



National Apprenticeship Hub Network (NAHN):

Solent case study

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Introduction

The **Solent Growth Partnership** (SGP) is a collaborative business support and skills solution initiative. This is one of a number of skills partnership hubs that sit within the National Apprenticeships Hub Network in England. The SGP comprises the Solent economic area, that is the Isle of Wight, Portsmouth City and Southampton City Councils (see Fig. 1). The SGP is explored as a case study in order to gain a deeper understanding of how it operates with partners and understand the benefits to the local area and stakeholders, as well as uncover any challenges it may face. In order to do this, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 stakeholders associated with the SGP. This includes senior leaders and staff working for the SGP, as well as employers and learning providers who have worked with them. Interview data and documents provided by SGP or found online provide the insights into this case study.

Figure 1: The Solent area



Background and context

Brief history of Solent hub

The SGP has gone through a number of iterations since 2019 to reach its current format as we now see it in 2026. Initiated in 2019, the Solent Apprenticeship Hub was established with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) to support employers in navigating the apprenticeship landscape and directly assisting local employers in understanding their workforce needs and creating apprenticeship opportunities. The Hub was led by Southampton City Council, working in partnership with Portsmouth City Council, the University of Portsmouth, Solent LEP, Solent University, and a wider group of regional stakeholders.

Over the subsequent years, the hub expanded its focus to include employer interaction with the wider skills system and supporting apprenticeship levy transfer between employers. Again, the hub was successful in securing ESF funding for their operations until 2023, however, the UK's earlier withdrawal from the EU meant they had to seek alternative funding sources to sustain operations. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) offered the financial lifeline for existing services as well as evolving into the area's single point of call for skills, training and business growth services.

In 2025 the hub established into what it most closely resembles still today, the Solent Growth Partnership which also brought the existing Solent Growth Hub into the fold, a long standing service providing business support and access to finance across the region. The SGP aims now to be a single-entry point to simplify the business support landscape.



New Forest





Portsmouth

The local economic context

The ports of Southampton and Portsmouth are crucial economic drivers, creating thousands of jobs and generating economic return for the area. Marine and maritime activities are a key sector in the economy (activities including sailing, ports suppliers, specialised ship building, marine tech, events, as well as marine research spearheaded by the local universities), as are advanced engineering, hospitality and tourism. The region's 2025 [Get Solent Working Plan](#) puts forward ambitious aims for the coming years, primarily to achieve an 80% employment rate for working age adults (in 2025 this sat at 75.9%) and raise earnings. This will be achieved through a focus on strengthening and building upon existing industry sectors such as maritime and health and social care, as well as focussing on emerging jobs in areas such as green energy and advanced technologies.

The Solent area is not without its challenges that need to be addressed to help it succeed in its ambitions. This includes an ageing population of skilled workers and the large number of small business owners in specialised industrial sectors, significant levels of deprivation, lack of infrastructure often associated with coastal regions, and housing availability and affordability, which may cause problems for retaining talent in the area. Parts of the Solent continue to suffer from economic disconnection as they have struggled to respond to deindustrialisation, changes in tourism and globalisation, whilst also facing significant skills shortages across a number of key areas:

Our evidence base shows us that across the Solent there are currently significant skills gaps at higher technical levels and in specific sectors. We do not have enough technicians, engineers or health and social care professionals to meet the many vital challenges we face, from building our green and maritime economy to meeting the health and care needs of our ageing population (solentlep.org.uk).

Simultaneously, the area is composed primarily of small businesses, particularly microbusinesses of under 10 employees, alongside a few very large employers, for example, BAE Systems and Airbus.



Ryde (Isle of Wight)

Political landscape and funding

The area covered by the SGP is on the government's [Devolution Priority Programme](#) list, meaning that the area of Hampshire and Solent are moving towards being established as a combined authority over the next year, with the election of a mayor in 2028. This will allow for new local powers and funding from central government on key regional priorities, such as on skills and employment support. However questions remain about what this will mean for the hub, in terms of what will be available to them in terms of funding and the changing knowledge requirements, leaving them in somewhat a state of limbo for the time being:

Quite how that will roll out as we go through the next two years of funding, and how we sustain projects that we consider to be key for our area, is a little bit unknown (Local policy representative).

