



The Access to Opportunity Spectrum: Skills in Place





Over the past ten years, City & Guilds Foundation has invested in programmes and charities delivering skills to people and communities where they are needed most. Over this period, investment in skills across the UK has fallen at a time when it is needed more than ever and Government and philanthropic funding is increasingly focused on exploring place-based approach.

This paper offers a fresh contribution to the conversation around the investment in skills in a geographical area. Drawn from reflections across City & Guilds Foundation's network of skills-focused charities, employers and partners, it focusses on the concept that physical proximity to a service, a college or a business is not the same as having access to opportunity, and different places need different things. Some need pathways to be created, others need people and industry to be connected to pathways that already exist.

Our learning so far shows that taking a place-approach is an excellent way to find and support those organisations that are trusted and understand what their communities need. But where we want to help transform access to skills for people with cumulative barriers, there are other factors that cut across place which involve looking outside of a particular location to find ways to improve outcomes of those furthest from opportunity.

"I just think whether you're a young person or a person in Dundee, Port Talbot, Great Yarmouth, I would like to imagine a world where the quality of pathway and opportunity is levelled out."

Mike Adamson CBE, Interim Chief Executive, City & Guilds Foundation (1 November 2025 – 31 July 2026)



Policy & impact economy context for place-based funding

9.11 million people of working age in the UK are economically inactive, and local labour markets and local training supply are too often misaligned (ONS, July 2026).

DCMS's April 2026 Our Place to Give plan sets out Government's strategy for growing place-based philanthropy, including the £5.8 billion Pride in Place programme and the £500 million Better Futures Fund, both designed to draw in match funding from foundations, and a new Office for the Impact Economy acting as a single front door into Government for funders (DCMS, 2026).

In August 2026, Prime Minister Andy Burnham confirmed that English mayors will retain a share of local income tax and business rates and will gain direct control over 16–19 technical education routes for the first time. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 has placed strategic authorities on a firmer legal footing and made skills and employment support a statutory area of mayoral competence (Policy Connect, 2026; Institute for Government, 2026).

Vocational skills policy has moved in parallel. The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper replaced the apprenticeship levy with a Growth and Skills Levy from April 2026, allowing employers to spend levy funds on short, flexible courses in critical skills areas, and established Skills England as the system's coordinating body (UK Government, 2025; Skills England, 2026).

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement opens for applications from September 2026, giving adults access to four years of loan-funded training across their working lives (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2026).

Alan Milburn's review of young people and work, whose interim findings were published in May 2026, has sharpened attention on the transition from education into employment, finding that more than a million young people are NEET and calling for a system oriented around destinations rather than qualifications (Milburn, 2026).





The two agendas increasingly share the same delivery architecture. Mayors produce ten-year Local Growth Plans setting local economic priorities in line with the national industrial strategy, and delivery is grounded in Local Skills Improvement Plans, over which strategic authorities now hold joint ownership alongside the employer representative bodies that have traditionally run them (Policy Connect, 2026).

City & Guilds Foundation funds place-based approaches directly, through its social investment and Local Community Skills Fund and lifts up best practice from small and medium employers (SMEs) across the UK through the Princess Royal Training Awards (PRTA) network. The 306 organisations awarded represent a combined workforce of around 3 million people in the UK, or roughly 9% of the UK workforce. Drawing on evidence from these programmes, Bean Research has analysed how skills can be a route to supported place-based change, and the myriad of variable factors that should be considered when doing so.

Defining place

While the Department of Education increasingly report a place-based skills policy, it is the Department for Culture Media & Sport which defines place-based funding as targeting “the specific needs and opportunities of a defined geographical area”. Meanwhile Place Matters treats place-based change as fundamentally about relationships, addressing “the wider causes of inequality and social injustice in communities.”

