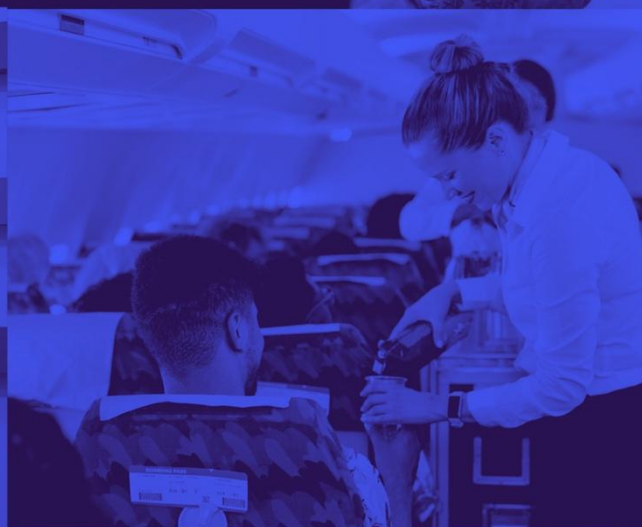




LSIP PHASE 2: COMMUNICATION SKILLS RESEARCH



Pathways to improving
communication skills in
the North East



This report was commissioned the North East Chamber of Commerce as part of its role as the employer representative body (ERB) for the North of Tyne and Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs).



**Funded by
UK Government**

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The North East Chamber of Commerce is the North East's largest and most influential business membership network. They support, connect and represent more than 2,000 organisations employing 40% of the region's workforce. They are also the employer representative body (ERB) for both the North of Tyne and Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), leading their development and review.



Urban Foresight® is a multidisciplinary innovation consultancy practice that is dedicated to advancing the next generation of technologies, services and policy frameworks for both public and private sector organisations. We have worked with ambitious organisations around the world on projects that improve lives, protect the environment, and boost local economies.

Executive Summary

The North East Chamber of Commerce commissioned Urban Foresight to investigate challenges employers face surrounding communication skills. This work is part of the second phase of the North of Tyne and Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIP).

Communication skills challenges in North of Tyne and Tees Valley

95% of employers that engaged with Phase 1 LSIPs identified communication skills of employees as a challenge. Key areas of weakness identified were professional client communication, oracy, active listening, verbal telephone skills, and basic body language. Communication skills for the workplace are highly dependent on literacy, which is also a growing challenge in the North East.

Engagement with education providers in Phase 2 shows that while providers are aware of the challenge and are making strides to tackle it, there are barriers to ensuring effective provision of communication skills for the workplace. Best practices employed by providers are included in the form of case studies ([Table of best practices](#)) throughout this report, and they should be adopted and expanded upon to improve the current provision of communication skills training.

The main challenges that remain are that:

- The socio-economic profile of the North East creates barriers to the development of communication skills, with 20.3% of adults in the region not possessing a qualification, 25.2% not in employment, education, or training, and 23.1% having functional illiteracy.
- Communication between employers and providers is inefficient, and there is confusion over the communication and work-ready skills that are desired and in expectations.
- Recruitment practices can exclude strong candidates and lower confidence. Complex job adverts and qualification requirements often discourage applicants.

Pathways to addressing communication skills challenges in the North of Tyne and Tees Valley

The research has uncovered three main pathways for employers and education providers to take that could further address the challenges:

- Developing an **employer-endorsed communication skills framework for education providers and employers** that would make communication between employers and education providers more efficient by creating a shared language related to the real-life requirements of employers.
- **Employers can redesign recruitment practices to focus on skills and competencies**, which can improve candidate confidence, and encourage greater applications.
- **Both education providers and employers increasing collaboration with VSCE sector** can help people access safe spaces to improve their communication skills and their confidence.

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Introduction

The North East Chamber of Commerce commissioned Urban Foresight to investigate the challenges that employers face surrounding communication skills as part of the second phase of the North of Tyne and Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plans.

Project overview

The North East Chamber of Commerce (NECC) is the employer representative body (ERB) for both the North of Tyne and Tees Valley Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), leading their development and review. The LSIPs are supported by the Department for Education.

The first phase of the North of Tyne and Tees Valley (LSIPs) involved consultation with over 3,500 businesses across the region to understand skills requirements. Businesses involved in the LSIPs overwhelmingly identified communication skills as a key priority.

For the second phase, Urban Foresight was commissioned to further investigate the challenges that employers face surrounding communication skills and to develop pathways for improving communication skills attainment.

Project scope

This research aims to generate insights into how workforce challenges in communications skills attainment can be addressed in the two LSIP areas moving forward. For clarity, the North of Tyne area includes Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumberland, and North Tyneside, and the Tees Valley area includes Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton-on-Tees.

Working collaboratively with the NECC LSIP team, Urban Foresight conducted a mixed methods study:

- A comprehensive desk-based study to understand the challenges surrounding communication skills in the North East, to review existing research and establish the context behind those challenges, and to identify best practices to tackle them effectively.
- Mixed-method stakeholder engagement with 18 education providers, one VSCE organisation, and one central government department to understand the current provision of communication skills training in the region, and to identify any gaps in provision.
- A workshop was held with six education providers, and two focus groups were held with three education providers, two policymakers, two VSCE organisations, and four businesses to identify and develop potential pathways to address challenges in communication skills attainment.

Report overview

This report summarises findings from both phases, but with a focus on the newer research conducted in phase two. It then presents the challenges that education providers face in improving communication skills, including a deep dive into the challenges surrounding adult literacy in the North East, and the current best practices employed currently to tackle those challenges. A series of 12 case studies ([Table of best practices](#)) are woven throughout the report to highlight examples of best practices shared by providers across the region.

The report then recommends three potential pathways that could improve communication skills across the region. This report's findings, recommendations and conclusions are aimed at education providers across the two LSIP areas. They also have relevance for the North East region more broadly, and likely for other LSIP areas across the UK.

What the research showed

In the first phase of research, employers reported a lack of communication skills amongst the North East's workforce.

Engagement with education providers in this second phase shows that while providers are aware of the challenge and are making strides to tackle it, challenges remain in ensuring effective provision of communication skills for the workplace.

Phase one research showed that 95% of employers in the North of Tyne and Tees Valley LSIPs require further communication skills. Main areas of weakness identified were professional client communication, oracy, active listening, verbal telephone skills, and basic body language.

Some sectors such as health and social care, hospitality, and construction highlighted specific concerns surrounding communication skills that are essential to the work they carry out, including interacting with clients and customers.

There is therefore a need to address the challenges surrounding communication skills provision in the region to meet employers' needs.

This section provides an overview of the key opportunities and challenges to ensuring effective communication skills provision in the North East, as well as examples of best practices employed by further education (FE) and higher education (HE) providers to tackle many of these challenges.

