

Eurocities WG Employment Meeting Bristol

12.11.2025-13.11.2025 | Critical Friend Review Report



Figure 1 - Participants visiting Temple Quarter in Bristol

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Introduction

Improving equity of outcomes in employment:

The aim of the Employment Working Group meeting in Bristol in November 2025 was to discuss and evaluate Bristol City Council's Employment, Skills and Lifelong Learning Service (ESL) through a Critical Friend Review.

In order to review Bristol's ESL service, participants were invited to focus on one of four areas:

- A. Achieving inclusive employment for Disabled People and those with Health Conditions
- B. Supporting unemployed and NEET young people into education, training and employment
- C. Engaging with employers to improve the skills pipeline in construction and green skills
- D. Supporting migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, so they can progress to employment and thrive in their community

Study visits were conducted at various sites around the city where the service is having an impact, and participants were asked to bring their insights to discuss, challenge and review these areas.

The Critical Friend Review method involves:

- Preparation – Writing descriptions of the sites to be reviewed based on topics set by the host city. Roles are also assigned to reviewees.
- Interviews – The core activity of the review. The interviews are based on a brief description prepared by the host city and the inquisitiveness of the reviewers.
- Analysis and Feedback - Each group analyses its interviews using a SWOT analysis and a plus/delta analysis in which the strong elements and suggestions for improvement are listed, based on the experience and expertise of the reviewers.
- Reporting and Dissemination – Based on the preparatory materials, the SWOT analysis and the plus/delta analysis and the feedback of both reviewers and reviewees, the host city writes up the results from the CFR (documentation) and shares it with the reviewees (host sites).

[EUROCITIES Critical Friend Review Handbook.pdf](#)

Study Visit A: Achieving inclusive employment for Disabled People and those with Health Conditions

Study Visit Location: Wellspring Settlement Site, 43 Ducie Rd, Barton Hill, Bristol BS5 0AX

Briefing Document: [Achieving Inclusive employment for Disabled People and those with Health Conditions CRF.pdf](#)

Supporting Materials: [WorkWell Eurocities Visit 13th November 2025.pptx](#)

Staff:

- Paul Gaunt – Employment Support Manager
- James Bruton – WorkWell West Programme Managers

Partners:

- Laurence Ross – Learning and Change Manager – Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board
- Emma Heath – GP Liaison Officer – Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board
- Rebecca Keating – Work and Health Strategy Lead - – Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board
- James Bruton – WorkWell Programme Manager
- Adrian Wieteska and Sarah Freeman – WorkWell Work and Health Coaches
- Charlie Hartley – Hodge and Julie Matthews – VCSE Alliance
- Somali Resource Centre

Service Users:

A visit to the Somali Resource Centre to discuss WorkWell West with our service users engaged through partnerships with the voluntary sector.

Study Visit Agenda:

The Eurocities delegation assembled at the Wellspring Settlement, a community building which is located in one of Bristol's most disadvantaged areas, Lawrence Hill. The objective was to find out more about the strategy and delivery behind WorkWell West through presentations, discussion and interviews to inform the Critical Friend Review

WorkWell West is a programme that works with people who have either lost their job or are at risk of losing it because of their recent health condition. It provides them with the help to maintain or enter paid employment whilst managing their health condition. www.workwellwest.org

Agenda

Time	Detail
10am	Arrival and Welcome Jane Taylor
10.05	<u>Workwell</u> overview and highlights – Laurence Ross and Paul Gaunt
10.15	GP Liaison and VCSE engagement – Emma Heath
10.25	Developing the Work and Health Strategy – Rebecca Keating
10.35	Questions and Answers
10.45	Site visit to the Somali Centre to speak with their Health and Employment Officers funded through WorkWell and to meet some clients
11.15	Discussion - All
12.00	Close of session

After a welcome from Jane Taylor, (Head of Service for Employment, Skills and Lifelong Learning at Bristol City Council, the group found out more about the WorkWell West programme, the Government strategy behind funding it, and the collaboration between the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board, (Health), Bristol City Council, (Lead Accountable Body), and the partnerships between governmental and voluntary sector organisations. Information about the demographics and presenting health conditions were also shared.

