

Cabinet – 2 July 2025

Adoption of the New Forest Skills Action Plan

Purpose	For review
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	This report seeks agreement for the New Forest Skills Action Plan to be published and adopted.
Recommendations	That Cabinet: 1. note and adopt the content of the New Forest Skills Action Plan and accompanying Technical Report; 2. support the objectives and recommended actions of the New Forest Skills Action Plan including the setting up of a New Forest Skills Group
Reasons for recommendation(s)	To progress the New Forest Skills Action Plan through to publication and adoption. This in turn will enable the Economic Development team to work with partners to implement the actions agreed as part of its service delivery.
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Derek Tipp – Planning and Economy
Strategic Director(s)	James Carpenter – Strategic Director of Place, Operations & Sustainability
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Introduction and background

1. Ensuring that our communities hold the skills needed for businesses both now and in the future is an important function of the economic development service of this Council in helping to support the sustainable economic growth of the District and wider region.
2. It is particularly important in the New Forest following the Solent Freeport being officially designated in December 2022. A significant proportion of the sites that make up the Solent Freeport are in the New Forest.
3. The potential benefits, expectations and commitments made in designating the Freeport have been reported to this Council on a number of previous occasions. However, a key factor in the ability of the District, and wider economy, to maximise these benefits is in understanding the particular local skills challenges that the District currently has and then preparing an Action Plan to deliver future skills training that addresses these challenges.
4. New Forest District is recognised as a unique geography with a particular combination of issues (and opportunities) relating to the provision of workforce and resident skills that more generic skills programmes haven't necessarily addressed, such as the Hampshire Chamber of Commerce *Solent Local Skills Improvement Plan* (LISP) and Hampshire County Councils *Hampshire Skills Strategy*. These issues include its rural character and location (with pockets of isolated communities), an increasingly ageing population, the underrepresentation of knowledge intensive jobs with almost twice the proportion of the population working in low skilled occupations when compared with the wider county, and significant net outflow of resident workers, often to access higher skilled roles.
5. In April 2024, Cabinet agreed that securing employment and skills is a key priority for the New Forest to ensure a legacy from the Freeport. Ensuring residents have the skills to access higher paid/higher value jobs, and that businesses have the right resources to exploit the opportunities that the Freeport will provide, is a fundamental part of creating that legacy.
6. To support this aspiration, it was recognised that a place specific skills action plan was required for the New Forest. During the winter of 2024, New Forest District Council commissioned EKOS Limited to prepare a New Forest District Skills Action Plan covering the period 2025 to 2030. The resulting Skills Action Plan is provided at Appendix One.

Key steps in preparing the New Forest Skills Action Plan (NFSAP)

7. Over the last few months the consultancy team, working with officers of this Council, undertook a number of tasks in the preparation of NFSAP as follows: -
 - a. Desk-top and primary research to confirm and clarify the specific skills challenges within the New Forest.
 - b. Interviews, followed by workshops with a range of stakeholders to test the emerging findings and identify preliminary approaches to address.
 - c. Produced and shared for comment and feedback with stakeholders a draft plan; and
 - d. Produced a revised NFSAP taking into consideration comments and feedback from stakeholders.
8. The latest version of the NFSAP is provided at Appendix One. An accompanying Technical Report providing further details of the research and consultation undertaken is provided in Appendix Two.

Identifying the skills challenges

9. The NFSAP is an evidenced based strategy. A significant amount of data gathering was undertaken to identify the challenges (and opportunities) in skills provision in the New Forest.
10. The following key trends were observed:
 - a. There is an ageing population & potential future decline in working age population. Higher incidences of young people moving away to study and work, due in part to the relative lack of affordable housing options;
 - b. Jobs are often lower paid & more part-time work;
 - c. Decline in key industries including manufacturing and construction - despite their importance to the local economy and the transition to net-zero. Ensuring that skills pathways support both replacement demand and future workforce needs in these sectors is critical;
 - d. Job demand: Current jobs demand continues to be in lower-paid foundational and service sectors with key employers including NHS, chefs, care workers, and cleaners;
 - e. Rising unemployment & related economic strain;
 - f. Earnings & gender pay gap - In 2024, the gross weekly median pay for full-time workers in the New Forest was £668, significantly below the national average of £732. Men earned £801 per week, while women earned £594, marking a £207 weekly pay gap. This gender pay gap has widened since 2014 when the gap stood at £173 per week; and

- g. Reliance on private transport and limited public transport options leading to some communities at risk of isolation.
11. The research and engagement has also identified groups and communities within the District that merit particular consideration in ensuring that their potential is enabled through future skills delivery:
- Women entering or re-entering the workforce;
 - Young people, especially those not in education, employment, or training (NEETs);
 - People aged 50+;
 - Job changers; and
 - Aspiring entrepreneurs and those seeking self-employment.

