



**Greater
Birmingham**
Chambers
of Commerce

STAFFORDSHIRE GATEWAY GROWTH PANEL

REPORT



**Burton &
District**
Chamber
of Commerce



**Cannock
Chase**
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of Commerce



**Lichfield &
Tamworth**
Chamber
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FOREWORD:



JONATHAN ROBERTS

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Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel

The Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel is a research exercise led by business, for business, working to develop a roadmap for unleashing the potential of businesses in South and East Staffordshire.

As Chair of the Panel, it has been a pleasure to work in partnership with key businesses across our region, as well as Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce (GBCC) and Divisional Chamber representatives from Lichfield & Tamworth, Burton and District, and Cannock Chase, to harness our expert knowledge of key enablers for local economic growth.

The goal of the Panel has been to provide expert insight into the unique opportunities and challenges facing business in South and East Staffordshire, with a particular focus on how devolution of power to a new Strategic Authority in the region could best enable growth.

These ideas were then combined with surveying and interviews to build a fuller picture of what businesses in the area need from policymakers to thrive and grow, as well as learning lessons from how existing Strategic Authorities have developed over the last decade.

As Staffordshire sits on the cusp of a once-in-a-generation change in local government, this report offers 17 policy recommendations for how the transition to a devolved regional power could best partner with business to the benefit of all.

The recommendations target how we transition to a new authority, how businesses can engage with regional support for growth, how we can strategically develop our built environment, and how to support people with skills to drive these changes. The recommendations include practical suggestions that aim to replicate and amplify existing best practice in the region, as well as looking further afield to what has worked well in other areas. Businesses also presented aspirational ideas, with business incubation and live/work spaces suggested. The outcome is a set of recommendations that have the potential to support businesses and local authorities to work together strategically and with a common goal.

Businesses in South and East Staffordshire are ready to embrace, shape, and work with a new Strategic Authority. Our key ask of local authorities and policy makers is to build business into your thinking, engage with us now, and partner with us to work towards a stronger and more prosperous Staffordshire for all.

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is currently going through the House of Lords, and it is anticipated that it will become law by late spring in 2026. Regions like Staffordshire will see the establishment of a Strategic Authority, a statutory body which sits over unitary councils, to which the government will devolve the legal power and funding to control certain policy aspects for the region from inception.

This will include areas such as transport, housing and local infrastructure, economic regeneration, and skills and employment support. Preparing for a Strategic Authority therefore requires early alignment not only on vision and partnership, but also on the statutory functions and delivery expectations that accompany devolution.

Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in 2024, the GBCC and its Divisional Chambers in Burton and District, Cannock Chase, and Lichfield & Tamworth launched an investigation into what further devolution of power and money could mean for the business community in South and East Staffordshire.

The Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel report details findings that are the product of multiple engagements across the region on the topic of devolution, including:

- Four thematic roundtables and a results roundtable with the Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel, comprised of business leaders across the region.
- A month-long period of surveying from 10th November to 8th December 2025, with 153 respondents from businesses across South and East Staffordshire.
- Over 20 interviews and meaningful engagements with MPs, local authorities, existing West Midland Combined Authority employees, devolution and policy specialists across the Chamber network, and other key regional stakeholders.

This final report brings together expert insights from these activities to identify the huge potential that devolution could bring for the region, and provides insights into existing barriers that businesses are currently experiencing. It centres around key themes that businesses often raise in their discussions with us, as well as a deep dive into how the region could best begin to prepare for this once-in-a-generation transition to a new structure of regional power. Our findings are structured around the following key issues:

- Preparing for a Strategic Authority, which interrogates what will happen during the transition period from the current moment to a Strategic Authority being fully functional.
- The Business Ecosystem, focusing on business support functions offered by local authorities and what businesses need to grow.
- The Built Environment, specifically on topics such as business premises and transport.
- People, Process and Skills, which considers levers for preparing the region for the future of work and how to attract and retain talent.

