

Hampshire & Solent LSIP

Local Skills Improvement Plan

New Forest Technical Skills Needs & Apprenticeships

A Place Based Report | March 2026

Produced by New Forest Business Partnership in conjunction with Hampshire Chamber of Commerce



1. Executive Summary

As part of the delivery of the New Forest Apprenticeship Hub, the New Forest Business Partnership (NFBP) has undertaken a comprehensive programme of business engagement and skills analysis in the New Forest economy between September 2025 and March 2026. This report synthesises evidence gathered through three complementary strands: 80 structured business engagements conducted through the New Forest Apprenticeship Hub; detailed skills needs analyses completed with 33 businesses; and a targeted employer survey completed by six New Forest businesses attending the New Forest Business Advisory Group, providing illustrative qualitative context to complement the quantitative analysis.

The evidence base presented here is intended to inform the Hampshire and Solent Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) for 2026–2029, ensuring that the distinctive characteristics of the New Forest’s predominantly micro and small business economy are fully reflected in regional skills planning and training provision.

Key Findings at a Glance

- Apprenticeship take-up is the central response mechanism: the evidence consistently shows that sector-specific technical skills gaps are best addressed through structured apprenticeship pathways, yet awareness, engagement and conversion rates remain well below potential across the New Forest business community.
- Technical skills gaps are acute and sector-specific: in hospitality, health and care, professional services, land management and construction, shortages of vocationally qualified staff represent the most immediate constraint on business growth and service quality.
- Digital skills represent the single most pervasive gap, identified across every sector and business size, with particular urgency around social media, CRM systems and cybersecurity — all areas with well-matched apprenticeship standards.
- Awareness of apprenticeship mechanisms — including levy transfer, available standards and the role of training providers — remains critically low, and is the single most impactful barrier to increased take-up among New Forest employers.
- Financial and business management capability is the weakest self-assessed skill area, particularly acute among sole traders and micro-businesses, with direct implications for their readiness to employ and develop apprentices.
- Structural barriers — housing costs, rurality and limited public transport — constrain recruitment and reduce the effective talent pool available to New Forest employers, compounding technical skills shortages.
- Short, flexible, accessible formats are essential to reach the New Forest’s micro-business majority, with Skills Bootcamps and bite-sized provision serving as stepping stones toward full apprenticeship engagement.

2. Context and Background

2.1 The New Forest Economy

The New Forest presents a distinctive set of skills and workforce challenges that require careful consideration in any regional skills planning exercise. The local economy is overwhelmingly characterised by micro and small businesses – those employing fewer than ten people – spread across hospitality and tourism, land management, professional and creative services, health and social care, and a growing digital and technology sector.

The New Forest National Park significantly influences the local economy by supporting a major seasonal tourism sector. It also requires extensive environmental stewardship, limits development and infrastructure—especially transportation—and contributes to some of the highest housing and living costs in southern England. These structural factors cannot be treated as peripheral to skills policy – they are foundational to it.

2.2 Programme Overview

The New Forest Apprenticeship Hub was delivered by NFBP between September 2025 and March 2026, funded through New Forest District Council's UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) allocation. The programme aimed to increase business engagement with apprenticeship pathways, raise awareness of levy transfer mechanisms and Skills Bootcamps, and conduct formal skills needs analyses to inform the LSIP process.

Key Performance Indicator	Target	Achieved	% of Target
Businesses receiving non-financial support	75	80	107%
Skills needs analyses completed	32	33	103%
Individuals enrolled on skills programmes	80	223	279%
Jobs created (FTE)	16	15	94%
Strategic partnerships established	—	20	—
Referrals to training and support partners	—	40+	—

The programme significantly exceeded most engagement targets, particularly in individual skills programme enrolments, which reached 279% of target. The sole area slightly below target – direct job creation – reflects both the complexity of attribution in a micro-business environment and the longer conversion timeframes typical of small employer apprenticeship decisions.

3. Evidence Base and Methodology

3.1 Strands of Evidence

This report draws on three interlocking sources of evidence:

Strand A: New Forest Apprenticeship Hub Business Engagements

Between September 2025 and February 2026, NFBP conducted 80 distinct business engagements spanning all major sectors of the New Forest economy. Engagements took the form of one-to-one briefings, follow-up consultations, group workshops and online support sessions (30 weekly sessions delivered). All follow-up notes were analysed to identify patterns in business readiness, sector-specific needs and recurring barriers.