Overview of themes to consider when delivering effective communication skills provision ↘

The analysis in Table 1 highlights the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the development of communication skills for the workplace in the North East. The key themes from the research revolved around challenges in training delivery, and other factors external to training delivery that affect communication skills attainment.

Table 1 - Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to communication skills development in the North East

Strengths ↘	Weaknesses ↘
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education providers are aware of the communication skills challenges employers face. 2. Education providers host frequent engagement sessions with employers. 3. Education providers are already mobilising and adapting their training delivery to meet employer needs 4. Many education providers integrate the development of communication skills into the curriculum. 5. There is a willingness to use novel methods and technology in training delivery. 6. Employers are willing to embrace change. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers can have difficulties articulating communication skills needs in detail to providers and potential employees. 2. Employers are time-poor with varying requirements and smaller employers struggle to onboard employees effectively. 3. COVID and technology changes have affected learners' confidence and functional skills. 4. Intergenerational and intercultural communication challenges are more prevalent. 5. The socio-economic baseline of the North East creates challenges to developing functional skills. 6. Learners have significant confidence issues.
Opportunities ↘	Threats ↘
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bespoke and tailored approaches are effective in developing communication skills. 2. Educators have a key role in developing communication skills and acting as role models. 3. Education providers are willing to collaborate across the region. 4. The VSCE sector plays a role in providing safe spaces for learners to gain confidence. 5. The policy landscape is changing to be more focused towards soft skills development. 6. There is a new national policy focus on devolving work on economic inactivity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recruitment practices often exclude many potentially good applicants. 2. Education providers face time and funding constraints. 3. The emphasis on achieving generalised qualifications for employment removes the opportunity for tailored support. 4. Rapid progression of technology into daily life will continue to impact learners' motivation, confidence, and resilience. 5. External events that affect the socio-economic circumstances such as the cost-of-living crisis. 6. Mismatch in expectations as employers expect candidates to be fully work-ready.

The North East's socio-economic profile poses challenges to developing communication skills ↘

The context in the North East means that there are barriers that must be overcome to increase the supply of labour with strong communication skills to meet employers' needs.

The North East¹ experiences higher levels of socio-economic deprivation and lower educational attainment than the UK, as demonstrated by Figure 1. This socio-economic baseline poses significant challenges when trying to improve communication skills. For example, around 20.3% of people do not complete schooling with a qualification and 25.2% are not in employment, education, or training.

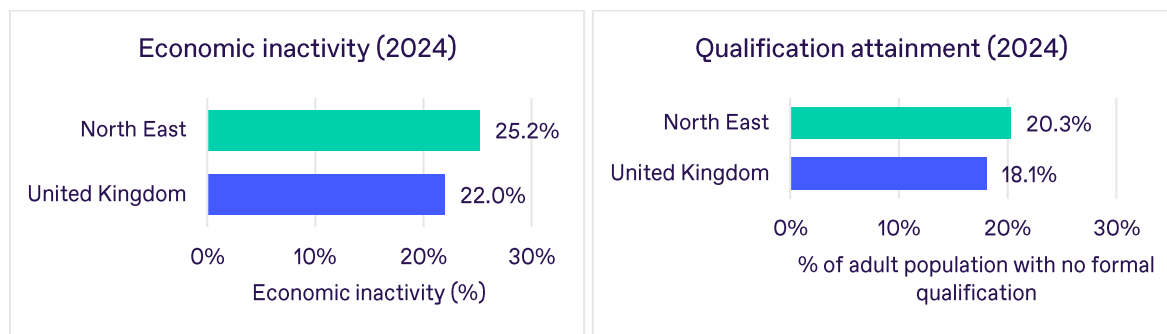


Figure 1 - Economic inactivity and qualification attainment rates in the North East in 2024 (Annual Population Survey, Nomis)

The research identified certain groups that require more support in communication skills development. It is therefore important for education providers to identify learners in need of greater support through skills self-assessments, and cater to their specific needs, as described in **Case Study 1**.

Often those who require more support in developing communication skills come from high socioeconomic deprivation, are English as a Second Language (ESOL) learners, or are rejoining education as adults. Other groups that may require more support are learners who may not typically engage with education and can miss out on developing communication skills.

Employers in the North East also face unique challenges in engaging with skills development. 99.8% of businesses within the North East are SMEs or microbusinesses, which means that they often do not have the capacity to invest in skills development. The phase one research reported that whilst employers are equipped to train their workforce technical skills, they struggle to deliver training that instils self-confidence and communication skills.

¹ Data includes the South of Tyne area. This includes Sunderland, South Tyneside, Gateshead, and County Durham. The North East Combined Authority was also not formed at the time of the implementation of the LSIPs, and so including analysis and recommendations for this report that extend beyond the North of Tyne and Tees Valley areas makes sense when developing pathways forward.

CASE STUDY 1 ▾

Skills self-assessments

Challenge addressed: Providers can implement regular self-assessments to help identify learners in need of greater support and their communication strengths and weaknesses.

How it works: This approach promotes self-awareness and enables providers to target support where it is most needed efficiently. Self-assessments can help develop confidence and motivation for learners to improve their communication skills. These self-assessments also signpost common areas that need further development and can help shape the curriculum and course delivery.

In the context of the North East, self-assessments address the highlighted weakness of inefficiencies in skill delivery and help mitigate the threat of inconsistent learner progression.

How it is being used within the North East: As part of the ‘Thrive Provision’ at Middlesbrough College, the students take part in a self-assessment using the skills and career platform, [GroFar](#). This termly assessment is passed on to the tutors who are then able to tailor sessions to student needs.

How it is being used outside the North East: The [Saints Skills Builder Award](#) at the University of St. Andrews emphasises personal reflection in ongoing skills development. It is an open-ended procedure and can be completed by the student at any time. It gives students space to develop a self-assessed soft skills passport which helps show areas of strength and areas for improvement.

The North East faces communication skills challenges due to low rates of adult literacy ↴

Adult literacy rates are a challenge across the UK. The North East also faces these issues with 23.1% of adults having functional illiteracy in 2021. This poses a challenge when considering the development of communication skills for the workplace.

Literacy skills are defined as being able to “read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world.” ([Literacy Trust](#)).

Figure 2 shows the results of the Literacy Trust’s assessment of adult literacy rates across the UK in 2021. Adults with very poor literacy skills can have trouble interpreting unfamiliar text, and may have trouble reading simple information such as bus timetables. The North East is the worst-performing region in terms of adult literacy rates. Not being literate can exclude adults from participating in employment, education, and in accessing support services.