This report reflects business sentiment in the region, offering a number of evidence-based policy recommendations that aim to support business to grow. While businesses are uncertain about the upheaval involved in local government reorganisation and devolution, the roundtable discussions also recognised the potential for long-term strategic benefits, with a regional Strategic Authority being able to pool resources and secure devolved powers from central government to prioritise spending and policy-making in a bespoke way that could meet local needs. Devolution offers opportunities to rethink how local authorities function and to explore potential efficiencies, such as the use of AI. Businesses also valued the prospect of gaining a Mayor via the Strategic Authority, both for the soft power Mayors are able to wield both in Westminster and internationally, but also for the accountability that it would bring for regional matters.

PREPARING FOR A STRATEGIC AUTHORITY

The Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel recognises the enormous potential that further devolution of power to a Strategic Authority can bring. Existing Combined Authorities have demonstrated that strategic regional thinking can bring huge benefits to communities via a coordinated plan for growth and development, driving investment to the places that need it. Businesses in South and East Staffordshire are excited at the prospect of generational thinking being built into a new Strategic Authority in the region.

Interviews conducted for this project with experts engaged in the creation of existing Combined Authorities have shown that there are a number of key lessons that can help to drive the successful development of a Strategic Authority. Across the interviews, the following key themes emerged:

- **The need for consensus:** Although there will always be political dynamics at play, a Strategic Authority across multiple Unitary Councils needs to take into account a range of views and find a way to achieve non-partisan collaboration and agreement. For the neighbouring West Midlands Combined Authority, this coalesced as a 'Statement of Intent', signed by all the constituent authorities, as well as other key stakeholders such as the (now former) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Chairs.
- **Regional thinking:** Local authorities need to prioritise thinking regionally. A phrase that came up repeatedly was "everyone benefits, but not at the same time and not in the same way". Acknowledging that the benefits of devolution may not be symmetrical across local authorities in a region, but will nonetheless be beneficial overall, will help local authorities work together more effectively and deliver shared regional gains.
- **Deal or no deal:** The first Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) that were created were granted their powers via negotiation between the government and the local authorities. Being collectively involved in striking a deal with the government gave local actors the power to secure bespoke powers for their region, creating a competitive and political element to the process. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill standardises the process and makes the process a top-down reorganisation, so there will be less room for initial negotiation with government. Interviewees agreed that the deal element was influential in pulling the local actors together behind the Strategic Authority, which invites the question of how this collective agreement will be achieved this time.
- **Anchor institutions:** While political actors will come and go, there are large institutional stakeholders in this region that are tied to the area and the community (and therefore unlikely to relocate) by their mission, history, buildings, and relationships with local people. Examples might include universities, NHS trusts, or other significant local employers like local authorities. Meaningful partnership working with these anchor institutions is essential for driving the long-term vision of Strategic Authorities, who can offer an apolitical representation of what the region needs and can also drive their own changes in skills, employment, procurement and social value by partnering together.
- **Evidence-based decision making:** Prioritising data and evidence in decision making has been fundamental for bringing consensus and a sense of direction to Strategic Authorities. In the West Midlands, stakeholder partners such as **City-Region Economic Development Institute** (City-REDI) at the University of Birmingham and the Black Country Consortium were key to developing sources of data, intelligence and research to support this. There are already great examples of data being used within the region, such as the **Lichfield Social Progress Index**.

- **Engaging stakeholders:** Many interviewees recognised the central importance of existing institutions and bodies, such as the LEPs and the Chambers of Commerce, in shaping the creation and development of Strategic Authorities.