Strand B: Skills Needs Analyses

Formal structured skills needs analyses were completed with 33 businesses, providing in-depth qualitative and quantitative evidence on skill levels, training priorities, and workforce development planning. This work was led by NFBP's Skills Action Group and generated a comprehensive picture of skill strengths and gaps across the New Forest business community. Headline findings from this analysis are incorporated throughout this report.

Strand C: LSIP Business Survey

A structured employer survey was administered to attendees at the New Forest Business Advisory Group in early 2026, generating completed returns from six key businesses across a range of sectors. The survey is used in this report solely to provide illustrative employer voices that corroborate — and in some cases add texture to — the primary findings from the 80 Hub engagements and 33 skills needs analyses. The respondents represent a cross-section of the local economy by sector:

Sector	Size
Port Operations	50+ employees
Hospitality & Tourism	Not stated
Health & Social Care	10–49 employees
Professional Services	Sole trader
Digital/Tech	Sole trader
Professional Services	50+ employees

All survey respondents are treated anonymously throughout this report, referenced by sector rather than by organisation name.

4. Skills Gaps and Training Needs

4.1 Overview: A Consistent Pattern

Across all three evidence strands, a remarkably consistent pattern of skills gaps emerged. The consistency of findings across very different business sizes, sectors and organisational contexts lends particular weight to the conclusions. The following sections examine each theme in turn, drawing on evidence from the Apprenticeship Hub engagement programme, the skills needs analyses and the employer survey.

Throughout this analysis, the question is not simply whether businesses are aware of apprenticeships, but whether identified technical skills needs are being met through them — and what is preventing greater take-up where they are not.

The project brief — improving understanding of New Forest businesses' technical skills needs specifically in the context of apprenticeship demand, engagement and take-up — shapes the recommendations that follow. Where a skills gap has a well-matched apprenticeship standard, this is noted explicitly. Where businesses are not yet ready to employ apprentices, the evidence identifies what interventions would build that readiness. The overarching question running through all sections is: what would it take to convert identified technical skills need into sustained apprenticeship demand and take-up across the New Forest economy?

4.2 Digital Skills: Widespread Gap, High Awareness

Digital skills represent the most pervasive and cross-cutting gap in the New Forest business community. The skills needs analysis identified this as the top priority across all sectors and business sizes. Crucially, businesses demonstrated high awareness of the gap — they knew they were behind — but consistently lacked the capacity and confidence to address it without external support.

The skills needs analysis found digital literacy gaps across 82% of the 33 businesses assessed — the highest citation rate of any theme. Hub engagement notes across all 80 businesses confirmed the pattern, with digital skills featuring in follow-up actions for businesses in every sector. The indicative employer survey corroborates these findings, with four of the six respondents identifying digital skills as a priority across social media, CRM, cloud tools, website management and cybersecurity.

The skills needs analysis identified the following as the most prevalent specific digital gaps, confirmed across Hub engagements and corroborated by the illustrative survey responses:

- Website management and SEO — cited across professional services, hospitality and port/logistics sectors in Hub engagements
- Cloud-based productivity tools — particularly relevant to micro-businesses without in-house IT support
- Data management and analysis — growing need across professional services, health and care, and larger employers
- CRM adoption — low uptake identified across retail, hospitality and professional services in the skills analyses
- Cybersecurity awareness — identified as an emerging but under-addressed need, particularly among sole traders and micro-businesses
- Social media marketing and content creation — lowest-rated digital skill in the skills needs analysis despite being the most widely recognised priority

4.3 Financial Management and Business Planning

Financial literacy was identified in the skills needs analysis as one of the weakest skill category of all. This was particularly evident among sole traders and micro-businesses. Specific weaknesses included cash flow forecasting, pricing strategy, book-keeping software, and understanding of business funding mechanisms.

The skills needs analysis rated Financial Management and Business Planning as the lowest-performing skill category across all 33 assessments — a finding consistent across every sector and business size in the programme. Hub engagement notes identified financial management weaknesses as a recurring theme in follow-up actions, particularly for sole traders and micro-businesses with fewer than five employees. The indicative survey responses corroborate this: financial management sub-areas were among the most widely selected priorities, with particular concern around levy transfer awareness, pricing strategy and book-keeping software.

