

Skills Action Plan 2008-2011

West Midlands Region
2009 Update

October 2009

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There are two associated detailed reports¹:

1. Progress Report – more detailed information about progress against the Skills Action Plan (SAP) 2008

This contains the following sections:

- Closing the Gap: three-year delivery priorities 2008-2011
- Business Engagement Outcomes 2011
- Outcomes from new ways of partnership working – progress made on pledges made in SAP

2. Technical Report – quantitative data relating to targets in the Skills Action Plan 2008 as set out in the Regional Skills Performance Indicators: Annual Review of Performance, June 2009²

This contains the following sections:

- Introduction
- Key headlines
- Economic context
- The Region's overall skills performance
- Operational drivers of performance
- Next steps

1. These reports can be obtained from the Regional Skills Partnership www.wmskillspartnership.org.uk.

2. To download the report go to <http://www.wmro.org/standardTemplate.aspx/Home/OurResearch/Businesseconomy/Skillsperformanceindicatorframework>.

Ministerial Foreword

Since the launch of the Skills Action Plan in 2008, the Region has felt the full impact of the global recession which has made it even clearer that a high level of skills is critical to our future competitiveness. One thing we can be sure of about the post-recession economy is that higher-level skills will be essential if we are to realise the opportunities presented by new products, new processes and new industries. We also know that people without basic skills will have fewer and fewer opportunities.

The U.K. Commission for Employment and Skills put it well - "Our future prosperity depends ultimately on how many people are in work and how productive they are when they are working." These remain key challenges for the West Midlands.

The Government is committed to creating the conditions in which British businesses can compete and prosper. To take just one example, advanced manufacturing, with its heartland in the West Midlands, is one of the UK's biggest exports and is central both to our recovery from recession and to our future success. That is why we are committed to ensuring that we equip businesses and their workforce with the capabilities and skills to take advantage of opportunities in the new growth areas such as advanced manufacturing and low-carbon technologies. Above all, it is about science and technology and sophisticated skills in innovation, design and production. These are the skills we need to encourage and stimulate in the West Midlands using our excellent universities and all the support that we have put in place to help people at every age and level to improve their skills and employability; whether they are young people setting out on their working lives through Apprenticeships or following further or higher education, or through people who are taking stock in these tougher economic times and choosing to improve their skills.

This first annual update report on the West Midlands Skills Action Plan shows that the first year of work by the employer-led Regional Skills Partnership has resulted in good progress in many areas. The proportion of people in the Region qualified to at least NVQ2, 3 and 4 has increased; more employers in the Region have taken advantage of the Train to Gain scheme than in any other region; and the West Midlands also has the highest proportion of young people and adults successfully completing Apprenticeships.

As you read the update you will find many more examples of the progress which has been made over the last 12 months, and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all involved – not least the people of all ages who have worked to improve their skills.

There are many challenges ahead for us as a Region but there are also many opportunities for us as employers or as individuals to take the challenge to improve our skills. For employers, I would urge you to put yourselves firmly behind the Government's Apprenticeship programme so that we can meet our commitment of increasing the number of young people starting an Apprenticeship from 1 in 20 to 1 in 5. At a personal level, I was privileged to launch the West Midlands Graduate Internship programme earlier this year which is providing a unique opportunity for employers to access graduate-level skills and to help students from the West Midlands start their careers, despite the recession. This will be a real boost to the Region.

It is clear though that we cannot relax – there is still a lot to do before we reach the targets set out in the Skills Action Plan, and when we get there we will need to set ourselves new objectives to ensure that we can give businesses what they need in a world where competition is becoming more and more intense. It won't be easy, but it is achievable and I am sure that, working together with a shared determination, we can and will succeed.



Ian Austin
Minister of State and Minister for the West Midlands

Chair's Report

This document is intended to provide all members of the Regional Skills Partnership with an update and refresh of their Skills Action Plan. It reflects contributions and comments from a wide range of partners.

In our first Skills Action Plan March 2008, we recognised we had to bring about a step-change in our ambitions for the knowledge, skills and talents of all who live, work and study in the West Midlands. The Leitch targets, that were adopted by this Region, are stretching and we knew we would have to work in completely new ways to achieve them. Our ambitious targets, developed with key partners across the Region, were set out in the Skills Action Plan against which we agreed to be held accountable. In this report we set out our progress and reaffirm our commitments.

We have achieved much of which we can be proud, but we need to be honest about the size of the challenge still remaining. In this report we set out both.

Much has happened nationally and regionally since the original Skills Action Plan was written. The economic recession has put pressure on employers, individuals and the public sector. Funding for both private and public sector organisations, needs to be targeted more than ever before. We need everyone to play their part and we urge you all, organisations and individuals, to continue investing in skills that help people remain employable and businesses, not only to withstand the recession, but also to emerge from it strengthened and invigorated.

Our work is set within a national policy context and this year Government has set out a strategic vision for investing in new industries and new jobs³, proposed significant structural changes in the planning and funding of skills development⁴ and created the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). Currently, consideration is being given to modifying the existing plans for the creation of the Skills Funding Agency and to making the Regional Development Agencies the single body with responsibility for producing the Regional Skills Strategy.

Regionally, we welcome the new ways of working that these national changes herald. We know we have to work differently, be more proactive, more flexible and ready for the future. We need to be less focused on historical trends and better informed so that we can make decisions on provision and funding more quickly.

Over the last year we have made real progress. We have improved our work-based skills development and been rewarded with success, particularly in the take up of Train to Gain and Apprenticeships and in both areas we are one of the highest performing regions in the country. We have developed more integrated ways of working and our integrated business brokerage is one of our success stories. We have responded quickly and effectively to the economic downturn, with a number of task groups tackling the challenge head on.

Moving forward, the Single Integrated Regional Strategy and its associated investment plan represents welcome and much-needed progress. The Impact Investment Locations we identified as important physical areas for development will be key centres of skills development at all levels⁵.

Skills challenges are not only about numbers, although in absolute terms the number of people in the Region with few or no recognised qualifications is still huge. Difficulties of accessing skills development at all levels still exist; barriers to progression need to be removed and policy decisions need to be translated into actions to make this the high-performing Region we want it to be.

We know there are still major challenges ahead but we know we can achieve more together. We are committed to the Region, its performance and its future. We are committed to working in partnership. The Regional Skills Partnership⁶ is strong in this Region and committed to meeting these challenges.



Mike Beasley
Chair of the Regional Skills Partnership, on behalf of all its members

3. 'New Industry, New Jobs; Building Britain's Future' April 2009.

4. The Apprenticeship, Children, Skills and Learning Bill 2008-9.

5. These are set out in the Regional Funding Advice, available at http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/documents/download.aspx?id=tc:9-17430&file=/Images/West%20Midlands%20Regional%20Funding%20Advice%202009-19%20FINAL_tcm9-17430.pdf&title=

6. Members of the Regional Skills Partnership are listed at the end of this report.

Executive Summary

This report represents the first annual update and refresh of the Regional Skills Partnership's Skills Action Plan. It reflects the impact of the economic downturn and changes in national and regional policy.