Policy context

12. The consultancy team reviewed a wide range of strategic skills documents including the following:
- a. Skills England – *Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities*.
 - b. Hampshire County Council – *Hampshire Skills Strategy*.
 - c. Hampshire Chamber of Commerce – *Solent Local Skills Improvement Plan (LISP)*.
13. Whilst considered excellent strategies in their own right they are not capable of providing the New Forest specific skills targeted support that is the focal point of the NFSAP.

Defining the objectives for a successful Skills Action Plan

14. In the context of the above the NFSAP sets out four key objectives to ensure the district's residents and businesses can thrive:
- a. *Inclusive growth*: Ensuring everyone in the New Forest can participate in and benefit from economic, social, and environmental growth, being prepared to capitalise on emerging opportunities through entrepreneurship and with a focus on priority target groups;
 - b. *A nature positive transition to a low carbon economy whilst also supporting established sectors*: Working with key partners we will deliver skills for conservation, land and forestry management, and renewable technologies to support

a sustainable future whilst also strengthening the workforce for key established sectors;

- c. *Lifelong learning and upskilling opportunities for all*: Ensuring individuals are well-informed and prepared to make decisions about their education, training, and career pathways; and
- d. *Effective coordination of skills delivery*: We will work with key education providers to ensure a coordinated and effective skills delivery programme that avoids duplication and addresses gaps in provision.

Setting the actions

15. Over 30 actions have been identified in the report, grouped into seven themes covering: -

- a. *Aligning skills with emerging opportunities* – Its aim is to ensure the workforce is prepared to capitalise on emerging opportunities including the Solent Freeport, renewable energy and sustainable land management. There are three actions linked with this theme including *the "development and promotion of training programmes that focus on trade, innovation and job creation within the Freeport"*;
- b. *Supporting established sectors* – This theme recognises the need to strengthen the workforce in established sectors such as 'Health and Social Care' and 'Hospitality and Tourism', ensuring they have the necessary skills to meet current and future demands. The action plan allocates 7 actions to support this theme such as "developing training programmes in customer service, hospitality management and tourism" with a view to improving the visitor experience;
- c. *Lifelong learning and upskilling* - Providing continuous skills development to enable residents to adapt to an evolving job market. Actions such as "greater access to digital literacy and advanced IT skills" are recommended that supports residents' adaptability in an ever-increasing digital world;
- d. *Collaboration and community engagement* –This theme seeks to facilitate the development of partnership delivery, whilst recognising the strengths of community-driven skills programmes. Actions include bringing together diverse organisations such as education establishments, local employers and local government to create partnerships that are greater than the sum of their parts, whilst also engaging effectively with communities to identify skills gaps and training opportunities;
- e. *Inclusive growth* – Providing equality of access to skills provision, with targeted support for vulnerable and marginalised priority groups is a key theme for this Council.

The action plan identifies two actions under this theme including “targeted initiatives for individuals facing barrier to employment such as NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training”;

- f. *Business and entrepreneurship* – This theme seeks to foster entrepreneurship and support businesses with access to resources with the right skills to succeed and grow. There are four actions linked with this theme such as the development and promotion of “entrepreneurial activity in the New Forest including support and resources for starting a business”; and
- g. *Monitoring and Evaluation* – The final theme seeks to embed assessment and reporting of progress of the delivery of the Action Plan to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with strategic goals. Actions linked to this theme include “the establishment of clear metrics and indicators”.

16. The NFSAP, in its Appendix One, also identifies approaches that will break down barriers to skills provision for those priority groups within our communities where specific measures are merited, maximising opportunities for a broad cross section of New Forest residents.

Delivering the Skills Action Plan

17. The Skills Action Plan prioritises the actions across the short (1-2 years), medium (2-3 years) and long term (4+ years), with an emphasis in the short term on actions which are more readily deliverable and those required to ensure that the effectiveness of the Skills Action Plan is monitored in future years.
18. The Skills Action Plan specifically recommends the setting up of a New Forest Skills Group to coordinate the delivery of skills training across the New Forest. The recommendation to form such a Group has gained support from a number of partners operating across the New Forest and it is recognised that the success of the NFSAP is dependent on effective collaboration and shared responsibility across these partners. To resource this Group in the first instance, it is proposed that NFDC initially chairs. Although it is envisaged that this group will predominantly be attended by officers across the partners, the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy will be invited to attend given their wider skills remit.

