

[Home](#) ▾ [Education, training and skills](#) ▾ [Further and higher education, skills and vocational training](#)
▾ [Further and higher education courses and qualifications](#)
▾ [Pathways to priority occupations: supporting post-16 education and skills](#)



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Policy paper

Pathways to priority occupations: a measure to support post-16 education

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Applies to England

Contents

[A skills system to support the Industrial Strategy](#)

[Identifying pathways to priority occupations in the priority sectors](#)

[Using the measure to support the skills system](#)

[Quality technical and vocational pathways to jobs](#)

[Next steps](#)

A skills system to support the Industrial Strategy

The [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#), published in October 2025, sets out

the government's plan to:

- educate and train the workforce of the future
- give people the skills and knowledge they need to succeed

Our vision is for a joined-up, targeted, and responsive system informed by national and local needs.

The [Industrial Strategy](#) sets out a 10-year plan for growing investment, productivity and economic resilience, focused on priority growth sectors^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)}, where the UK has strong potential and expects significant future workforce demand. This will create opportunities for people in communities across the country. We want to help people benefit from these opportunities, as well as support this government's commitment to reduce reliance on migration.

We need to ensure the skills system equips people - both young people and those already in the workforce - for the jobs that our economy most needs. This includes jobs supporting government's commitments to:

- build 1.5 million homes
- end hospital backlogs
- make Britain safer at home and abroad

Identifying pathways to priority occupations in the priority sectors

Skills England analysis indicates that the Industrial Strategy priority sectors, construction, and health and social care will need 1.8 million more workers in priority occupations through to 2035. Skills England have been refining this analysis and published new estimates in June 2026^{[\[footnote 2\]](#)}.

In the post-16 education and skills white paper, we committed to developing a new measure that monitors 'increasing starts in priority courses' mapped to Industrial Strategy priority sectors, construction, and health and social care.

Our ambition is to increase the proportion of learners starting pathways – courses and subjects – that are more likely to lead to priority occupations in priority growth sectors, and to reduce the number of vacancies attributed to skills shortages.

To measure progress, we identified the pathways that are most likely to lead to employment in these occupations based on mapping to occupational standards or historic progression to priority occupations.

By applying [this methodology used to develop the new measure](#) to the 2023 to 2024 cohort, we established a baseline of 616,000 starts on a pathway to a priority occupation, or 33% of all starts using:

- academic year starts for:
 - level 4 and above Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE)
 - full level 2 and 3 FE
 - apprenticeships
 - T Levels
- financial year starts for skills bootcamps

Proportion of starts in priority pathways by provision type, 2023 to 2024

Pathway	Percentage
Level 4 and above	32%
Full level 2 or 3	19%
Apprenticeships	45%
T-levels	60%
Skills bootcamp	70%
Total	33%

Source: Department for Education (DfE) estimates based on Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and higher level learners data for England

This high-level measure allows us to assess the overall trend in learners starting pathways with strong alignment to priority sectors. We recognise that while a backward-looking measure on progression into priority occupations is a strong indicator of future career outcomes, it is not a definitive predictor. We will continue to refine our analysis in partnership with Skills England, using responsive data and

insights to reflect evolving evidence and trends.

Using the measure to support the skills system

This measure is one lens through which we will assess our success in achieving the aims set out in the post-16 education and skills white paper. These were:

- aiming for two-thirds (66.7%) of young people to participate in higher-level learning - academic, technical, or apprenticeships - by age 25, including a sub-target of at least 10% of young people going into level 4 or 5 study, including apprenticeships, by 2040
- measuring the proportion of skills shortage vacancies in priority sectors
- having 6,500 more teachers across colleges, mainstream secondary schools and specialist schools across this Parliament
- measuring the percentage of 16 to 21-year-olds in either classroom-based education and training, or a job which provides skills training, to help reduce the not in education, employment or training (NEET) rate

This measure will help us to identify where we need to go further on:

- supply of training
- take-up of training
- progression pathways into jobs

It will also help us understand where we need a clearer signal of demand from employers to attract more learners to these priority pathways. Where we have high numbers of starts on pathways but poor progression to priority occupations, we will explore the causes of this as part of jobs plans and working with mayoral strategic authorities on local skills improvement plans.

The post-16 education and skills white paper commits government and Skills England to target public funding to increase skills provision in priority sectors to meet employer and economic need. We are investing £295 million over the course of this Parliament into Technical Excellence Colleges (TECs) in:

- digital and technologies

- clean energy
- advanced manufacturing
- defence

We have announced sector packages to support the talent pipeline through to jobs in the sectors of:

- construction
- digital
- defence
- engineering

The £625 million construction package will deliver an additional 60,000 construction workers over this Parliament. The £182 million defence package will boost the talent pipeline for this industry.

This new measure will help to inform how funding can be targeted to support future skills needs and the Industrial Strategy, as well as the wider objectives set out in the post-16 education and skills white paper. For instance, recent reforms to the [Growth and Skills Levy](#) aim to:

- support rapid upskilling in priority areas through new apprenticeship units
- create more opportunities for young people and reverse the decline in apprenticeship starts amongst young people

Quality technical and vocational pathways to jobs

Our vision for reforming 16 to 19 technical and vocational education is centred on creating clearer, more coherent pathways that enable young people to progress confidently into skilled work or further study^{[\[footnote 3\]](#)}.

The introduction of new Occupational and Foundation Certificates at level 2, new V Levels and the expansion of T Levels at level 3, will help students understand their options earlier and choose routes that match their ambitions.

V Levels will be linked to occupational standards set by Skills England, ensuring they

are relevant to employers and have clear progression into further study, skilled employment or an apprenticeship.

We are introducing new T Levels in more subject areas, and making improvements to existing T Levels, so more students benefit from their strong outcomes.

Two new level 2 pathways provide distinct routes to progression for students:

- Foundation Certificates lead to further study at level 3
- Occupational Certificates lead to skilled level 2 employment

Next steps

We expect this measure to support partners in the skills system by:

- for **learners**, improving the data underpinning information, advice and guidance on pathways that can lead to employment in priority sectors
- for **providers**, providing information to support decisions on provision and specialisation, alongside local skills improvement plans and other priorities
- for **employers**, providing key insights on the supply of learners in pathways to priority occupations, informing industry and sector-led discussions about where more can be done to attract achievers to these priority occupations
- for **local government**, supporting the design and implementation of local skills improvement plans

We expect to update the output of the measure annually. We will provide further analysis (for example, on the learner cohort and place-based participation) in future publications.

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1. The priority sectors are the 8 sectors offering the highest growth opportunity for the economy and employers, as set out in the Industrial Strategy: advanced manufacturing, clean energy industries, creative industries, defence, digital and technologies, financial services, life sciences, and professional and business services; and housebuilding and health and adult social care, where skilled workforces will be critical in delivering 1.5 million homes and ending hospital backlogs. [↩](#)
 2. [Skills England annual skills report and sectoral skills needs assessments 2026](#) [↩](#)

3. [Post-16 education and skills white paper](#) and [Post-16 level 3 and below pathways: government consultation response](#) ↩

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