

# Evaluation of the work of the Data and Labour Market Steering Group

**May 2022**

Please Note: This report has been commissioned for the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership by the Cheshire and Warrington Data and Labour Market Steering Group on behalf of the Employers' Skills and Education Board with support from the Department for Education.

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## 1. Introduction

This short evaluation was commissioned by Cheshire and Warrington's Data and Labour Market Steering Group to understand and establish:

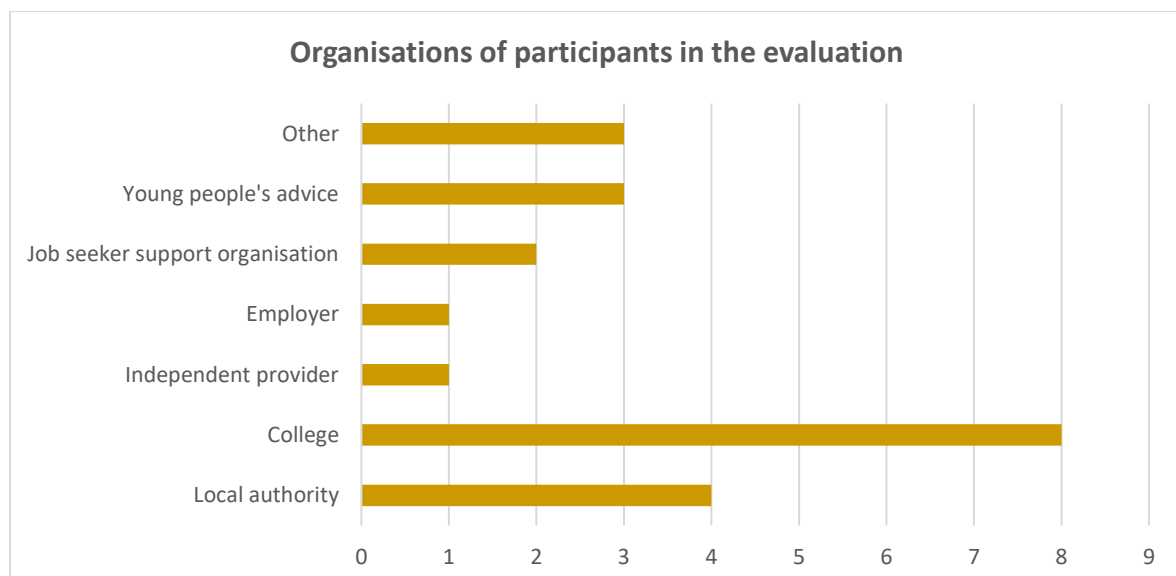
- The overall utility to partners of the outputs from the group's work programme over recent years.
- The uses that outputs have been put to.
- Examples of how the outputs of the group have been used.
- Suggestions for how the work programme might have been improved
- Priorities for future work

## 2. Method

Stakeholders had the opportunity to input to the evaluation in two ways. A number of colleagues were interviewed (sometimes in groups). Those that were not interviewed had the opportunity to complete a questionnaire that covered the same issues as the interviews. In total 22 people (representing 17 organisations or partnerships) participated in the evaluation.

