

West Midlands College Compact

**Mayor of the
West Midlands**



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**

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Mayoral Foreword

The West Midlands has always been a place of opportunity, a region that helped shape the modern world and continues to power the UK's economy. But for too many people, that opportunity has not always been within reach. Whole communities have felt left behind for too long, with talent going unrealised and potential untapped. When the West Midlands succeeds, the UK succeeds, but that success has to be shared more fairly.

I know this personally. I left school at 16, not knowing where my life was headed. It was only because someone encouraged me to take another chance through further education that I gained the confidence, skills and direction I needed to move forward. That experience has stayed with me, and it is why I am committed to making sure others across our region are given that same opportunity to succeed.

That is also why my Youth Plan matters so much to me. This plan is now approaching 20,000 work experience placements, opening doors for young people across the West Midlands and giving them that first step into the world of work. For many, it will be the first real chance to see what is possible and to start building a future they can believe in.

We have made real progress in recent years. Together with our colleges, we have begun to turn what was once a fragmented skills system into something more aligned and more responsive. That success is down in no small part to the leadership and commitment of our colleges, who sit at the heart of our communities and understand the challenges people face.

But we are at a critical moment. While we can be proud of what we have achieved, we know there is much more to do. Too many residents still face barriers to learning and work, and too many places across our region have yet to fully feel the benefits of growth. If we are serious about unlocking opportunity, we must go further together.

That is why we are investing over half a billion pounds in skills and training between now and 2029. And it is why initiatives like WM Works matter so much, connecting people to good jobs and making opportunity real in every community.

Our colleges will be central to making that happen. Deeply rooted in their communities, they are uniquely placed to reach those who have been overlooked, to rebuild confidence, and to equip people with the skills they need to thrive. At the same time, they are key partners to business, helping to ensure that the skills we invest in match the needs of a modern and growing economy.

This College Compact is therefore not just a statement of intent. It is a commitment to act together. It sets out how we will provide the collective leadership, coordination and accountability needed to turn ambition into real impact for people, places and businesses across the West Midlands.

Through this Compact, and alongside programmes like WM Works and my Youth Plan, we are backing our colleges to go further and faster, strengthening their role as engines of opportunity, supporting inclusive growth, and ensuring our region responds to the changing needs of residents and employers alike.

Put simply, this is about opportunity. It is about making sure that where you start in life does not determine where you end up. It is about creating a West Midlands where everyone has the chance to succeed, just as I was given that chance.

I want to thank all our colleges for their incredible work so far, and I look forward to continuing this journey together, unlocking potential, widening opportunity, and building a stronger, more inclusive West Midlands for everyone.



A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink that reads "R. Parker". The signature is fluid and modern, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Richard Parker
Mayor of the West Midlands

Introduction

The West Midlands is at a pivotal moment in reshaping a skills system that truly delivers for its people, places, and economy. This Compact provides a bold, collaborative framework to unlock the full potential of our FE sector and drive inclusive, sustainable growth.

Colleges across the region have achieved a great deal, but persistent structural challenges continue to leave too many residents without the skills they need to fully engage with learning and employment. This Compact creates the opportunity to reset the system, moving beyond competition-driven policy and towards a more coherent, collaborative approach that strengthens strategic planning and supports innovation.

Aligned with the West Midlands Growth Plan, the Compact acknowledges the unique value each college brings to the system and strengthens collaboration across schools, colleges, universities, national agencies, and employers to create coherent pathways for young people.

It also responds directly to employer needs, particularly SMEs, by championing a more agile skills offer that prioritises core technical skills and upskilling alongside formal qualifications.

This marks a practical step forward: a shared commitment to strengthen the skills system so it works better for residents, employers, and communities, recognising that success depends not only on provision, but on removing barriers that affect people's ability to participate and succeed.



The purpose of the West Midlands College Compact

To improve outcomes for residents, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and its college partners recognise the need to work more closely as a system, aligning priorities, sharing insight, and coordinating activity to address the challenges facing the region.

Our Vision

A skills system that is joined-up, inclusive, and easy for residents and employers to navigate, with clear pathways into good jobs and opportunities to keep learning throughout life.

