

Growing Kent and Medway Workforce 2030 Strategy

1. Introduction

This strategy represents the workforce and skills strand of Growing Kent and Medway, which aims to build a thriving and innovative food sector in Kent and Medway. It has been developed through a process of research and consultation with companies in the landbased and food sector, universities, Further Education colleges and other key stakeholders.

This second draft follows a review by the project Advisory Group on 10th May and discussions within the Growing Kent and Medway programme team, after which it will be revised and shared for wider consultation.

2. Strategic Issues to be Addressed

Industry Context

The *Growing Kent and Medway Workforce 2030 Skills Research Report* identified two key issues about the industry context that should inform the approach taken in the skills strategy. These are summarised in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Industry Context – Issues that Should Inform the Approach Taken in the Skills Strategy

Key Issue	Implications for the Skills Strategy
<p>1. Consolidating sector and a dual economy</p> <p>The sector is increasingly dominated by larger, more sophisticated companies. Among primary food producers this seems often to be the result of smaller operators being taken over by larger companies seeking to achieve greater market share and efficiencies through increased scale of operation. Co-operative business models (like Berry Gardens) achieve a similar effect. This also seems to be happening among processors and manufacturers, with Kent and Medway being home to a number of large and growing companies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) <i>There is a reducing, but increasingly sophisticated pool of employers with large workforces to support, companies who are more likely to take a more strategic approach to staff recruitment and retention and have in-house training and development capabilities.</i> b) <i>These companies are also highly innovative and quick to adopt new technology and business processes, and engage with key sector agendas like sustainability, climate change, the nature crisis, and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).</i> c) <i>These companies have greater ‘pulling power’ to potential new recruits and can offer attractive career pathways, in opposition to the well-documented ‘image problem’ that the sector is believed to have. Taken together, such companies could also form part of a story of innovative, growing, exciting businesses, which are socially and environmentally engaged and providing an important product to the community.</i> d) <i>These companies are the ones that education partners must partner with to address the sector’s workforce and skills challenges, setting the standard that smaller companies will hopefully</i>

	<i>follow, and so become more resilient in the process.</i>
<p>2. Cost and quality</p> <p>Company behaviour, and hence workforce and skills requirements, will be driven by both cost and quality considerations. The food market is highly cost-competitive and cost pressures will continue to bear down on companies.</p> <p>At the same time, quality requirements will continue to become more complex and challenging, both in terms of the product itself and the associated standards that apply in the sector.</p>	<p><i>Companies will need workforce and skills to support both cost reduction and quality improvement in order to remain competitive. Automation and new technology will need to go hand in hand with compliance with ever-more and more sophisticated customer and government requirements.</i></p>

Key Skills Issues to be Addressed

The research also identified six key skills issues that the strategy needs to address. These issues, along with their implications, are set out in Figure 2.2 (below).