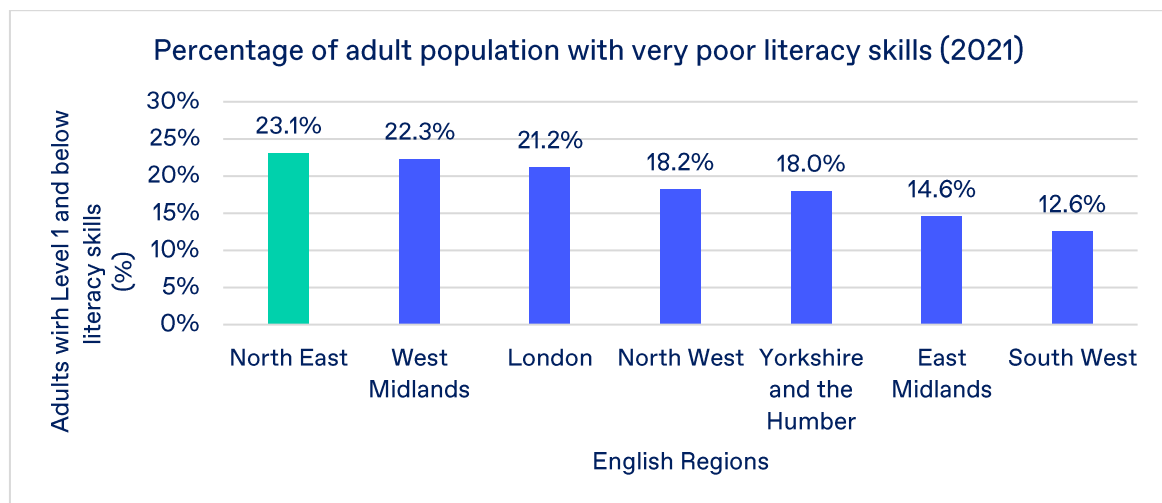


Figure 2 - Adult literacy rates in England by region in 2023 (Literacy Trust and Pro Bono Economics)

Detailed data on literacy at sub-regional levels is unavailable. To address this gap, we used ONS data on workplace skills and the literacy requirements associated with competence in specific professions. This approach offers a more nuanced definition of literacy, focusing on practical application in the workplace rather than relying solely on a broad, general concept of literacy.

Literacy is assessed using the ONS Skills Supply dataset (2024) using the following criteria and using Level 4 as the baseline for competence for the workplace:

1. Written expression
2. Written comprehension
3. Reading comprehension
4. Communicating with people outside the organisation
5. Communicating with supervisors, peers, or subordinates
6. Oral expression
7. Oral comprehension
8. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
9. Analysing data or information
10. Thinking creatively

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show that adult literacy rates in the local authorities vary across the region. Sunderland and Middlesbrough are the local authorities with the largest gaps in literacy competence in the workplace with 60.5% and 59.9% having below level 4 workplace literacy skills. This is around 10% higher than the national average.

There are likely pockets of higher deprivation at a ward level across all local authorities, but the availability of data to assess adult literacy using this method is limited to a local authority level of granularity. More data needs to be collected on adult literacy to create a more comprehensive picture of the extent of challenges in adult literacy.

Figure 3 shows the local authority-level breakdown of adult literacy rates under level 4 for all TVCA Local Authorities as well as the UK.

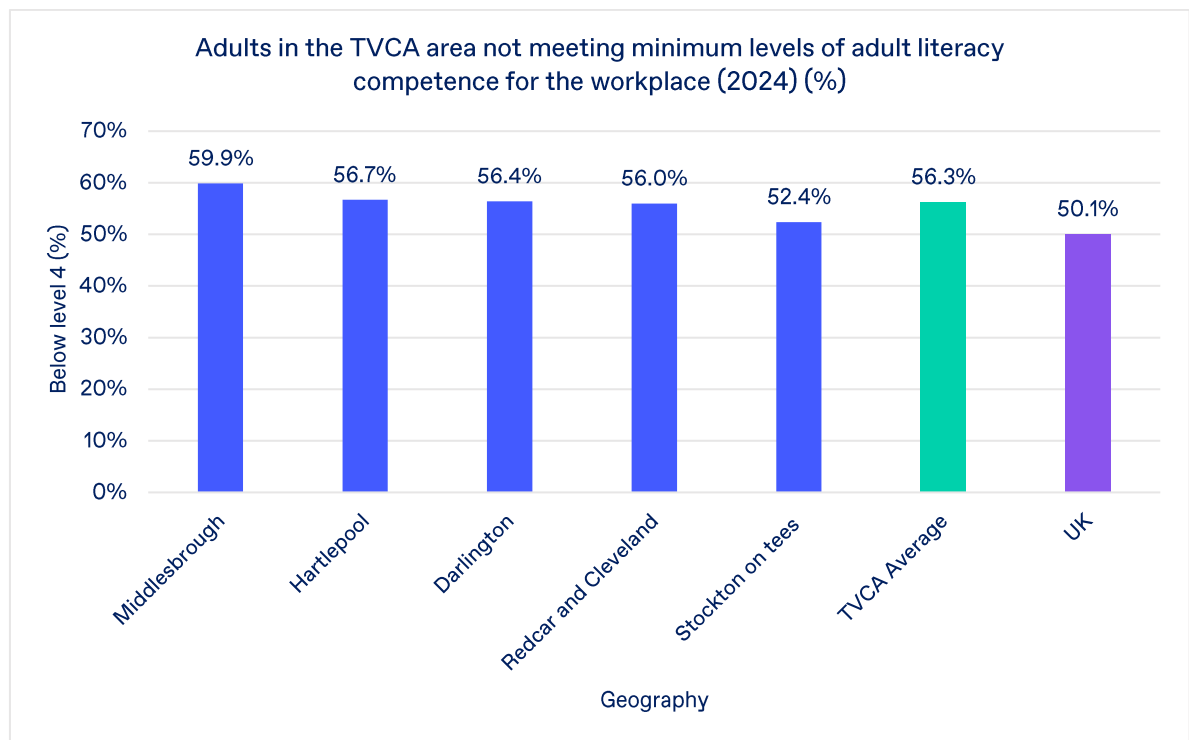


Figure 3 - Adults in the TVCA area not meeting minimum levels of adult literacy competence for the workplace (2024) (%)

Similarly, Figure 4 shows the adult literacy rates under level 4 for both the North of Tyne local authorities, and South of Tyne local authorities as well as the average for the UK.