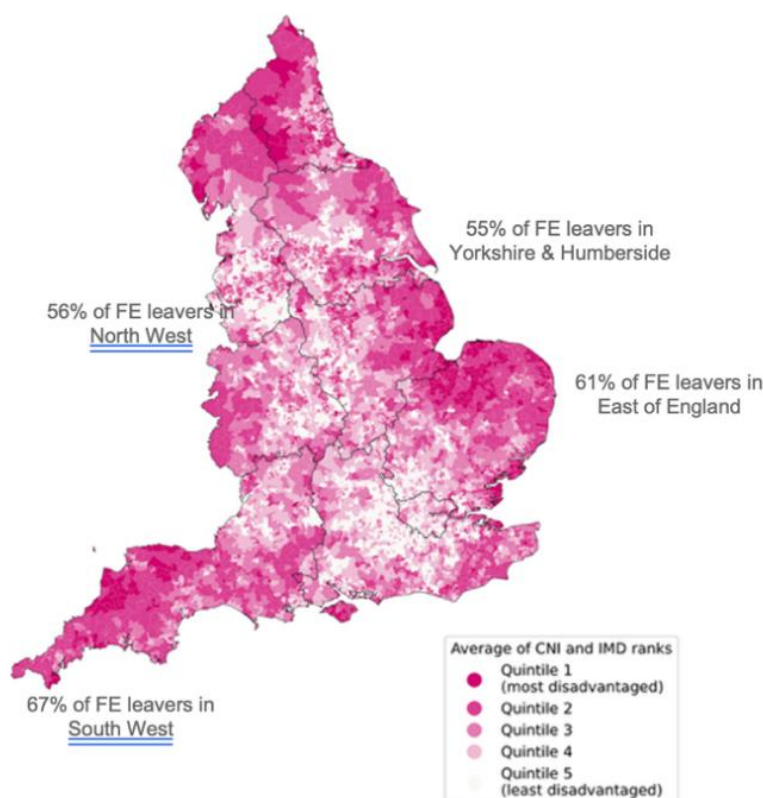


Understanding places in need: The Evidence Base

Analysis of the Education, Skills and Training Deprivation Index (as part of the broader Indices of Multiple Deprivation), alongside the more recent Community Needs Index, which measures factors linked to community resilience and social infrastructure, provides a more complete picture of need within a neighbourhood ranking each of the England's 33,755 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), with the bottom 20% often described as experiencing "double disadvantage".

Another crucial data source is the Further Education Longitudinal Education Outcomes (FE LEO), maintained by the Department for Education, which links individual FE, apprenticeship and traineeship records to HMRC employment data and DWP benefit histories, tracking the proportion of learners who enter sustained employment or further study and their median subsequent earnings (DfE, 2026).

If these are overlaid, there is a clear map of need.



Bean Research's analysis of the activities and evidence of the 30 funded partners of the Local Community Skills Fund across the UK takes this further by categorising these areas of need based on barriers to accessing skills opportunities, distinguishing:



Funded Partners report that the response required therefore differs by either: **creating local pathways where opportunity is scarce** versus **connecting people to pathways that already exist but feel out of reach.**

Access to opportunity spectrum

LOW PHYSICAL ACCESS HIGH PHYSICAL ACCESS



Rural and geographically isolated communities

Barrier: Physical access

- Limited transport and fewer local employers
- Small labour markets and fewer training routes
- Geographical isolation restricts access to services and work

Coastal and small-town areas with fewer local opportunities

Barrier: Mixed structural and opportunity constraints

- Weaker or seasonal local job markets
- Some services available, but limited progression routes
- Pockets of deprivation within coastal and post-industrial towns

Urban areas experiencing high multiple deprivation

Barrier: Engagement with systems, confidence and trust

- Higher levels of relative deprivation across multiple IMD domains
- Services, colleges, employer physically present, but people may feel excluded and disengage from systems

Local pathways may need to be created (when opportunity is scarce)

People are more likely to need to be connected to existing pathways (when opportunity exists but feels out of reach)

Some of City & Guilds Foundation funded delivery illustrates this:

Coastal

Feathers Futures, based in Great Yarmouth, works mainly with women facing domestic abuse, financial hardship, mental health difficulties and involvement in the criminal justice system, in a town that ranks among the most deprived in the UK with limited local training and employment opportunities. Its approach starts with Foundational Readiness before Supported Work Exposure with a bespoke six-week course covering assertiveness, interview confidence and core workplace skills, built around local employers' vacancies and expectations.

Similarly, Gower College supports at-risk young people into and through college and has **increased retention to 76% of participants** and now informs FE funding and policy in Wales.

Rural

Volunteering Hebrides works in their own words, *"In our remote island community, where there is desperate need... The Social Learning Academy will provide opportunities where no others exist"*. Its Social Learning Academy takes 20 vulnerable young adults through a supported work placement, alongside accredited training in first aid, food hygiene and health and safety. Each learner is paired one-to-one with an experienced staff member who works alongside them as a mentor throughout.

Urban

Cardiff & Vale College's Integration Hub, funded by City & Guilds Foundation, created a dedicated work coach role focused specifically on Cardiff's refugee, asylum-seeker and ethnic-minority community, a one-stop shop for employment advice, CV and interview support, and practical items such as interview clothing.