Key achievements to date

The Regional Skills Performance Index reveals an overall improvement in skills, with the Region moving up one place to fifth in the league of English regions, but the underlying picture is mixed. Regional qualifications, at all levels, are below the progress needed to meet the trajectories set out in the original Skills Action Plan. Employers continue to invest less per head in skills, than in other regions, although 2,300 employers (public and private sector) have committed to the Skills Pledge.

In 2008, Train to Gain involved more employers in this Region than in any other. Employers have also been involved in significant initiatives including building a new qualification framework (with Sector Skills Councils), using the integrated Business Link business brokerage service and establishing Employment and Skills Boards across the Region.

Access to higher level skills is improving. Specialised teams have worked with students and employers to improve work preparation training, work placements and entrepreneurial skills. The growth of Foundation Degrees has been the strongest of any Region. The Director Development programme and the Specialist Leadership and Management Service, delivered through Business Link, have helped to improve business performance through investment in leadership and management skills.

There are now fewer 16-18 year-olds not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET). Progress in the attainment and participation of young people has also been good. Apprenticeship attainment remains above the national average and the gap to the national average in GCSE attainment for people, gaining five or more A*- C grades, has reduced.

The economic downturn has adversely impacted the West Midlands. By June 2009, worklessness had risen to nearly 30% compared with a national average of 27% and unemployment to 10.6%, compared with a national average of 7.8%. Local Employment Partnerships, Local Area Agreements, the Integrated Employment Skills Pilot and the Unity Project are examples of initiatives undertaken to address this.

Key challenges remaining

Challenges remain in raising overall skill levels, raising employer investment in skills and making more effective use of skills in the workplace. We need to maintain progress made as well as achieve future targets and as a result of the economic downturn, partners will need to better target investment and work together to identify priorities.

Despite recent progress, there are still significant numbers of individuals who need to develop their skills to achieve our targets. All skill levels in the working-age population remain lower than most other regions and there are more people with no qualifications than any other region.

The Region has the second lowest share of managerial and professional jobs and management competence is relatively poor. This affects ability to innovate and develop business value and future improvement is essential. Overall, more leaders and managers need to invest in their own skills as well as the skills of their employees.

GCSE attainment, whilst improving, is below the national average and well below the best. Good progress in lowering NEET levels is under threat as a result of the recession, which also creates a challenging environment for the National Apprenticeship Service to stimulate employer demand for Apprenticeships. New Diploma and Apprenticeship programmes need embedding as part of the 14-19 entitlement, with Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) playing a key role. New responsibilities for planning, commissioning, delivering and monitoring progress of young people will be determined through the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill (2008-9), and the implementation of these statutory and regulatory mechanisms will be identified regionally by Local Authorities and other agencies.

There are still high levels of worklessness in the Region.

Action plan and next steps

The Leitch and Public Sector Agreements (PSA) targets set out in the original Skills Action Plan still represent the ambition of the Region. To help meet the significant challenges, additional actions have been identified and are set out in Section 3 of this Action Plan.

Section 1: Progress against last year's targets

1.1 The original Skills Action Plan 2008 – an introduction

In 2008, the West Midlands (WM) Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) produced the first ever Regional Skills Action Plan and identified three main purposes:

1. 'To set out the ambitious skills goals that we have to achieve for the Region';
2. 'To explain how this change will be led by the Region's business leaders, with clear roles and accountabilities for the Region's key stakeholders in achieving these goals';
3. 'To detail the new ways of working between the key public stakeholders to streamline and simplify our customer offer to businesses and individuals'⁷.

This report represents the first annual update. It reviews progress and assesses if work is on track. It identifies areas where plans may need adjusting in the light of the recession and changes in the legislative and policy framework, both regionally and nationally. It is a progress update and a refresh of what we need to do in the future.

In this first section we specifically review progress made over the last year against the actions identified in the 2008 plan. We review quantitative evidence in terms of the Skills Index and the Leitch targets and information from partners about their progress.

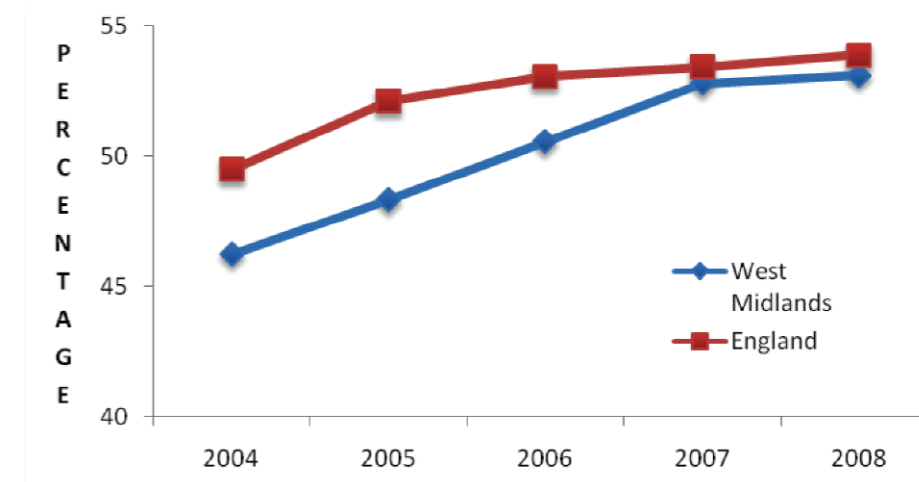
More detail of the progress made, as well as explanations of many of the measures used in this report (including the three tiers of indicators used by the RSP), are given in the two associated reports – the Progress Report and the Technical Report.

7. Skills Action Plan 2008, Ministerial Foreword.

1.2 Regional Skills Performance Progress

In general, skills performance in the Region has improved significantly over recent years.

Chart 1: Skills Performance Index, 2004-2008, West Midlands compared with England



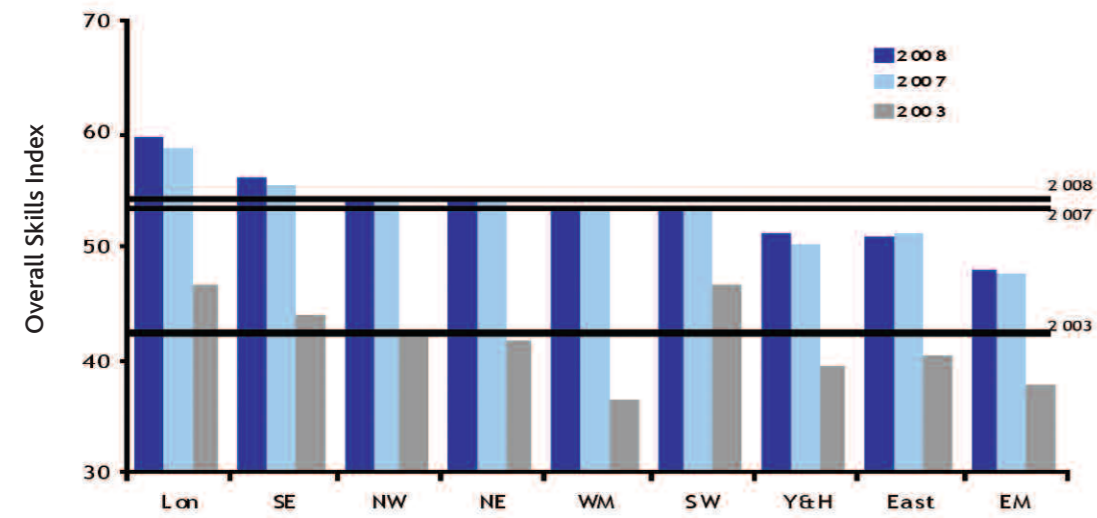
Source: WMRO

As the chart shows, the West Midlands has demonstrated an improving position compared with the England average.