- Cash flow forecasting and management — cited in 74% of skills needs analyses; most acute among hospitality, creative industries and land management businesses
- Pricing strategy and profitability analysis — a consistent weakness across professional services, trades and creative sectors
- Growth-stage business planning — identified particularly among businesses approaching 10+ employees and contemplating their first apprentice hire
- Understanding tax, legal and funding obligations — including apprenticeship levy transfer mechanisms, which were poorly understood across the cohort
- Book-keeping and accounting software adoption (e.g. Xero) — particularly low among sole traders and micro-businesses managing finances manually

4.4 Leadership, Management and People Development

For businesses with employees, people management and leadership development emerged as a significant priority. The skills needs analysis found that People Leadership was rated as a relative strength but that interest in further development consistently exceeded current skill levels – indicating an appetite for growth in this area that current provision is not meeting.

The skills needs analysis found that interest in leadership development consistently exceeded current capability across 67% of businesses assessed — the clearest signal of latent demand that existing provision is not meeting. This was most pronounced in hospitality, health and care, and construction, where owner-managers had grown their businesses organically and found themselves responsible for teams without formal management training. Hub engagement with health and care providers highlighted leadership and basic employability skills as compounding gaps: managers lack both the technical HR knowledge and the confidence to conduct performance conversations, plan succession or navigate employment law basics.

Voice of the Business

"Clinical skills for our clinical team. Customer service skills and utilising changes in technology for our administrative teams." – a health and social care provider, on skills priorities for the next three years

4.5 Sales, Marketing and Customer Engagement

Beyond digital channels, broader sales and commercial capability was a recurring gap, particularly for businesses reliant on word-of-mouth referrals or seasonal footfall. The skills needs analysis identified weaknesses in value proposition development, customer retention, business development and networking skills, and the ability to write compelling bids and proposals.

The skills needs analysis identified sales and commercial capability as a gap for 58% of businesses assessed, with the greatest concentration in hospitality, professional services and creative industries. Hub engagement notes highlighted a recurring pattern: businesses that had grown through word-of-mouth or seasonal footfall had never developed an active commercial proposition, and lacked both the vocabulary and the tools to do so. The challenge is compounded by rising employment costs across the sector — a theme raised consistently by hospitality businesses throughout the Hub programme — which constrains the time and budget available for staff development. Illustrative survey responses confirmed this picture, with hospitality and professional services respondents both identifying commerciality and sales management as their top forward priorities.

Voice of the Business

"Commerciality and the importance of maximising sales potential " – a hospitality employer respondent, illustrating a theme consistent across the Hub's engagement with the sector

4.6 Sector-Specific Technical Skills

Given the New Forest's distinctive economic character, several sector-specific skills needs were consistently identified through the Apprenticeship Hub engagement programme:

- Hospitality and tourism: Front-of-house standards, food hygiene and allergen compliance, sustainable tourism practices
- Land management and agriculture: Environmental stewardship, agri-environment scheme administration, precision farming
- Construction and trades: Retrofit and low-carbon building, planning regulations, health and safety
- Professional services: Project management, client relationship management, estimating and pricing professional services. Hub engagement with solicitors, accountants and consultancies consistently identified a structural shortage of qualified legal and professional advisors, driven by the combination of geography, cost of living and competition from urban employment markets.
- Health and care: Hub engagement with health and care providers consistently highlighted the challenge of attracting clinical staff to the New Forest. Housing and living costs represent a direct financial barrier to relocation, and training providers have largely not recognised private healthcare as a viable apprenticeship or career pathway — a gap that the LSIP should address directly.

4.7 Green Skills

Green and sustainability skills emerged as an emerging rather than immediate priority across the Hub engagement programme, with the strongest current need concentrated in land management, agriculture, construction and larger employers with formal environmental reporting obligations. The skills needs analysis found green skills were not yet a top-five priority for most micro-businesses, though awareness of their growing importance was noted. Where they did feature, energy efficiency, environmental stewardship and carbon accounting were the most commonly cited sub-areas.

The Apprenticeship Hub engagement programme found green skills to be most relevant in land management, agriculture, forestry and construction, where agri-environment schemes, environmental stewardship and retrofit methods were cited as growing needs. For the hospitality sector, sustainable tourism practices were identified as increasingly important, particularly given the New Forest National Park's profile.

5. Recruitment and Workforce Challenges

5.1 Structural Labour Market Constraints

The New Forest's recruitment challenges are not simply a product of skills gaps – they are compounded by deep structural features of the local economy and geography that were raised consistently across the 80 Hub business engagements and corroborated by the indicative survey responses.