This situation will likely mean another period of upheaval and change. However SGP representatives were also optimistic that in the long-term the change could give the team longevity and stop the reliance on year to year volatile funding models.

Aims of the SGP

The original iteration of what is now the SGP was to reverse the decline of apprenticeship starts which was being witnessed in the area. At a time when significant changes were being made to the system, for example the Apprenticeship Levy becoming Growth and Skills Levy, a move from apprenticeship frameworks to standards, and the introduction of degree apprenticeships, both the national and local apprenticeship start numbers were dropping. It was thought that many employers locally were not aware of all the changes happening and their often-limited knowledge was becoming quickly outdated. This paved the way for someone or something to step in to offer employers impartial advice and guidance on apprenticeships, but also skills more broadly, for instance work placements, skills boot camps and T Levels. Therefore the SGP aimed to support employers firstly to grow their talent through the development of skills, in terms of both existing employees and new recruits, supporting both staff recruitment and retention. Secondly, the SGP aims to support business growth, this might include providing them with insights, opportunities and new thinking, to support businesses to innovate and grow, and ensuring this is done in a personable and accessible way. This holistic approach to business development is exemplified by the senior leadership of the hub:

I think our role is twofold. Number one is that education piece that impartial advice and guidance. The other bit is about putting our businesses in places that [...] causes them to grow, and therefore need more skills, more of the, you know, new talent etc.

The key problem that the SGP was attempting to wrestle with was the issue that many employers, particularly SMEs, do not have the capacity, financially or administratively, to focus their efforts on the training needs and career progression of their workforce, and that is where the hubs are believed to be able to fill the gap. Furthermore, the SGP endeavours to ensure that once people are in their jobs, the work environment is high-quality to ensure they are supported to sustain and thrive in these jobs:

The majority of our work is trying to prepare businesses to be an environment that these individuals can move into and be supported. So, it's not just, "Oh, you've got a job. Amazing." Two weeks later, they're back on the NEET (SGP senior leader).

The whole team is we're here to support businesses to grow. Part of that is skills, and part of that is other support, and skills is the golden thread that runs through everything we do (SGP senior leader).

The SGP aims to engage partners and stakeholders across the region in order to realise these goals and raise aspirations amongst employers.



Services provided

The SGP is run by 12 members of staff, of which two are apprentices, really allowing them to practice what they preach. They deliver tailored, hands-on support to businesses across a wide range of skills and workforce challenges. At its core, they provide one-to-one engagement with employers, beginning with a diagnostic conversation to identify gaps in skills, workforce development opportunities or other organisational needs. From this, SGP helps broker solutions, offering impartial guidance on training opportunities and providers, importantly allowing the employer to make their own independent, yet informed, decision. Although the SGP is an obvious advocate for apprenticeships, they only encourage employers to take one on if it will be a good fit for both the business and apprentice:

...we will then ascertain whether it's a good fit for them to take on an apprentice. Have they got the capacity? Does the job role fit? Is it going to be, you know, worthwhile for the business to move the business forward? But also, on the flip side of it is it going to be a beneficial apprenticeship for that apprentice coming into that business, and they're going to be able to develop and move in to, ultimately, the end goal that they want to do, of being qualified and working within that industry. So, it's working that out, and then if that's not a match [...] then we'll look at other opportunities that are in the area. (SGP employee)

After this initial support is given, for example getting an employer set up with an apprenticeship, the SGP will check in with the employer some months later to ensure that everything is going smoothly and if there are any issues attempt to fix these.

Their support extends beyond skills alone, often encompassing broader business needs such as leadership mentoring or guidance on adopting new technologies like AI:

We had a good network of employers already. So it was about, what can we offer more when we're in there? Instead of just talking about one topic, maybe we can discuss actually you know, if it's recruitment they're struggling with, then there might be options that we can do to support marketing or how to make the job more appealing (SGP employee).

Alongside individual support, SGP delivers a programme of webinars and training sessions designed to address key workforce themes. These include areas such as finance, neurodiversity in the workplace, inclusive recruitment practices, and writing effective job descriptions that appeal to younger generations who have changing expectations of the workplace. Sessions on AI adoption and creating strong online presence, e.g. LinkedIn marketing, have proven to be particularly popular with businesses. Other sessions have included small business days, where they have offered a carousel of up to six workshop training sessions throughout the day, delivered in collaboration with the local university, college group and independent training provider (ITP). These have been offered free to the businesses and appetite from the business community has been strong, hosting up to 100 SMEs a time at full capacity.