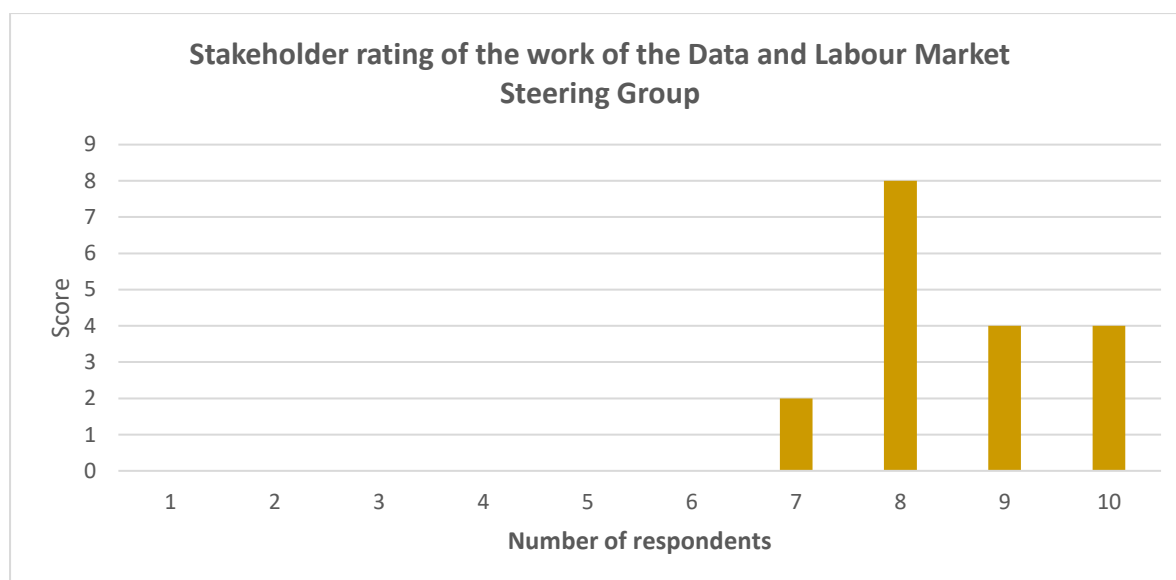
## 3. Participant profile

The full list of the 22 participants and their organisations can be found at the annex. The chart below summarises the type of organisations that participants represented in the consultation.



## 4. Usefulness of Outputs

Consultees were asked “How useful have the various reports and outputs of the work commissioned by the Data and Labour Market Steering Group over the past few years been for your organisation?” and asked to rank this on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is not useful and 10 is very useful). This question elicited responses in the range of 7 to 10. The frequency of these ratings is illustrated in the chart below. The average (mean) rating was just over 8.5.



Overall, stakeholders are appreciative of the group and of its outputs. Comments on the reports produced included:

*“A consistently good, high quality product that provides incredibly clear messages on the slides”* (Local authority)

*“The use of data has been a game changer for the work that is done, which is now based on facts and evidence rather than anecdote”* (Employer representative)

*“The data has provided evidence and helped justify our case for support for a range of funding bids.”* (Youth support organization)

*“It is very helpful to get all the data in one place, for example, it was helpful to pull together all the data on Covid -19 impact.”* (Local authority)

Many stakeholders felt that the slides that accompany the reports were very helpful:

*“The documents are very big so the slides are really important because senior people will not read the full reports.”* (Local authority), and *“The slides are more useful than the reports”* (FE college)

The realtime labour market data that are periodically circulated to partners is also felt to be useful:

*"They have supported our advisers when helping clients searching for work by providing insights into both the sectors available and the skills required."*  
(Employment support organization)

For some stakeholders the group itself adds value just by existing:

*"The group itself has been incredibly helpful. I've come to the patch with no inkling as to the lay of the land: this group has been able to fill that knowledge gap."*