The consistency across the interviews suggests that the factors above, undoubtedly among many other elements, led to a collective narrative and purpose that helped to drive the success of the existing Strategic Authorities. Therefore, while the geography of a future Strategic Authority has not yet been determined, this report makes recommendations to encourage what is referred to here as the new Staffordshire Strategic Authority (SSA) to consider adopting a similar approach. It also recognises concerns within the business community that there has been insufficient communication and engagement around devolution to give businesses the certainty they need to operate confidently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establish a Key Stakeholders Forum with regular meetings to support communications and strategic input on the development of the SSA in 2026.**
 - Allows for engagement from the start of the process, building longer-term buy-in.
 - Creates a network of business leaders who will be central to the partnerships necessary to drive forward Strategic Authority policies and initiatives.
 - Should comprise political representatives and civil servants alongside businesses and representatives from the third sector to build lasting relationships.
2. **Create a ‘Statement of Intent’ that sets the direction for the SSA, bringing the various new Unitary Councils and other strategic partners together as a united front. The statement can define the parameters and vision of the new Strategic Authority, as well as setting short, medium and long-term goals.**
 - A ‘Statement of Intent’ would ideally be prepared before the inception of the SSA to allow the new organisation to hit the ground running.
 - This statement should be shared publicly and made available for citizens across Staffordshire to engage with.
3. **Create a Business Board for the Staffordshire Region, which will hold a governance role on the SSA.**
 - LEPs and the Regional Development Agencies that preceded them, were repeatedly cited as a positive influence on the development of the West Midlands Combined Authority in the interviews conducted for this project, and as a useful body by panellists.
 - Although government funding was cut entirely for LEPs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government specifically stated on **20th March 2025** that the LEP functions should be integrated into Combined Authorities via the English Devolution Accountability Framework. It also mentioned that Local Growth Plans are a statutory duty and that these should be informed by engagement with the private sector.
 - Giving a new Business Board a governance role on the SSA will make engagement with business a constituent part of the new body, ensuring that a commercial and entrepreneurial approach is built into its structures.
 - There is evidence of other local authorities having worked together to take this step before the establishment of a Strategic Authority, such as the creation of a **Joint Prosperity Board** in Berkshire and the **Hertfordshire Growth Board**.

4. **Under the remit of the Business Board, develop an anchor institution programme, identifying which businesses and institutions regionally have the power to drive change and to collaborate at a significant and strategic level.**
- Including anchor institutions within the formal governance role of the Business Board will provide apolitical stability and partnership for the SSA and will support the Business Board to drive economic and social growth.
 - The Business Board should investigate existing anchor institution programmes, such as the anchor institution programme in the West Midlands, to explore how this model could be best implemented and to learn best practice.
 - The anchor institution programme should start with a clear pilot project addressing a specific issue to draw together the partners and demonstrate the value of working together.



BUSINESS SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

As Chambers of Commerce business engagement often finds, the business support ecosystem provided at local, regional and national levels can be difficult for businesses to navigate. Businesses of all different sizes describe challenges due to a lack of understanding of the support offered, the overly complicated requirements to be awarded funding, and business advice being outsourced with strings attached.

Of those surveyed, nearly 52% had not engaged with business support in the last 2 years. The main reason for this was a lack of awareness amongst businesses of the support offering available, but other firms also commented that they did not believe that they were entitled to support, or that their previous experiences of seeking support had been too difficult or had not resulted in a good outcome for them. There was also a general agreement that events put on by local authorities were often announced with insufficient notice or exclusively during business hours, making it difficult for business owners to engage with them.

Nonetheless, the research for this project also highlighted multiple examples of where there is excellent practice and business support available already in Staffordshire, with highly engaged local authority staff and support programmes that are making a real difference in their business communities. Over 43% of survey respondents had engaged with business support in their area in the last 2 years, and of those, 56% were very satisfied or satisfied.

Access to funding was raised by businesses as the most important piece of the puzzle. Businesses understand that local authority funding comes from government in different pots and needs to be assessed via metrics, but the quantitative and qualitative data showed that these metrics often constrained ideas and growth rather than supporting them, especially for SMEs. A funding call led by Cannock Chase District Council was cited as a good example of where UKSPF funding requirements were tailored to support business growth. This was achieved by simplifying the application and success metrics to ensure they were easy for businesses to comply with. Businesses also need clear and impartial advice on finance options, alongside grant funding, to ensure that their business growth can be supported. There is evidence that businesses that accessed Start Up Loans and the associated advice from the British Business Bank were **far more likely to survive** the first five years of business compared to firms that did not access support.