In a similar vein, the SGP have supported the delivery of skills boot camps targeting young people seeking work in particular sectors. For example an independent training provider discussed the tender they were awarded by the SGP to run a hospitality-focussed training programme for long-term unemployed young people. It included customer service skills, food hygiene certification, and extended to support around writing CV and cover letters and mock interviews.

A key strand of SGP's work focuses on improving employers access to apprenticeships, this has been bolstered through the launch of the **Transfer to Transform** initiative. The scheme helps large employers redirect unspent apprenticeship levy funds to support SMEs and individuals in upskilling and reskilling. The process is designed to be simple for both levy payers and beneficiaries (usually SMEs), with SGP managing administration and matching funds to suitable applicants. For the levy paying organisations, the initiative allows them to share their pot of money with organisations that align with their values and ethos, with very little work on their part; they just check the application from the SME and if they agree they wish it to go with that organisation the SGP team manages the rest of the process: *'it's pretty seamless after that, we don't get involved'* (Levy-paying employer). For the SME a lot of the stress and administration is also taken out of their hands by the SGP and the process is de-risked. As one SME explained, it allows them to *'sort of dip our toe into apprenticeships'* (SME).

A spin off of the Transfer to Transform initiative is currently being piloted with Airbus:



Southampton

Engineering is a considerable sector in the Solent area but one which faces significant skills shortages. Employers face a significant issue of recruiting suitable candidates to their apprenticeships. At the same time Airbus Defence and Space UK identified a significant mismatch between their strong apprenticeship applicants and the limited number of apprenticeship roles they have on offer. Each year, hundreds of high-quality candidates apply for a small number of apprenticeship positions, leaving many capable individuals without opportunities despite meeting strong thresholds. To address this, Airbus partnered with the Solent Growth Partnership to pilot an 'apprenticeship matching' model. Through this initiative, unsuccessful but high-potential Airbus applicants are invited into a talent pool and matched with relevant local SMEs and employers. Airbus supports this process by transferring levy funding and sharing pre-assessed candidates. This reduces recruitment and financial risk for smaller employers who may not have suitable candidates applying to them.

The SGP reach out to local employers to understand what vacancies they have in order to reignite apprenticeships in the area. By applying to Airbus, the candidates themselves have proven they are motivated and have shown an interest in engineering, so are a good sell to the employers. Some of the candidates that have been added to the pool are from out of the Solent area and have declared that they are willing to relocate so the scheme can also potentially bring in young engineering talent into the area. For employers it takes away any of the burden and time involved in the recruitment of apprentices, which has meant there has been strong appetite from employers, thanks also to the Airbus name being attached to these candidates, and they understand the high calibre of applicants Airbus has to reject.

The pilot is in its early days with the matching process still ongoing, however even a single successful placement demonstrates a model that could be replicated regionally across other sectors. So far there has been enthusiasm from both employers and potential candidates, with even some of Airbus' own suppliers getting involved, showing that this can also feedback to have some benefit to the company too.



The SGP have a drive to support care leavers into the workplace and have attempted to include this in their one-to-one discussions with businesses, e.g. 'are you willing to take on a care leaver?'. This prompts them to have a conversation about what it means to take on a care leaver and dispel any myths or concerns. The same question is asked on the initial forms that employers complete for levy transfer. This again prompts conversations along with levy pledges to encourage them to take on care leavers. This has helped them to raise awareness and drive commitment from employers. The SGP even pledged to specifically take on a care leaver to their internal apprenticeship position. Despite attempting to remove many barriers during the application process for this, they received no applications, highlighting that are still larger structural barriers hindering care leavers' integration into the job market.