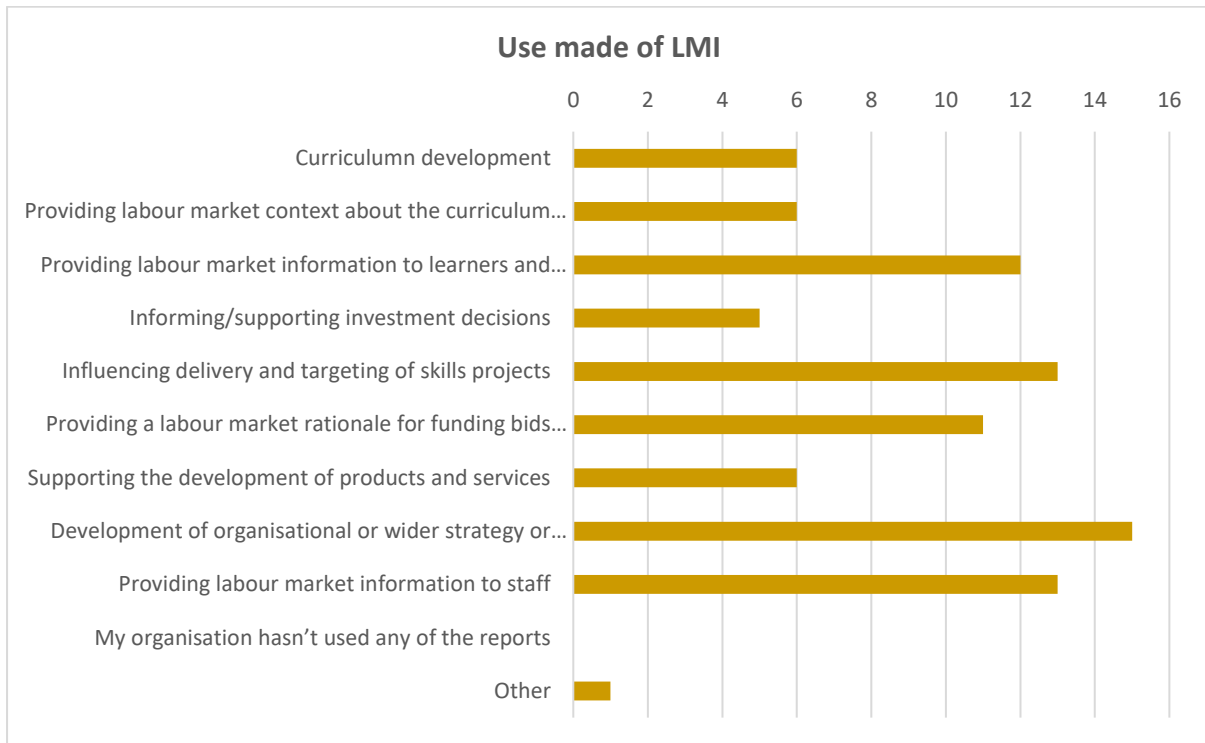
## 5. What have the outputs been used for?

Consultees were asked what, if any, use was made of the outputs from the Data and Labour Market Steering Group with the following suggestions:

- Curriculum development
- Providing a labour market rationale for funding bids and applications
- Providing labour market context about the curriculum to staff and learners
- Supporting the development of products and services
- Providing labour market information to learners and people seeking work or progression opportunities.
- Development of organisational or wider strategy or business planning.
- Informing/supporting investment decisions
- Providing labour market information to staff
- Influencing delivery and targeting of skills projects
- My organisation hasn't used any of the reports

The most frequent uses for the outputs of the group were:

- 'Development of organisational or wider strategy or business planning';  
*"The college use the labour market reports for visioning, horizon scanning and strategy development. The data has also been used in curriculum development. It is also useful for looking at the wider context. Insights come from both the real-time information and the broader reporting."*
- 'Influencing delivery and targeting of skills projects';  
*"The data provided has enabled me to look at the Restart programme and my suppliers who operate in this area and tailor the provision in this area. We've ramped up efforts in key hotspots, and identified skills gaps, which has been backed up by the data shared."* (Employment support organization)
- 'Providing labour market information to staff':  
*"My brief is to provide LMI to our frontline advisers through a variety of channels including presentations and webinars and the reports help me to give staff a clear and coherent picture of what is happening in the Cheshire and Warrington labour market"* (Independent provider)



The Digital Report, the Young People report and the Labour Market Assessment were the three reports most often cited by consultees (unprompted) as being useful, although the Covid-19 impact reports, the low carbon report and the mapping of the IFATE routes were also raised by some.