Next Steps

19. If there is ultimately agreement to adopt the Skills Action Plan in accordance with the recommendations of this report, the next steps

will be the setting up of a New Forest Skills Group which will be tasked with coordinating existing and future skills delivery within the New Forest, the delivery of the actions set out in the NFSAP (including identifying funding opportunities as appropriate) and monitoring progress and outcomes.

20. It will also be important to ensure that skills delivery is coordinated, where appropriate, with wider sub-regional and national skills priorities to maximise external funding opportunities.

Corporate plan priorities

21. The NFSAP directly supports the Councils Corporate Plan Priorities themes of People, Place and Prosperity. The NFSAP vision captures this synergy through the creation of *"A skilled, resilient workforce for the New Forest – driving inclusive, nature positive growth through place-based skills planning"*.
22. Focusing on individual priorities from a people theme perspective the NFSAP empowers residents to lead more fulfilling lives, as well as supporting those in the community that are most in need through its supports of priority groups such as NEETs.
23. In terms of the place theme the NFSAP will protect the New Forest climate, coast and natural world, through its focus on skills in sectors such as conservation, land management and renewable technologies, supporting a nature positive transition to a low carbon economy.
24. Finally, the NFSAP aligns with the prosperity theme through its ability to champion skills and access to job opportunities for residents across the District.

Options appraisal

25. The NFSAP was prepared to address a significant gap in documenting the existing skills challenges and opportunities in the New Forest District and identifying an appropriate response in the form of a series of objectives and actions to address these.
26. Not undertaking this work would fail to provide a robust basis for taking a more coordinated and proactive approach to skills delivery in the future. This is particularly important in considering the opportunities and needs arising from the delivery of the Solent Freeport.
27. The Place & Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel considered the basis of this report at its meeting on 19 June 2025. The Panel

supported the recommendations set out in this report. Overall, the Panel welcomed the report and raised the following observations:

- Concern over the availability of future funding.
- Transport issues for employees.
- The raising of expectations due to the Freeport not turning out to be the employment centre which was promised.
- Concern that the action plan concentrated on the Freeport and its surrounding area only and did not cover the whole of the District.

Consultation undertaken

28. As part of the development of the NFSAP significant engagement and consultation has taken place with a range of stakeholders. This informed the evidence base, priorities, outputs, outcomes and delivery actions. Engagement and consultation were fundamental to the production of a plan that recognises need, whilst at the same time provides pragmatic and realistic solutions to address it.
29. Examples of stakeholders engaged and consulted with include education and skills providers, Hampshire County Council, business representative organisations and youth and community groups. Further detail on engagement and consultation can be found in section four of the NFSAP.

Financial and resource implications

30. The production of the NFSAP was funded externally from the 2022 – 2025 UK Shared Prosperity Fund and its adoption as part of this governance process creates no financial implications.
31. The delivery of the NFSAP will be dependent on securing external funding for some actions. The NFSAP will help to support future bids for funding by providing the necessary context, evidence and commitment from key stakeholders.

Legal implications

32. None

Risk assessment

33. There are no risks associated with the subject of this decision paper, however as the implementation of the plan moves forward risk and issues logs will be employed as best practice management of standalone interventions.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

34. There are no environmental/climate and nature implications directly related to the adoption of the Skills Action Plan. In seeking to deliver the actions identified, consideration will be given to the design of interventions to ensure that opportunities are taken to enable resilience to climate change and protect and enhance the natural world.

Equalities implications

35. The NFSAP is inclusive in its approach to delivering positive outcomes for residents of the New Forest District. Whilst it does set out priority groups it aims to support the full cross section of society through the theme of inclusive growth and does not distinguish between the protected characteristics. Looking forward interventions that form part of the delivery of the NFSAP will carefully consider equality implications and where necessary will undertake equality impact assessments.

Crime and disorder implications

36. None

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

37. None

New Forest National Park / Cranborne Chase National Landscape implications

38. The Skills Action Plan includes actions related to supporting economic sectors that are strongly associated with activities within the National Park and National Landscape. As such there are considered to be likely positive outcomes arising from the delivery of the Skills Action Plan.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – New Forest Skills
Action Plan 2025 – 2030

Appendix 2 – New Forest Skills
Technical Report 2025-2030

Background Papers: