

# Skills Deal 3.0 - Programme Evaluation

## History of Skills Deal:

The original funding pot was compromised of £500,000 from both Norfolk and Suffolk County Council and £1,000,000 from Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). As a result of an initial under-allocation and subsequent underspend, Suffolk County Council had a total funding pot of £113,400 available.

## Skills Deal 3.0 Programme Aims:

The Skills Deal Programme 3.0 was launched in November 2024 and aimed to:

- Enable partnership working between employers and training providers.
- Enhance Suffolk's current training offer via development of curriculum.
- Encourage innovative solutions to Suffolk's skills challenges.
- Widen the talent pipeline for key areas of the economy requiring a skilled workforce.

## Background:

The Skills Deal 3.0 Programme was developed at a time of significant change in the local and national skills landscape. With the closure of European Social Fund programmes and the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Suffolk's employability support offer shifted towards economically inactive residents. While this created valuable opportunities for those furthest from the labour market, it also left a clear gap in funding for people who were ready to enter work or who were already employed but needed further skills to progress.

Suffolk's demographic and economic profile provide important context for the programme. The county continues to experience an ageing population, a high proportion of economically inactive adults who are not seeking work, and lower-than-average qualification levels. These factors collectively contribute to ongoing skills shortages, constrain local economic growth, and often limit individuals' opportunities for progression at work. Supporting the development of the existing workforce is therefore central to improving productivity and strengthening Suffolk's long-term economic resilience.

Skills Deal 3.0 was shaped through a collaborative Skills Deal Summit, which brought together local training providers who had previously delivered a successful Skills Deal to co-develop priorities for the 3.0 programme. The resulting theme, "Unleashing Potential", reflects a shared commitment to widening the talent pipeline, supporting innovation in curriculum design, and enabling providers and employers to work in partnership to address Suffolk's most pressing skills needs.

Projects were expected to be innovative, employer-engaged, and designed to fill gaps not met by existing provision or alternative funding streams. All activity was required to deliver measurable

impact for Suffolk employers and adult learners aged 19+, aligning with the programme's aim to support in-work development and progression.

### **The Projects:**

Each grant recipient was grant funded £37,800 against which they were required to provide 50% match funding.

#### **East Coast College**

The project set out to address clear recruitment and retention issues identified by employers across the region. It aimed to create training that both prepares new entrants for roles in fast-growing green energy sectors and supports existing staff through stronger leadership, clearer career development, and more inclusive workforce practices. A key ambition was to ensure employers could attract, support and retain a more diverse and skilled workforce through practical, targeted interventions.

Training primarily focused on offshore wind and nuclear, two industries experiencing rapid expansion and acute workforce shortages. In offshore wind, the emphasis was on helping individuals understand what the work involves, the expectations of employers, and possible progression routes. In nuclear, the programme strengthened understanding of nuclear safety behaviours and supported both new entrants and supply-chain businesses preparing for Sizewell C. Alongside sector-specific skills, the project delivered professional development and leadership skills, as well as training and guidance on inclusive recruitment, neurodivergence, and managing multi-generational teams.

Delivery was strongly employer-led: the team consulted extensively with major industry partners to design courses that genuinely addressed workforce needs. This led to new courses such as Introduction to Wind, Introduction to Nuclear Behaviours, and three targeted leadership and career-development modules. The Inclusive Workforces conference played a major role in promoting better recruitment and retention practices and raising awareness of inclusive approaches. Although hydrogen and carbon-capture courses were created, they were not delivered due to limited employer readiness, highlighting the project's commitment to relevance rather than delivering training for its own sake. Feedback from participants and employers was consistently positive, reinforcing the value of the practical, real-world focus.

#### **Suffolk New College**

The project aimed to expand Suffolk New College's Net Zero Skills Centre by developing and delivering high-quality heat pump and solar training, strengthening green-skills expertise among staff, and building strong partnerships with manufacturers and local businesses. Its core purpose was to address growing skills needs in renewable technologies, improve the quality and consistency of installation practices in the region, and support the wider shift toward Net Zero by making practical, industry-aligned training more widely available.

The focus was firmly on the renewable energy and low-carbon installation sector, particularly heat pumps, solar PV, and electrical energy storage systems. Learners were supported to develop

hands-on technical skills, understand current installation standards, and gain insight into the practical realities of working in the green technology field. Staff were also upskilled through direct manufacturer training, ensuring the college had up-to-date expertise. Partnerships with NIBE, Greenscape Energy and others strengthened access to specialist equipment and real-world knowledge.

Delivery centred on deep employer and manufacturer engagement. The college developed new training bays, collaborated with industry experts to design course content, and established strong partnerships, most notably with NIBE, who provided equipment, specialist training and delivered successful installer courses. The BPEC offer for heat pumps, solar PV and electrical storage systems was shaped by ongoing industry feedback, with new introductory one-day courses added to meet demand from plumbers, electricians and small businesses exploring green skills. Despite positive employer interest, uptake for some BPEC and introductory courses remained low due to wider industry conditions and the lack of mandatory qualifications, though NIBE-led installer courses were a regional success. Across the project, multiple events, staff training sessions and repeated employer consultations ensured the offer remained relevant, practical and aligned with emerging skills needs.