Discussions moved on to how WorkWell integrates its services with the Health Ecosystem through working with doctors and other health related support functions. This was then linked in strategically through the work that is being undertaken within the region join up work with health.

After a short Q&A session the group moved on to visit the Somali Centre and find out more about the work within the Somali community that WorkWell is undertaking. After a brief overview with the service manager and Employability Coach, there was an opportunity to hear from a participant, (a Somali) who had a muscular skeletal condition that was preventing her from working. She also felt isolated.

The group heard how her WorkWell Work and Health Coach signposted the participant to the Somali Centre who had been commissioned by WorkWell to run a targeted programme of support. Furthermore she also received a free pass to her local swimming pool to enable her to exercise more as well as advice on how to manage her health condition whilst in work. Through her work with WorkWell and the Somali Centre the participant has successfully returned to work.

Following the visit, the group returned to have an open discussion with participation from all of those in attendance, (see above). Areas under discussion included:

1. Employers and in work – How are you working with employers / improving employers policies to be more inclusive for people with disabilities / health conditions?

2. Barriers to outreach – What is your experience of the many barriers to outreach for disabled people and those with health conditions?
3. Languages – How do we engage with communities where there are barriers with languages?
4. How have you helped Doctors and GPs to support residents through more holistic approaches rather than just clinical solutions?
5. Changing mindsets – How do we change people’s mindsets that they cannot work with certain health condition to take up support and make changes?
6. How do you support / work with residents at risk of losing their jobs?
7. Customer experience – what is the client experience and how do we monitor impact / experience?
8. Whole system integration and change... How are you aiming to achieve it?

Critical Friend Review Feedback:

Strengths

1. **Integrated model:** Our collaborative approach was viewed as a strength because we have created an integrated team where both health and employment staff sit alongside each other and integrates with our wider supply chain of specialist health and employability providers. Note: Since the Eurocities visit we have won the Collaboration category of the South West Regional Integrated Personalised Care Awards which is an endorsement of our collaborative and integrated model.
2. **Person Centred Approach:** Our model of delivery takes a person-centred approach to supporting both the health condition management and employability requirements of the individual into consideration. Through the model we can offer services such as physiotherapy, counselling and social prescribing activities alongside helping people to gain and thrive in employment.
3. **Links with health services:** The links with local doctor surgeries and frontline health related referral pathways was viewed as a strength and we have received additional funding to further integrate our services into the web based patient solutions platform used by medical professionals.
4. **Links with voluntary sector:** It was recognised that our links with voluntary sector organisations are a strength, not only as a referral pathway into the programme, but as a route to be able to provide a wide variety of social prescribing and sustainable health and wellbeing activities for our participants

5. **Varied referral pathways:** It is a strength that we are not dependent upon one single referral pathway into WorkWell. Our referral pathways include Local Authority frontline services, medical professionals, social prescribers, (voluntary sector), the Department for Work and Pensions, our comprehensive outreach and event activities, online / social media as well self-referral.

Weaknesses

1. **Work and Health Coach Capacity:** The capacity of our Work and Health Coaches was viewed as a weakness. Whilst we originally envisaged caseloads of 40 per coach, in some circumstances this has been as high as 60 active participants in any one moment in time.
2. **Single Point of Failure:** The team only have one expert Health Liaison Officer and the capacity to expand our integration with the health ecosystem at an operational level would benefit from additional capacity in this area. The team would face a significant risk to their model if this expert left their role.
3. **Extension Funding:** At the time of the visit of the Eurocities delegation we had not received any formal notification of any extension to the programme post March 2026. This has created a level of uncertainty in our staff, the majority of whom are on fixed term contracts of employment. Note: since the Critical Friend Review visit, we have received notification of a 3 year extension to the programme from 1st April 2026 and we are currently planning our phase 2 delivery of the service

Opportunities

1. **Voluntary sector 'the way we do things' framework:** It was felt that we would benefit from strengthening the role of the voluntary sector organisations and their links and contributions to employment and health services, and across wider ESL services. VCSE organisations have a valuable skills set that could be used to strengthen our system and approach. Commissioners just give out money. How do we shift the relationship so it is more equal, including co-production of a collaborative framework and plan? This could ultimately increase our inward referral rate and enable us to build a stronger joined up approach to offering the best quality person centred service.
2. **Employer engagement and offer:** Our employer engagement is still at an early stage of development and whilst we have made inroads, we still have a long way to go on this journey. We need employers to support our clients through the development of inclusive recruitment and in work support policies – including work tasters, supported internships and apprenticeships. We are currently planning for the second phase and will be making changes to our delivery model to accommodate this.