Our Mission

To tackle the West Midlands' key challenges; economic inactivity, youth unemployment, skills gaps and low productivity through practical, coordinated leadership between WMCA, Local Authorities and FE colleges. By working in a more place-based and partnership-driven way, addressing barriers that affect participation and progression, and by strengthening engagement with Local Authorities and local businesses, we will support residents to progress into work, develop their skills in work, contribute to improved productivity, social mobility and strengthen communities across the region.

Where are we now?

A shared understanding of our starting point is essential. The challenges outlined below provide the basis for our joint work and highlight where we need to focus to improve outcomes for residents.

Colleges play a crucial role in delivering this strategy, providing learning and support within their local communities. The Compact focuses on improving opportunities and outcomes across the region, with particular attention to areas that have been underserved.

This requires a partnership built on trust, clarity, transparency and shared responsibility. By working together, partners can take a more coordinated approach and improve the support available to residents and employers.

Stronger joint working can also lead to better value for money and more consistent outcomes, while recognising the distinct role each college plays in serving its community.

The big challenges

1

The employment rate in the WMCA area remains below the national average, with over 25% of working age residents economically inactive, largely due to long-term health conditions.

2

Unemployment is significantly higher than the UK average, particularly for young people and older workers.

3

Persistently high youth unemployment and NEET rates, reflecting deep-rooted deprivation and long-standing barriers to young people entering sustained employment or training.

4

Many residents lack basic skills, and the region falls behind in Level 3 and above attainment, limiting progression and productivity.

5

Skills shortages persist across key sectors despite high vacancy levels.

6

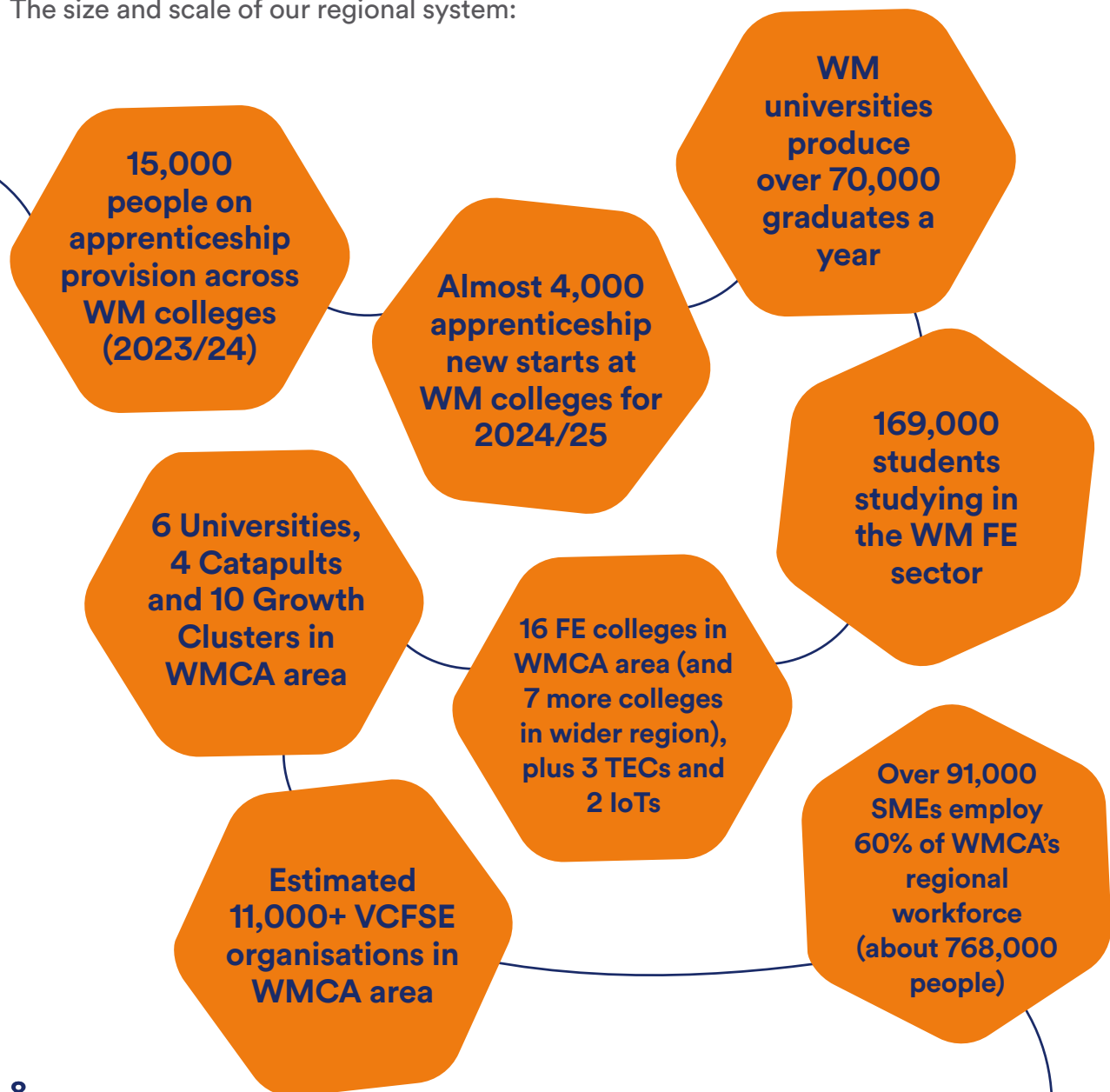
Rising levels of poor mental health and wellbeing are affecting learner attendance, retention and progression, particularly among those facing multiple barriers.