Figure 2.2: Key Issues the Skills Strategy Needs to Address

<p>1. The recruitment and retention challenge</p> <p>The challenge to recruit and retain staff in the landbased and food sector has never been greater and is a long-term challenge, and some kind of migrant labour scheme will always be required.</p> <p>Workforce 2030 cannot solve the labour shortage issue, but it can help with making the sector more attractive to people in the local labour market and help people to build successful careers in in food.</p>	<p><i>More needs to be done to build the profile of the sector, making work and careers more visible and better understood, and education and skills pathways into and within the sector more visible to help people make a start and the get on in work. Experiential approaches to building understanding of sector opportunities – visits, placements, workshops, ‘field to fork days’ and meeting employers – are probably the most effective way of engaging people, but digital probably also creates further opportunities. The work needs to engage people early, pre-16-19.</i></p>
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<p>2. Level 2 and Level 3 Sector-specific Offer Not Fit for Purpose</p> <p>Horticulture provision in Kent and Medway, it tends not to be focused on food growing. Similarly, there is no specific provision for viticulture locally, despite the rapid growth of this sub-sector. In food processing, beyond more generic engineering programmes, there is nothing for companies whose requirement is increasingly for production technicians, rather than production operatives. More generally, given the rapid growth of automation, robotics, digital technology and data in the food sector, people in a wide range of roles need much stronger technology ‘user’ skills, even if they are not technical specialists themselves.</p> <p>The main opportunities to improve the 16-19 and apprenticeship offer at Levels 2 and 3 seem to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A low-level foundational programme for people interested in joining the food sector at lower levels, wanting some basic knowledge and skills and to find which part of the sector is best for them. Ideally this would industry placements and / or work experience to the extent that this is possible (16-18-year-olds in a producer or processor workplace raises health and safety issues). • Horticulture / food production apprenticeships focused on a food growing environment, with a significant element of technician skills included. • New viticulture programmes – college-based or apprenticeships. • The new T Levels, when available, including agriculture, land management and production; digital (various); design and development for engineering and manufacturing; engineering, manufacturing, processing and control; maintenance, installation and repair for engineering and manufacturing; and catering. • Data collection and analysis, and digital skills applied to a food environment. • The Level 3 Food and Drink Maintenance apprenticeship standard, which is not available in Kent and Medway, but for which there is likely to be sufficient scale of demand, given the number of food processors. • The Food and Drink Compliance Passport (FDCP), a suite of short modules at Level 2 being developed by the Food and Drink National Skills Academy. • Embedding more food science in Level 2 and 3 STEM programmes and exploring the potential to offer food science and GCSE and A Level in Kent and Medway. • Promoting the new MDS Flexible Apprenticeship scheme in Kent and Medway. • Personal development and lifelong learning for low-qualified staff, providing a ‘second chance’ in education, including in subjects like IT / Digital Skills, English (including ESOL) and Maths and achieving a Level 2 or 3 qualification. Personal development opportunities offer through work could help companies with staff recruitment and retention. <p>Programmes should include ‘soft’ / transferable skills in the offer to cover skills such as team working, and communication, as well as relevant attitudes, behaviours and general work readiness.</p>	<p><i>The implications of this issue for the skills strategy is that new and improved provision is needed for the sector, whether brought in from outside or developed within Kent and Medway. In respect of the latter, the main risk for providers is whether the scale of actual demand will justify the investment required to create the new provision. In line with the approach advocated in the Kent and Medway Local Skills Improvement Plan, this probably requires a ‘co-development’ or ‘solutions panel’ approach with employers working with Further Education to define the curriculum, support its development and delivery and commit to using the new service, offering industry placements (including those involving a number of companies) or, for example, guaranteeing job interviews to anyone who completes a given programme.</i></p>
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<p>3. More engineering</p> <p>The growth of automation and robotics, and the increasing importance of data science, means that engineering and technical skills will grow in importance in two ways:</p> <p>a. Entry-level staff will need to be more digitally and technically literate, able to work with technology adaptively as users, becoming more technicians than operatives.</p> <p>b. Mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, software engineering and data science will become more important at intermediate levels, especially Level 3 apprentices, but also with requirements to progression at Levels 4, 5, Degree and post-graduate, whether through apprenticeships, higher technical education (HNC/HND) or taught Higher Education programmes. The larger and more sophisticated the company, the greater the need.</p> <p>High-end engineering skills will also be important to enabling technology providers, but these are not especially concentrated in Kent and Medway.</p>	<p><i>Sector employers need access to a full suite of mechanical and electrical engineering options, but with some focus also on the food sector technology environment (eg: robotics and automated systems, but also activities like irrigation, controlled environments, refrigeration, packing and processing) and a significant data / digital focus (including sensors, measurement and Internet of Things). Progression pathways to higher- and degree-level learning also need to be available from the FE and HE sector¹.</i></p>
<p>4. Sector-specific Leadership and Management Skills</p> <p>The various drivers of company behaviour are also increasing the need for leadership and management skills focused on a growing or food production environment. Generic leadership and management programmes do not address the complexity and peculiarities of the sector, which tends, for example, to have a diverse and multi-lingual workforce and is subject to quite specific quality regimes, standards and regulation. Because companies tend to ‘promote from within’, the requirement is for people already in work, who will progress through lower-level supervisory roles and then into middle and more senior management potentially. Short, ‘bite-sized’ units could be more attractive to many companies than full qualifications.</p>	<p><i>The scope for a food sector leadership and management programme, tailored to the needs of supervisory and junior management roles in growing, packing and processing, should be explored.</i></p>

¹ North Kent College / Hadlow College is the Kent Further Education lead for Kent and Medway and can meet many of the sector’s engineering requirements, but specialist provision is also being developed by EKC Group under the Strategic Development Fund and MidKent College is offering pathways to degree apprenticeships in Manufacturing Engineering with CCCU, for example.