3. **Development of a clearer customer journey:** In addition to the high-level strategy, delegates would have found it useful to be presented with a typical WorkWell customer journey. This could be used as part of future presentations and could also help partners and participants to understand the WorkWell offer more clearly.
4. **Stronger locality working:** There is huge scope for the WorkWell service to be more fully integrated within key neighbourhoods and localities. During the visit, the team learned about the Manchester City Council Work Clubs that have been established in partnership with community-based partners. With the NHS moving to a stronger neighbourhood model of health, this is something that the team want to explore further.
5. **DWP Workforce Development:** There is an opportunity for the WorkWell team to feed into the workforce development of DWP – including the key principles and WorkWell approach. This could strengthen the work of job coaches across the system – regarding these frontline roles as part of one team.

Threats

1. **Future Sustainability:** At the time of the visit, the main threat was the loss of the service if the grant funding from central government stops. Whilst three year extension funding has been confirmed, we have been notified that when this funding ends, partners will be expected to integrate the activities of WorkWell into the “business as usual” activities of the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board. Considering the anticipated funding pressures across the health system in the short and medium term, it is therefore important that we start our planning process for full-service integration as part of our planning for the second phase of WorkWell.

PLUS

1. **Integrated approach (e.g. one stop shop):** WorkWell West is powered by a unique and ambitious partnership between BNSSG ICB, Bristol City Council, and an exceptional network of 16 VCSE organisations. What makes this model different is its brokerage approach: The Council’s Employment Support Team provides and also links to a wide range of specialist employment support, VCSE partners deliver tailored, community-rooted interventions, while NHS and local authority teams provide clinical expertise and strategic oversight. This cross-sector working approach is practical, relational, and built on deep trust.
2. **Person-centred approach:** The WorkWell West Project is an example of organisations working as one system, united by a shared purpose: helping people move toward meaningful activity, volunteering, and employment through personalised, compassionate support. The person centred support offered is unique to each participant
3. **Link with GPs/health network/VCSE:** What began in South Bristol and the Inner City now reaches communities across Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset. This growth has been made possible by strengthened partnerships with Primary Care, Job Centre Plus,

Health Pathways, and a VCSE sector whose contribution is able to support the diverse, individual needs of participants.

DELTA

- 1. Strengthen our Employer Engagement:** Whilst we have established relationships with employers, this is still in its infancy and needs to be further developed.
- 2. Building on connections/skills of VCSE sector with GPs/health:** Workwell has developed a strong collaborative approach with clinical, health and employment support partners however this is on an operational level. This now needs to be further developed strategically through the adoption of a Work and Health Plan for the region.
- 3. Capacity/ Sustainability of work + health coaches:** Caseloads for Work and Health Coaches are currently high. There are also concerns about delays by the National DWP in formally announcing the anticipated next phase of WorkWell is causing uncertainty amongst our staff, leading to a risk that they will seek alternative employment.

The planning for the next phase of WorkWell will enable us to revisit our workforce, create roles and a delivery model that build upon the learning from the first phase

Areas for further development

1. Build upon our connections and skills of the voluntary sector and their contribution to the health ecosystem
2. To further strengthen our employer engagement and offer
3. Develop and utilise a clear WorkWell customer journey to promote wider understanding of the service
4. To review the WorkWell team structure, including the capacity and sustainability of our Work and Health Coaches and the potential to create a second Health Liaison role.
5. Ensure that medium to long term integration across work and health services is considered as part of the development of the next phase of the WorkWell programme.