SGP is increasingly focusing on early intervention in order to prevent young people becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). This includes direct engagement with schools, where skills advisors deliver workshops and assemblies to students in years 9-11 to raise awareness of apprenticeships and career pathways. The SGP has also begun trialling what is essentially an employer experience brokerage service for schools, whereby employers can say what kind of experiences they are able to offer pupils, whether it's a placement, a school talk or a tour of the workplace, and schools across the region can choose what they need for a particular pupil or a cohort of pupils. As an interviewee explained:

the intention for that is that every young person gets a valuable and appropriate form of work experience for their own future career aspiration. So, if they want to be a nursery practitioner, yeah, go and do the nursery placement. But if you want to be an engineer, get a factory tour of airbus on a day in their hub, or, you know, training facility, or whatever, or something which is at least adjacent to that or aligned to that career pathway (Training provider).

Financial incentives for employers have also been a recent addition to the SGP offering. These encourage employers to take on young apprentices who have previously been NEET. These are in addition to national government's incentives that have now been put in place. These incentives are all relatively new and in progress, so their success is yet unknown.

Finally, SGP also feedback insights gathered through their employer engagement into the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), where they meet with local decision-makers periodically. This ensures that regional skills strategies are informed by real and up to date business needs.

Across all these activities, SGP acts as a connector and an independent source of information and guidance, helping businesses navigate the skills system while promoting inclusive, forward-looking workforce practices across the region.

Engagement with stakeholders

The SGP's strength is clear when considering how it engages with its stakeholders. The key stakeholder group and purpose of its operations are employers, but they also engage closely with training providers (TPs), local policy makers, and other intermediaries such as the local chambers of commerce and job centres, which have allowed them to gain a wider reach within the business community. In terms of their employer engagement, SGP have established themselves as a holistic 'go-to' organisation which is able to offer a whole business perspective with open conversations not just about apprenticeships, but about broader skills needs, workforce planning and wider business support. This breadth is particularly important in building trust with employers who may not initially be seeking apprenticeship advice but rather broader business solutions. As a senior leader of the SGP explains:

The reason we get through the front door of these businesses is that we'll talk to them about the whole thing, rather than a singular proportion, singular bit of it.

SGP reaches employers through a diverse mix of channels, these include social media campaigns, collaboration with training providers, attendance at networking events, business expos or training workshops, and sometimes referral between internal services, for example when a business engaging on trade or growth issues is asked about its skills needs. Word of mouth also plays a significant role, reflecting the strength of existing relationships. Employers themselves highlighted the importance of networking events as a starting point for engagement, with many relationships developing organically from these interactions. Strategic partnerships have further extended SGP's reach, particularly with organisations such as the local Chamber of Commerce (CoC), which can communicate directly with the wider business community. They have also made effective use of their partnership with the CoC by co-hosting workshops and sharing intel rather than duplicating efforts.

In the early days of the hub, active networking took precedence whilst they established themselves, but now they are seen as the 'go to' for apprenticeship information, advice and guidance, and they often have employers who are approaching them first. This has taken time to establish however, which they have been building since their establishment, including use of case studies and positive employer stories to help illustrate their offering and how they can benefit a business. Once the SGP have established an initial relationship with employers, it has tended to develop positively:

and because we now have that relationship [...] I can pick up phone or drop any of them an email with a question about apprenticeships or funding, or we think we've got this person, what's the next sort of steps, and they're always available to help, which is great (SME).

The SGP appear to have three key features that are the backbone of their relationship with employers: **informative, impartial and visible**. Firstly, all the advisors at the SGP were credited with being highly knowledgeable about the skills and training system, as well as broader business processes, and are able to fill the gap in understanding for employers. This often included such things as how to use the levy, apprenticeship technicalities, and how to have a relationship with a college or TP. Given that the skills policy and landscape is often changing, employers' knowledge can become quickly outdated and the SGP fills this gap by interpreting the system, translating technical information into business-relevant language, as well as connecting employers with appropriate experts. As one SGP team member explained: *'we're not business mentors at all. So, we identify what support they need, and we go and find experts.'*

Secondly, the team's **impartiality** is highlighted in that they do not promote a single training provider but instead offer clear, honest information and typically present two or three providers as options, whilst prioritising local providers. This reflects their role as a trusted intermediary rather than a broker with vested interests. Training

providers on the other hand are themselves businesses with their own agendas and often protective of their own relationships. The SGP on the other hand can be objective with no official affiliation with any particular provider, instead it positions itself as an independent source of guidance, enabling employers to make informed decisions. Crucially, the business retains ownership of the final decision, reinforcing the advisory role SGP play.

