

Parliamentarians in attendance

- Toby Perkins MP
- Lord Hampton
- Pam Cox MP
- Iqbal Mohammad MP
- Jayne Kirkham MP
- Ian Sollom MP (*staffer*)

Co-chair of the APPG, Toby Perkins MP opened the session, outlining the topic of devolution and skills. He then invited all attendees in room and online via Zoom to introduce themselves.

To start the conversation, he invited the first speaker, Adam Swersky, Interim Director of Skills at East Midlands County Combined Authority to speak about his organisation and its work.

Adam explained that the East Midlands Combined Authority covers Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. It is one of the larger combined authorities and has a proud industrial history as a coal powerhouse, with nuclear energy now becoming more prominent. The region has a 76% employment rate, which is broadly in line with national standards, but household income is lower than average, creating challenges. The East Midlands Combined Authority was only established last year, which he described as a positive new opportunity to shape skills provision more closely to regional needs. The authority has been chosen as a Youth Guarantee Trailblazer, and collaboration across the region with colleges, the DWP and health services has already proved valuable in supporting the “Get Britain Working” plan.

Adam explained that the goal is to raise the employment rate to 80 per cent. However, with only 40,000 vacancies available, achieving this target will be very challenging. The “Connect to Work” programme is one major opportunity, aiming to support 6,000 people into employment. He stressed that bringing the system together will be instrumental for success. With devolution, leaning into the agenda is essential, as this will allow greater flexibility within the skills system. He emphasised that while combined authorities are working to deliver the “Get Britain Working” plan, national government must act as a partner if national targets are to be achieved. He added that employers also have a central role, not only in taking on apprentices but also in supporting them effectively.

Toby thanked Adam and introduced Fliss. Fliss, who is currently Director of Skills at Yorkshire Combined Authority and will shortly move to the East Midlands Combined Authority, spoke about the transformative impact of skills. She noted that the recent ministerial reshuffle will see skills move into the Department for Work and Pensions, which she described as an exciting development with significant growth potential. She raised the question of what this shift would mean for 16-year-olds and higher education.

Fliss emphasised the value of place in navigating the complexity of the skills system, which involves numerous qualifications and a wide range of stakeholders. She argued that skills funding is the key to driving Britain’s growth, but it is the local focus of place that can knit together the different parts of the system to make it deliver effectively.

Toby thanked Fliss and then introduced Alison May, Assistant Director for Skills and Employment at London Borough of Lambeth. Alison began by agreeing with the points raised by both Adam and Fliss. She explained that, in Lambeth, while the borough is rich in cultural sites, it also faces deep inequalities. Lambeth is supporting the City Growth Plan while also developing its own version, and is leaning into devolution. The council endorses

the Local Growth Improvement Plans and views the growth and skills levy as an opportunity to strengthen engagement with employers, creating a system in which employers are willing to invest because they see real returns. As a London borough, Lambeth works particularly closely with developers.

She explained that the Adult Skills Fund is currently delivered under an agreement with the Local Government Association, which she said is working well for boroughs. Lambeth is also one of the LGA's trailblazer groups, which are tasked with reaching some of the most marginalised communities, meaning their work is necessarily highly localised.

Following these contributions, Toby opened the floor to questions. He asked the speakers how they saw the role of independent providers in a more devolved system. Drawing on his own experience, he noted that devolution often leads to resources being retrenched into FE colleges and a few favoured providers, leaving others at risk of being excluded.

Alison responded that Lambeth has around 150 providers, all of whom play an essential and flexible role in delivering skills. Adam agreed that independent providers are important, describing them as agile and able to fill gaps. He said that although reductions in the Adult Skills Fund had created challenges, the East Midlands had acted to protect providers in order to prevent disruption, though this had financial consequences. He added that smart procurement will be vital to ensure the region gets what it needs. Fliss noted that combined authorities often find it easier to award contracts to FE colleges but emphasised that they also have a responsibility to nurture independent providers and help them meet procurement specifications.

Lord Hampton asked what learning combined authorities are undertaking, citing the use of data on NEETs as an example (Youth Futures Foundation has established a project in Blackpool known as Blackpool Connected Futures). Adam explained that his authority had commissioned a data provider to establish good data-sharing practices, which would help create a local system to maximise use of data. Fliss added that although there are many combined authorities, they meet every two weeks, which allows for the sharing of best practice, although she acknowledged that more could be done and that data protection issues remain. She argued that combined authorities are generally better at sharing best practice than central government. Alison added that London boroughs are particularly strong at sharing data, especially around NEETs.

Pam Cox MP noted that the new Great Essex authority is about to be formed and will benefit from devolution. She said that it would be useful to have a list of organisations, as mentioned by Adam, and agreed with Fliss's point that local leadership is essential to ensure that the system works in practice for young people and their parents.

Gareth John from First Intuition, an independent provider, reflected on Toby's question from his own perspective. He explained that First Intuition serves as a bridge between colleges and employers. As a national provider, he values the consistency of apprenticeships, which are delivered to the same standard across the country. He expressed concern that devolution of apprenticeships could deter employers, particularly those operating nationally, who want learners to have the same experience regardless of region.

Jayne Kirkham MP shared the experience of Cornwall, noting that while they lack large employers, a more localised approach is better suited to their context. She explained that Cornwall understands its strengths and weaknesses, but as a foundational authority, it does not benefit from the same level of devolution as combined authorities.

Responding to these points, Adam highlighted the importance of demonstrating to people how they can gain qualifications and jobs locally and of getting pathways right. He clarified that apprenticeships are not devolved, but argued that local leaders have a responsibility to drive up apprenticeship numbers and improve awareness of opportunities. Alison observed

that Lambeth and Cornwall share some similarities: Lambeth has 15,000 companies, most of which employ only a handful of people, creating a significant barrier to apprenticeships. Fliss agreed that apprenticeships should not be devolved but said that changes should be made to make them more accessible.

Phil West, from Coach Core, asked about the challenges businesses face with apprenticeships. He noted that the main issues are the level of commitment required and the restrictive timeframe, which are particularly difficult for small businesses. Liz Gorb from Manchester Metropolitan University added that while local or regional incentives can work for small businesses, larger employers already struggle with differences across devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. Further devolution of apprenticeships, she argued, could make it even harder for employers to deliver consistently across the UK.

In closing, Toby thanked all speakers and attendees for their contributions and for their patience with the EGM. He said it had been valuable to hear from a wide range of providers and to gain different perspectives