Next Steps:

1. Following on from our session at the Somali Centre with the Eurocities Delegation we have decided to host a similar Critical Friend Review with our Programme Board, partners, stakeholders and funders. This, combined with the feedback from our European colleagues will feed into our planning for the second phase of WorkWell, commencing 1st April 2026 and lasting for a further three years.
2. During our group discussions the VCSE partners spoke about their links with community health services. It was recommended that we co-develop a 'the way we do things with the VCSE sector' framework to strengthen our partnership approach, improve our reach into diverse communities and enable more sustainable health and wellbeing improvements across our most vulnerable communities.

3. We are seeking to strengthen our employer engagement and are planning to restructure the work of our delivery team to:
 - a. Broaden our referrals from local employers
 - b. Strengthen employer in work support for people with health conditions as they transition into work and progress in work – including the provision of in work mentoring, work tasters and paid internships.
 - c. Enable us to increase the level of support for our participants who are in work through working directly with their employees by providing advice on reasonable adjustments
 - d. Provide an “employer voice” in the development of our regional Work and Health Strategy.
4. The work that we have undertaken with General Practice (GP) doctor surgeries across the region was seen to be a success as was our integration with other locally delivered health support such as Pain Clinics and Health Screening Days however the capacity of our existing GP Liaison Officer is already stretched. We will therefore create an additional role within our WorkWell team to further integrate our work with the Health Ecosystem.
5. The use of case studies to bring programmes to life was discussed and we are seeking to increase the use of these together with creating short videos of participants describing their journey with WorkWell for use through digital and social media channels
6. We are planning to hold further conversations with Greater Manchester about their work in the Work and Health sector and especially to focus on their experience of creating 17 local “Work Clubs” across the region with a view to introducing neighbourhood level delivery ourselves.

Study Visit B: Supporting unemployed and NEET young people into education, training and employment

Study Visit Location: The Park Centre, Daventry Rd, Bristol BS4 1DQ

Briefing Document: [Supporting unemployed and NEET young people CFR Briefing.pdf](#)

Supporting Materials: [Supporting NEET young people Eurocities Session 13th November 2025.pptx](#)

Staff:

- David Harrigan – Post 16 & NEET Reduction Manager
- Karen Blong - Project Manager
- Faye Johnson & Nikki Maloney - Employer Account Manager
- Sarah Bhagotra - Development Worker

Partners:

- Sarah Minter – Tutor at HWV
- Zak Dugdale – Youth Moves
- Charlotte Fife – Square Food Foundation
- Rebecca Porter & Dawn Jevons – Galliford Try

Service Users:

A visit to the classroom where the Youth Guarantee employability training course is delivered.

Study Visit Agenda:

We hosted delegates from Finland and Spain who were taken to The Park Centre (Daventry Road) for the delivery of a presentation from members of the South Bristol Youth Guarantee. This was a good chance them to hear first hand from those who are delivering the project.

The agenda covered:

Overview of Youth Guarantee – its purpose, delivery model, strengths, challenges, and emerging learning.

Programme details – employability course, work tasters, case studies.

Partner engagement – visits to Youth Moves and Square Food Foundation, plus employer insights from Galliford Try.

Impact and evaluation – progress metrics, success stories, and future plans.

Group discussion – reflections and recommendations.

The study visit began with a presentation by Karen Blong, and this included why we chose South Bristol and the implementation of the programme delivery and this was supported by Faye Johnson and Sarah Bhagotra.

Sarah then showcased the neurodiversity training she developed for participants as part of the 4-week employability programme. This was a key element of the agenda because we wanted to share our experience of working with a high number of participants presenting with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or undiagnosed SEN. Sarah explained how the programme adapted to meet these needs across different cohorts, reinforcing the importance of tailoring delivery to individual participant requirements.

Galliford Try attended the entire event and showcased the strong partnership we have built with them. They highlighted how these relationships are critical for creating work tasters and employment opportunities for participants. A video was shared featuring one participant's journey through the Trailblazer programme, providing a powerful, real-life example of impact. Following this, Galliford Try visited the classroom and spoke with the tutor, who gave an in-depth overview of programme delivery, its significance, and the challenges faced. Delegates were able to ask questions about effective strategies for engaging participants. As this was a new cohort, some participants were less comfortable interacting with delegates due to complex personal barriers.