- In 2003, the WM showed a six-point performance gap with the average for England;
- By 2005 this had narrowed to 4 percentage points;
- In 2007, this gap had further narrowed to less than 1 percentage point;
- While the gap did not narrow any further between 2007 and 2008, it remained at less than 1 percentage point.

The WM moved up one place in the 'league' of nine English regions, from sixth place last year to fifth place this year. The diagram on page twelve shows this, together with the significant improvement since 2003.

Chart 2: Overall Skills Performance Index, Regional Comparison



Source: WMRO

1.3 Progress against Leitch and PSA targets

The Leitch and PSA targets are qualification-based. Not all training results in an externally recognised qualification, even though it might have a significant and positive effect on output, productivity or even innovation.

However, qualifications are widely used as a proxy measure for skills and are relatively easy to measure and compare on a regional and national basis. The Skills Action Plan sets out clear goals for qualification levels in the West Midlands for 2011, the PSA targets and the Leitch targets for 2020.

Charts 3 and 4 set out progress made against these targets in the last 12 months and additional detail is provided in the associated Progress Report, Section 2: 'Closing the Gap'.

Chart 3: WM Goals for achieving skills to help address the productivity gap with the rest of England

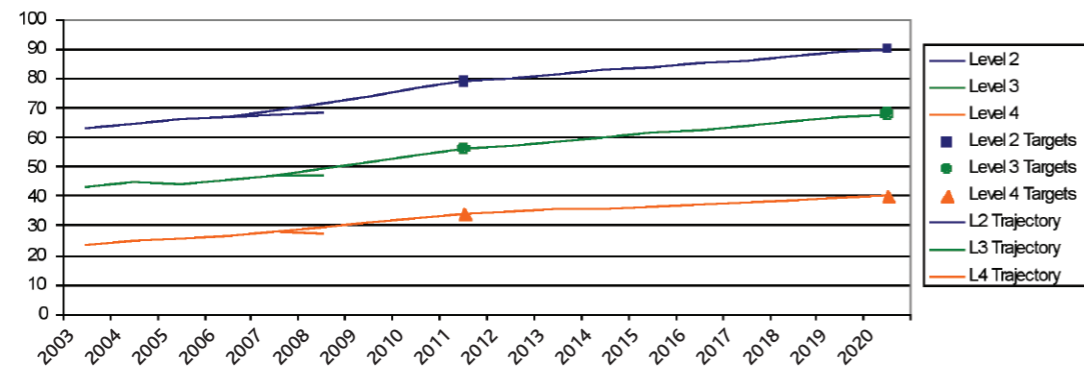
Key measurable skills goals	West Midlands position 2006	WM current position (2008)	West Midlands goals for 2011 (PSA targets)	Leitch review targets for 2020
Percentage of adults that have functional literacy and numeracy	83% literacy 78% numeracy	The survey to confirm percentage performance is carried out bi-annually so progress in this area cannot be reported at this stage.	89% literacy 81% numeracy	95% literacy 95% numeracy
Percentage of adults qualified to at least a Level 2	66.7%	68%	79% (PSA2: Indicator 2)	90%
Percentage of adults qualified to at least a Level 3	45%	47%	56% (PSA2: Indicator 3)	68%
Percentage of adults qualified to at least a Level 4	26% ⁸	27%	34% (PSA2: Indicator 5)	40%

Source: West Midlands Skills Action Plan March 2008 and Labour Force Survey Quarter 4 2008

In terms of the percentage of the population with qualifications at Levels 2, 3, 4 and higher, the chart on page fourteen shows the baseline position in 2003, the 2011 and 2020 targets and the progress made over the last year compared with targets. At the inception of the Plan, it was recognised that the Leitch targets were stretching for the West Midlands given its starting position; however the ambition to achieve these targets provides a focus for action.

8. This figure was incorrect in the original Skills Action Plan. It was shown there as 24% instead of the correct figure of 26%.

Chart 4: Percentage of population with Levels 2, 3 and 4 qualifications (or higher)



Source: West Midlands Skills Action Plan March 2008 and Labour Force Survey Quarter 4 2008

This graph highlights the slow start made in early 2008 in achieving additional skills qualifications⁹. Although improvements have been made, they are below the trajectory required if the Leitch targets are to be achieved.

Information from Partners

1.4 Work-focused skills development

During the year, a key focus has been the development and targeting of skills provision that meets the needs of employers and the regional economy, as well as the aspirations of individuals. Work is also continuing to align these resources to respond to regional strategies for recovery and growth.

One of the key indicators which has demonstrated a work-focused skills development approach has been the high level of employer engagement with the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) Train to Gain service delivered through the Business Link, Further Education Institutions (FEIs) colleges and private training providers. In 2008 more employers were involved in the programme in the West Midlands than in any other English region and over 24,000 employers have now used the demand-led Train to Gain service to help upskill their workforce.

Business Link has also helped small and medium businesses identify and develop their leadership and management skills through the Director Development Programme which has provided business-related learning and development support to over 700 directors and senior managers in the Region.

In addition, the Specialist Leadership and Management Service, which was launched in 2008, has supported 64 middle-market businesses and 17 owner-managed businesses during its first year. The take-up of this specialist service is expected to treble in 2009/10, as Business Link collaborates with the Advantage West Midlands business clusters, Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Chambers of Commerce and other associated network groups, to target businesses which can gain maximum benefit from the service.

The development work that has been undertaken in the last year on the new qualification framework, is critical to an effective approach to work-focussed skills development and employers throughout the Region have been working with the network of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to help identify and develop the key qualifications required by their sectors.

9. Progress shown here is as measured by the Labour Force Survey. This can be affected by the precise nature of the sample year-on-year, but will show a clear direction of travel over the longer term. In addition it does not include the impact of Train to Gain and Apprenticeship work during the current year due to the time-lag of information or the impact of the economic downturn.