A number also identified the realtime vacancy/skills data as being useful:

*“The job postings data on skills sought has been very useful in helping to shape the BeReady programme (run alongside the college’s 16-19 study programmes). The T-level assessment days are also shaped around these skills.” (FE College)*

*“The college has piloted the T-level transition offer and we have used the information about ‘hard’ and ‘common’ skills to inform the content of the level 2 transition programme for T-levels” (FE College)*

### Case Study: Skills Accelerator - Strategic Development Fund

The Skills for Jobs White Paper published in January 2021 set out the Government’s blueprint for reshaping the technical skills system to better support the needs of the local labour market and the wider economy. It is intended that the system will be driven by employers, colleges and other providers collaborating to identify and respond to the skills needs of an area. As part of this, the Skills Accelerator/Strategic Development Fund (SDF) was piloted in 2021- 22. It provided capital and revenue funding to create a more coordinated and efficient skills offer through sharing development costs and facilities and reducing duplication of provision.

Colleges in Cheshire and Warrington were successful in a collaborative bid for grant funding under the Strategic Development Fund pilot projects programme. The stage 2 bid application focused on how the pilot project will deliver skills which are valuable in the local labour market and called for identification of priority skills within the region.

The colleges were able to draw on the Cheshire and Warrington Skills Report 2021/22, which brigades the key local labour market analysis and the skills priorities for the area. The colleges report that because the LMI was Cheshire and Warrington wide it helped to develop a richer understanding as to the potential opportunities for the colleges to collaborate. In addition to the Skills Report, the Digital report was felt to be particularly helpful. A college senior manager commented: *“If we hadn’t had the Digital report, we wouldn’t have had the data we needed for the Skills Accelerator bid.”*

The colleges used the report to agree the key skills needs to which the SDF project would respond, with a focus on digital, construction and low carbon. Specifically, the Skills Report enabled the colleges to provide the evidenced detail of how their collaborative project would work to address the requirements, skills gaps, and skills shortfalls of employers. The project included the creation of a College Business Centre which works with employers that wish to reskill to establish links to the most appropriate college to meet their needs.

### **Case study: Reaseheath College Curriculum Planning**

Reaseheath College has built the need to understand the labour market into its annual business planning process. Staff are encouraged to talk to employers and students; understand LEP priorities; understand the key priorities of Government; and consider student demand and destinations.

In addition to this, staff use EMSI data in curriculum planning and across marketing materials. The college has worked with EMSI to develop a template for curriculum planning which is used by staff in developing their offer. The template covers: Understanding the Local and Regional Economy; Fit with the College’s Curriculum; Labour Market Demand for the Curriculum; Summary and Conclusions.

### **Case Study: The Pledge**

The wider work of the Pledge is being influenced by the Data and Labour Market intelligence work. Key findings informed discussions with the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) about how the Careers Hub could have the most impact. As a consequence, schools were picked for inclusion in the Hub’s activities based on need. Specifically, three indicators were used 1. Schools serving areas of deprivation; 2. Pupil premium volumes; and 3. Ofsted grades.

This has helped the CEC understand how its work might contribute to closing the disadvantage gap. Baseline data is being collected this year and a CEC driven self-assessment will be reported by participating schools again in July.

This new focus means that there are now regular conversations with employers about how they can work with/be introduced to priority schools rather than those they are already familiar with. This approach is bearing real fruit. For example, the analysis already undertaken allowed computers donated by Engie during lockdown to be directed to the schools with the highest levels of pupils in receipt of free school meals.

## 6. Things that could have been done differently

Participants in the evaluation were asked how could the data and labour market work programme have been better, and whether there was anything that should have been done differently, or should be done differently in the future. Suggestions were made by those consulted in the following areas:

- Focus of the reports
- Usability of the reports
- Access to data
- Report usage and communication
- Tapping into the expertise of the partnership

Each of these is discussed briefly below.

### ***Report Focus***

Some respondents argued that it is action at a local level that delivers progress and that reporting should reflect that with more local reports.