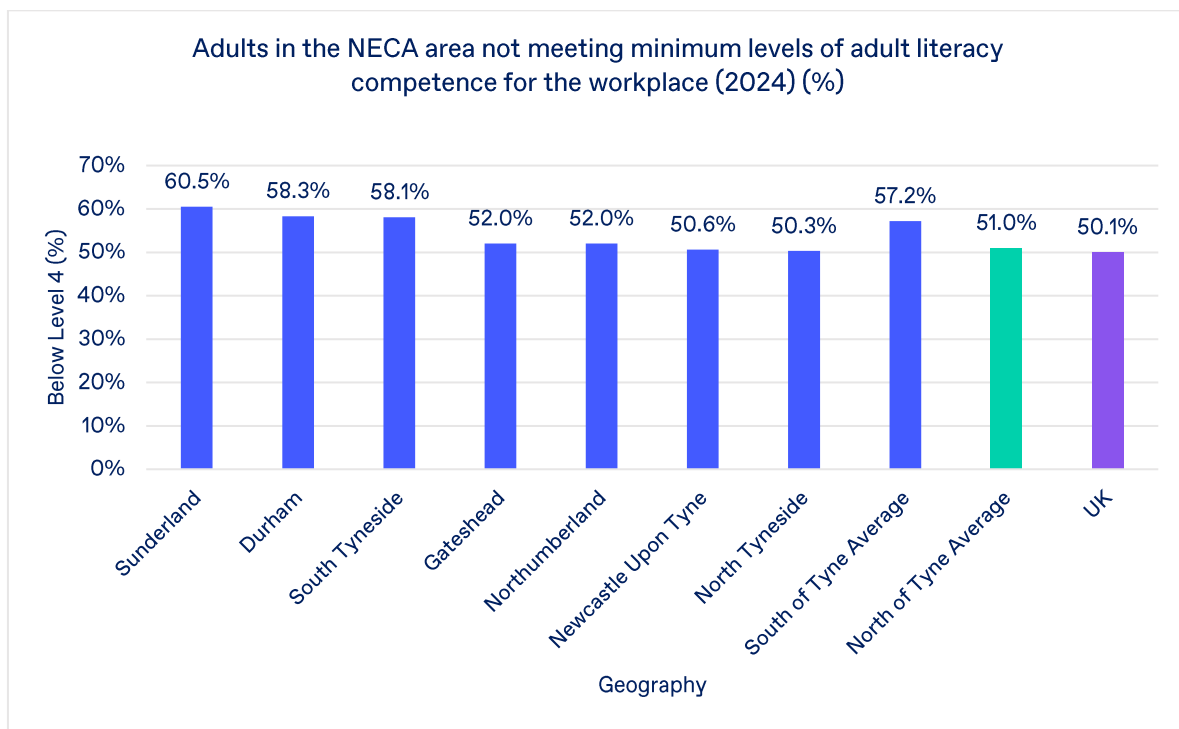


Figure 4 - Adults in the NECA area not meeting minimum levels of adult literacy competence for the workplace (2024) (%)

Table 2 illustrates some examples of the current adult literacy training provision in colleges in the North East. The main avenue for delivering adult literacy support comes from Functional Skills English Language courses delivered by FE colleges, which are limited by funding requirements. Education providers successfully address communication skills deficiencies such as adult illiteracy through delivering bespoke and tailored learning support, as demonstrated in [Case Study 2](#).

However, the provision that colleges offer is often insufficient due to funding and time constraints. This means it can exclude some entry-level learners because there is limited pre-entry level support, provision is often limited in duration, and it is often not offered outside of working hours. There is also a need to expand or invest more in ESOL provision.

Outside of the colleges, much of the support for adult literacy is provided by literacy charities in the UK and are often volunteer led. This indicates that more can be done to coordinate efforts to tackle adult literacy problems in the North East.

Table 2 - Examples of literacy programmes provided by education providers across the North East

Provider	Entry	Level 1	Level 2	Price	Hours (p/w)	Duration	Additional
East Durham College	Y	Y	Y	Free	2	1 year	Offer evenings and weekends
Northumberland College	Y	Y	Y	Free	3	16 weeks	
Newcastle College	Y	Y	Y	Free	3	12 weeks	
Stockton Learning and Skills	Y	Y	Y	Free		Roll-on roll-off	Entry assessment
Stockton Riverside College	Y	Y	Y	Free		Up to 34 weeks	Offer in-person and online
Darlington Learning and Skills	Y	Y	Y	Free	2	Roll-on roll-off	Entry assessment
Hartlepool Learning and Skills		Y	Y	Free	2.5	10 weeks	Entry assessment
Hartlepool College	Y	Y		Free		Start in Feb end ASAP	Offers evenings
Middlesbrough College	Y	Y	Y	Some eligible for free	8	16 weeks	
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council			Y	Free	2	Roll-on roll-off	
University Centre Quayside	Y	Y	Y	Free		10 weeks	Offered through employers, flexible to accommodate shift patterns
Sunderland College	Y	Y	Y		3	16 weeks	
Skills North Tyneside		Y	Y	Free		Up to 72 hours	
Tyne Metropolitan College			Y	Free	3	Roll-on-roll off up to 17 weeks	Option to fast track, evening and daytime

CASE STUDY 2 ▾

Bespoke and tailored learning support

Challenge addressed: This approach directly delivers interventions for learners who face unique challenges in attaining communication skills – those from disadvantaged backgrounds, underrepresented groups, and those who have had lower exposure to professional environments and fewer opportunities to practise.

How it works: Providers work to identify groups with distinct communication barriers, such as young learners, mature students, or individuals from low-income backgrounds, and design bespoke programmes to address their specific challenges. These programmes often include targeted workshops, one-on-one coaching, or peer-led activities that build confidence and address gaps in exposure to professional communication. This requires further funding to implement, however.

How it is being used within the North East: For example, Newcastle City Learning creates bespoke courses by looking at the language level needed in specific job roles – like a teaching assistant. They then tailor introductory courses for ESOL students to be able to engage and perform in those roles using role-specific vocabulary and phrases.

How it is being used outside the North East: [Individualised support](#) and [Individualised Educational Plans \(IEPs\)](#) are used across the UK to give learners the extra support they may need. IEPs are prepared by parents to provide educators with the information they need to tailor learning. Individualised instruction involves providing different tasks for each learner and support at the individual level.

Key findings and areas for further research to examine adult literacy in the North East to consider are:

1. Socio-economic deprivation and adult literacy rates are closely related, and external factors must be considered when addressing adult literacy.
2. There is no established regular data collection on adult literacy. Data must be collected at a higher level of granularity to identify areas, ideally at a ward-level, to identify areas that require more targeted support.
3. Entry-level functional skills provision is not always appropriate and can exclude adult learners who need greater support. Greater provision of support to those learners is required.
4. Many funded functional skills programmes do not allow re-entry, this can exclude adult learners with greater responsibilities.
5. Adult literacy support should also be extended to beyond working hours across the region to encourage uptake.
6. Literacy is often thought of as reading alone, which can be seen in the focus on reading in course offerings. The National Literacy Trust also includes oral (speaking and listening) and written communication as part of literacy. Expanding the definition of literacy could also have synergies with the development of communication skills for the workplace.
7. ESOL best practices could be used in non-ESOL adult literacy classes.
8. Digital literacy is becoming more important at all levels as technology continues to evolve in the workplace.
9. Peer support is often used effectively in voluntary literacy programmes run by charities and could be integrated into other provision.
10. Familiar spaces such as community centres, libraries, and other public spaces are frequently used as the venue for adult literacy programmes. They can support in literacy attainment due to the importance of trust in tackling self-perceived stigmas that often hinders motivation and confidence, especially for adults. These supportive spaces can therefore encourage threshold crossing and encourage adults to return to education.