1.5 Business engagement

The business base in the West Midlands is immense with the private sector comprising 376,000 businesses, employing 1,938,000¹⁰ people. Of these, 72% (271,220) are micro-businesses or sole traders with no employees, whereas the 505 largest businesses employ 41% of the workforce. This demonstrates the difficulty of engaging with such a large number of individual businesses. Similarly the Third Sector employs in excess of 51,000 people across the Region, the majority working in organisations of 100 or fewer people. The investment in skills across the Region is almost impossible to calculate; but it is clear that the majority is made by businesses and individual learners, supported by public sector investment. However, benchmarking data shows that employers in the West Midlands invest less per employee than employers in other regions.

The Skills Action Plan identified that, if the Region is to meet the ambitious skills goals it set itself, employers must play a role in driving skills policy and increasing the demand for skills. The Plan set out a significant number of key actions, through which regional stakeholders agreed to work in partnership with employers to meet the planned targets and define some key principles for working together.¹¹ The progress made in the development of a successful strategy for business engagement, and the progress made by regional stakeholders in the delivery of roles and accountabilities, is set out in the more detailed Progress Report. This identifies clear achievements.

The integrated business brokerage service, operated by Business Link, has been welcomed by employers and providers alike and has proved successful in targeting skills development that helps employers achieve real improvements in their business performance.

The LSC and Jobcentre Plus (JCP) have developed and published 'The Employer Offer for the West Midlands – Unlocking Talent'¹² which provides employers with clear information about available services. This offer has been further developed in response to the economic downturn to ensure the delivery of a comprehensive and supportive employment and skills service.

Over 2,300 employers have committed to the Skills Pledge, making a public commitment to train their workforce to Level 2 and above. This means that 376,000 individuals are employed in organisations committed to skills development. In response to the Regional Minister's 'Skills Challenge', 111 public sector organisations have responded, with 89 signed up to the Skills Pledge (including 43 out of 44 National Health Service (NHS) organisations) and 45 involved in Local Employer Partnerships, formalising their commitment to work with disadvantaged individuals from the local community.

Whilst Local Employment Partnerships have enabled employers to play a key role in supporting individuals to return to work, this activity has also enabled employers to develop effective partnership arrangements with JCP in order to fill other vacancies and recruitment needs.

The Regional Clustering Programme¹³ seeks to grow industries to exploit attractive markets where the Region has existing or potential strengths and to encourage businesses to work together to achieve this. Cluster networks have created links between businesses, relationships with universities and other organisations – playing a catalysing role within their sectors. Cluster Opportunity Groups influence public sector skills initiatives and business support to help achieve their market objectives and themselves represent 150 participating businesses of a much wider network.

10. Source: (SME Statistics for the UK & Regions, 2007).

11. As set out in the original Skills Action Plan 2008.

12. (www.lsc.gov.uk/wmpublications).

13. <http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/working-with-us/business-clusters/default.aspx>.

Examples of cluster projects, which have played a major role in developing markets and sectors with the most wealth and employment potential include: the Premium Automotive Research and Development Programme, which has addressed a range of technologies from the application of lightweight materials through to hybrid engines; the Advantage Offsite Programme, which is helping to develop the latest techniques and innovation in offsite manufacture and Medilink West Midlands, which facilitates access to commercial opportunities for the Region's health medical and healthcare company.

Employers are also playing an active role in working with public sector partners to develop local employment and skills plans. A network of Employment and Skills Boards covering most parts of the Region has also been established.

1.6 Higher skills for the future

Businesses have increasingly been driven towards greater engagement with new and emerging markets and technologies and as such they have needed to develop appropriate skills to take advantage of the new opportunities offered.

Significant work has been undertaken to enable employers to access and develop the higher level skills they need to innovate and prepare for the future.

Most of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and FEIs have established business development teams, and across the Region, have embedded employability skills within their curricula and made senior appointments to support this. They have been developing their links with employers to improve the employability of their students and their effectiveness once in work. This has been through a higher proportion of work placements, voluntary work (including mentoring and outreach) and more robust information, advice and guidance schemes. For example, Keele University has an Employability Charter setting out the support students can expect to receive in developing their employability. There has also been significant progress in better access to higher level qualifications, through a wide variety of routes, although more could be done.

Many of the HEIs and FEIs offer work experience opportunities to their students, to enhance their skills, working closely with companies to broker placements. For example, Graduate Advantage has also helped to place students in smaller companies in the West Midlands.

In response to the economic downturn the West Midlands Graduate Internship Programme has been developed. This service has emerged by combining the existing activities of a range of regional organisations to deliver a new approach. HEIs across the Region have encouraged their students to develop entrepreneurial skills by supporting them in setting up their own businesses and developing the skills they need to do this.

There has been a significant increase in the numbers of Foundation Degrees, with the West Midlands having the strongest growth of any of the English regions. An example of this is the WM Health and Social Care Foundation Degree, developed by the WM NHS and providing a consistent approach to the acquisition of Foundation Degrees across the Region.

Other areas of particular growth include Engineering Degrees at Aston and Coventry Universities.

Business Link has also offered an increasingly effective business brokerage service. This includes promoting the development of skills to support innovation and enterprise, and Train to Gain Higher Education (HE) coordinators in each Lifelong Learning Network (LLN). This has helped to improve access to higher education provision in FEIs and HEIs.

1.7 Developing Young people

Education attainment and skills development among young people was another clear priority identified as helping to achieve the Region's skills targets. Again, there are clear examples of the progress that has been made over the last year.

The number of 15 year-olds achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A*- C, including Maths and English has increased, reducing the gap with the England average.

Encouragingly, increasing participation by young people in further education or work-based learning has been reflected in falling numbers of young people who are not engaged in employment, education or training. The NEET rate has fallen from 8.9% in 2006, to 7.1% in 2007 and 7.0% in 2008. However, the RSP does not underestimate the challenge in this area given the profound impact that the economic downturn has had on opportunities for young people.

There has been a strong take-up of Apprenticeships and over the last year, the proportion of young people and adults successfully completing Apprenticeships was the highest in the country.¹⁴ Employers in the Region have recruited 15,000 16-18 year-old apprentices this year taking the current number of young people on the programme to 23,000. They have also recruited 19,000 apprentices who are 19+, taking the number on the programme to 43,500. In addition, over 1,300 employers have advertised Apprenticeship vacancies through the new Apprenticeship Vacancy Matching Service.

There is strong and growing engagement between businesses and young people in several areas, including schools, academies, FE Colleges and HE institutions. Much of this is facilitated by business organisations such as Business Link, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Chambers of Commerce, WM Business Council, the Federation of Small Businesses and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). Other partners, including Local Authorities, contribute to this work in their localities.

In the academic year 2008/2009, diplomas for 14-19 year-olds in Creative and Media, Construction and the Built Environment, Engineering, Information and Technology and Society and Health became available. In the Region 30 Diploma Programmes have been offered in 10 local authority areas and just under 1,000 young people commenced learning. To support this approach the WM NHS has developed seven 'Health Tec's' across the Region to support the delivery of health and social care diplomas.