The recommendations below try to harness the best of the good practice identified in the region to allow a future SSA to replicate this across the whole of Staffordshire, ensuring all businesses have the same opportunities to thrive and grow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. **Organise business support for Staffordshire centrally to ensure that all businesses across the SSA have the same opportunities of access, engagement, funding, and advice on finance.**
 - Although the Staffordshire Growth Hub exists currently, this brings together different offerings from the various local authorities across Staffordshire, creating boundaries where businesses do not see them.
 - Businesses want to see a business growth journey set out by a central business support hub, helping guide organisations on their business journey from small to medium to large.
 - They would also like there to be a consistent experience and “one front door” to access support across the whole SSA region.
 - Options for access to finance should also be provided as an educational piece for businesses to help them grow.
6. **Funding should be designed with the involvement of the business community, be available across the whole region and allow for flexibility in metrics.**
 - Co-designing funding with the involvement of the business community will allow the funding to draw on their experience of key barriers to growth and scale.
 - Organisations like the Chamber have existing delivery staff who can support the SSA in this objective.
 - Businesses and customers do not see boundaries and barriers. While these are necessary for government funding to some extent, reducing these barriers as much as possible will avoid a postcode lottery of funding.
 - While job creation is important, it is not the only measure of success for businesses or for regional productivity and often locks smaller firms out of money that can support growth. Considering distance travelled in terms of business capability development, market position and innovation and financial resilience could help ensure outcome metrics are more meaningful.
7. **Ensure that business support is provided by a team of SSA employees rather than contractors, with representatives for each district, town or city.**
 - Businesses are keen to develop relationships with a regional contact. A particular example of best practice is Lichfield District Council, by employing a Town Centre Manager who has developed meaningful relationships with businesses and who signposts them to the support they need. A familiar point of contact has helped businesses in Lichfield to develop a productive and communicative working relationship with the District Council.
 - Businesses were critical of business support services that purported to offer free advice, but was actually outsourced to contractors who were perceived to have secondary interests.
 - Businesses expressed a desire for support services provided by people who have experience of working in business, and so recruitment should target people with a business background. A successful example of this is Innovate UK, where Business Growth Advisors are recruited from industry.
8. **Implement a ‘buy local’ policy for procurement processes to give priority to local firms over outside national suppliers.**
 - Sourcing locally for procurement processes ensures that money spent by a future SSA benefits the local economy rather than leaving the region. It helps to create jobs locally and can drive investment in skills provision for local people. **Changes to the Procurement Act in 2023** mean that local authorities can now legally reserve competition to their local area or the UK for smaller contracts.
 - Current procurement processes are not set up to allow SMEs to realistically compete, with 39% of respondents to the survey commenting that they had faced barriers in bidding for public contracts in the last 2 years.

- Reading Borough Council implemented a similar policy to drive local business procurement by reframing procurement policies to reflect the economic value that is created through supporting social value. To do this, social value was inherent to awarding a contract, not just seen as an add-on, and additional support was provided via the LEP to support local supply chains.
- This report acknowledges that local authorities across the region already implement social value policies; the goal of this recommendation is to ensure that social value is built into frameworks robustly to keep funding circulating in the local economy.

9. Create a Tourism and Hospitality Taskforce to promote the visitor economy in Staffordshire.

- The Staffordshire Gateway Growth Panel recognised that, while bodies like ‘Visit Staffordshire’ do a good job of promoting the county as a destination, there was a feeling that there is a lack of joined-up thinking and a belief that there wider opportunities to promote the region exist.
- The creation of a Taskforce would recognise the importance of hospitality and tourism in the region but would also create opportunities for businesses and the SSA to connect and work together more strategically in the long term.
- The Taskforce should consider issues such as how a Visitor Levy might be implemented and how this money could be ringfenced for projects related to tourism and hospitality. The government has been consulting over the last few months on how Strategic Authorities might implement this policy.