Education providers are already addressing some of the challenges that they face in delivering communication skills training ↘

The main challenges surrounding communication skills training delivery centre around the quality of engagement between education providers and employers, and the quantity and quality of communication skills training delivery itself. However, education providers are taking action to address many of these challenges.

Many education providers across the North East are already taking unique and effective approaches to communication skills provision to tackle many of the challenges in communication skills training delivery described in this section. These approaches can be scaled and replicated.

Table 3 shows examples of successful approaches currently being used by education providers. These approaches were ranked by HE and FE providers in a collaborative workshop.

Table 3: Top ranked best practices by type of education providers

By HE providers:

1. Employer-led masterclasses, work experience programmes, and employer involvement in course delivery
2. Embedded communication skills development in course design, with assessments
3. Networking events, job fairs, and extended interactions with employers
4. Skills self-assessments to then signpost students to appropriate additional support and build self-reflection

By FE providers:

1. Bespoke and tailored training depending on vocation, skill level, and background of the student
2. Arts and performance techniques used in other courses such as role play and “simulations”, and using VR immersion
3. Accelerator and problem-based learning programmes, including social action projects
4. Networking events, job fairs, and extended interactions with employers

The case studies ([Table of best practices](#)) describes other approaches providers are implementing to improve learner outcomes, strengthen ties with employers, and optimise resource use. These are a mixture of classroom-level and provider-level approaches.

- Classroom-level approaches to improving communication skills attainment are delivered by educators in a classroom setting. They can therefore be implemented in addition to current delivery within the organisation.
- Provider-level approaches to improving communication skills attainment are implemented across the entire organisation. They require collaboration at an organisation level and therefore can be implemented in addition to current delivery, but they may require support from outside the organisation.

Despite these innovations, some challenges remain, such as the effectiveness of employer-provider engagement, recruitment practices, and providing safe spaces for development.

Quality of engagement between education providers and employers ↘

Table 4 describes the strengths, inefficiencies, and opportunities surrounding engagement between employers and providers. [Case Study 3](#), [Case Study 4](#) and [Case Study 5](#) provide further detail about what education providers are already doing to address those challenges.

Table 4 - Strengths, inefficiencies, and opportunities surrounding engagement between employers and providers

<p>Strengths</p>	<p>Education providers are aware of the communication skills challenges employers face.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Education providers and employers frequently engage each other between before, during, and after curriculum design through forums such as sector-and-skills-specific employer boards as can be seen in Case Study 3. <p>Education providers are working directly with employers to tackle these issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Education providers are working with employers to provide experience to learners to improve work-readiness. These take the form traditional work experience placements, and employer-led masterclasses as demonstrated in Case Study 4. → They are also hosting networking events with local employers to help learners interact with employers and practise professional communication as shown in Case Study 5.
<p>Inefficiencies at present</p>	<p>Employers often have difficulties articulating communication skills needs in detail to both education providers and potential employees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Many employers are time-poor and have varying needs for their employees. This can be difficult to communicate to education providers. This is particularly the case for SMEs. → This often means that feedback is mainly received from larger employers and where SMEs engage, their needs are not effectively communicated. <p>There is often a mismatch in expectations for candidates by employers and education providers and therefore a need to find more efficient and effective means of communication between education providers and employers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Employers often expect “work-ready” candidates, however, many candidates require time to settle into new organisations regardless of level. This is especially true for those leaving FE or HE with limited workplace experience. Existing employees also require communication skills development. → There is confusion whether employers are demanding communication skills or work-ready skills, which require different approaches to address.
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Employers are engaged and are willing to embrace change and take action to address their skills needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Many initiatives such as the North East Institute of Technology are embracing a collaborative approach to developing training provision that meets employer needs, through co-design with employers, policymakers, and educators.

CASE STUDY 3 ▾

Curriculum co-development with employers

Challenge addressed: Many providers actively involve employers in curriculum design and delivery to ensure that communication skills training remains relevant and impactful.

How it works: This approach addresses the weakness of inefficiencies in aligning educational content with employer needs and the threat of recruitment challenges. Stronger partnerships with employers also position providers as key players in the region's economic and workforce development strategies. Engagement is most commonly organised through sector-or-skill-specific employer boards or forums.

Strong collaboration with employers is also the key to understanding what exactly is meant by communication skills in the workplace – this way, training can be accurately tailored to address the growing need and perception that communication skills are lacking across the North East.

How it is being used within the North East: Redcar & Cleveland College co-designed a 'Pilot Plan' programme with employers for students looking to enter the construction industry. In this scenario-based programme, someone is 'isolated' inside an operation and the other participant is 'outside'. They are only able to communicate through a hand-held radio transmitter. This has been found to be highly effective.

How it is being used outside the North East: The Inspire Education Group (Peterborough College, Stamford College, and University Centre Peterborough) deliver an [employer skills programme](#), specifically designed to bring together students, educators, and employers to establish those critical long-term partnerships that are essential to developing relevant knowledge, skills, and behaviour to succeed.

CASE STUDY 4 ↘

Employer-led masterclasses and work experience

Challenge addressed: Engaging employers to deliver masterclasses and offer work experience ensures that communication training is aligned with industry needs.

How it works: This directly leverages one of the North East's highlighted strengths of frequent employer engagement and addresses the weakness of employer difficulties in articulating their skill requirements. It also offers a familiar means for employers to engage more in education. For providers, these partnerships enhance curriculum relevance and better prepare learners for varying workplace expectations.

How it is being used within the North East: This is the case at many education providers across the North East, which work very closely with employers to deliver masterclasses to learners. The employers are also part of the co-design process for the curriculum – ensuring that students are fully equipped to join the workforce at a level of skill that employers find acceptable.

Opportunities like [Building My Skills](#) allow students to network with employers in their region through interactive lectures and mock interviews. Through this programme, students attend four lecture-style workshops each with different employers from a range of four sectors. A purpose-built app allows students to reflect and complete four digital checkpoints after each session. The programme is designed to raise awareness of the breadth of opportunities available across the North East, and change perceptions of different industries.

How it is being used outside the North East: SULSA is an alliance of twelve Scottish Universities and one research institute that aims to advance Scotland's research and innovation capacities. They offer a [graduate employability masterclass](#), industry-led masterclasses for undergraduate and postgraduate students across Scottish Universities. This high-quality programme takes students through the industry life cycle from concept to consumer, learn about career opportunities in life sciences, and build their professional network. 500 students attended the classes in 2021, with over 95% of students providing positive feedback.

CASE STUDY 5 ↘

Networking events

Challenge addressed: Organising networking events such as job fairs allows learners to practice professional communication in real-world settings.