Thirdly, the team at the SGP have clear **visibility** within the business community in the Solent area. Employers and other stakeholders interviewed usually referred to a team member of the SGP warmly and by name, highlighting the personal relationship that they have developed, and enhancing trust and accessibility. Team members were often credited with being always available and easy to talk to and get advice from, and again showing that they have become the 'go to' for apprenticeship advice and support locally. This visibility also extended to external events and representation across the local area, such as representation from the local CoC on the SGP board, which ensures the SGP is well embedded within the business community.

From a couple of years ago to now, and we have always worked with Solent Business Skills Hub as sort of one of the first people we contact when we're thinking of launching an apprenticeship, and to sort of for their help and guidance and support (SME).

The relationships SGP develops with employers are typically long-term and multi-faceted, extending beyond a single intervention. This sustained engagement enables ongoing dialogue, feedback and problem-solving. For example, employers can report back on their experiences with apprenticeships (e.g. onboarding or TP support), which SGP can then feedback to training providers. This creates a feedback loop in which issues are identified and used to improve delivery across partners. A team member explained how on several occasions feedback has led to tangible changes in the system, for example when a learning provider started introducing fees for pre-screening interviews of prospective apprentices that they were doing on behalf of employers. Employers, many being SMEs with small budgets, fed back to the SGP that they were not willing to pay for this service and wanted to withdraw. The TP took on this feedback and since have had a successful flow of business from employers.

Overall, the SGP's engagement is characterised by breadth, impartiality and long-term relationship-building, enabling it to act as a trusted advisor within the local skills ecosystem.



Impact

The impact of the SGP over seven years of operation in various formats is obvious when hearing the stories of individual employers in the Solent area.

WayAhead are a small private company which runs day centres for adults with severe learning difficulties, with three day centres across Southampton. The sector faces many challenges, it is massively underfunded, staff are low paid, and there's usually high staff turnover. WayAhead have around 20-25 staff.

The organisation has benefited from levy transfer funding to support staff training. Over time, they have managed to gain funding for a small group of apprentices to do adult social care apprenticeships, including all ages and different backgrounds. As a small organisation they would not have been able to afford to put these employees on apprenticeship programmes. They have had employees who have had negative experiences at school and been out of learning for many years. WayAhead have started them off on a level 2 apprenticeship to get their confidence back and then have gone on to progress to level 5. Having a small group together means that they can support each other on their learning journeys and in turn WayAhead have seen good retention rates. A few have dropped out for personal reasons but as an employer they have tried their best to support them through any personal challenges through a solid support system.

WayAhead emphasise the importance of professional qualifications for staff retention and development. The apprenticeships have given WayAhead the opportunity to give their staff the knowledge and skills to be able to fulfil their role, and at the same time helped the workforce to feel more valued.

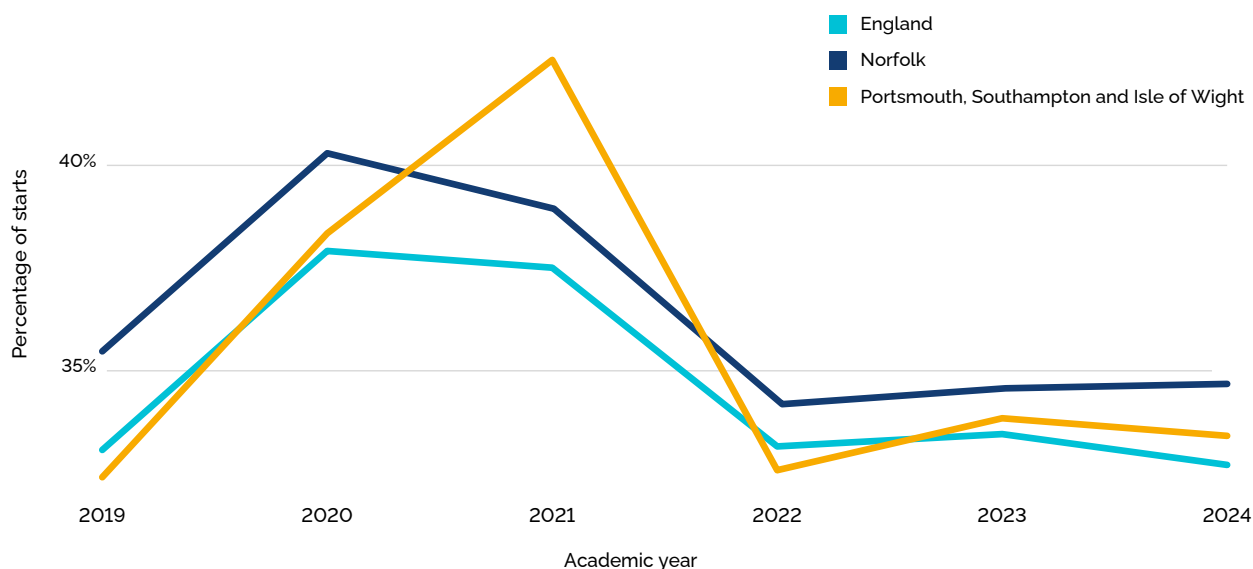
Throughout the duration, WayAhead have had direct contact at the SGP to support them with any question or administrative assistance and funding transfer, which they found incredibly helpful.