Museum of London Archaeology, a Princess Royal Training Award recipient, took a place-based approach to hiring and training with 81% of its new-to-sector trainees based locally (of whom 67% had been unemployed), helping make its workforce more reflective of the communities it works in.

Displaced people and refugees face a 'place' challenge that cuts across this spectrum

Positive Youth Foundation's accelerated ESOL model supported 239 displaced young people, of whom 123 have achieved a qualification and 102 moved into education, employment or training within six months. The model since informed Coventry City Council's Migration Team and has been cited in research by the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford.



ICOS, in Sunderland, has supported 62 people, primarily refugees and asylum seekers with the right to work, into qualifications including driving theory, CSCS, first aid and Level 3 teaching assistant training. Participants have progressed into paid employment and strengthened local employability infrastructure including closer working with Jobcentre Plus in Sunderland.

"You give people somewhere they're welcome. People smiling at them, who know their name, respect them, and notice if they turn up below par and ask why."

Will Evans, Managing Director, Onwards & Upwards



Evidence from Practice: What works

Research suggests that place-based delivery succeeds when two things happen together – the investment is both matched to where a place sits on the Access to Opportunity Spectrum, and the support is matched to where a person sits on their own journey. From across the Foundation's funded programmes there seem to be two key delivery models, depending on the person's stage.

Foundational Readiness

For people further from the workplace, prioritising trust, stability and engagement before formal progression is expected. Delivered in safe, familiar, often informal or community settings, flexible around participants' lives, frequently addressing barriers linked to trauma, anxiety, neurodiversity, caring responsibilities or homelessness.

Bright Futures, in South Tyneside, is a Foundational Readiness example with clear outcomes. The programme supported 18 women facing complex barriers, including homelessness, poor mental health, domestic abuse and social isolation, through intensive one-to-one support alongside group and drop-in sessions. All 18 women reported increased skills and confidence, and all showed positive progression: 12 moved into employment and 6 into education or training.

Hackney Quest's New Futures HQ programme supports young people aged 16 to 25 in Hackney who face multiple barriers to progression, including mental health difficulties, school exclusion and housing insecurity. The model combines goal-based mentoring, one-to-one counselling through Talking Quest, AQA unit award accreditation, employer engagement and supported pathways into training and employment.

"With over three decades in the borough, we operate from a position of deep community embeddedness, with established relationships across youth, housing and mental health networks in Hackney."

Hackney Quest 2026

Supported Work Exposure and Transition to Employment

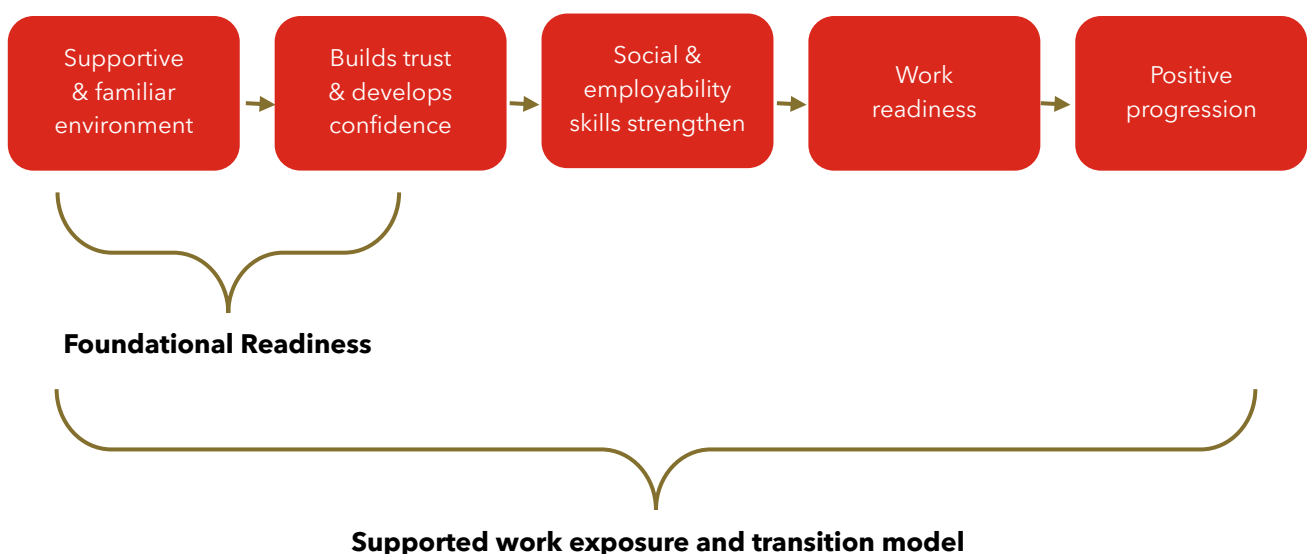
For people ready to test work in a low-stakes, real-world setting as a bridge into sustained employment. Delivered through work environments, placements, workplace visits, and mentor or work-coach support.