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

South and East Staffordshire is a great place to live and work. It benefits from proximity to major urban centres like Birmingham and is polycentric with historic urban and rural communities situated in beautiful countryside. The county benefits from existing excellent infrastructure, such as the M6 toll, and is looking towards the future with large infrastructural projects like HS2 and the Midlands Rail Hub. Government investment in Midlands Rail Hub will add 300 additional trains a day in the West Midlands rail network, with this additional capacity boosting rail links in Tamworth, Lichfield and Burton.

Despite the increasing ease of travel to, or through, the county, transport infrastructure between the towns and cities in South and East Staffordshire was repeatedly flagged as an issue for businesses. Capacity on the A38 is a concern for logistics firms, but many businesses are also struggling with public transport and other commuting options inter-regionally. Responding to the question “What are the biggest transport challenges affecting your business?”, 32% flagged parking as an issue, 28% were worried about road capacity, 22% had issues with staff commuting, and 20% were concerned about public transport availability.

There were also concerns around modern infrastructure, with electrification capacity a clear issue, alongside energy costs continuing to place pressure on businesses. 42% of survey respondents also stated that they struggle with internet connectivity, whether mobile, fibre or both. This reflects trends across the UK, as recent **research from the British Chambers of Commerce** (BCC) highlights, with a widening technological divide between urban and rural areas making it harder for businesses in less urban areas to operate.

Business premises in the region are a concern, with 15% of survey respondents saying that their premises were not suitable. Room to grow was an issue for all different sizes of enterprises, with a recognition that there was little transitional space in the region and a feeling that business premises were not a priority for local authorities. 22% of survey respondents believe that their business would benefit from access to business incubation spaces, and over 46% would benefit directly or indirectly from an innovation or science park in the region.

A number of larger businesses also expressed issues with planning, with complicated and slow planning processes delaying – and in some cases obstructing – business growth. While the government committed £48 million of additional funding to boost capacity in the planning system in the Autumn Budget 2025, including additional investment to recruit an extra 350 planners in England, bringing the total by the end of the Parliament to 1,400, there are concerns about how long this may take to have an impact. Anecdotally businesses commented on an authority gap, with town planners deferring significant decisions because of the prospect of the incoming SSA. Nearly 10% of respondents to our survey said that issues with planning permission had constrained their business growth in the last 2 years. Businesses flagged how they struggled to get approval for projects such as the installation of EV charge points and solar panels, as well as a lack of local authority support or interest in business development opportunities.

Businesses expressed a general feeling that land for business uses was not seen as a priority by local authorities compared to housing. A **2026 report from the BCC** argues for employment land and uses to be given equal priority to housing in planning policy, requiring councils to maintain a five-year quality employment land supply to meet market demand. The BCC research also showed that ‘66% of businesses feel their views are taken into account ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’ on local infrastructure decisions, rising to 81% for national infrastructure decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. Create a Strategic Housing and Infrastructure Taskforce comprised of local authority and political representatives, as well as key stakeholders from across the region, to address regional challenges.

- This must be established as soon as possible to ensure that there is no pause in operations during the period before the SSA elections and during the shadow year while the SSA is being established.
- The Taskforce should be responsible for developing a strategic housing and infrastructure plan that uses regional data to make long-term, strategic decisions which put aside political considerations.
- This should address issues such as housing and workspace need, high street redevelopment, transport connectivity, education spaces, health premises, and modern infrastructure like electrification and internet connectivity.
- The Taskforce's work will help Staffordshire to get a head start on the creation of a Spatial Development Strategy, which is a statutory requirement for Strategic Authorities, and will ensure that the interim period before the SSA is fully established is not wasted.
- Longer-term, the key stakeholders should take a governance role within the SSA to ensure the longevity of strategic planning.