<p>5. Learning to support innovation</p> <p>The future of the food sector in Kent and Medway is innovation. ‘Standing still’ is not an option. Some forms of innovation are, as yet, unknown, and will emerge over the coming years. So an important learning need is horizon scanning and understanding emerging trends in technology, processes and approaches. However, there is already a clear sense of the main areas of innovation that are already happening or will come to the fore over the coming decade. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automation and robotics: in all aspects of growing, packing and processing. Kent and Medway companies are already active in this field, but the technology will continue to evolve. Learning will be expert-to-company and company-to-company (peer-to-peer), especially in respect of how technology can be applied in a range of contexts and to meet a number of requirements. • Data collection and analysis, application of data in a range of contexts in growing, packing and processing. Linked to process automation, artificial intelligence and machine learning. • Sustainability and climate change: reduced resource use, reduced waste, recycling, carbon accounting, carbon reduction and sequestration, adaptation to changes to growing conditions and dealing with new pests and diseases. • Nature crisis and biodiversity: production techniques and land use approaches which lead to nature gain and greater biodiversity alongside the most intensive production methods (including the ‘Three Compartments’ model set out in the National Food Strategy). • Compliance, regulation and standards, including subjects like product uniformity, traceability and quality management. • Technical and scientific aspects of food, including food science, food hygiene, food reformulation, product development and packaging. <p>Promoting and enabling learning to support innovation matters, because, although Kent and Medway has many well-run and innovative companies, there is not yet, in the view of major companies, a strong and vibrant ag-tech innovation ecosystem. It is not yet the ‘silicon valley’ of the landbased and food sector. Promoting more learning around innovation will help to address this.</p>	<p><i>The good work already going on in companies and universities could be enhanced and extended further to reach more companies and build the sector’s knowledge, placing it at the cutting edge of the latest developments. The need is for taught, expert-led, short courses, workshops and masterclasses, plus peer-to-peer learning through practice sharing and ‘learning visits’.</i></p>
<p>6. Communication and engagement</p> <p>There is a gap in how companies are engaged in education and skills opportunities, especially for smaller companies, and also a gap in how individuals, especially children and young people, learn about the many good jobs and careers on offer and the learning pathways towards them. In part, the problem is that part of the offer does not meet the sector’s needs (see, for example, 4.4 above), so improving that should engage more companies and individuals. However, making the skills offer more coherent and communicating it better to companies and individuals would make sense. Companies would have one place to go to explore their external learning and development options. Individuals could explore careers and skills opportunities. Everyone would benefit from opportunities to learn about the latest and upcoming innovations.</p>	<p><i>A mechanism is needed which helps companies and individuals make sense of and access the various sector career and learning opportunities, and access the learning they need. As originally envisaged in the Workforce 2030 project brief, the concept of a new ‘skills hub’ should be explored further in order to address this need.</i></p>

The following section details the strategy for addressing these issues.

3. The Strategy: Aim, Objectives and Action Plan

3.1 Aim

The Workforce 2030 Strategy aims to unlock innovation and sustainable growth in the landbased and food sector by addressing the long-term, strategic skills needs, so helping to create a world-leading sector cluster.

This will be done by working closely with Kent and Medway’s leading growers, processors, distributors and enabling technology companies to develop workable and sustainable responses to the challenges faced. An overarching challenge in doing this is the need for companies to *both* control costs *and* increase quality.

3.2 Objectives and Action Plan

Figure 3.1 (below) sets out the objectives for the strategy, each linked to the six key skills issues that need to be addressed.

Figure 3.1 Strategy Objectives and Actions

Issue to be Addressed	Objective	Potential Owner	Potential Funding Source
1. Recruitment and retention challenge	1.1 By December 2025, deliver a programme of activities for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people in schools and colleges. • School / college careers advisers, Jobcentre advisers, and National Careers Service advisers. The activities will build awareness and understanding of sector work and career opportunities, learning and skills development pathways into them.	GKM or North Kent College / Hadlow College working with sector employers	GKM (WP6)

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	<p>1.2 By December 2022, make new careers and jobs resources about the sector generally and specific to Kent and Medway employers available to young people and adults through the Skills Hub.</p> <p>Update these annually. Promote to schools, colleges, universities and DWP. Focus on explaining learning and skills pathways into sector jobs and careers.</p>	Skills Hub operator (NIAB-EMR)	GKM (WP6)
<p>2. Level 2 and Level 3 sector-specific offer not fit for purpose</p>	<p>2.1 By July 2023, Kent Further Education, through North Kent College / Hadlow College and sector employers to complete a landbased and food sector 'solutions panel' process to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify a small number of priority learning and skills pathways into sector jobs and careers – what qualification will get you into which job, and then how you can progress your career further. identify and progress opportunities for curriculum improvement and new curriculum co-development, responding to the pathways identified and building on the list in section 4 of Figure 2.1 (above). 	Kent Further Education through North Kent College / Hadlow College in partnership with an employer panel.	Local Skills Improvement Plan (Kent Invicta Chamber) / Kent and Medway Workforce Skills Evidence Base Action Plan (KCC)
	<p>2.2 By December 2022, MDS Flexible Apprenticeship launched in Kent and Medway.</p>	GKM programme	GKM programme
	<p>2.3 By December 2022, relevant Level 2 and 3 training service information from providers inside and outside Kent to be available on the Skills Hub.</p> <p>Update this information on an ongoing basis.</p>	Skills Hub operator	GKM WP6