The West Midlands System: Opportunities to deliver better resident outcomes

This section summarises the regional system and identifies some of the existing and emerging opportunities where a more joined up systems approach can deliver better outcomes for our residents, this includes recognising and addressing non-academic barriers to participation, including health and wellbeing factors that impact attendance, retention and learner success.

The West Midlands Further Education System

The size and scale of our regional system:



New and Emerging Opportunities to improve outcomes for residents

The West Midlands Growth Plan aims to boost living standards and create a high growth, high skill economy by building on regional strengths such as engineering, clean energy, digital, creative industries, health technologies and professional services, while also recognising the importance of foundational and enabling sectors like retail, care, hospitality, logistics and construction. Skills sit at the heart of this transformation. FE colleges play a key role in upskilling residents, removing barriers to training, and aligning talent with future labour market needs.

West Midlands Works sets out how employment, skills and health systems can collaborate to remove barriers and help 93,000 residents into good jobs, recognising the influence of health and wellbeing on participation and progression.

The Local Skills Improvement Plan strengthens employer leadership in shaping post16 provision, ensuring clearer employer demand and better system alignment. The Technical Excellence College (TEC) model expands high quality technical provision at Levels 3–5. Dudley College's Construction TEC was announced as part of the first wave in 2025. In 2026, City of Wolverhampton College secured one of four Advanced Manufacturing TEC designations, while BMet College was awarded one of five Digital and Technologies TEC designations.

In parallel, we worked closely with East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) and Greater Lincolnshire to secure a Midlands Defence TEC, reflecting the region's strategic importance to the defence sector as set out in the Midlands Defence Blueprint.

Lincoln College has been designated as the Defence TEC, supported by key “spoke” partners across the West Midlands: Walsall College, North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College, and Telford College.

WMCA is also reforming economic delivery by streamlining the West Midlands Growth Company into a new economic delivery vehicle to unify investment, site development and Investment Zone activity, improving accountability and accelerating growth.

The Milburn Review highlights that inequalities in opportunity are increasingly shaped by place, not just personal circumstance, and that national policy alone has struggled to close deeply rooted geographic gaps. It points to persistent disparities in education, skills, pay and progression, and makes the case for stronger local leadership.

This call for stronger local leadership aligns closely with the Government's ambition in Rewiring the State to devolve power, funding and decision-making to places best positioned to understand and respond to local needs. For the West Midlands, this presents an opportunity to strengthen coordination across public services, employers and education providers. Rewiring the State can therefore be a catalyst to help create a more joined-up system capable of responding to complex and persistent challenges that no single organisation can address in isolation.

For the WMCA, the Milburn Review strengthens the case for its role as a place based system leader rather than simply a delivery body. WMCA's effectiveness depends on how well it works with its seven constituent Local Authorities and the region's further education colleges, which sit at the heart of the opportunity agenda. The Review implicitly supports a model where WMCA convenes councils, colleges, employers and other partners to shape an integrated approach to skills, employment support and inclusive growth - using local insight and data to target investment on communities most at risk of being left behind. This raises expectations that WMCA will help broker a more outcomes driven settlement with central government, demonstrating how devolved powers, anchored in strong local authority and college partnerships, can narrow opportunity gaps and improve long term mobility across the West Midlands.

Coordinated regional delivering for our residents

Collectively, these developments provide the opportunity for a more focused, disciplined and outcomes driven approach in the West Midlands.

This ambition is formalised through our Multi Year Settlement with the UK government, with the College Compact sitting at the heart of delivery. Through the settlement, WMCA will invest over £550 million in skills revenue and capital programmes between 2026/27 and 2028/29.

Colleges are integral to delivering the regional outputs and outcomes for the Employment and Skills Pillar of the settlement. The WMCA Adult Skills offer spans the full range of RQF levels from Entry Level to Level 7 (post-graduate). Delivery is, however, predominantly focused on Level 2 and below, which accounts for over 90% of provision. Colleges are critical partners in delivering statutory programmes in English, maths, and digital skills, alongside English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). ESOL learners account for just over 20% of all WMCA enrolments, while more than 10% of learners access into-employment training.

Since the start of the 2024/25 academic year, around 80% of Adult Skills Fund provision has supported learners living in the most deprived communities in the region. Approximately 75% of provision has been accessed by learners from minority ethnic backgrounds, and three quarters of learners are unemployed at the point of enrolment. Across all provision, 15% of learners report a learning difficulty and/or disability.

Our commitments under the settlement, output and outcome targets for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29 represent a significant increase on the 2024/25 baseline. These Multi Year Settlement Targets require that by 2029, we must deliver:

- **210,000 enrolments at Entry Level and Level 1** (170,100 achievements), expanding participation and attainment among residents with the lowest qualification levels.
- **81,000 enrolments at Level 2** (59,700 achievements), enabling sustained progression into higher level skills.
- **35,100 enrolments at Level 3 and above** (18,960 achievements) supporting access to higher value jobs and career progression.
- **9,720 enrolments on Level 2 and above construction courses** (7,800 achievements), expanding the pipeline into skilled and specialist construction careers.
- **2,051 teaching days delivered by industry professionals in FE settings**, strengthening teaching capacity and ensuring learning remains industry relevant.
- **7,899 industry placements**, providing learners with practical experience and clear routes into construction employment.

Colleges are already responding at pace. Plans for the 2026/27 academic year indicate over 70,000 enrolments at Level 1 and below. Delivery at Level 2 and Level 3 and above also represents a substantial increase, with more than 37,000 enrolments planned, compared with a 2024/25 baseline of just under 26,000 enrolments - an increase of over 11,400 enrolments.

Colleges will continue to deliver the outcomes set out in WMCA's Integrated Settlement Outcomes Framework. Given that delivery spans all priority areas, this approach will ensure outcomes are achieved collectively across each settlement priority.

Delivering the agreed outputs and outcomes requires a joint endeavour between WMCA and colleges. WMCA will continue to fund provision primarily through annual delivery plans. The annual delivery plans agreed between WMCA and each college will remain the primary mechanism through which funded activity, outputs and performance expectations are agreed. Participation in the Compact does not override the governance responsibilities of individual colleges, nor require delivery beyond that set out in the agreed delivery plan and funding agreement.

Looking ahead, any additional resources will be pooled and allocated through a clearer, more strategic process, with colleges submitting Expressions of Interest aligned to regional priorities to address sectoral or geographic gaps in participation and outcomes. Colleges will also be expected to submit timely monthly data to support effective planning, performance management, and accountability.

Key areas for collaboration

Areas for joint working

The partnership between WMCA and colleges is shaped by three shared commitments: **collaboration**, **innovation**, and **aspiration**, underpinned by a focus on **practical system leadership**.

Collaboration

Working together provides an opportunity to better connect schools, post-16 and post-19 provision, improve transitions for learners and support progression into further learning, into employment and in-work progression. This is particularly important in our region where too many residents fall between parts of the system often facing overlapping barriers that impact their ability to engage, attend and progress in learning and work. Working with Local Authorities, colleges' community reach also enables more consistent support for groups such as those young people at risk of becoming NEET.

A key part of this collaboration is strengthening how WMCA and colleges work with the West Midlands Growth Company and employers. Local Authorities and businesses, particularly SMEs, play a central role in shaping local skills needs and in creating opportunities such as work experience, apprenticeships and in-work progression routes. Sharing labour-market intelligence and employer insight will help ensure that provision reflects real demand and supports progression into and within work.

Innovation

Colleges already apply innovative approaches to teaching, learning and engagement. Through this Compact, partners will work together to apply innovation at a system level, for example by sharing practice, testing new approaches, minimising duplication, share resource and staff expertise and adapting provision in response to employer and community need.

Aspiration

By working collectively, WMCA and colleges can provide a clearer voice on regional skills priorities and influence national policy more effectively. This includes addressing issues such as short-term funding cycles, improving the transitions both in education and work, and ensuring the region's needs are reflected in national programmes.

Making it happen: our commitments

System leadership

The Compact sets out a practical approach to system leadership across the West Midlands. It aligns local delivery with the West Midlands Growth Plan and national priorities, helping colleges and WMCA work more consistently at local, regional and national levels. Partners commit to shared responsibility for regional priorities and to responding more effectively to the needs of employers. This includes using good data and employer insight to plan provision, adapt to changing labour-market needs, and support more coordinated delivery across the system.

Making it happen: Key Commitments

To deliver on these key commitments it will be critical that the WMCA and colleges are able to make a series of reciprocal commitments to each other. These are outlined in the following tables.

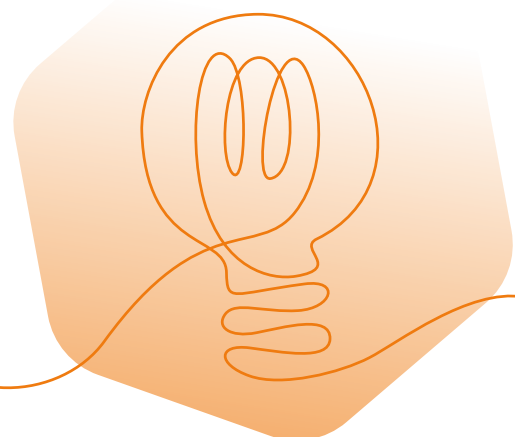


A: Co-develop effective strategies and plans to widen participation

WMCA commitments	College commitments
• Identify ways to maximise contribution of colleges to support delivery of the West Midlands Growth Plan ambitions. • Through West Midlands Growth Company, strengthen regional collaboration with business and education partners, providing sector and cluster intelligence to inform investment. • Work with colleges to understand and respond to factors that affect learner engagement, retention and completion.	• Work with Local Authorities to inspire and support local residents to engage with the wider skills system, driving increased participation and progression. • Meet employer demand by developing a responsive and relevant offer – ensuring residents are equipped to access emerging opportunities. • Improve progression into employment and further learning—particularly for residents in disadvantaged communities, including those facing additional barriers to participation.

B: Integrated approach to planning delivery

WMCA commitments	College commitments
• Work with colleges on long-term planning and develop region-wide strategic planning approaches on shared priorities. • Invest in innovation and capacity-building, taking a whole systems approach. Identify opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale and strategic resource allocation.	• Act as co-leaders in shaping regional skills strategy based on a shared understanding of wider regional planning, including working with Local Authorities and the wider skills system. • Align long term strategies with local and regional programmes and strategies, such as the Youth Employment Guarantee and local employment and skills strategies.



C: Develop and invest in place-based intervention

WMCA commitments	College commitments
• Consult with colleges as key stakeholders in place-based strategies and place-based budget setting processes across a range of WMCA activities. • Enable test and learn approaches to specialise/differentiate offer based on local strengths.	• Actively participate in place-based planning with local partners like WMCA, Local Authorities and other key stakeholders - and advocating for this approach across the region. • Serve local communities' specific needs while aligning with regional objectives, recognising the differing challenges learners experience in different places.

D: Share data to help joint understanding of our system

WMCA commitments	College commitments
• Share data, such as labour market insights drawn from local, national and regional sources. • Minimise duplication of reporting requirements by making maximum use of existing data wherever possible and ensure that requests for additional information are proportionate and aligned to agreed regional priorities.	• Provide relevant timely data each month on spending, outputs and outcomes for use in Multi Year Settlement performance and planning purposes. • Share data to help understand collective regional capacity on college capacity, learner demographics and learner progress and achievements (such as destination data and early leavers).*

E: Act as advocates for our places and region

WMCA commitments	College commitments
• Co-develop positions on strategy and policy. Advocate nationally on behalf of the region's FE system to articulate as one voice.	• Demonstrate innovation and excellence as national trailblazers so helping to put West Midlands FE on the national map.

* NOTE: All partners working within an agreed governance and legal frameworks for data management

Governance and Accountability

The Compact partnership represents a new approach to collaboration between the WMCA and regional colleges. This new model will be accompanied by a refreshed approach to governance and accountability, this will include:

- **Meeting practice:** to ensure effective collaboration, the partnership will meet quarterly, in person, with college Principals expected to attend directly rather than sending substitutes. Additionally, task and finish groups will be established to oversee the implementation of time-bound initiatives. WMCA will provide the secretariat function for these meetings.
- **Decision-making:** strategic oversight will be provided by the College Principals' Group, which will feed directly into the Mayoral Task Force for Skills and the West Midlands Works Board. This structure ensures that decisions are aligned with both educational priorities and regional economic strategies.
- **Duration and review cycle:** the Compact partnership will initially run up to 2029, with formal annual reviews to assess progress and establishing the annual workplan.
- **Shared knowledge and tools:** development and use of shared digital tools will be developed to enhance transparency and support long-term planning—enabling the tracking of provision and impact.

Colleges and WMCA recognise that institutions vary in size, learner volumes, specialisms, geography, capacity and funding allocations. Commitments within this Compact are therefore intended to be delivered on a proportionate basis, reflecting each college's strategic priorities, agreed delivery plan, expertise, resources and local context. Not all colleges will contribute equally to every priority area; however, all partners commit to supporting the overall objectives of the Compact through appropriate and meaningful participation.



Year 1 Priorities

These key principles will be used to establish a jointly developed annual workplan between WMCA and FE colleges, agreed each March, which will guide delivery and priorities for the following financial year.

WMCA and colleges will collectively support delivery of the Year 1 priorities, with the scale and nature of individual college contributions determined with consideration of institutional strategic priorities, available capacity and agreed delivery plans.

WMCA will take responsibility for programme oversight and will report progress, risks and delivery updates to the quarterly WMCA-College Principals meetings. In turn, colleges commit to enabling their staff to actively contribute to the joint delivery of these priorities, working alongside WMCA and other regional partners to ensure that activity is aligned, evidence-led and focused on improving outcomes for residents across the West Midlands.

Joint Commitments:

1. Digital and AI: WMCA and colleges will work together to embed digital adoption and AI enabled approaches across the design and delivery of skills provision. This will involve digital tools, data insights and new technologies to improve curriculum design, enhance teaching and learning, and strengthen progression pathways. By jointly testing, sharing and scaling digital and AI driven innovations, WMCA will support colleges to implement a future ready skills system for the West Midlands.
2. Construction: Colleges will work collaboratively with WMCA to help deliver the Mayor's action plan to create 4,000 opportunities a year for young people to enter the construction industry. Building on the Construction Skills Action plan, WMCA and Colleges will jointly foster and coordinate employer led pathways that support young people into apprenticeships, and sustained employment.
3. NEETs: Colleges will work together with WMCA and Local Authorities to clearly articulate their current and future potential role in reducing the number of NEET young people. Colleges will share insight on what works and identify where college-led action can have the greatest impact. They will also highlight where action is required from wider system partners. This approach will support WMCA to drive a fully integrated, region-wide strategy to prevent and reduce NEET levels.
4. Higher Level Skills: WMCA and colleges will work together to co design and implement a strategic action plan to expand and strengthen higher level skills (Levels 3+), ensuring that provision is fully aligned with the priorities of the West Midlands Growth Plan.
5. Data Sharing: Both WMCA and colleges commit to working together to find ways to improve the accuracy, completeness and timeliness of ILR returns, including colleges sharing ILR returns directly with WMCA to enable better planning, monitoring, evaluation and commissioning across the regional system. This will be undertaken within agreed legal, governance and data protection frameworks. In addition, colleges will share relevant data and insight with WMCA to support effective skills capital investment - helping the region understand current capacity, future demand, and where targeted investment can have the greatest impact on learner outcomes and economic growth.

West Midlands colleges

- Birmingham Metropolitan College
- City of Wolverhampton College
- Coventry College
- Dudley College of Technology
- Fircroft College of Adult Education
- Halesowen College
- Heart of Worcestershire College
- Hereward College of Further Education
- Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College
- Kidderminster College
- North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College
- Sandwell College
- Solihull College and University Centre
- South & City College Birmingham
- South Staffordshire College
- Telford College
- Walsall College
- Warwickshire College

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