Housing and Living Costs

Housing affordability and the general cost of living in the New Forest emerged as the most consistently cited barrier across the survey. Three of the six respondents explicitly identified this as a challenge:

- a professional services employer: 'Housing availability/affordability for staff' is a top recruitment challenge. They noted that competition from Bournemouth and Southampton employers is acute because 'potential staff do not want to commute into the forest.'
- a health and social care provider: 'Housing and living costs in the New Forest certainly have an impact when we are recruiting health care staff from outside of the County.'
- a digital/tech sole trader: 'Housing costs make it difficult for young people starting out.'

A professional services employer identified the single most impactful change as 'cost of living for employees within the region.' This is a systemic issue that skills training provision alone cannot resolve, but which LSIP planners should acknowledge as a ceiling on the effectiveness of any supply-side intervention.

Rurality and Transport

The geographic character of the New Forest – dispersed settlements, limited public transport, and cross-forest journey times – restricts the effective labour market catchment area for many businesses. A professional services sole trader noted: 'rurality and ability to get from one side of the Forest to the other in a reasonable time has its impact.' A professional services employer identified 'geography and cost of living, limited public transport' as creating unique skills challenges.

This has direct implications for training delivery: provision that requires learners to travel to a central location faces a structural disadvantage in the New Forest context. Online and in-business delivery formats are not merely preferences but necessities.

Competition from Urban Employers

New Forest businesses face direct competition for talent from significantly larger employment markets in Bournemouth, Southampton and beyond. A professional services employer commented that the 'lack of lawyers wanting to be here rather than cities due to commute and cost of rent/property' illustrates a recruitment disadvantage that affects professional services businesses disproportionately.

5.2 Apprenticeship Readiness

The Apprenticeship Hub engagement programme found businesses operating across a clear readiness spectrum:

- Immediate / High Readiness (~30%): Already employing apprentices or seeking to recruit immediately. Examples include a hospitality employer, two marine companies and a marketing company.
- Development Stage / Medium Readiness (~40%): Exploring upskilling for existing staff or considering apprenticeships for future growth. Examples include a bakery, a college and a hotel chain.
- Awareness Building / Early Stage (~30%): Learning about opportunities without immediate plans.

Even businesses already offering apprenticeships face ongoing barriers — a finding consistent across Hub engagement notes. The most common issues for active apprenticeship employers were time required for supervision and mentoring, and uncertainty about which standards are available in their specific sector. This underlines the need for sustained account management beyond initial engagement: the conversion journey does not end when a business takes on its first apprentice.

For micro-businesses and sole traders, the barriers are more fundamental: Both sole trader respondents cited 'business too small' as the primary barrier to offering apprenticeships. This is a reality that LSIP design must accommodate – apprenticeship pathways are not appropriate for all businesses, and alternative provision such as Skills Bootcamps and short accredited courses plays an essential role.

6. Awareness of and Access to Training

6.1 Awareness of Funded Training Mechanisms

Limited awareness of publicly funded training, apprenticeship mechanisms and business support grants was identified throughout the programme as a ‘meta-gap’ – a knowledge deficit that compounds all other skills challenges. This was one of the most impactful findings of the Apprenticeship Hub work: for many businesses, simply making them aware of what was available was the most valuable immediate intervention.

Across the 80 Hub engagements, limited awareness of training and funding mechanisms was identified as the single most common barrier to progression — present in businesses at every readiness stage. The weekly online drop-in sessions, attended by businesses across all sectors, consistently revealed that even motivated, growth-minded employers had significant gaps in their knowledge of available pathways. The indicative survey, while too small to be statistically representative, provides a useful snapshot of awareness levels even among relatively well-connected Advisory Group participants:

Mechanism	Very Aware	Somewhat Aware	Not Very Aware	Not Aware At All	Pattern
Apprenticeships	2	2	0	0	Generally well known
Apprenticeship Levy Transfer	2	1	1	1	Significant gaps remain
Skills Bootcamps	1	1	1	1	Low and patchy awareness
Adult Education courses	0	0	2	1	Poorly known
T Levels	0	1	3	0	Low awareness
Business support/grants	1	2	2	0	Partial awareness

Note: Figures are illustrative only, based on six survey respondents. They are presented as directional context alongside the primary Hub engagement evidence, not as statistically representative findings.

These indicative responses align closely with what the Hub engagement programme found at scale: apprenticeships are reasonably well-known as a concept, but the mechanics — levy transfer, available standards, provider routes, eligibility and cost — are poorly understood even by employers already using them. Skills Bootcamps and T Levels are largely unknown among the micro-business majority. This awareness gap is not a marginal issue: across the 80 Hub engagements, providing basic orientation to the apprenticeship landscape was the most frequently needed and highest-impact immediate intervention.