In response to the changes Government has announced for 14-19 year-olds, the LSC and Local Authorities throughout the Region have worked closely to develop clear and robust transition plans for the transfer of responsibility. This work will enable Local Authorities to commission learning opportunities for young people, ensuring that the 16-18 entitlement in all areas is met and that arrangements are in place for the raising of the participation age to 17 in 2013. Local Authorities have established sub-regional groups for commissioning 16-19 learning provision and submitted their initial proposals to Government. It will be important that future regional arrangements reflect the need to ensure that this work contributes to meeting the output gap and that the commissioning process enables all employers to contribute.

14. Source: LSC performance data 2008. More detailed analysis of the Region's skills performance, considering the overall index together with all of the indicators within the wider RSP performance indicator framework, is published in the associated Technical Report, July 2009.

1.8 Addressing worklessness and unemployment

The proportion of the Region's working-age population who are workless (i.e. either unemployed or economically inactive) was 29.88% or 973,000 people in the three months to June 2009. This is up from 27.5% a year earlier and compares with a UK average of 27.3%. Only the North East and London have higher workless rates.¹⁵ The chart below sets out the national picture in 2008.

Chart 5: Workless rates by region in the 3 months to June 2009



Source: Annual Population Survey 2008

This has been further compounded by the recent economic downturn which has had a severe impact on the West Midlands and particularly the unemployment rates. The WM Monthly Economic Update report (August 2009) showed the regional international Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployment rate at 10.6% (compared with a UK average of 7.8%). The regional figure is 4.2 percentage points higher than the year before and equates to some 285,000 people.

The challenges of economic inactivity and unemployment have been addressed through the work of Jobcentre Plus, LSC, Local Authorities and others working in partnership with employers. The Integrated Employment and Skills Pilot, the development and delivery of Local Area Agreements (LAA) and the Multi-Area Agreement for the City Region, (which prioritise the tackling of worklessness), together with regeneration strategies and community initiatives are all designed to develop skills for employment and enable individuals to enter into sustainable employment.

Employers have also played an active role in seeking to address the worklessness agenda and over 10,000 are now signed up to Local Employment Partnerships assisting over 13,000 individuals into work over the last 12 months.

In responding to and supporting the needs of employers and individuals affected by the economic downturn, partners have introduced increased flexibilities including targeted training through the work of the West Midlands Task Force and the deployment of additional European Social Funding. To illustrate this work the West Midlands LSC has worked in partnership with employers, trade unions, FEIs and training providers to develop and offer a range of pre-redundancy and redundancy support, including the Unity Project which alone, to date, has assisted over 300 employers and 6,000 individuals affected by redundancy. In addition, as well as providing employment and skills opportunities as employers, the Third Sector plays a significant role in responding to and supporting individuals affected by the current and previous economic downturns.

¹⁵ It should be noted that it takes time to collect and analyse data. Therefore, these figures will not represent the current position or reflect the impact of the current initiatives.

1.9 Conclusion

It is clear that there has been significant progress made in both quantitative and qualitative terms over the last year and much has been achieved through partnership working. However, the Region's Gross Value Added growth is still much lower than the UK average, there are still significant numbers of unskilled or low-skilled people in the workforce and there are still high numbers of unemployed. In addition, the recent recession has accelerated the structural change in the economy which is going to require new skills along with greater flexibility and more responsiveness. The next section briefly reviews this challenge.

Section 2: The challenge ahead

2.1 Introduction

Despite the progress made over the last twelve months, major challenges remain in achieving the targets set out in the Skills Action Plan. This section reviews the key areas of challenge.

2.2 The challenge of improving economic performance – the output gap and skills

In 2005 when the West Midland Economic Strategy (WMES) was developed, output per head in the West Midlands (WM) was 89% of the UK average. When this is scaled across the whole economy it equates to a £10bn output gap. More recent estimates suggest this gap has grown.

A recent report from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills is clear that "Our future prosperity depends ultimately on how many people are in work and how productive they are when they are working."¹⁶ These remain key challenges for the Region.

Overall skills levels in the working-age population remain lower than in most other regions, with more people without any qualifications than anywhere else in the country, fewer working-age people with Level 4 qualifications than anywhere in the country (other than the North East Region) and relatively fewer people with graduate-level skills in the private sector, thus limiting the Region's ability to improve productivity levels.

2.3 The challenge of achieving Leitch targets, and PSA targets

Despite the progress made over the last year, the scale of the challenge to meet the targets set in this plan for 2011 remains considerable, particularly when the absolute numbers are considered (percentage improvements over the year are set out in chart 3 on page 13 and chart 4 on page 14).

¹⁶ World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK, April 2009.

Chart 6: Number of learners who need to gain new qualifications to meet the targets

Key measurable skills goals, learner achievements	West Midlands position 2008	Additional number required to meet West Midlands goals for 2011 (PSA targets)	Additional number required to meet Leitch review targets for 2020	Number of adults achieving a qualification in 2008/9** through LSC and other funded provision
Number of adults qualified to at least a Level 2	Just over 2 million	357,900 (PSA2: Indicator 2)	628,000	60,842(LSC)
Number of adults qualified to at least a Level 3	Just over 1.4 million	289,500 (PSA2: Indicator 3)	No target set	16,891(LSC)
Number of adults qualified to at least a Level 4	Nearly 830,000	211,600 (PSA2: Indicator 5)	366,000	30,000 (HEFCE) 3.500 (LSC)

Source: West Midlands Skills Action Plan March 2008 and Labour Force Survey Quarter 4 2008

Note LSC figures - not all will be 'first' full Level 2/3 qualifications for individuals. Figures include Adult Apprenticeship, Train to Gain and Adult Learner Responsiveness funding streams, full Level 2/3 achievements.** Figures for 2008/9 are estimated from data available at the time of writing.

These figures show that there is still a significant gap in terms of the number of individuals who need to develop their skill levels to achieve the Region's 2011 and Leitch 2020 targets.

More details are given in the associated Technical Report.

2.4 The challenge of work-focused skills development

The impact of the economic downturn will mean that there is a significant challenge to maintain and increase employer investment in skills. Business Link and other partners need to ensure that businesses continue to view skills as central to their survival, have recession recovery and growth strategies in place and continue to invest in the skills of their employees.

In an environment of restricted public sector spending, Train to Gain resources will need to be prioritised to meet the needs of the regional economy and workforce.

Sector Skills Councils will have a key role at a national and regional level in articulating the skills needs of employers and ensuring that qualifications and the delivery of provision is fit-for-purpose and meets business needs. As new qualifications are developed there will be further scope for the accreditation of in-house employer training (as demonstrated by Aviva in Norwich and FlyBe in Exeter) and the West Midlands should aim to be at the forefront of such developments.

2.5 The challenge of business engagement

If the performance of the West Midlands economy and of individual businesses is to improve, a greater number of employers need to invest further in the skills of their employees on a more consistent basis and in themselves as leaders and managers. To do this, they must be convinced of the business benefits of investing in skills – this is an immense challenge.

In a period of restricted public funding there will be a need to work with employers to determine priorities for public sector intervention and to determine the investment required by employers to meet their training needs.