They believe the next step is to spread the message to other small employees like themselves about the training opportunities that may be available to them to help tackle some of the critical skill shortages the care sector faces.

The example of WayAhead's journey illustrates the kind of impact the SGP has had on individual apprentices, colleagues, the organisations and the wider sectors. For individual apprentices the SGP has helped start careers, supported promotions and given employees career progression opportunities which may not have been available because of lack of funds or lack of awareness of the employers. Through the SGP's services, new skills have been generated where there had been talent deficits and skills shortages. For small employers, the levy transfer initiative in particular has allowed them to access the skills systems and take on new apprenticeships that they otherwise would not have done. By 2026, the SGP has reached 899 SMEs and supported the transfer of over £10 million to small businesses. In terms of individuals who have started an apprenticeship, this has translated to 1021 apprentices across levels 3 to 7. As can be seen in Figure 2, since the inception of the SGP in

2019, non-levy starts (i.e. employers who do not pay into the apprenticeship levy) in the Solent area have jumped above the England average in all subsequent years except 2022.

Figure 2: Percentage of non-levy apprenticeship starts by year and area



(Source: Solent Growth Partnership)

As one senior leader of the SGP explains, the levy transfer initiative alone has generated not only funding for apprenticeship but further support for businesses:

... because there is a huge need for levy transfer support across the region and it took off. We'd spent half a million before we knew it, and it's just grown and grown and grown into something huge. You know, we are the people to go to for levy transfer [...] Suddenly [employers] were coming to us for a levy transfer and we could talk to them about other skills within their business that the training provider had no incentive to do.

I think the fact that Solent Growth Partners [...] got [transfer to transform] strategically off of the ground within the region is fantastic. [...] how much money that they've pushed through the system is quite incredible I think. And you know, for those organisations in the Solent area to be able to support others, generally, smaller organisations or charitable organisations, has been key, and it's definitely made an impact for us. It's been, you know, a little bit of a sales tour, if you like, but it allows us to take one of those barriers away (TP).

In turn this has helped apprenticeship numbers grow within the region and counter the decline that had previously been witnessed:

If I go back to day one, what was the purpose of the team? It was to reverse that trend in declining numbers in apprenticeships. We've reversed that trend and continue to reverse that trend above the national average of growth (SGP senior leader).

Bringing on a first apprentice within an organisation has also had a knock-on effect further down the line. Some employers interviewed discussed taking on their first apprentice as a result of interacting with the SGP and who then reached out to the hub six months or so later in order to recruit a second because of their positive experience. Ultimately the SGP and particularly the Transfer to Transform initiative helps organisation save money when funds are already tight:

They wanted to give her [someone who has been out of work] an opportunity to do an apprenticeship. And, you know, the funding support that was available for levy transfer, saved that organisation, okay, a couple of 100 pounds. I think it's 225 pounds, but for a small charity, that's then 225 pounds that they can put into, you know, delivering their main support for their main charitable aims. Rather than just giving it to us. So, you know the fact that [SGP employee] and team are happy to go out and source that funding, and we're happy for her to do that on our behalf. It's a win win for us and for the charity, and also for that obviously, that learner that's now able to come on programme and is doing really well. So, you know, we can multiply that story several times with a number of different organisations that have taken advantage of the levy transfer (TP).