The following recommendations should fall within the remit of the Strategic Housing and Infrastructure Taskforce.

11. Investigate, develop and approve plans for a science and innovation park in South and East Staffordshire.

- There is a clear need for specialist business premises in the region, with at least one large employer requiring such space within the next 5 years, at the risk of needing to relocate from Staffordshire and the loss of hundreds of jobs in the region.
- Businesses flagged concerns that there was a brain drain from the region, with a lack of skilled, technical and professional roles. Creating a science and innovation hub would help to bring together Higher Education provision from around the region, attract funding and innovation, and create higher level employment opportunities.
- The Chambers have been investigating the potential for partnership on this, already identifying a number of leads on interested parties.

12. Investigate, develop and approve plans for business incubation spaces, where start-ups and micro businesses have the opportunity to work alongside and learn from more experienced businesses.

- Businesses involved in the panel were very positive about the potential for growth and development through incubation projects, with successful examples across the West Midlands and internationally discussed.
- 22% of businesses surveyed agreed that their business would benefit from access to incubation spaces.
- More advanced businesses could offer mentoring and development in return for lower rent, examples including sites like **iCentrum** and **STEAMhouse** in Birmingham.

13. Investigate the potential for live / work spaces across the region.

- Businesses see the potential for high street regeneration by helping to transform existing spaces.
- Ankerside Shopping Centre in Tamworth was suggested as a potential opportunity for this.
- **Historic England** recently produced a report on their project that re-imagined high streets and other spaces, demonstrating a positive effect on footfall, bringing vacant building back into use, and creating jobs.

PEOPLE, PROCESS AND SKILLS

Using ONS data, in the year up to September 2025, South and East Staffordshire had over 205,000 residents aged over 16 in work, around 66% of the population of the region, with over 212,000 classed as economically active, around 68%. For comparison, this is above the UK average, with just 61% of people in work and 63% classed as economically active. The unemployment rate for the region in 2023 was around 3.3%, marginally lower than the UK average of 3.98%.

For full-time workers across South and East Staffordshire, weekly pay increased by around £30 between 2024 and 2025 (from £658 to £688), but both remained behind the national average and did not increase as rapidly over the same period, with weekly UK pay for a full-time worker rising by nearly £40 from £728 to £766. So, despite more people working in South and East Staffordshire than the UK average, wages were not as high.

When we look at qualification levels in the Staffordshire Gateway area, data from 2023 shows that:

- 36% of residents were educated to level 4 and above (including qualifications like HNC and CertHE), compared with the average across England of 46.7%.
- 56% of residents were educated to level 3 and above (including qualifications like A-levels, level 3 NVQs and T-levels); across England it was 67.4%.
- 76% of residents were educated to level 2 and above (including qualifications like GCSEs and O-levels); across England it was 86.6%.

The factors mentioned above are perhaps an indication of why businesses that took part in this research flagged real problems with recruiting and retaining the right candidates. 51% of businesses that responded to our survey stated that they are currently not operating at full workforce capacity, and 15% of respondents said that they are struggling to recruit and retain the right candidates for roles. Breaking this down further, for those who were struggling to recruit and retain the right candidates, 82% of respondents said that there was a lack of qualified candidates and 47% of respondents found that labour costs were an issue.

A concern that the Chamber repeatedly hears from businesses is that rises in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and the National Living Wage (NLW) have squeezed pay differentiation between entry-level roles and those who are more senior, with many organisations not having the capacity to give equivalent pay rises to more experienced staff. During the roundtables, businesses flagged that these rises, combined with rises in employer National Insurance Contributions (NIC) and a perception of “brain-drain” to larger neighbouring cities because those firms can offer higher wages, was making hiring staff and keeping them increasingly difficult in South and East Staffordshire. It has also had a negative effect on businesses hiring young people, as it can be more cost-effective to hire someone with experience for not much more money, meaning that there are fewer opportunities for young people to get their first role.