The visit continued with a tour of The Park, including a stop at Square Food Foundation, a key delivery partner providing work tasters. They spoke about the needs of South Bristol residents and the vital role programmes like ours play in supporting families. They also shared positive feedback on participant engagement during work tasters.

Next, delegates met with Youth Moves, who discussed the upcoming Youth Zone in South Bristol. They explained how this space will support young people by offering dedicated areas for professionals and support networks, enabling participants to access a wide range of services. Youth Moves also presented their Youth Voice Project, which aims to capture and amplify young people's perspectives across five key themes:

1. Experiences of services supporting education, skills, and employment
2. Feedback on what young people need and expect from these services
3. Aspirations for future education, training, and employment pathways
4. Perspectives on employment and career opportunities
5. Insights into the transition process at age 16, including courses, apprenticeships, or employment

Critical Friend Review Feedback:

Strengths

1. **Team Commitment and Collaboration:** Delegates highlighted the exceptional commitment of the team as a core strength of the programme. They noted how individual team members worked collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for participants, demonstrating a shared sense of purpose and adaptability.
2. **Effective Use of Data:** Our approach to data was praised for its effectiveness and transparency. Delegates valued the collaborative data-sharing process between council teams, DWP, and other stakeholders. This whole-team approach ensures a complete picture of participant needs before engagement, enabling tailored support. Importantly, data is used as a tool to empower participants rather than as a barrier.
3. **Strong Employer Relationships:** The relationship-building efforts of our Placement and Progression Managers were identified as a major strength. Delegates appreciated how work tasters were aligned with participants' interests, improving engagement and outcomes. Employers were briefed on potential barriers and supported to mitigate these, fostering trust and leading to success stories—many participants progressed into apprenticeships or employment.

Weaknesses

1. **Limited Mental Health Support:** A growing number of participants present with mental health concerns, but there is a shortage of professionals to provide adequate support. This was acknowledged as a national issue. We shared how we have funded counselling and art therapy sessions, which have been well-received by participants.
2. **Rigid Post-16 Funding Rules:** Delegates identified the lack of flexibility in Post-16 funding as a significant risk. Young people who leave education after enrolment struggle to re-enter, increasing the likelihood of remaining NEET. While programmes like Boost Your Future and Trailblazer help bridge this gap, the absence of provision until September creates challenges. We discussed alternative pathways such as employment and apprenticeships, supported by additional training opportunities like the CSCS card **course, which has led to successful employment outcomes.**

Opportunities

1. **Expanding the Model:** Delegates saw potential in applying the Trailblazer model to other age groups, such as over-55s, to help them re-enter employment.
2. **Engaging New Stakeholders:** Building an alumni network of employers who have successfully supported participants could help attract new stakeholders and secure additional work placements. Delegates also suggested incentivising employers through initiatives like a Social Responsibility Award, which could be showcased on websites and used in council procurement processes.

3. **Accreditation and Celebration:** Aligning the employability programme with accreditation (e.g., AQA Unit Awards) would add value for participants. Hosting celebration events with employers could strengthen relationships and encourage repledging for future work tasters.
4. **Employer Funding Pledges:** Exploring ways for employers to pledge funding for workforce development could help sustain the programme with limited public funding.

Threats

1. **Funding Constraints:** The finite, one-year funding model poses a significant threat. Delegates stressed the need to use resources effectively and adapt the test-and-learn approach in Year Two to increase enrolment and support sustained progression into education, employment, or training.
2. **Economic Downturn:** A potential economic downturn could reduce available roles and employer engagement, while increasing demand for support. This scenario could overwhelm coaches and challenge programme delivery.
3. **Programme Sustainability:** To maintain engagement and attract new participants, we must continue promoting opportunities, capturing impactful case studies, and showcasing success stories to resonate with potential candidates and employers.

PLUS

1. Effective engagement and working with employers
2. Coordination across the post 16 and employment and skills system
3. All are engaged to the program, no exceptions - everybody is connected
4. There is a strong commitment to the young people
5. Companies are matched, quality is good because the need and interests of the employer and young jobseeker are matched
6. Provision of accessible skills for work and life
7. Strong pathway thinking and development

DELTA

1. Funding restriction on age - only 17-21 years
2. After the project, how to put it in action without extra money?
3. Consideration of how young people can be supported to achieve formal qualifications
4. How to keep good strategic, tactical, and operational interaction going?
5. Finding ways to increase the number of companies engaged and providing inclusive opportunities?
6. Incentive to the companies – utilising the social responsibility label

Next Steps:

What will you do with this feedback? What are your next steps?