6.2 Preferred Information Channels

Business networks emerged as the most commonly used channel for finding training and skills information, with three of the six survey respondents citing the New Forest Business Partnership specifically. This validates NFBP's position as a trusted intermediary and reinforces the case for embedding LSIP communication within existing business network activity.

Other channels cited included trade associations (a professional services sole trader, the professional services employer), online search (a professional services sole trader), word of mouth (the digital/tech sole trader, the professional services employer), and Chambers of Commerce (the health and social care provider, the professional services employer). The port operations employer noted that their training needs are managed centrally through the port operations employer's HR function and the the port operations employer Academy.

6.3 Training Barriers

The survey identified a range of barriers to accessing training. a professional services employer – reflecting the position of a growing professional services firm – selected every barrier option available: cost, availability of information, time away from the business, local availability, relevance, staff cover, and information access. This breadth underlines how multiple barriers compound each other for growing businesses with limited capacity.

The health and social care provider identified cost and difficulty covering staff during training as the primary barriers. The digital/tech sole trader noted that he is currently downsizing towards retirement, making training a lower priority. a professional services sole trader and the port operations respondent reported no current barriers to training access.

6.4 Preferred Training Formats

Short workshops and bite-sized modules (1–2 hours) were the most consistently preferred format across the survey – selected by four and four respondents respectively. Online/webinar formats were selected by three respondents. This aligns strongly with the Apprenticeship Hub's experience: the 30 weekly online support sessions delivered throughout the programme maintained consistent engagement precisely because they offered a low-commitment, accessible entry point.

A professional services employer selected all format options, reflecting a desire for maximum flexibility. The port operations respondent preferred short workshops, online formats, in-business training and bite-sized modules. The pattern strongly supports a 'portfolio of access' approach rather than any single delivery mode.

7. Implications for the LSIP 2026–2029

7.1 Priority Skills Themes for New Forest LSIP Representation

Based on the totality of evidence presented, NFBP recommends that the following skills themes receive explicit priority in the Hampshire and Solent LSIP for 2026–2029, with specific consideration of the New Forest's micro-business context:

Skills Theme	Representative Quotes / Evidence	Survey Corroboration
Digital Skills (all sub-domains)	"IT exploitation" – the port operations employer. Social media, CRM, cloud tools, cybersecurity identified across multiple respondents.	82% of skills needs analyses; top-ranked across all 80 Hub engagements
Financial & Business Management	Lowest-rated skill category in formal analysis. a professional services employer and the health and social care provider identified comprehensive needs.	74% of skills needs analyses; lowest-rated skill category overall
Sales, Marketing & Commerciality	"Commerciality and maximising sales potential" – a hospitality employer. "Sales and client management" – a professional services sole trader.	58% of skills needs analyses; strong theme across Hub engagement notes
Leadership & People Management	67% citation rate in skills needs analyses. Leadership demand consistently exceeds current provision across hospitality, care and construction.	67% of skills needs analyses; interest consistently exceeded skill level
Sector Technical Skills: Health & Care	Health and care Hub engagements consistently identified clinical staff shortages compounded by housing costs and low sector awareness among training providers.	Health and care Hub engagements; structural recruitment data
Sector Technical Skills: Professional Services	Professional services Hub engagements identified structural shortages across legal, accountancy and consultancy sectors driven by geography and cost of living.	a professional services employer survey; professional services Hub engagements
Sector Technical Skills: Hospitality	Hub engagement with 7+ hospitality businesses; consistent theme across skills needs analyses.	Hub engagement with 7+ hospitality businesses; skills needs analysis data
Green / Sustainability Skills	Emerging theme in land management and construction Hub engagements. Growing regulatory exposure among larger employers.	The port operations employer and the health and social care provider & Health surveys; land management Hub engagements

7.2 Structural Context: What Training Cannot Solve

LSIP planners should recognise that several of the most acute workforce challenges identified in the New Forest evidence base are structural rather than skills-based in origin. Housing costs, transport connectivity, and competition from urban employment markets place genuine ceilings on the effectiveness of supply-side skills interventions alone. These factors should be acknowledged in the LSIP and addressed through complementary policy levers at local and regional level.