How it works: These events leverage the strength of frequent engagement with employers and address the weakness of varying employer expectations by fostering direct interaction. Providers can use these events to bridge the gap between education and employment, building valuable networks for their learners. Whilst this is favoured by HE providers, there is an opportunity for FE providers to also take advantage of this approach.

How it is being used within the North East: Northumbria University has introduced an innovative programme: [speed networking for students and potential employers](#). This event allowed students to engage with a range of our employers and alumni in small groups and individual discussions. Topics covered included important questions concerning what different careers offer, what employers will look for in recruits and what they could do to improve their CVs and selection prospects.

How it is being used outside the North East: The London School of Economics offer [employer recruitment and networking events](#), providing an in-person, relaxed, and informal session for students to meet and interact with employers.

Quality of communication skills training delivery ↘

Table 5 describes the strengths, inefficiencies, and opportunities in communication skills training delivery. **Case Study 6**, **Case Study 7**, and **Case Study 8** describe what education providers are already doing to address the challenges in further detail.

Table 5 - Strengths, inefficiencies, and opportunities in communication skills training delivery

<p>Strengths</p>	<p>Many educators and education providers across the North East are already taking unique and effective approaches to communication skills provision to meet the needs of employers based on existing engagement. They are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Embedding and establishing effective means of communication skills development into the curriculum and student experience → Using a “scaffolding” approach to deliver training at the right level → Embracing novel methods and technology in training delivery as demonstrated by the classroom-level approaches in Case Study 6, Case Study 7, and Case Study 8. → Offering a wide range of activities outside of the classroom to boost communication and other transferable skills
<p>Inefficiencies at present</p>	<p>Education providers face time and funding constraints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → FE colleges are limited to only 16 hours of contact time with students. This means that often some students who require extra support can slip through the gaps. → Current communication skills-specific training tends to focus on interview prep and pre-employment communication, rather than in-work preparation. This places much of the responsibility in providing more workplace-oriented communication skills within course delivery. <p>Similarly, additional support offered outside of classroom time is often not taken up by those who need extra support due to commitments outside of education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → There are a small number of existing dedicated communication skills programmes in the North East, with the rest more focused on overall employability or accessing work placements.
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Where current activities of education providers are already effective, there is scope to scale up efforts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Educators are adapting with the resources they have to improve provision and ESOL educators are particularly effective. Educators also act as effective role models. → Bespoke and tailored approaches are effective → There is a need to ensure that communication skills development is made “structurally unmissable” within the core learning activities. <p>There are also further opportunities to link with other work being done in the region to support skills development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The VSCE sector in particular plays an effective role in providing safe spaces for learners to gain confidence and practise their communication skills.

CASE STUDY 6 ▾

Communication games and daily practice activities

Challenge addressed: Bringing communication games and daily exercises into the classroom provides learners with continuous, low-cost opportunities to practice and refine their communication skills in a fun way.

How it works: This practice directly addresses the threat of funding and time constraints while enhancing learner engagement. Providers can use these activities to build learner confidence gradually, ensuring that communication becomes ingrained in academic and professional contexts.

How it is being used within the North East: In the North East, some community organisations have been using communication games and exercises with success. In Newcastle, once a week, the ‘World Writes’ creative writing workshop is run exclusively for ESOL learners. This provides a way to spend time doing activities rather than just focusing on learning – similar to the way a child parallel plays.

Likewise, they use the [‘Exquisite Corpse’](#) storytelling game designed to showcase differences in textual interpretation and highlight the importance of perspective in communication.

How it is being used outside the North East: Deliverable programmes such as the European Union’s [‘Playing 4 Soft Skills’](#) are excellent examples illustrating the power creative learning has to address skills building for education providers. The use of games is an engaging and consolidating method to develop soft skills via creative learning, non-formal education, and digital tools in the context of vocational education providers.

CASE STUDY 7 ▾

Role-play, mock interviews, and VR simulations

Challenge addressed: Role-play, mock interviews, and virtual reality (VR) simulation are engaging and low-pressure methods for providers to deliver vital communication skills, and prepare learners to adapt within different scenarios.

How it works: Interactive tools like VR ('body swaps'), mock interviews, and role-play allow learners to practice communication in low-pressure environments.

Role-play can be used to simulate real-life scenarios, allowing students to gain face-to-face experience communicating in diverse situations. It has been noted that art students, particularly performance art students, are adept in communication – using them in role-play situations can be an effective way to transfer their skillset to the wider student body.

This type of approach leverages the strong integration of technology highlighted by providers across the North East while concurrently addressing the threat of reduced social and cultural capital by providing immersive, equitable learning opportunities.

Using performance arts students to provide role-play scenarios is a low-cost and integrated way to develop communication skills. Providers can use these non-traditional tools and methods to modernise delivery and make communication training more engaging and accessible for all learners.

How it is being used within the North East: Across the North East, providers such as Newcastle City Learning, Newcastle College, the Education Training Collective (ETC) and Middlesbrough College all report successes in using role play and mock interviews in the development of communication skills. Furthermore, the ETC has attested to the success of VR-simulated 'body swaps'.

Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, and Darlington Colleges have recently invested in AI training mannequins and interactive, full immersion rooms through the Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF) and LSIPs. This is to develop patient-focused communication skills amongst its health and social care students through introducing real life scenarios and simulating genuine patient interaction.

How it is being used outside the North East: The City of Wolverhampton College currently provides soft skills training through AI '[body swap](#)' simulation for education, healthcare and enterprise. The social and health care students (ages 16-19) are provided training scenarios through VR headsets – allowing students to interact with patients.

CASE STUDY 8 ↘

Accelerator programmes/skills boot camps

Challenge addressed: Accelerator programmes can be used by providers to rapidly address skills deficits.

How it works: These programs would run over 6 weeks with a small group of learners to accelerate communication skills through social and employer-led project work. They immerse students in real-world scenarios, helping them to quickly develop practical communication skills.

The intensive format means learners can gain hands-on experience in a sprint format. The knock-on effect of this allows for rapid upskilling at volume.

This approach addresses the demand for work-ready graduates in the North East where communication skills are highly needed and highly valued. When employers are involved, it also helps build important networks with students and gives them an example of working environments.

How it is being used within the North East: ETC is deploying an accelerator programme specifically targeting students resitting GCSE English. The programme runs over 6 weeks with 6 students and accelerates communication skills development by identifying and improving deficits in language – verbal and written. Similarly, Middlesbrough College is using the ‘Thrive provision’ for the bespoke development of communication skills through 20 possible modules in the Thrive portfolio.

How it is being used outside the North East: Currently deployed examples outside of the North East include [Words for Work](#), designed to accelerate communication skill development over 6 weeks for young people (ages 16-19) from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Factors external to training delivery affect communication skills attainment ↘

Table 6 describes the factors external to training delivery that are affecting communication skills attainment in the North East, which must be considered when developing pathways moving forward. [Case Study 9](#), [Case Study 10](#), and [Case Study 11](#) provide best practice examples of actions that education providers are taking to mitigate these factors.

