

Keystone Employers: Six Months of Collaboration, Candid Insight & Real Momentum

Over the past six months, the Keystone Employer programme has really gathered momentum, bringing employers together, sparking honest conversations, and generating insights that matter. What's stood out most is the willingness to engage, challenge assumptions, and co-design practical solutions.

We've explored a wide range of challenges and opportunities; technical skills, future talent pipelines, leadership development, digital pressures, and the day-to-day realities of recruitment. The progress made so far reflects the strength of this growing community.

Across the board, employers showed huge willingness to engage, challenge assumptions and codesign solutions. As one participant put it:

“We don't need more noise - we need clarity, relevance and things we can use on Monday.”



What Employers Told Us (Loud and Clear)

1. Back to basics: digital & soft skills gaps are growing

Professional Services and Business Services employers echoed each other almost word for word. Many new starters lack email etiquette, confidence with spreadsheets and professional communication

Meanwhile SMEs described operating with “1982 style systems” and limited digital literacy - a barrier not just to productivity, but also to AI adoption.

“If you can't use Word or Excel, you can't use Copilot - start with the basics.”

2. Practical, local, bitesized training wins every time

Across Health & Social Care, Manufacturing and SME sectors, employers said time off the floor is the biggest barrier. They want short, applied modules and hybrid delivery:

“No more generic online modules - we need training people can actually use.”

3. A system that's too complex for busy businesses

The phrase “black box” came up repeatedly in Care. Employers can't easily see what's funded or available - Apollo, LDSS, bootcamps, levy share - and want a simple skills brokerage for the region.

“We spend hours trying to work out what's funded... we haven't got the time.”

Sector Snapshots from the Last Six Months

Health & Social Care

- Demand for deputy manager and first-line leader development continues to dominate.
- Strong appetite for peer networks and bitesize leadership
- Funding exists - but visibility is low.

Advanced Manufacturing

- Chronic shortages continue in welding, fabrication and electrical roles.
- Employers welcomed new local Level 3 pathways and partnerships with colleges.
- A push for pre-apprenticeship soft skills to improve work readiness.

Ports & Logistics

- Sector remains under-recognised despite being essential infrastructure.
- Employers stressed: “Without logistics, nothing moves.”
- Calls for better facilities, early-years outreach and a regional “careers map”.
- Strong momentum with FE partnerships and Generation Logistics assets.

Professional Services

- Early career skill gaps in resilience, workplace behaviours and MS Office.
- Appetite for in-person LSIP sessions to raise visibility and share practice.

Business Services

- SMEs tackling digital adoption, leadership development, and AI uncertainty.
- Recruiters reported significant challenges with both 50+ candidates and long-term unemployed, where intensive support is unsustainable.
“We gave one candidate every possible chance - but we can't run a business that way.”
- Strong demand for a pick-and-mix, CPD ready curriculum for SMEs.

Looking Ahead

The next phase of the LSIP will focus on turning employer voice into system change. Simplifying access to training, strengthening early career pathways, and designing the practical skills modules businesses are asking for.

“It’s not about looking outward - it’s about giving people the mindset and capability to succeed.”

Keystone employers have shown what’s possible when sectors come together with honesty, ambition and a shared purpose. That momentum is now building the foundation for LSIP2.0.