7.3 Delivery Principles for New Forest Provision

The evidence strongly supports the following principles for training provision targeted at the New Forest business community:

- Flexible and accessible formats: Short workshops, bite-sized online modules, and in-business delivery are not optional extras but essential requirements for reaching a micro-business majority.
- Trusted intermediary channels: New Forest Business Partnership, Hampshire Chamber of Commerce, and sector trade bodies are the trusted information channels. LSIP communication should be cascaded by the Hampshire Chamber as ERB and embedded in the other networks, not delivered in parallel to them.
- Awareness-first: Many businesses need introduction to what is available before they can engage with it. Sustained awareness-raising about apprenticeships, levy transfer, bootcamps and business support grants remains the highest-return immediate intervention.
- **Apprenticeship-first framing:** Where a technical skills need has a matched apprenticeship standard, apprenticeships should be the default solution presented to businesses, with other routes — Bootcamps, short courses, CPD — positioned explicitly as pathways to apprenticeship readiness rather than standalone alternatives.
- Sector-sensitive design: Generic provision will not meet the specific needs of hospitality, professional services, health and care, land management, or creative industries. Sector-specific clinics and targeted provision are necessary.
- Stepping-stone pathways: For micro-businesses unable to commit to full apprenticeship employment, bootcamps, short accredited courses and upskilling pathways provide essential stepping stones. These should be positioned as a route to apprenticeship readiness, not as a second-best alternative.
- Long-term relationship: Converting awareness to action takes time in a micro-business environment. The LSIP should support sustained account management and follow-through, not one-off engagement events.

7.4 Recommendations

NFBP makes the following specific recommendations to the LSIP steering group:

#	Recommendation	Evidence Base
1	Commission a Digital Skills Bootcamp specifically designed for New Forest micro-businesses, covering social media, CRM, cloud productivity and cybersecurity, delivered in short online modules.	Skills needs analysis (82% citation); Hub engagement data across all sectors
2	Develop a Financial Literacy for Small Business programme including cash flow, pricing, bookkeeping software, and funding awareness, targeted at sole traders and businesses with fewer than 10 employees.	Skills needs analysis (lowest-rated category, 74% citation); Hub engagement notes
3	Establish a Levy Transfer Awareness Campaign targeting New Forest employers, in partnership with Hampshire County Council's Transfer to Transform programme and large local levy-paying employers including NFDC, Brockenhurst College and Exxon Mobil.	Low levy transfer awareness across Hub engagements; Transfer to Transform groundwork established
4	Develop sector-specific apprenticeship clinics for hospitality, professional services, and health and care, bringing together businesses with common needs and matched training providers.	Hub engagement with 7+ hospitality, 6+ professional services and 5+ health and care businesses
5	Work with training providers to develop and promote private healthcare career pathways, addressing the shortage of clinical and allied health professionals willing to work in rural New Forest locations.	Health and care Hub engagements; structural recruitment and housing cost data
6	Embed LSIP communication within NFBP's existing 140+ annual business events programme and trusted network channels, rather than creating parallel outreach infrastructure.	Business networks consistently the primary engagement channel across all 80 Hub interactions
7	Commission research into housing, transport and cost of living barriers to workforce recruitment and retention in the New Forest, as a complement to skills supply-side interventions.	Structural barrier identified consistently across all 80 Hub engagements

8. Conclusion

The New Forest Business Partnership's contribution to the LSIP evidence base reflects a substantial programme of engagement with the real and varied businesses that make up the New Forest economy. The evidence presented in this report is grounded in 80 direct business engagements, 33 formal skills needs analyses, and structured employer survey returns from six businesses attending the New Forest Business Advisory Group.

The picture that emerges is of an economy where technical skills gaps are real, well-understood by businesses themselves, and directly addressable through apprenticeship pathways — yet take-up remains well below potential. The barriers are not primarily attitudinal: businesses across the New Forest are willing and motivated. They are structural and informational — housing costs and rurality constrain the available talent pool, while limited awareness of apprenticeship standards, levy transfer and training provider options means that demand is not being converted into engagement. Closing that gap between latent demand and actual take-up is the central task the LSIP must address for the New Forest.

Above all, the evidence underlines that knowledge — awareness of what training, funding and apprenticeship support is available — remains the most impactful intervention for many New Forest businesses. The New Forest Apprenticeship Hub demonstrated that trusted, accessible, low-barrier engagement by a well-known local intermediary is an exceptionally effective mechanism for converting awareness into action.

NFBP is committed to continuing this work beyond the funded programme period, embedding skills and apprenticeship support within its existing business network activities, and acting as the connective tissue between New Forest businesses and the wider LSIP framework.