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3. More engineering	<p>3.1 By July 2023, Kent Further Education, through North Kent College / Hadlow College to run a landbased and food sector engineering 'solutions panel' process with employers to identify and progress opportunities for curriculum development.</p>	<p>Kent Further Education through North Kent College / Hadlow College in partnership with employer panel.</p>	<p>Local Skills Improvement Plan (Kent Invicta Chamber) / Kent and Medway Workforce Skills Evidence Base Action Plan (KCC)</p>
4. Sector-specific leadership and management skills	<p>4.1 By December 2023, identify with employers whether there is scope to develop a bespoke leadership and management offer for the sector, via the 'solutions panel' process set out in Objective 2.1.</p>	<p>Kent Further Education through North Kent College / Hadlow College in partnership with employer panel.</p>	<p>Local Skills Improvement Plan (Kent Invicta Chamber) / Kent and Medway Workforce Skills Evidence Base Action Plan (KCC)</p>
5. Learning to support innovation	<p>5.1 By December 2022, programme a 2023 set of events, expert talks, learning visits, short courses and masterclasses in the subject areas identified under item 5 in Figure 2.2 (above), plus other themes identified in the preparation of the programme.</p> <p>The programme will include expert talks and events by the three Kent universities, local companies, subject experts and companies from outside Kent.</p>	<p>Skills Hub operator</p>	<p>GKM WP6</p>
	<p>5.2 By December 2023, 3 thematic good practice sharing groups to be established, hosted by the Skills Hub, for the sharing of practice in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Automation, robotics and data; 2) Sustainability, climate change and nature crisis / biodiversity; and 3) Quality, compliance and standards. 	<p>Skills Hub operator</p>	<p>GKM WP6</p>
6. Communication and engagement	<p>6.1 By March 2023, establish a curated repository of education and training information, links and resources for employers, individuals and careers advisers on the Skills Hub. Update on an ongoing basis. Will include all local providers and the Learning to Support Innovation programme. Promote to the sector.</p>	<p>Skills Hub operator</p>	<p>GKM WP6</p>

The Strategy Objectives and Action Plan will evolve over time, with the approval of the central Growing Kent and Medway programme. For example, the planned Government review of Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance could create new opportunities to promote the sector to young people and adults. Similarly, the 'solutions panel' approach to developing the training offer should create new and improved programmes, which Workforce 2030 could promote to the sector.

3.3 Governance and Monitoring

The Skills Strategy's implementation will be overseen by a small Advisory Group made up of industry representatives, education sector organisations, and other stakeholders. Progress will be reported to the Growing Kent and Medway main Board via the current Workforce 2030 lead, Locate in Kent.

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4. Skills Hub

Aims

The Skills Hub will be a key resource in the implementation of the strategy. Its aims are to:

1. Promote sector jobs and careers to young people and adults, by providing information and resources on jobs, career and learning / skills pathways and local companies.
2. Promote learning and development opportunities to local sector employers, including Growing Kent and Medway's own programme of Learning to Support Innovation programme of events, expert talks, learning visits, short courses and masterclasses, the offers of local FE and HE providers and other partners like MDS, and the good practice sharing groups.
3. Provide a curated repository of education and training information, links and resources for employers.
4. Support the promotion of Kent and Medway as a world-leading cluster of food sector businesses by demonstrating in tangible ways the sector's commitment to learning, skills and people.

Operation

The Skills Hub's operation will be based on:

- A dedicated section of the Growing Kent and Medway website where information, resources, links and events can be promoted and shared.
- A Skills Hub Manager (0.5 FTE), with admin support (0.25 FTE) to liaise with partners; undertake promotional activities; commission, produce and update content; organise and manage events and courses; and engage with the sector to assess emerging learning and skills requirements.
- New programme commissioning in liaison with partners, subject to development funding availability or provider business case.
- Service and staff hosted by a GKM partner (such as North Kent College / Hadlow College, or a university) or the central GKM programme team at NIAB-EMR.
- Uses high-prestige GKM-funded facilities, such as those at the universities and at NIAB-EMR.

Budget

To be determined, subject to specification.