

UNISON North West

Liverpool City Region Skills Strategy Response

January 2018

UNISON represents 50,000 members in the Liverpool City Region employed in areas including local government, health, police, transport and all sectors of education.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Skills Strategy consultation document produced by Cambridge Policy Consultants.

We have consulted UNISON branches in the city region in developing this response which is organised in two parts. The second part is an attempt to provide concise answers to the specific questions put in the consultation. But first, some wider thematic points about the direction of the strategy are set out.

Access

The draft strategy document makes welcome reference to equal access to education and learning. People from all ethnic communities and parts of the city-region, people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, people with caring responsibilities – should not be excluded from employment, training and development.

A major omission from the strategy at present though is any requirement for organisations that receive public money to provide support for existing and future employees to overcome potential barriers. Where goods and services are being commissioned by public authorities, there should be requirements made of employers to invest in the people of Liverpool City Region. We believe that the strategy should seek to utilise the power of public commissioning to achieve better outcomes on access to quality employment and training. These requirements should form part of the proposed employment charter for the city region.

Provision

The strategy refers to the need for a “[h]igh-quality provider base” (p. 4).

Liverpool City Region should have a training and skills *system* – meeting everybody’s needs - rather than a set of *ad hoc* projects. Key to that system of provision is the role of Further Education Colleges – which are key ‘anchor’ institutions in their localities and should be accountable and responsive to their communities. Having well-funded FE colleges in every locality in Liverpool City Region is the best way of ensuring that high-quality education is accessible to all. For that reason, we would not support resources being diverted from FE colleges to a new centralised Institute of Technology.

Apprenticeships

It is welcome that more apprenticeships are available. It is important that they lead to sustainable employment and that apprentices receive high-quality training in safe working environments. Employers and training providers need to be accountable for the apprenticeships they offer. There needs to be quality assurance and unions can play a key role in helping to ensure that apprenticeships are not exploitative.

Southport & Ormskirk NHS Trust recently signed [UNISON's apprenticeship charter](#) – which sets out commitments to high-quality training, decent pay and future employment. It would be very welcome if other key employers in the city region made similar commitments to apprentices.

Curriculum

The strategy calls for a “much closer link to be in place between the employers’ needs and the curriculum offer” (p. 4).

It is appropriate that people can gain the skills needed to get a job in their local community – such that some employer involvement in curriculum design is helpful. But everybody in Liverpool City Region should have the opportunity to pursue their individual talents and interests. A wide-ranging curriculum should be available in every part of Liverpool City Region to allow people to pursue the career path and interests of their choosing – regardless of where they live. We should not limit individuals’ ambitions to the immediate needs of the local labour market where they happen to live.

Employer responsibilities

The document states that “...everyone in the labour market will need to be flexible and resilient...” (p. 10).

There is a danger that too much emphasis is put on requiring the workforce and individual workers to adapt to the changing needs of global business rather than focussing on how to support our people to get into, and develop at, work. Employers need to be ‘flexible’ in supporting workers and ‘resilient’ in their long-term commitment to the economy and people of Liverpool City Region.

Meeting skills needs in high employment sectors

The draft strategy (p. 6) includes a high-end prediction that there could be as many as 75,000 new jobs in high-growth sectors by 2025 but notes that this figure is far outweighed by the 26,000 job openings every year that will need to be filled in existing job roles.

Alan Southern¹ and his colleagues at the University of Liverpool have analysed Nomis data and found that over a third of all jobs in the city region are in health (14%), education (10%) and public administration and defence (6%). An additional 11% of employment is in the retail sector and the authors note that these jobs are distributed widely across the six authorities of Liverpool City Region.

The evidence shows that a large proportion of jobs in the city region are in sectors that are rooted in all of our communities. The draft strategy mentions the need for “[s]table employment at a living wage... [to allow workers to] afford to buy goods and services” (p. 4) but workers in these important sectors are often low-paid. We believe that the strategy should better reflect the need for improved employment standards and training provision in these sectors. For example in social care, the quality of life of vulnerable people and a growing number of workers would be improved through sustained investment in the terms and conditions and skills of the workforce.

The Union Role

It is very disappointing that there is no reference to trade unions in this document at all. This is a major omission and oversight. Unions are key partners in any discussion about skills and have a significant role to play in working with employers to ensure existing employees have opportunities to upskill and develop throughout their working lives, in ensuring that apprentices are not exploited and to help make workplaces accessible.

¹ Southern, A., Thompson, M. Davies, J., Nowak, V. and Furnedge, P. (2017) How to deliver great jobs: towards a regional industrial strategy for Liverpool City Region. Report prepared for the TUC. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/great-jobs-Liverpool.pdf>

1.	<p>Are the priority actions appropriate to securing the achievement of the stated outcomes? Are there alternative actions that could work more effectively?</p> <p>An action that should be taken by public authorities and anchor institutions is to use public money spent on commissioning to pursue good outcomes. Where public authorities are commissioning goods or services externally, employers should be required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to provide opportunities for local people and those facing potential barriers to employment (e.g. disability, caring responsibilities) with opportunities and support to access work (Outcome 2) • to provide good quality jobs in regard to pay, security, opportunities to develop and train, trade union recognition and bargaining, and equalities. (also Outcome 2) • to invest more in the quality and quantity of skills of their workforce (Outcome 5)
2.	<p>Are there any additional performance measures that we should be considering?</p> <p>The only proposed measure of employment quality is average weekly wage (Outcome 2). A better employment quality measure would also include reference to wider aspects including security, worker voice and equalities.</p> <p>Outcome 3 is based on the assumption that the key growth sectors will deliver a high quantity of good jobs. Both the quantity and quality of jobs in these sectors needs to be measured and monitored.</p>
3.	<p>What activity currently exists that will contribute to the delivery of this Strategy? Is there scope to scale this up?</p> <p>Unions already play a central role in learning at work through Unionlearn and at a large scale. Over 220,000 people are being given training and learning opportunities through their union every year and over 30,000 union learning representatives (ULRs) have been trained. ULRs play a key role in promoting the value of learning, analysing learning or training needs, consulting employers about carrying out such activities, supporting learners and arranging training.</p>
4.	<p>How can your organisation contribute and what specific actions will enable you to contribute more to support delivery of this Strategy? What impact will this have?</p> <p>The key role of unions in workplace learning and training needs to be acknowledged and utilised. It would be beneficial if more employers in the city region established formal learning agreements. The combination of a clear employer commitment to supporting lifelong learning and skills and trained ULRs being available to help staff access learning opportunities is very helpful in creating a culture of learning and development – with positive impacts on productivity.</p>
5.	<p>Are there any areas of further devolution that the Combined Authority should consider to enable delivery of this Strategy and its ambitions to be met?</p>