Table 6 - External factors affecting training delivery in the North East

External factor	Description
Capacity of learners to engage in communication skills training	<p>Providers reported that external events and circumstances are affecting learners' willingness and ability to develop communication skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Some learners are unengaged, and struggle to communicate even amongst peers. Moreover, intergenerational and intercultural communication challenges are becoming more prevalent. → COVID-19 and technology changes have affected learners' confidence, their functional skills, and social and cultural capital. The rapid progression of, and reliance on, technology will continue to impact learners' motivation, confidence, and resilience. → The cost-of-living crisis is affecting socio-economic circumstances and learners' ability to fully participate in education. <p>Education providers are currently offering opportunities to build social and cultural capital to build learner's capacity to engage as described in Case Study 9, Case Study 10, and Case Study 11. More support is required, however.</p>
Responsibility of employers	<p>Recruitment and in-work processes contribute to low communication skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Recruitment practices often exclude potentially good applicants and reduce their confidence. → Job adverts can often be complexly written, and/ or demand generalised qualifications, which can discourage applicants. → Smaller employers can struggle to onboard employees effectively → Senior staff do not always receive training to communicate effectively. <p>Employers must adjust their existing recruitment, onboarding, and training approaches. However, this will require support, especially for SMEs.</p>
Policy landscape	<p>The national policy landscape is changing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → More emphasis is placed on economic inactivity. As part of this, transferable skills such as communication skills rise up the agenda. → Continuing devolution means that the North East is well-positioned to adopt a regional approach to tackle these challenges. <p>The qualifications landscape also poses challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The emphasis on achieving generalised qualifications for employment removes the opportunity for tailored support. → Some learners therefore treat courses as tick-boxes, they need a qualification to get a job, and the lack of qualification in communication skills also discourages interest from learners <p>There is a need, and an opportunity, for the policy landscape to better facilitate the attainment of communication skills in the North East.</p>

CASE STUDY 9 ▾

Social action projects and volunteering

Challenge addressed: Offering opportunities for volunteering and social action and/or integrating those opportunities into the curriculum enables learners to develop communication skills while contributing to and engaging with the wider community.

How it works: This approach aligns with the strength of embedding communication in meaningful contexts and helps mitigate the threat of the post-COVID impact on interpersonal skills through diverse socialisation. Providers can position these projects as a way to build resilience and civic responsibility in learners, enhancing both personal and professional growth.

How it is being used within the North East: Stockton Arts Centre, a partner of Stockton College, hosts a [Tea Dance](#) at the beginning of each season for students to support communities with Dementia. This type of event enhances communication skills and fosters a sense of community in students and participants alike.

[‘Future Focus’](#) in County Durham encourages young people to gain essential volunteering experience – enriching their communication skills and building learner confidence.

How it is being used outside the North East: Loughborough University offers students the opportunity to get involved in a diverse range of volunteering projects, from environmental activities to assisting in local schools through [Loughborough Students’ Action](#).

CASE STUDY 10 ▾

Enterprise competitions

Challenge addressed: Competitions challenge learners to apply their communication skills in high-pressure, real-world scenarios.

How it works: These events capitalise on the opportunity provided by the North East's evolving policy landscape, which emphasises entrepreneurship and innovation. Providers can use enterprise competitions to develop persuasive communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, making their learners more adaptable and competitive in the job market.

How it is being used within the North East: Newcastle University offers the Young Entrepreneurs' Scheme (YES), where teams of students attend presentations from leading industry figures on the commercialisation of ideas, prepare an oral business plan presentation for a hypothetical start-up company, and take part in a series of five, three-day workshops. The winning team from each workshop moves forward to the final for a chance to win cash prizes.

How it is being used outside the North East: [Barclays Life Skills](#) runs an enterprise project challenge which helps students to solve a brief set by entrepreneurs related to real businesses and to develop core transferable skills such as problem-solving, creativity, teamwork and listening and speaking while doing so.

CASE STUDY 11 ▾

Using extra-curricular activities to promote transferable skills and enriching cultural/social capital

Challenge addressed: Providers can use this whole-picture approach to address shortfalls in social and cultural capital – which is vital for developing complete communication skills and confidence.

How it works: Providers design programmes that integrate transferable skills development, such as teamwork, collaboration, and leadership, into communication-focused activities. These experiences enrich learners' cultural and social capital by exposing them to diverse perspectives, team dynamics, and real-world problem-solving.

Providers can also, where possible, promote and facilitate extracurricular activities. These provide both transferable communication skills, say from a team-based sport, and easy access to socialisation. This requires further funding to implement, however.

How it is being used within the North East: Most of the providers consulted for this report mentioned that their institution offers or is aware of extracurricular activities for their learners. This typically includes clubs, societies, and recreational sports.

Darlington College offers trips abroad, including funding support for those who cannot afford it. They also leverage a 360-projection room to expose students to media designed to aid cultural and social development.

How it is being used outside the North East: [Skills Builder Partnership](#) offers a framework to employers and educators to help build transferable skills for people in the workforce or about to enter. This is typically reinforced with real-life practice scenarios.

What are the pathways to tackle the remaining challenges?

Three pathways were co-developed with employers, education providers, policymakers, and voluntary sector organisations to tackle currently unaddressed challenges in employer-provider engagement, recruitment practices, and providing safe spaces for development.

Education providers across the North East are already taking unique and effective approaches to communication skills provision to tackle many of the challenges in communication skills training delivery. However, some challenges remain unaddressed such as the effectiveness of employer-provider engagement, recruitment practices, and providing safe spaces for development.

The research has uncovered three main pathways, which are described in more detail in this section, that employers and education providers could take to further address these challenges. The pathways include:

- Developing an employer-endorsed communication skills framework that would make communication between employers and education providers more efficient by creating a shared language related to the real-life requirements of employers.
- Redesigning recruitment practices to focus on skills and competencies rather than qualifications, improving candidate confidence, and encouraging more applications.
- Increasing collaboration with VSCE sector for people to be able to access safe spaces to improve their communication skills and their confidence.