Employers also need to ensure that they are involved, either directly or through business representative organisations, in the development and design of training provision for young people and adults. The Strategic Business Engagement Project, funded by Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and delivered by a consortium of the West Midlands Chambers, provides strategic support to the Region's largest businesses and aftercare to inward investment companies. This project is now being guided by the priorities of the West Midlands Task Force as a result of the economic downturn.

2.6 The challenge of higher skills for the future

The UKCES Report, 'Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK' highlighted that if the UK is to recover from the recession and thrive in the new global economy, businesses must build a future based on innovation, quality and higher value-added, and efficiency. This will involve the development of higher level skills and will be a major challenge for the West Midlands.

The West Midlands Region has the second lowest share of managerial and professional jobs in England and these are the jobs which generate the most innovation and yield the greatest value for businesses. It is essential that the challenge of addressing the low share of managerial and professional jobs is met by working with businesses to design and deliver high-level skills modules that meet current business needs and create real bottom-line benefits.

Within the skills goals for adults qualified to at least a Level 4, there is a particular challenge within the private sector. In 2008 only 23% of the Region's private sector workers were qualified to NVQ 4 or higher (representing just over 411,000 people) which is down from 24% in 2007 and compares with an England average of 28%. The highest performing regions are the South East (30%) and London (45%).¹⁷ In order to just achieve parity with the English average, we need an additional 70,000 people, who are already in work, to be qualified to Level 4 or above.

By comparison, the Region's public sector has around 50% of workers with graduate-level skills and 31% of the Region's Third Sector paid employees, are educated to degree level or above.

The West Midlands Regional Observatory (WMRO) has published a number of reports that show, on average, management competence in the Region is relatively poor. Research has highlighted "*there is a deficit between management skills in the West Midlands and the rest of the country in a range of specific competencies*" and based on the Advantage West Midlands-funded Management Matters Project, 13% of managers are not proficient in their role compared with 7% nationally and 42% of companies with management vacancies have problems filling them, compared to 34% nationally. Poor management skills are contributing significantly to the £10bn productivity gap in the West Midlands and the ability of employers to innovate successfully.

Improvement in this area will be essential and the West Midlands Regional Observatory (WMRO) estimates that working with 300 companies (which is on a par with the scale of the current Specialist Management and Leadership programme) employing between 100 and 400 people and achieving a 9% increase in Gross Value Added (GVA) through developing leadership and management skills, could generate an estimated £250m for the West Midlands.

17. Source: ONS Labour Force Survey Q4 2008.

2.7 The challenge of developing young people

The education and skills of our young people are critical to the future success of the Region and we must ensure that they have access to a range of opportunities that will enable them to fulfil their potential and contribute to the regional and local economy. To achieve this ambition we must challenge current performance and drive forward improvements.

Whilst 46% of 15 years-olds in the Region attained five or more GCSEs at A*- C including English and Maths in 2007/08, this is 2 percentage points below the England average and 5 percentage points below the best performing region in England - the South East. To close the gap with England, 1,400 more pupils need to attain this standard and 3,600 more if we are to close the gap with the South East.

Although significant progress has been made in increasing young people's participation in learning, the number of young people not in employment education and training (NEET) in the West Midlands is the fourth highest in the English regions with specific 'hotspots' identified in Stoke-on-Trent and Sandwell. Focussed action to address this must continue if we are to ensure that young people are not at risk of missing out on opportunities that will enable them to meet their full potential and gain skills that will benefit the economy.

Although the number of apprentices made redundant since the onset of the recession is less than might have been expected, there is evidence that the number of employers taking on apprentices in the coming year is likely to be significantly reduced. There is therefore a significant challenge for the new National Apprenticeship Service in encouraging employers to continue to invest in Apprenticeships in a time of recession and meet the Government's commitment to increase the number of young people starting an Apprenticeship from 1 in 20 to 1 in 5.

This work will demand that the range of Apprenticeship Frameworks that are developed and delivered, are relevant to employers and attractive to young people.

Similarly, the entitlement of young people to have access to a range of learning opportunities and support will demand that the availability of the 14-19 Diploma Programme, is extended and expanded throughout the Region.

As a result of these challenges, employers will need to be much more engaged in the development and delivery of 14-19 Diplomas and Apprenticeships. If they are to be successful, businesses will need to be engaged in their design, to ensure they are relevant and 'future-proofed'. To improve delivery, they will need to ensure that there are sufficient work placements and jobs that are attractive to young people and their advisers (particularly parents and teachers).

Employers will also need to actively work with Local Authorities to ensure that the overall commissioning of learning and training opportunities for young people takes account of the economic needs of the Region.

2.8 The challenge of worklessness and unemployment

The West Midlands as a Region has been severely affected by the economic downturn and addressing this challenge will be at the forefront of our partnership work.

The number of those claiming Job Seeker's Allowance in June 2009 across the Region was 175,500. This represents 6.4 % of the Region's working-age population, an increase of 2.8% over the previous twelve months and still rising.

It is clear that those 'newly' unemployed individuals (including large numbers of executives and recent graduates) will have different needs from those long-term unemployed, and so different approaches will be needed.

Worklessness (a wider definition than those claiming Job Seeker's Allowance) can have a debilitating effect on communities, damaging social cohesion. The impact of previous recessions and severe economic crises is still being felt in some places. It is important that another generation of long-term unemployed is not created in the current circumstances.

Around half the workless population are claiming the main out-of-work benefits. Of these, over half were claiming Incapacity Benefits, more than double the number of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants. In common with other regions, by far the largest group of Incapacity Benefits claimants were those suffering from mental or behavioural disorders. These represent significantly greater challenges in terms of developing new skills levels and routes back into employment.

There is also a challenge around addressing potential worklessness in young people, ensuring that they are in some form of education, employment or training. This will form part of the work of Local Authorities in the future, who will be looking at worklessness as a key element of their proposed new duty to produce Local Economic Assessments for their areas.

The Future Jobs Fund, an employment programme aimed primarily at long-term unemployed young people, aims to create 150,000 jobs nationally and this will be a key focus for work going forward.

2.9 Conclusion

It is clear that significant challenges lie ahead, not least as a result of the changing structure of the regional economy.

Whilst it is not possible to forecast precisely what skills will be required as the country emerges from recession, it is clear that they will be different. The Government's policy document: 'New Industry, New Jobs: Building Britain's Future', published in April 2009, clearly identifies the need for employers to be flexible and to develop skills in key areas which are likely to be required, whatever their precise application. In addition, potential changes are planned to make the Regional Development Agencies the single body responsible for producing the Regional Skills Strategy and developing a system of working that delivers new industry and new jobs. This makes for a significantly changing landscape in the immediate future.

The document also emphasises the importance of public sector funding being clearly aligned with the skills development required to support emerging technologies. The scale and nature of all these challenges is not to be underestimated.

Section 3: Action plan and next steps

3.1 The 2008 - 2011 Action Plan

In the Skills Action Plan 2008 - 2011, a detailed action plan was produced to meet the key skills objectives identified by the RSP. The objectives, defined and detailed below, reflect the regional ambition to meet the Leitch targets in 2020 and the interim PSA targets set for 2011.

Chart 7: Skills Objectives

Skills Action Plan - Skills Objectives		
Increase the percentage of adults that have functional literacy and numeracy (basic skills) to at least 95% (PSA 2011 targets of 89% literacy and 81% numeracy)	LSC/SFA	2020 (interim 2011)
Increase the number of adults qualified to at least a Level 2 to at least 90% (PSA 2011 targets of 79%)	LSC/SFA	2020 (interim 2011)
Increase the number of adults qualified to at least a Level 3 to at least 68% (PSA 2011 targets of 56%)	LSC/SFA	2020 (interim 2011)
Increase the number of adults qualified to at least a Level 4 to at least 40% (PSA 2011 targets of 34%)	RSP/WMHEA	2020 (interim 2011)

(The scale of the challenge to which these objectives relate is set out in chart 6 on page 20).

3.2 The Next Steps

Whilst the skills objectives based on the Leitch and PSA targets still reflect the ambition of the Region, the recession has led to a worsening economic position. If we are to close the output gap, achieve the goals of the West Midlands Economic Strategy and address the challenges outlined in the previous section, a number of key actions need to be taken.

Outlined on the next page are the key actions that we, as a partnership, need to focus on if we are to achieve these objectives and emerge from the economic downturn. The actions are partly taken from the existing Skills Action Plan, and are partly new actions that require attention, going forward to 2011. Against each action (in brackets) we have identified the lead partner(s) who will drive forward this work.

3.3 On work-focused skills development:

- Supporting the diversity of potential learners and meeting the diversity of their needs by providing appropriate advice and careers services to support the socio-economic mix of the Region. (LSC/Skills Funding Agency/FEIs)
- Developing a universal Adult Advancement and Careers Service that will enable informed employment and skills development choices to be made. (LSC/SFA)
- Continue to align Train to Gain resources with regional strategies for recovery and growth. (LSC/SFA)
- Ensuring that qualifications, as defined by Sector Skills Councils and Sector Qualification Frameworks and driven by Sector Skills Agreements, meet regional business needs. (SSCs)

3.4 On business engagement:

- Ensure that the skills needs of regional businesses, including the Third Sector, are clearly articulated and understood through the ongoing engagement with the CBI, Chambers of Commerce, Employment and Skills Boards, Engineering Employers Federation, Federation of Small Businesses, Institute of Directors, Business Voice West Midlands and Regional Action West Midlands and that these views are used to influence the design and delivery of skills provision. (SSCs)
- Ensure that Business Link advisors continue to offer high-quality business support and skills brokerage within the framework of a fully integrated business support service. (Business Link)
- Continuing to work with AWM Business Clusters and their associated network groups to help them identify the skills they will need to grow and prepare for the economic upturn. (AWM)
- Work with businesses to raise aspirations and thus to stimulate business demand for higher level skills. (Business Link/SSCs/AWM/HEIs)

3.5 On higher skills for the future:

- Working with every HE institution to develop a more coherent offer on work placements for West Midlands' Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs). (AWM/West Midlands Higher Education Association/HEIs)
- Working with HEIs to encourage and facilitate the further embedding of employability skills throughout the curriculum. (AWM/HEIs)
- Working with the HEIs Careers Services to broker more effective linkages with employers. (HEIs/Graduate Advantage/Grad Central)
- Providing a more visible and accessible route into the Region's HEIs and access to higher level skills. (HEIs/FEIs/ Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs))
- Developing a more co-ordinated leadership and management offer linking Higher Education public and private sector funding to meet the needs of employers, driving organisational development and measurable improvements in business performance and Gross Value Added. (AWM/HEIs/LSC/SFA)

3.6 On young people:

- Continuing to focus support on a range of actions that will contribute to reducing the number of young people who are identified as NEETs, particularly in the identified geographical 'hotspots'. Ensuring that the target to reduce NEETs across the Region, by 2 percentage points at 2010, is achieved from a baseline of 10%. (LSC/Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA)/LAs)
- Increasing the number of young people gaining 5 GCSE A*- Cs (including Maths and English) throughout the Region, with schools achieving and exceeding the 30% performance target they have been set and contributing to the targets of 82% of young people achieving a Level 2 by the age of 19 and 54% of young people achieving a Level 3 by the age of 19. (LAs/FE/YPLA)
- Embedding the work of the National Apprenticeship Service and the Apprenticeship Vacancy Matching Service at a regional and local level. (LSC/SFA)
- Delivering enhanced careers advice for young people and intermediaries such as parents and teachers. (LAs)
- Working with Local Authorities and the Young People's Learning Agency to ensure that their new responsibilities for 14 - 19 are fully aligned with regional employment and skills plans and priorities. (LAs/YPLA)

3.7 On worklessness and unemployment:

- Helping unemployed graduates access work placements and employment opportunities in the West Midlands. (SMEs) (JCP/AWM/HEIs)
- Ensuring tailored provision is in place across the Region for unemployed executives. (JCP)
- Embedding the Integrated Employment and Skills services and partnership arrangements at a local level. Working with City Region to deliver the Employment and Skills Multi-Area Agreement (covering eight local authority areas) and aligning this work with the targets set by Local Authorities outside of the City Region. (JCP/LSC/SFA)

3.8 Conclusion

In its role as the strategic lead for skills within the Region, the RSP will drive the implementation of the skills actions, co-ordinate the work of partners and monitor progress. The Partnership will continue to keep the Action Plan under review, revisiting and clarifying individual actions, roles and responsibilities and reporting on the progress made.

Importantly, the work of the RSP and the actions identified within this plan will be taken forward in the context of a changing skills landscape, the development of the Single Integrated Regional Strategy and during a time of public sector funding constraints.

Members of the Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) October 2009

Mike Beasley	Chair of Regional Skills Partnership
Lowell Williams	Association of Colleges
Gareth Parry	Association of Learning Providers
Gerard Coyne	Advantage West Midlands Board Member
Mick Laverty	Advantage West Midlands
Richard Hutchins	Advantage West Midlands
Jerry Blackett	Chamber of Commerce
Lorraine Holmes	Business Link West Midlands
Kate Canty	Chamber of Commerce Member
Ray Bradnock	Chamber of Commerce Member
George Marsh	Clusters Chair and Professional Engineering Institute Representative
Robert Bolam	Confederation of British Industry, Nominee
Mike Chapman	Confederation of British Industry, Nominee
Chris Clifford	Confederation of British Industry
John Morris	Confederation of British Industry, Nominee
Sinead Butters	Employment and Skills Board
Daniel Gidney	Employment and Skills Board
Barrie Williams	Engineering Employer Federation
Wade Lyn	Ethnic Minority Business Forum, Nominee
Carol Undy	Federation of Small Businesses, Nominee
John Perkins	Government Office for the West Midlands
Yvonne Perry	Higher Education Funding Council for England
John Rider	Institute of Directors, Nominee
Margaret Tovey	Jobcentre Plus
Olwen Dutton	West Midlands Leadership Board
David Cragg	Learning and Skills Council West Midlands
Julie Robson	Learning and Skills Council West Midlands
Ben Reid	Learning Skills Council, Regional Council
Graham Urwin	Primary Care Trust
Denise Taylor	Regional Action West Midlands Board Member
Keith Marshall	Alliance of Sector Skills Councils
Mark Rogers	West Midlands Leadership Board, Nominee
Peter Ralphs	Chamber of Commerce
Peter Blythin	Strategic Health Authority
Roger McKenzie	Trade Union Council
Clive Stone	Business Voice West Midlands
Graham Hooley	West Midlands Higher Education Association
Ray Linforth	West Midlands Higher Education Association
Rosie Paskins	West Midlands Regional Observatory
RSP Support	
Pat Jackson	Advantage West Midlands
Teresa Addinell	Learning and Skills Council West Midlands

Glossary of Terms

Adult Advancement and Careers Service (AACCS)

Service offering anyone over the age of 19 information, advice and guidance in respect of skills and career development.