### **West Suffolk College**

This project sought to address longstanding and increasingly urgent skills shortages across Suffolk's logistics, transport and international supply chain sector. Its aim was to raise awareness of logistics careers, improve employer engagement, expand and connect training pathways, and make the sector more accessible to both young people and adults, including those furthest from the labour market. The project was also designed to build sustainable structures for workforce development, responding to rapid changes such as automation, digitalisation and green logistics.

The programme focused on the logistics and supply chain sector, including haulage, warehousing, freight forwarding, port related operations and transport management. Skills development centred on a combination of technical, digital and sustainability related competencies, such as automation technologies, hydrogen safety, carbon measurement, and digital logistics systems, as well as transferable skills like problem solving, communication, leadership and customer service. A wide range of adult courses, apprenticeships, and enhancements to curriculum pathways were introduced or improved, alongside early stage careers engagement with schools and colleges to tackle misconceptions and widen participation.

Delivery combined labour market intelligence with extensive employer led engagement. The project ran employer forums, careers events, sector visits, and networking opportunities that directly shaped training content and created new pathways, including future degree level logistics options and strengthened adult upskilling routes. Partnerships with organisations such as the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, Wincanton, and port operators helped align provision with real labour market needs. Practical activities, like site visits, primary school outreach, sustainability events, and

the introduction of hydrogen training, helped demystify the sector and highlight modern logistics technologies. International collaboration was also a feature, with a study visit to Finland influencing future plans for simulator based driver training, student mobility and deeper employer–college links. Overall, the project provided a more connected, accessible and responsive skills ecosystem for Suffolk’s logistics sector.

**Outcomes**

We’ve seen some great outcomes as a result of the Skills Deal Programme, including: a number of employers supported with their skills needs, new courses being developed and delivered, existing courses being enhanced, and a number of individuals gaining new skills to support with progression in the workplace.

The programme's overall success was rooted in great employer engagement: understanding sector-specific skills needs and developing curriculum that responds directly to them.

Total no. of employers engaged	242
Total no. of employers benefitted	212
Total no. of new courses developed	17
Total no. of new courses delivered	14
Total no. of existing courses enhanced	12
Total no. of individuals gaining new skills	223
Total no. of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds gaining new skills	47

**Skills Deal 3.0 Programme Celebration & Sharing Best Practice Event:**

The Skills Deal 3.0 Programme Celebration & Sharing Best Practice Event on Tuesday 27th January 2026 at West Suffolk College's XR lab. This meeting presented an opportunity for our grant recipients to celebrate the achievements of their programmes, reflect on what went well and the lessons learnt. Information captured at this meeting has been captured and presented in the following section.

**Reflections and Recommendations**

- **Sustained, structured employer engagement is essential.** Early and ongoing collaboration consistently produced more relevant training, better curriculum alignment and stronger long term partnerships. Employer engagement was also the strongest driver of quality across all projects.
- **Employer interest does not automatically lead to participation.** Even when employers value skills development, practical barriers (time, staffing pressures, non-mandatory training) often prevent uptake. Training must be designed around these operational realities.
- **Market readiness heavily influences uptake.** Even high quality courses struggle when introduced ahead of sector demand. Timing training to real world need is critical for

engagement. -quality courses struggle when introduced ahead of sector demand. Timing training to real-world need is critical for engagement.

- **Flexible delivery models reduce participation barriers.** Modular, shorter, blended or more accessible delivery approaches help employers and learners participate despite operational and time constraints.
- **Clear and visible progression pathways improve engagement.** Learners and employers respond better when they can see how training connects to real jobs, advancement routes and long term career opportunities.
- **Ongoing staff upskilling underpins high quality provision.** Trainers must stay current with emerging technologies and evolving industry expectations to deliver credible, future focused training. -quality provision. Trainers must stay current with emerging technologies and evolving industry expectations to deliver credible, future-focused training.
- **Labour market intelligence must actively guide provision.** Using evidence dynamically, rather than as a one off planning, helps maintain alignment with rapidly changing skill needs. -off p
- **Cross institution and cross sector collaboration enhance innovation.** Partnerships across colleges, industry bodies and international providers strengthen curriculum development, encourage shared practice and support long term system change. -institution and cross-sector collaboration -term system change.
- **Sectors undergoing rapid change require adaptive training models.** Fastmoving fields (e.g., those shaped by digitalisation, automation or net zero transitions) need training that can evolve quickly with new technologies and job roles. -moving fields (e.g., those shaped by digitalisation, automation or net-zero transitions) need training that can evolve quickly with new technologies and job roles.
- **Strong partnerships create sustained impact.** Long-term employer, industry and educational relationships build foundations for ongoing collaboration, innovation and workforce development beyond funded periods.

## Conclusion

Overall, Skills Deal 3.0 has made a significant contribution to strengthening Suffolk's skills ecosystem. It has supported innovative curriculum development, deepened employer relationships, and created lasting structures that will continue to benefit learners, providers and businesses. By focusing on partnership, flexibility and real world relevance, the programme has helped to "unleash potential" across the county and positioned Suffolk to better meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing economy.-world relevance, the programme has helped to "unleash potential" across the county and positioned Suffolk to better meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing economy.