The pathways were identified and prioritised across two focus groups. One focus group was held with employers, and the other was held with a mixture of education providers, policymakers, and voluntary sector organisations. Other pathways that were considered can be found in Table 7,

PATHWAY 1 ▾

Employer-endorsed communication skills framework

What?	The highest-ranked pathway from the workshop and focus groups was an employer-endorsed communication skills framework that is linked to job “touch points”. “Touch points” are clear examples of strong communication skills needed specific to jobs.
Why?	<p>Producing a framework that articulates the levels of communication skills and links them to job “touch points” creates a common language that employers can use to articulate their needs effectively. This would improve the effectiveness of communication between employers and education providers.</p> <p>It also provides education providers with a framework for assessing communication skills amongst learners in preparation for employment, and to design and deliver training more easily in gaps identified by employers.</p>
Who and how?	<p>Requires cross-regional collaboration to ensure that it is implemented effectively and appropriate for purpose. It was ranked highest in the workshop held with education providers, the mixed focus group with education providers, policymakers, and VSCE organisations, and the employers focus group. This suggests high levels of buy-in to progress this pathway forward.</p> <p>Language should connect with that used in job adverts and recruitment.</p>
Potential limitations and challenges	Value must be demonstrated through either a monetary value or accreditation such as the Good Work Pledge. It is important that the framework is not too generalised as it will be ineffective without taking specific sector needs into account. There will likely be difficulties in achieving agreement in the design process, in ensuring participation of SMEs in the process, and in keeping it fit for purpose by adapting it as needed. Other concerns involved the consistency and clarity of the language used and achieving region-wide buy-in.

PATHWAY 2 ▾

Redesign of recruitment practices

What?	The second-ranked pathway was the redesign of recruitment practices to ask for skills and competencies rather than qualifications.
Why?	<p>This pathway was suggested to improve the confidence of learners and to create clear examples of strong communication skills needed specific to jobs. Changing hiring practices in this way can help increase the pool of labour available to employers by encouraging greater applications and can make the recruitment process fairer and more equitable. Employers in some rural places have already moved away from qualifications and are now evaluating based on skills, which has improved the availability of labour.</p> <p>Furthermore, using language based on motivation and competence can improve the confidence of prospective employees to not only apply, but to also perform once hired as pressure is reduced on them being “work-ready”.</p>
Who and how?	This pathway largely relies on buy-in from employers to adapt their current systems. It was rated highest in the employers’ focus group. This implies that there is appetite for employers to change their current approach. There is also a need through this redesign to improve the visibility of smaller employers’ job adverts to encourage further applications and increase the size of the pool of labour available to them.
Potential limitations and challenges	Despite their willingness, this pathway requires the provision of support to employers in transitioning from traditional hiring practices. Redeveloping front-end hiring practices is time-and-cost intensive for both large and small employers. Without consistent language across the region, the redesign of recruitment practices may also serve to further confuse the definition of strong communication skills. Moreover, skills-based hiring can be less clear to candidates, especially when receiving feedback compared to traditional practices based on previous experience and qualifications.

PATHWAY 3 ▾

Further collaboration with the VSCE sector

What? The third-ranked pathway was to increase collaboration with VSCE sector for learners to be able to access safe spaces to improve their communication skills and their confidence.

Why? This pathway was discussed to take advantage of spaces where many learners feel more comfortable, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. This can enable learners to practice their communication skills in a real-world environment with confidence and support.

Further collaboration with the VSCE sector can help fill the experience gap for learners, and prospective and new employees. Many education providers already provide these opportunities in a non-formalised manner and have demonstrable evidence of their success in improving the confidence and communication skills of learners.

Moreover, VSCEs work within communities already so are aware of challenges surrounding communication skills attainment and accessing employment. This also provides learners with greater social and cultural capital, upon which they have a greater base to develop their communication skills.

Who and how? This pathway requires buy-in from providers, VSCE organisations, and policymakers. There is already collaboration between the VSCE sector and education providers to help provide learners with a space to build confidence, gain experience, and develop skills. This is often not formalised or integrated within curriculums. Further involvement of the VSCE sector in helping to develop communication skills will require further research to understand how this could be achieved in practice.

Potential limitations and challenges Many VSCE organisations may not have the capacity to engage, and equally, learners may not have the capacity to engage. This approach could exclude learners from groups that need extra support who have other commitments, and other learners may not be motivated to engage. Similarly, these organisations can only be involved formally through public tender, which many do not have the capacity to compete for.

Other pathways suggested

Other pathways were suggested in the workshop and focus groups, but they were not prioritised within the workshop and focus groups for further development as part of this research. Table 7 describes these alternative pathways with a brief description.

Table 7 - Alternative pathways suggested

Pathway	Description
Signposting using a centralised region-wide shared platform	This pathway was suggested to improve awareness of and access to additional free and low-cost resources for communication skills development. For example, this approach is already being used by the NHS with the Making Every Contact Count (MECC) platform.
Transition programme for new hires (at all levels) in collaboration with FE & HE	This pathway was suggested to improve the transition of new hires into their new jobs, and support employers in onboarding them effectively. This would improve the confidence of new hires, and provide them with a space to further develop skills.
More extra-curriculars, contact time, and personalisation	This pathway was suggested to expand on existing activities and make sure each group can access the support they need, and develop life experience and cultural capital.
“Training the trainer” - support for educators	This pathway was suggested to improve staff in their own communication skills training and delivery. Staff should be trained by “communication skills” specialists such as ESOL teachers.
Community of practice amongst FE and HE providers	This pathway was suggested due to the feedback from the workshop about the usefulness of exchanging ideas with other education providers, across both FE and HE.

Summary of findings and recommendations

Communication skills attainment is a challenge for employers across the region. Providers are already addressing this effectively, however, there are still gaps that need to be addressed. The research has uncovered three main pathways that could be taken to further address the challenges.

95% of employers who were engaged as part of the first phase of the LSIPs faced challenges with communication skills within their businesses. This challenge cut across company size and sector, was not limited to age groups, and was a challenge for both new hires and existing employees.

Communication skills are required for all jobs, and many jobs require specific instances of communication. The fundamentals of these skills are often overlooked in the wider skills picture. This often means that many are excluded from attaining these skills, therefore limiting the supply of labour in the region. There is therefore a need to make the attainment of communication skills “structurally unmissable”.

Education providers across the region are taking innovative approaches to tackling these challenges. These have been particularly effective and are highlighted in the case studies ([Table of best practices](#)) in this report. These approaches should be magnified and warrant further investment.

However, the current provision is not translating completely into the workplace. This is because:

1. Many employers struggle to articulate their needs to education providers
2. Recruitment practices serve as a barrier that limits the labour supply and reduces confidence
3. Many education providers face funding and time constraints, which can limit the volume of support for communication skills that can be provided
4. There is limited collaboration in the region tackling challenges in communication skills attainment

The following pathways were co-developed with education providers, policymakers, and employers to help address these shortcomings. The top three ranked pathways are:

1. Employer-endorsed communication skills framework linked to job “touch points”
2. Redesign of recruitment practices to promote skills and competencies
3. Further collaboration with the VSCE sector

Appendix

4.



Appendix 1: Table of best practices

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Urban
Foresight

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The Catalyst, 3 Science Square
Newcastle Helix
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE4 5TG
United Kingdom
+44 (0)191 814 2210

30 City Quay,
Camperdown Street,
Dundee, DD1 3JA
Scotland
+44 (0)1382 549946

urbanforesight.org

hello@urbanforesight.org