Advantage West Midlands (AWM)

The Regional Development Agency (RDA) for the West Midlands.

Apprenticeships

Work-based training programmes that allow people to earn whilst receiving on-the-job training and whilst studying for nationally-recognised qualifications.

Apprenticeships Vacancy Matching Service (VMS)

A web-based service for employers, potential apprentices and learning providers promoting Apprenticeship opportunities and matching potential apprentices with an appropriate Apprenticeship.

Business Link

Provides information, advice and support to employers of all sizes, to start, maintain and grow a business.

Business Voice West Midlands (BVWM)

Business Voice West Midlands has been formed as a consequence of the merger between the **Business Voice West Midlands** and the **One Voice Group**.

The Regional Business Community is speaking with one voice to key decision makers on areas such as transport, skills, and the rural economy.

Chambers of Commerce

Provide services, information and guidance in the local business community.

City Region

The City Region is a voluntary partnership of Local Authorities and other organisations that exists to align ways of working for public benefit and economic prosperity.

The key West Midlands partners are: the Local Authorities of: Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Telford, Walsall and Wolverhampton, working with the West Midlands Regional Assembly, Advantage West Midlands, The Learning and Skills Council, the business community and other public bodies such as Jobcentre Plus and the Higher Education sector.

Confederation of British Industry (CBI)

Work with the UK Government, international legislators and policy-makers to help UK businesses compete effectively.

Employment and Skills Boards (ESBs)

Employer-led groups which provide leadership in improving adult skills and employment.

Engineering Employers Federation (EEF)

Provides engineering and manufacturing support and employment advice as well as general business support to manufacturing, engineering and technology companies.

European Social Fund (ESF)

Set up to improve employment opportunities in the European Union and so help raise standards of living and to help people fulfil their potential by giving them better skills and better job prospects.

Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)

Non-profit making and non-political pressure group promoting and protecting the interests of the self-employed and owners of small firms.

Foundation Degrees

Qualifications designed to integrate academic and work-based learning and to equip individuals with knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to their employment.

Further Education Institutions (FEIs)

FEIs in the United Kingdom include education institutions for people over 16, usually excluding universities.

Grad Central

An online resource for matching employers and graduates in the West Midlands region.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Higher education institution (university or college of higher education) delivering higher education programmes.

Integrated Employment and Skills

An integrated service to help people move from low skills and worklessness through to high-skilled, sustainable employment.

Institute of Directors (IOD)

Represents senior-level professionals as the business network for leadership.

Jobcentre Plus (JCP)

Help people move into and remain in work and provide advice and signposting on benefits, tax credits, childcare, housing and health.

Learning and Skills Council (LSC)

Responsible for funding and planning education and training for individuals in England, aged 16-years-old or above.

Leitch Review

Published in 2006, sets out how the UK can move towards attaining world-class skills levels by 2020.

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)

Aim to improve progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

Set out the priorities for a local area, agreed between central government and a local area and other key partners at the local level and simplify some central funding, helping to join up public services more effectively and allow greater flexibility for local solutions to local circumstances.

Local Employment Partnerships (LEPs)

Collaborations between Government and business to tackle the increasing recruitment and skills challenges of the labour market and economy.

Multi-Area Agreements (MAA)

A way of helping councils work with their neighbours to promote economic development at a city region and sub-regional level.

National Apprenticeship Service (NAS)

Has end-to-end responsibility for Apprenticeships in England and works to increase the number of Apprenticeship opportunities, providing a responsive service to both learners and employers.

Qualifications and Credits Framework (QCF)

Aims to recognise a wide range of learner achievements in order to be more responsive to employer and learner needs.

Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM)

Established in 2000, to make sure the voluntary and community sector is involved in regional decision-making.

Regional Development Agency (RDA)

Set up in 1999 to bring a regional focus to economic development.

Regional Skills Partnership

A strategic group of representatives from key public and private organisations whose role is to create a demand-led approach to skills. The Regional Skills Partnership is a major component of the national skills strategy.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)

Employer-led, independent organisations that cover specific sectors across the UK to improve skills and business performance.

Single Integrated Regional Strategy (SIRS)

Sets out the economic, social and environmental objectives for each region. The strategy acts as a focus for economic development with national agencies, regional bodies, sub-regional tiers and Local Authorities, all working together to achieve the agreed outcomes.

Skills Funding Agency (SFA)

From April 2010, (subject to legislation), it will be the single funding provider for adult skills in England outside of higher education.

Skills Pledge

A voluntary, public commitment by the leadership of a company or organisation to support all its employees to develop their basic skills, including literacy and numeracy and work towards relevant, valuable qualifications to at least Level 2 (equivalent to 5 good GCSEs).

Train to Gain

A service that aims to make sure that businesses are offered impartial, flexible, responsive training and skills advice at a time and place to suit them.

UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)

Established by Government in 2008, it has a remit to raise UK prosperity and opportunity by helping to develop world-class employment and skills systems in the UK.

Unity Project

A bespoke support programme available to help all individuals in the region who are under notice/threat of redundancy. The managing agent for the programme is the Trade Union: Unity. The project is marketed as BETTER West Midlands.

West Midlands Economic Strategy

Sets out what the Region needs to do to improve its economic performance.

West Midlands Graduate Internship Programme

A pilot scheme to help businesses in the West Midlands access graduate-level skills and knowledge and give unemployed graduates vital experience of work.

West Midlands Higher Education Association (WMHEA)

Set up by vice-chancellors of the Region's universities to promote higher education institutions' collaboration and partnership in the Region.

West Midlands Regional Observatory (WMRO)

Responsible for helping the Region to develop better access to well-organised information in order to improve the quality of strategy and policy-making.

West Midlands Taskforce

A forum for leaders from Government, business, regional agencies, Local Authorities and trade unions to monitor and influence how the West Midlands region responds to the changing global economic picture.

Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA)

From April 2010, (subject to legislation), it will be responsible for securing sufficient education and training provision for all young people, supporting Local Authorities to discharge their planning and commissioning functions and budgetary control.