ● Empowered ● Bold

The B&NES NEET Support Panel was established in partnership with lead delivery partners Bath Rugby Foundation (BRF) to address the challenges faced by 16-25-year-olds in the region who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). By bringing together key stakeholders, the panel sought to identify barriers, develop collaborative solutions, and create sustainable opportunities for young people.

**Purpose and Objectives** Funded by Mayoral Priority Skills Fund, the panel was set up to:

- Identify key challenges preventing young people from engaging in education, employment, or training.
- Develop practical and sustainable solutions to reduce NEET numbers.
- Foster collaboration among local authorities, providers, and businesses,
- Improve access to relevant resources and create new opportunities.

**Panel Activities and Approach** Since its inception, the panel has engaged 16 local partners, conducted research, and facilitated discussions to ensure a coordinated approach. Key activities have included regular panel meetings with representatives from education, youth services, and local employers, Conducting youth voice surveys, Sharing best practices and resources, and establishing working relationships between service providers.

**Findings and Key Insights** The panel's work has provided valuable insights into the barriers young people face, and from this the panel has played a vital role in unlocking new opportunities, led by our provider community including:

- **Additional Funding:** Secured six months of administration funding through BRF
- **Youth Hubs Development:** Engaged with WECA and DWP to explore youth hubs, improving access to support services.
- **Trailblazer Initiative:** Influenced funding allocation to address transport challenges, impacting 250 young people.
- **Employer Engagement:** Strengthened partnerships with local businesses and educational institutions.
- **Partner Collaboration:** Facilitated deeper connections between partners to enhance support and funding use.

**Looking Forward** The panel's work has shown the power of collaboration in tackling the NEET challenge. By refining and expanding initiatives, B&NES can build on these successes, ensuring young people achieve their full potential. With strong partnerships, innovative solutions, and commitment to positive change, the future looks bright.