The feedback from the delegates has been invaluable and will directly inform our test-and-learn approach for Year Two of the Trailblazer programme. Based on the insights gathered, we will focus on the following actions:

1. Celebration Event and Employer Engagement

- Host a celebration event with employers and participants who have successfully transitioned into employment or apprenticeships.
- Showcase success stories and participant journeys to inspire future engagement.
- Use this event to launch our Social Value Badge, which employers can display on their websites and use in council procurement processes as part of their social value contribution.
- Invite employers to become programme champions, helping us build a stronger network of businesses offering work tasters and employment opportunities.

2. Strengthening Employer Partnerships

- Work with employers to reserve roles for participants and align recruitment pipelines with programme timelines.
- Support employers in reducing recruitment challenges by training and preparing young people for upcoming roles.
- Combine this preparation with two-week work tasters, ensuring the right fit for both participants and employers.

3. Programme Development and Sustainability

- Explore accreditation opportunities (e.g., AQA Unit Awards) for participants completing the 4-week programme, adding value and recognition to their efforts.
- Investigate employer funding pledges to help sustain the programme and create a trained workforce ready for everyday economy roles.
- Continue to capture and share case studies to promote the programme and attract new participants and employers.

4. Addressing Identified Risks

- Expand partnerships with mental health professionals and creative therapy providers to meet the growing need for participant support.
- Advocate for greater flexibility in Post-16 funding rules while continuing to develop alternative pathways into employment and apprenticeships.
- Monitor economic trends and prepare contingency plans to maintain employer engagement and participant support in the event of an economic downturn.

Study Visit C: Engaging with employers to improve the skills pipeline in construction and green skills

Study Visit Location: Temple Quarter Hub, 1 Temple Studios, Temple Gate, Bristol, BS1 6QA

Briefing Document: [Employer Engagement in Construction and Green Skills CFR Briefing Document.pdf](#)

Supporting Materials: [Employer Engagement Eurocities Session 13th November 2025.pptx](#)

Staff:

- Darren Perkins – Apprenticeships Manager, On Site Bristol
- Donna Woodland – Building Bristol Coordinator

Partners:

- Councillor Andrew Brown – Local Councillor and Chair of Economy and Skills Board
- Clem Teagle - Bristol Temple Quarter LLP
- Kerry Cruden – Sir Robert McAlpine PLC
- David Dibble – Partners in Bristol

Study Visit Agenda:

- Visit to the New University Campus to view Temple Quarter (development in progress)
- Welcome to the Temple Quarter Hub
- Our journey – On Site Bristol 1996 onwards
- Introduction to Building Bristol
- How we work; Other ESL Services links
- Post 16 team – 16/18 CSCS course – Restoring Futures
- What is Temple Quarter
- Case Study – Kerry Cruden, Sir Robert McAlpine
- Supporting the Sector CSCS Course– Dave Dibble, Partners in Bristol (City of Bristol College)
- Questions and review

Delegates were escorted to Sir Robert McAlpine's development adjacent to Bristol Temple Meads station and the gateway project for Bristol Temple Quarter's construction redevelopment project. Site Management team gave a talk on the site, the construction project itself, construction workforce and materials/designs in use. This was from a 12m high viewing platform which also then gave a vista of the Bristol Temple Quarter area. Delegates were able to field questions and then were escorted to Bristol Temple Quarter Hub where Donna Woodland led a presentation to highlight how Building Bristol operates - the context in terms of Planning Law; creation of Employment, Skills and Learning plans and how this links to Social Value and Bristol Temple Quarter's Charter etc. Darren Perkins provided a potted history of On Site Bristol from a local labour initiative to apprenticeship training provider. In addition Darren gave an overview of Mission

Net Zero, a demonstration project which is working to identify means of preparing the extensive supply chain for modern decarbonised methods of construction, energy generation and heating supply. Kerry Cruden gave Sir Robert McAlpine's take on the effectiveness of Building Bristol in assisting developers to achieve their Corporate Social responsibility aims and planning obligations. David Dibble concluded the presentation by describing the pre-employment training for construction roles that are delivered within the BTQ Hub to assist access to jobs and local labour. This was followed by an extensive question and answer session where delegates variously explored themes such as:

Legal framework and how public sector leverages contracts to improve outcomes and ensures compliance – need to share BB background planning information, BTQ Charter and Inclusive Growth Strategy plus Employment, Skills and Lifelong Learning Strategy

Measures to monitor outcomes – especially employment and upskilling?