*“There is lots of white noise generated by having data analysed at different spatial levels. We should cut through that by doing analysis at the local level. ‘Cheshire East’ and ‘Cheshire and Warrington’ are Government constructs, not ‘real’ places.”*

*“Job opportunities in, for example, railways in Crewe will not appeal to Warrington residents. Warrington, Widnes, St Helens and Wigan is a more natural geography than ‘Cheshire and Warrington’”*

An aligned point to this was that places in Cheshire and Warrington tend not to compare themselves to other places in Cheshire and Warrington but look to statistical neighbours that are mostly further afield:

*“The idea of comparing us with Cheshire East or Cheshire West and Chester doesn’t come up that much. Warrington is an urban mass.”*

Not all respondents were of the view that reporting would be improved with a greater focus on the local. One respondent thought that sometimes the reports presented too much local information – *“Ward level is very granular and the college doesn’t need that level of detail.”*

A separate observation by one of the consultees on the focus of the reports was that they have tended to have a focus on skills and deprivation, less so on what employers need. It was suggested that a counterweight to this might be to do an employer survey or possibly by accessing a product like that developed by Data City (<https://thedatacity.com/>). Possibly linked to this was the observation of another respondent that whilst we know what sort of vacancies are hard to fill, we don't know enough about why they are.

Whilst some participants fed back the Covid-19 impact reports were useful, one questioned whether, on reflection, they should have been produced as frequently as they were.

A couple of participants suggested that the report on young people would have been improved had it included analysis about the attainment and destinations of SEND young people, care leavers and young carers.

### ***Usability of the reports***

Because the reports try to offer a comprehensive view of the topic(s) under consideration, they are sometimes viewed as big or unwieldy. This can make finding the information sought difficult:

*"The reports can be quite overwhelming as they are quite meaty documents and if you are looking for a specific piece of info it can take some time to find it but there are contents so not sure what else you could do to help that – perhaps make them searchable with keywords?"*

Other participants suggested the greater use of infographics, and there was a suggestion for a 'show and tell' by partners of the charts and diagrams that they had found most useful/impactful. The visualisation of careers pathways that had been done recently by Cheshire West and Chester was cited as good practice that the group might seek to emulate.

### ***Access to data***

A number of those consulted believed that the work of the group would be enriched if partners were more inclined to share their own data with others. Specific examples were given regarding young peoples' participation and attainment, learner demand, and the characteristics of the unemployed and economically inactive.

### ***Report usage and communication***

A number of issues were raised about how the reports and other outputs were (or weren't) being used. A couple of the colleges were clearly concerned about this:

*"The biggest issue is getting people to use the reports."*

*"Just because things are being produced doesn't mean that they are being used. Whilst all reports are posted on the intranet and signposted to staff, I'm not sure how much the research is used by curriculum staff"*



One suggestion for dealing with this issue, that was made by a college, was to hold webinars for curriculum staff timed to fit with the college planning cycle.

Some associated, more generalised, concerns regarding communication were that:

- The group itself may not be as effective as sharing information within its networks as it should be;
- Whilst the outputs tended to be 'vanilla' and were intended to be subsequently customised by partners for different audiences, it is unclear as to the extent that this actually happens; and
- How were the messages from the group being communicated to wider groups of stakeholders eg employers or influencers of young people?

### ***Tapping into expertise***

It was suggested that we might get better insight into data if we were to periodically convene a 'think tank' of experts to discuss what the data is telling us.

## **7. Future Priorities**

A number of those consulted made the point that we need to know more about some of the labour market issues that have already been identified through the work to date. In particular, the Employers' Skills and Education Board has already identified key issues that need to be addressed, and these are the focus of the last two Skills Reports. These issues are not ephemeral. For many of the highlighted issues, if there is to be effective action, we need a deeper understanding.