Princess Royal Training Award recipient, **Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council**, redesigned entry into its apprenticeship and work placement scheme in direct response to a local problem of young people not in education, employment or training after the pandemic, and the specific barriers facing care leavers.

Entry routes were reshaped around the young people the Council wanted to reach, with non-competitive routes into apprenticeships, paid work experience and Kickstart placements offered to those at risk of long-term unemployment.

City & Guilds Foundation funded **Zink Project** in Buxton, supporting people who were long-term unemployed and facing complex barriers through mentored work placements in its community café, kitchen and office.

95% reported increased skills, and 88% showed positive progression: 18 people were supported by the funding, 9 people moved into employment and 7 progressed into training or gained qualifications. The model received a Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) Award in 2025.





Recommendations

The evidence considered by this paper suggests that funders need to go further than 'place-based funding' and develop place-specific skills solutions, built on the double disadvantage identified where high skills deprivation and weak community infrastructure overlap.

In practice, funders and local Government could most affect change most by:

- overlaying the Education, Skills and Training domain of the IMD with the Community Needs Index and FE LEO outcomes to identify neighbourhoods facing need;
- matching the response to the barrier a place presents, not just its location, using the physical access, mixed structural access, and engagement typology set out in this paper, so that funding either creates local pathways or connects people to pathways that already exist;
- building trust in place before committing funds through relationships, patience and shared decision-making;
- feeding employer needs and place-based skills delivery into Local Skills Improvement Plans as strategic authorities take on formal joint ownership of them, so that learnings from funders and employer networks shape local plans.

How this insight is informing our thinking

It starts with what happens on the ground

Skills are tangible. You can see when someone has gained valuable vocational or technical skills and when they are putting them to use in people, workplaces and communities.





Making that happen depends on collaboration between employers, organisations and communities, shaped by the needs of a particular place or industry. Government policy and funding may move between national priorities and local devolution, but access to the skills people and employers need ultimately comes down to what happens on the ground.

Even when tackling issues with the potential to scale nationally, such as in-prison rehabilitation, the starting point must be the needs of each setting.

But place shouldn't limit what we can learn

Being rooted in a particular place does not mean staying there. Good ideas and successful approaches can be adapted and built on, even when circumstances are very different.

If we look beyond individual places and sectors, we can spot what is working, understand why, and consider where else it might have relevance.

We can help connect the dots

City & Guilds Foundation is well placed to spot patterns and make connections across places, sectors and communities, between urban and rural settings, employers large and small, and people who are both privileged and furthest from opportunity.

We can do more to share what we are learning about what works and connect those insights with the people and organisations who can use them.

As we continue our grant-making, awards and advocacy work, we will make this a more deliberate part of our approach.



About the Research

This paper draws on a multi-method evidence base built up over several years from Bean Research's evaluation and learning partnership with City & Guilds Foundation. In addition, Bean drew on interviews and focus groups with 40 individuals between June and August 2026, including The City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) Fellows, Council members, skills providers and funded partners, providing first-hand perspective on how place can and does shape skills delivery.

This sits alongside a thematic analysis of ten years of Princess Royal Training Awards data, drawing on the 300+ awarded applications examined in Insights from 10 Cycles of the Princess Royal Training Awards and evaluation of City & Guilds Foundation's outcome evaluation of grants and feedback from funded partners, examining not only what the Foundation's funding has achieved but how. More recent recipients of the Local Community Skills Fund fed into this analysis directly.

About City & Guilds Foundation

With a focus on high-impact social investment, recognition and advocacy programmes, the City & Guilds Foundation aims to innovate, celebrate and evaluate opportunities that make a real difference in people's lives, supporting everyone to succeed, no matter who they are or where they come from.

The Foundation is a catalyst for providing opportunities in skills and work and delivering against our purpose. With a commitment to sharing knowledge and driving forward skills for growth, City & Guilds Foundation works with thousands of organisations, generating industry relationships, bringing together networks, matching funding, celebrating best practice and inspiring change.

City & Guilds Foundation is the working name of The City and Guilds of London Institute.

The City and Guilds of London Institute ("CGLI") is a body incorporated by Royal Charter and registered as a charity.

Additional References

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The City and Guilds
of London Institute

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