In the deeper panel discussions, apprenticeships were flagged as vitally important to economic growth for the region. Some businesses have the desire and capacity to exceed their apprenticeship levy, while others struggle to recruit apprentices. Many businesses felt that it would be beneficial if universities and further education providers could provide more assistance in supporting their apprentices, as apprenticeships generated an administrative burden on those facilitating the learning within businesses. Businesses also flagged issues with the kinds of provision available, particularly for more bespoke or niche industries, where available apprenticeships were not appropriate.

The Chancellor announced in the recent Autumn Budget that SMEs will no longer pay any training or assessment costs for apprentices aged 16-24 (removing the previous 5% co-investment required for businesses that did not pay the levy), but for businesses the impact of this will be limited as **around half of apprentices in the UK in the last three years have been 25 or older**. There will be also be a number of changes over the next few years that will potentially make apprenticeships more **complicated for many businesses**. Level 7 funding will no longer be available for apprentices over 22 and businesses who exceed their levy will now be expected to pay 25% of the additional costs, up from 5% currently.

With devolution of power to the SSA, the region will gain responsibility for post-16 skills provision, and so the following recommendations are designed to support greater engagement between businesses, local authorities, further and higher education institutions, and training providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. **Create an Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Scheme like the one offered by the West Midlands Combined Authority, ensuring that unspent levy can be retained in the region and used by businesses that have capacity to spend more levy.**
 - The Staffordshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) indicates that a pilot levy sharing scheme is underway via the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Skills Hub, but this promotes businesses volunteering to share their levy with another business, rather than unspent levy being retained by the region. Under the new changes brought in by the government, unspent levy will now be returned to the Treasury after 12 months.
15. **Develop a skills strategy for the region, using data to identify what skills are in shortage but also to plan for the future of work. This could focus on unemployment rates, youth skills and work readiness, older workers transitioning into new careers, and shifts in the labour market due to AI adoption.**
 - Keele University and Staffordshire County Council have secured Innovate UK funding to map Green Skills across the region and are intending to do the same for Digital Skills. These kinds of projects could be tied into a larger mapping project via a SSA that looks at longer-term planning over the next 20 years.
16. **Publish live employment / recruitment data at a regional level to support businesses and candidates in finding the right fit.**
 - This could be supported by creating a central data team within the SSA, whose role would be to establish a central point for publishing data and supporting collaboration between local authorities and private sector partners.
17. **Ensure that adult skills courses are designed for adults and create support for transitioning between careers.**
 - Businesses flagged concerns that many courses were geared towards young people just starting out in their careers, without recognising that many people now transition careers, sometimes multiple times, through their lives.

SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

51% of businesses are not operating at full capacity.

60% of respondents could recruit and retain the right people for their business.

Of those who couldn't, **82%** said that there was a lack of qualified candidates and over **47%** said that labour costs were an issue.

The biggest transport challenges facing businesses were parking (**32%**), road capacity (**28%**) and staff commuting (**22%**).

15% of businesses are not able to access business premises that suit their needs.

22% of businesses believe they would benefit from access to business incubation spaces.

46% of firms believe they would benefit from an innovation or science park in the region.

9% of businesses had issues with planning permission that constrained their growth in the last two years.

42% of businesses struggle with internet connection, whether fibre connections, mobile connections, or both.

51% of firms have not engaged with the local authority in their area for business support in the last two years.

Of those who did engage, **56%** were satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received.

58% of respondents would like more funding advice.

46% of businesses would like more support on skills or training.

43% of firms would like innovation support services.

43% of businesses have faced barriers when considering bidding for public contracts in the last two years.

Of those, **24%** businesses found the process too complex and **20%** struggled with awareness of the contracts available.

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