
Information sheet for qualitative research investigating skills mismatches in England

Information for focus group participants

What is the research and why is it taking place?

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is undertaking qualitative research to investigate skills mismatches (misalignment between supply of and demand for skills) in priority sectors in four areas of England. The research is being undertaken on behalf of Skills England.

Skills England aims to build the nation's world-class skills, assisting businesses to boost their workforce and getting more people into skilled jobs faster, ultimately helping the nation to prosper. It identifies skills gaps in the economy and uses this insight to improve provision so that individuals – both young people and adults - and businesses can access the right training and skills development. This research complements the work that Skills England is undertaking on Skills Needs Assessments. The Skills Needs Assessment is a new analytical process designed to evaluate national, sectoral, and regional skills requirements. It will analyse supply and demand for priority occupations, estimate future workforce needs, and identify key patterns such as skills mismatches, occupational hotspots, and emerging roles across local areas.

The research is taking place between February and March 2026. It includes focus group discussions with employers and training providers in four areas of England, with a particular sectoral foci in each areas as detailed below:

- Greater Manchester/Salford with a focus on: digital and cyber; health innovation; and creative sectors
- West Midlands with a focus on: advanced manufacturing/automotive; materials and engineering; and construction sectors
- Bristol/West of England with a focus on: digital and tech including health tech; green energy; life sciences sectors
- Oxford-Cambridge corridor (with East of England) with a focus on: life sciences; digital and tech; and green energy sectors.

Eight focus groups (two per area) will be undertaken with individuals from employers and training providers who are working in the sectors of interest. In terms of employers, depending on the size of the organisation, we expect focus group participants to be in roles such as: HR/hiring manager; CEO/founder/owner-manager; strategic workforce planning; technical team manager. Regarding training providers, we expect participants to include staff within further education colleges, higher education institutions and independent training

providers who have direct engagement with employers such as employer engagement leads and apprenticeship and training/skills leads.

The key aim of the focus groups will be to explore skills mismatches in the sectors of interest (further details provided below).

We would very much appreciate your participation in the research.

What activities will the research involve?

The research will involve taking part in an online focus group lasting around 90 minutes which will explore:

- roles recruited for, current/future skills needs and skills gaps/mismatches
- courses, training and qualifications provided and the extent to which they are aligned with labour market needs
- barriers to the supply and uptake of courses, training and qualifications and how they might be overcome
- readiness for emerging roles and technologies
- perceptions on the role of local government in shaping training/skills supply and demand.

Focus groups will take place at the end of the day (around 5/6pm) and participants will be provided with a voucher thanking them for their time and contribution.

Data protection

Skills England is the data controller for the research. NFER is the data processor and Acumen Fieldwork is a sub-processor. NFER will be facilitating and reporting on the focus groups whilst Acumen Fieldwork is responsible for the recruitment to the focus groups.

Participation in all research activities is entirely voluntary. Research participants will be fully briefed on the purposes of the study and how the information they provide will be used before consenting to take part. We operate fully in-line with data protection legislation (including GDPR) and we will not use the information we receive for anything other than this research. If participants consent to be contacted again for follow up research, contact details will be retained and will only be used for this purpose.

At the end of the study, NFER will produce a publishable report. Data collected during the study will be anonymised and no individual or organisation will be identifiable from the report, unless permission has explicitly been given by the data subject.

Who are NFER and Acumen Fieldwork?

NFER is an independent research organisation with many years' experience of undertaking research and evaluation with schools, colleges, businesses and the public sector. For more information please visit: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/>.

Acumen Fieldwork is a market research agency with extensive experience in all aspects of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork and recruitment. For more information please visit:

<https://www.acumenfieldwork.com/market-research-agency/>

Where can I go for more information?

More details about the research including a link to this information sheet and an associated privacy notice can be found on the project web page [here](#).

In addition, Suzanne Straw, the project director is very happy to answer any questions. Please contact Suzanne on s.straw@nfer.ac.uk

Thank you very much for your support with this research.