A further general point is that however we segment our analysis - by issue, sector, age, or place - we should be wary of developing a silo perspective:

*"We need to further interrogate the data we have access to. In particular, we should look at joining the dots between datasets. For example, discussions about unemployment might end up focussing on particular families or streets where action is needed."*

A similar point was made by another consultee who also highlighted that a key purpose for developing LMI is to develop more effective practice:

*"We are interested in LMI because it should be used to shape our practice. For example there is now a 2 sided A4 dashboard that has been produced that brings together data on long term unemployment, free school meals and vacancies. This goes to head teachers and partners. The objective is to support children and families where long term unemployment is an issue. The key to this is to understand what is going on in the place in question. Another example was during the pandemic, JCP supported the unemployed with free devices. Following discussion with JCP managers, this support was promoted through relevant schools to help the whole family benefit."*

A key focus of the questionnaire and consultation was to establish views on what the priorities should be in the next few months. This feedback is discussed below under the following headings:

- Young people
- The adult workforce (focussing on unemployment, economic inactivity and precarity)
- Shared Prosperity Fund
- Area reports
- Sector focus
- Other LMI issues
- Other action

### ***Young People***

A significant number of respondents have highlighted the need to know more about Young People. The context for this is that the Cheshire and Warrington Skills Report has identified the disadvantage attainment gap; the disparity in attainment between different areas; and gender disparities in learning as key issues. Consultees want to know more about these issues in order to develop more effective practice to address them.

Examples from the consultations of where better intelligence might inform practice include:

- If we understand more about young people's choices and destinations, can this illuminate our practice in informing and inspiring young people?
- What do we know about the differential contribution to learner progression of 16-19 learning routes (apprenticeships, college, school 6<sup>th</sup> form)?
- Whilst much of the core curriculum content of, say, T-levels is centrally proscribed, can we be more effective in enriching the curriculum by knowing more about the skills being sought by local employers?
- Can we know more about the experience of SEND and BAME young people to support their progression?
- Is there a relationship between the Key Stage 4 curriculum offered in schools and the attainment and destination of particular cohorts?
- What is the reason for the gender difference in students progressing to apprenticeships and students progressing to HE college?
- Can we get a better handle on learner demand and how that might be influenced? Is the Pledge making an impact?
- Will the pandemic make the disadvantaged gap bigger? What has happened to home school volumes (particularly for 14-16) over the pandemic and what will the impact on achievement be?

### ***The adult workforce (focussing on unemployment, economic inactivity and precarity)***

Like Young People, there was also a significant number of consultees wanting to know more about issues for adults in the labour market. The Skills Report identifies the need to mitigate impacts of the pandemic that are still working through the labour market. It also highlights a long-term shortfall in Level 3+ as well as more acute/immediate problems with filling vacancies.

There is a view that the recent tightness in the labour market can, in part, be attributed to growing levels of economic inactivity. This recent tightening is also reflected in the relatively low levels of people who have been searching for work for less than a year (at its lowest level for four years). However, long term unemployment is at very high levels and the claimant count onflow in Feb 2022 was higher than for any month (not including the pandemic period) for the last eight years. There appears to have been a significant decline in self-employment.

Examples from the consultations of where better intelligence might inform practice include:

- Detailed analysis of UC and JSA data, updated regularly, including by geography.
- We need to understand the relationship between adult unemployment and precarity on the one hand and the attainment and progression of the children of these people on the other. Should some of our interventions focus on family units?
- Is it possible to establish whether the increase in economic inactivity offers a potential opportunity to train and employ teachers in shortage vocational areas?
- Where are the precarious workers and what jobs do they do? Can reskilling or upskilling support these people to secure more stable employment?
- What skills (including digital and green) are employers seeking, what vacancies are being advertised and how might this inform the support on offer to different cohorts?
- The statistics suggest that there has been a very significant decline in self-employment. What's behind this and do we need to do anything about it?
- How effective has Kickstart been? What does this tell us about the possible inflows onto Restart?
- Will the pre-pandemic forecasts for demand for Level 3 still stand? What is the interaction between NSF and AEB? What is AEB/NSF delivering?
- Do we need to rethink the AEB offer because of the impact of DWP programmes?
- Anecdotally, adult learner demand is low (eg for Access to HE programmes). Why is that? What can be done to stimulate learner demand? What can be done to increase the volume of women in digital and technical courses? Are we making the most of employers as a route to market?
- What is the current role of apprenticeships in supporting adults to acquire skills? What are the trends across the economy?