The direct impact to individual apprentices is also clear. A community building charity on the Isle of Wight, have been able to take on a couple of apprentices through the Transfer to Transform initiative. One person had connected with the charity through a mental health support programme they run. She started volunteering with them and then through the initiative they were able to take her on as a HR admin apprentice at level 3. The charity did not have to finance any of the apprenticeship training since they received funds from another organisation's levy. The apprentice is progressing well and is also now keen to advance on to a level 5 management apprenticeship once she completes. The opportunity has therefore supported her in getting back on her feet and into work. For the charity, they explain:

It's probably been the difference between doing it or not doing it. To be honest, I think it's unlikely that we would have been able to find money to put into an apprenticeship. So yeah, that's made a real difference to us, and obviously to the kind of to the staff involved in doing that. It's made a massive difference (SME).

Employers were also appreciative of the impartial advice they received from the hub's advisors in a way that they did not feel pressure to follow a certain route. A CEO explained how the SGP give:

genuinely impartial advice or signpost us, you know, [it's] a lot easier because there's no, I don't say ulterior motive that sounds awful, but there's no motive to say "Oh no, you must, you know, let's speak to city of Portsmouth college" (Joe T).

I don't think I've ever spoken to anybody who I've referred to SGP, and who hasn't come back to me and said, thank you, I got so much from it, and I uncovered so much more than I knew I could have accessed. Or, you know, and that's from people just starting out on a brand new business who have got advice and guidance to people who are quite well established but didn't realize they should be optimising their levy in the way they could be, or could be doing more with cross skilling workforces at different levels, or utilising levy to transfer or increasing their CSR or whatever it is (Training provider).

The skills provision of an organisation has also been an enabler for further business growth which has fed into wider economic benefits the area, communities and cities.

Many sectors face severe skills shortages, and as displayed in the example of WayAhead, sectors dominated by small businesses and low turnover can struggle to train and retain staff sufficiently, for example, those in the health and care sector. Supporting these businesses to receive levy transfer funds and allow access to suitable training can support employers to recruit and retain skilled staff, and have real impact at the sector level:

If you're a small childcare nursery, the turnover is every month at this point, we've been able to support those businesses, to give them apprenticeships, give them levy transfers, show them small skills, short courses, keep their staff, keep that going, and to see nurseries and care homes and things like that actually flourishing, and to see the region take a small push in the right direction (SGP senior leader).

Furthermore, bringing the skills and business advice (growth) strands of the hub together has helped tie everything together; recognising that skills do not sit separately to other business elements, the SGP are able to give holistic support and advice to all areas of business growth. It has also helped develop a conduit across the Solent region between employers, TPs and government who can work together on shared challenges. For instance, the workshops on various topics were noted as having a direct impact upon businesses. As one SME explained:

The first sort of session we did with them about net zero was almost a massive sort of catalyst for us as a business. To focus more on the sort of sustainability route. So it's really nice that it was that session with them that now as a business we've sort of had solar panels fitted and looking at an urban space for a kitchen garden and things like that. So the positive impact that those two sessions that we had initially has sort of grown and grown and grown (SME).

A final area the SGP were recognised as having an indirect yet positive impact is around dispelling misinformation and misunderstanding regarding apprenticeships and skills. The fact that there is still ignorance on this topic makes such a hub important. One SME commented on how the SGP has helped educate and change opinion on apprenticeships for people in their organisation:

So, I think it's the hub have helped me in educating the people I work with, and [SGP advisor] actually had a call with one of the directors and I very early on around apprenticeships and sort of some of the stigmas and breaking them down a bit, so I would say that as a business they have had a positive impact in sort of dispel some of the myths around it and really sort of highlighting the benefits to a business of an apprentice.

Some employers attribute some of the changes in perceptions to boarder changes in the skills system: *'I think people recognise, I suppose, the quality and the level of the training, perhaps more than they used to'* (SME). This SME continued to explain that the perception of apprenticeships has changed, particularly thanks to the introduction of higher level apprenticeships, which have almost brought more credibility to the lower level ones at the same time.



Barriers

One of the key barriers of the SGP lies in the instability of its funding. Frequent changes in funding methodologies mean that each iteration of the hub has come with new ways of measuring success, different outcomes as well as frequent rebranding. This has created significant challenges in maintaining clear and consistent external messaging. Internally, this volatility can be equally disruptive, making it difficult for staff to align around long-term priorities or build continuity in delivery. Precarious funding has also meant staff have been on short-term contracts, which can undermine staff morale and risks staff retention. More secure funding would allow them to build sustained services, sustained relationships with employers and TPs and have greater reach and be able to offer more support to more employers.

We have 7864 something, or like that businesses, small businesses, however many we've got engaged. And I can name some amazing local businesses that are really strong advocates for apprenticeships. How many 1000s don't get it? Don't know what it is, don't understand or don't think it's for them (Local policy representative).

Current efforts have been impactful for some organisations but potentially the SGP's lack of longevity or lack of resources have not yet been sufficient in scale to reach a broader business community. The SGP staff were continually praised for the work they do but many acknowledged that there are only so many staff and so their ability to offer more to more businesses comes down to the available resource/capacity that they have.

Additionally, whilst large-scale online sessions, covering a wide range of business interests, have enabled some degree of scalability and efficiency, they do not fully replace the value of a more personalised engagement. As noted *'quite often the art of the possible is in that intimate conversation with small groups and helping address some of the misunderstandings that I think are out there'* (Local policy representative). Advisors are effective when they can directly address misconceptions and tailor support to employers' specific needs. However, this type of engagement is resource-intensive and requires a larger advisory workforce.

Despite successes in engaging thousands of businesses, there remains a persistent awareness and engagement gap when it comes to apprenticeships. Challenges exist around employers understanding of an ever-changing skills landscape and the practicalities of apprenticeships, particularly around fully understanding the commitment involved in taking on an apprentice. Employing an apprentice requires significant engagement, including providing mentorship, supporting training requirements and working closely with training providers. Without a clear understanding of these responsibilities, employers may be hesitant to participate or may struggle to provide a high-quality experience. This underscores the importance of not only funding apprenticeships but also setting realistic expectations and providing ongoing support. Likewise, the visibility of the SGP itself can also be a barrier to it having greater impact:

Still, I can speak to quite big employers within our region, and I'll refer them to [SGP] and they've never heard of them. So, there's things where that needs help. And I mean they're doing everything, I can't move for one of them talking to you about it, but if people don't know that's something they need, then they don't hear it...(Training provider).

Finally, there is a need to strengthen relationships with key partners, such as Jobcentre Plus and the education system. Stronger collaboration across institutions could improve referral pathways into apprenticeships and ensure a more joined-up approach to skills development and the worklessness affecting young people. Focussing on this could support newer recruits into businesses rather than a tendency to favour existing employees. This also links to the duplication and cross over between different organisations and agencies offering similar services in the area. For instance, the SGP, the Careers and Enterprise Company, the LSIP, the

Chamber of Commerce, many of these are trying to link employers to education, and it's necessary to ensure that this doesn't add to the confusion of the system. The key is to ensure these different bodies work together to deliver effective support for employers and young people.



Conclusion

The Solent Growth Partnership provides an example of how a locally embedded skills and business support broker can act as a trusted intermediary within a complex and rapidly changing skills landscape. Through impartial advice, strong local visibility and a focus on long-term engagement, the SGP has helped local employers navigate apprenticeships, access levy transfer and identify wider workforce development opportunities. In doing so, it has supported over a thousand apprentices and enabled many SMEs to access training and support that would otherwise have been beyond their reach. At the same time, the case study highlights the challenges faced by funding uncertainty and limited capacity.

As the Solent area moves towards greater devolution, the experience of the SGP demonstrates the importance of locally coordinated, employer-facing support in addressing skills shortages and creating opportunities for individuals and businesses alike. The SGP is helping support the vision for a combined mayoral authority before this is actually in place. It serves the whole region, which includes two distinct cities which have different councils and distinct identities, and so in embedding that partnership across the whole region they are breaking down barriers and working towards that mentality of a devolved area. This is helping people to realise that collaboration is regional not just city council level.



References

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