## ***Shared Prosperity Fund***

A number of stakeholders identified that there will be a need for good labour market intelligence to help deliver the levelling up agenda and target the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF):

*“We need to prepare for the Shared Prosperity Fund. Some will be local authority, some may be Cheshire and Warrington. What does our intelligence tell us about the projects that should be run?”*

*“The data itself is really good and it presents really well – for me it’s organising what collectively we do about it now. For instance informing a sub-regional preparation for the forthcoming Shared Prosperity Fund”*

A Government prospectus for the Shared Prosperity Fund is due to be published shortly. This is likely to crystallise thinking on partners’ needs for labour market intelligence to underpin SPF investment decisions, and it is suggested that this issue is revisited following publication of this prospectus. One consultee suggested that SPF might itself be used to support ongoing LMI needs.

### ***Area reports***

As discussed above, there is an appetite from some stakeholders for reporting at a lower level of disaggregation than Cheshire and Warrington. For example, one of the consultees asked if it were possible to generate periodic ‘State of the Nation’ type reports for Towns (or possibly Parliamentary constituencies), maybe using informatics in them to broaden their appeal.

There is also a desire to better understand travel to work and commuting patterns.

The 2021 Census will be important in providing the data to support this type of work. Originally Government intended to publish initial outputs from the census in late May. That timescale has now slipped to ‘early summer’.

### ***Sector focus***

Some consultees suggested that we needed to know more about particular sectors. The sector mentioned more than once was health and social care. Land-based and the food sector (including its supply chain) were also suggested.

### ***Other LMI issues***

There were a range of other LMI questions that don’t fit easily into any of the headings above. These included:

- How can we use the IFATE progression pathways together to understand learner journeys from school to FE to HE? Can the IFATE maps be expanded to other areas?

- How effective are local colleges at attracting talent into Cheshire and Warrington?
- Can we look at aims that don't map to SSAs
- Can we benchmark salaries for digital roles and apprenticeships?

### ***Other action***

There were also a range of suggestions for other action that might be taken. The proposals directly relevant to the future work programme of the group were:

- There should be a meeting with Curriculum leads from across the colleges to understand how best to meet their needs. Can we explore webinar updates aimed at curriculum leaders?
- There should be a meeting with the Local authorities to understand progression and destination data – what's available, how it can be accessed and what it might tell us.
- Maybe develop a one stop shop for the data and intelligence that's already been done eg a search engine on the web. Can the information be put into a dashboard?
- It might be worth speaking to Coast 2 Capital who are using the NESTA skills taxonomy or to colleagues in the East Midlands who are building a portal.

Other action that was proposed that was less directly linked to the groups future work programme included:

- It would be good if the Cheshire and Warrington LEP held their annual report launch again and included a focus on LMI in it.
- Can more short films about career paths be produced?

## Consultees

Colin Billingsley, JCP

Adam Bird, Priestly College

Marcus Clinton, Reaseheath College

Paul Colman, South Cheshire Chamber

Will Cookson, EMSI

Heather Heaton, G4S

Colin Jacklin, Cheshire East

Pat Jackson, LEP

Karen Cove, CWAC

Trevor Langston, Pledge

Iain Logan, Growth Company

Leah Maltby, CWAC

Nicola Meredith, WVR College

Helen Nellist, CCSW

Karen Roberts, CCSW

Grace Sheldon, Careers Hub

Tim Smith, Warrington

Jordan Swift, CCSW

Ruth Szolkowska, CCSW

Liz Watts, Reaseheath College

Lynsey Whitley, Youth Federation

Sarah Williams, Digital Skills Partnership