How is the local skills and employment system coordinated and how do businesses, individuals access support/find opportunities? Strategically how do you scope skills provision and upgrade training to meet future needs?

How is the strategy formed and who leads it, how do key partners engage at a strategic level? Are there City-wide fora?

What are the key challenges of engaging the construction industry? Any unique local challenges and/or ongoing structural issues e.g. reliance on SME sub-contracted labour

Critical Friend Review Feedback:

Strengths

- Established long term, sustainable relationships which leads to employer commitment – 29 year history of On Site Bristol as a collaborative skills and employment project supporting construction
- Political support - alignment between different authorities – assists wider ownership of challenges and ongoing supporting strategies
- Sense of joint responsibility rather than competition
- Legislation helps to place a responsibility on employer – Building Bristol as an operational element of The Local Plan provides scope for greater levels of influence of construction industry
- Willingness to do a lot of outreach - not waiting for others to act – this relates to On Site Bristol's active engagement which is well resourced with schools and other institutions which primes candidates for cross sector opportunities
- Integration of skills and employment plans at the beginning of planning projects – recent developments already showing the benefits of this nascent approach

Weaknesses

- Lack of discussion about the relevance of the skills that are being targeted
- Engagement felt very project-led and we didn't get a sense of strategic level discussion/forums beyond those around the charter
- Foresighting - could help to plan for the future better – given strengths mentioned group felt BCC, WECA and BTQ could convene with industry to better influence future provision (and the decisions around funding.
- Engagement did not feel like it was focussed on co-design or improving the system for small businesses in particular - recognises that strategic decisions and discussions around need have focussed on needs of major players and somehow voice of SMEs is not fully represented – recognised in apprenticeships a wider systemic issue
- Didn't get a sense of the type of data being collected/Hard to get data from (many!) subcontractors
- Many operational KPIs (=+) but no long term "employment" monitoring - in some areas there is a very strong focus on date e.g. in Lyons LA maps the movement of people from unemployment to employment.

Opportunities

- Could involve the university more to determine what is needed for the future - if you monitor more, you could plan better and e.g. addressing high-level skills gaps

Threats

- The provision may not be fit for future workforce challenges
- Activity seems very dependent on government support e.g. apprenticeship funding and no mandate for employer funded initiatives
- No legal basis to enforce - reliant on goodwill of employers – although Building Bristol is designed to operate within the Planning framework and helps developers fulfil pre start planning conditions there appeared little or no appetite to undertake enforcement
- Financial threat if legislation changes
- What if neighbouring cities implement something similar but different? A question of how supra Regional coordination might benefit from consistent approaches – included a discussion on Welsh vs English system given Newport/Cardiff proximity and also e.g. Swindon
- Willingness to do a lot of outreach - not waiting for others to act
- Integration of skills and employment plans at the beginning of planning projects

PLUS

- "Plug and Play" system: new firms/people can easily fit in
- The core is great, keep this going - LT relationships, political support, legislation, structure, outreach, get involved in planning phase

Overall, the group felt there were great strengths in how Building Bristol has been structured and how it has great capacity for a much more strategic role in future.

DELTA

- Greater focus on outcomes/impact of provision
- Better and broader data collection - do foresighting, do an impact analysis - prove that what you do matters/makes a difference
- You have a great operational ecosystem, but try to build a strategic ecosystem as well - with stakeholders

Next Steps:

On first reading in this format one would imagine this analysis to be quite disheartening with weaknesses seemingly outweighing strengths. However, the delegates we worked with here were great Critical Friends and have provided us with great insight about how we need to develop Building Bristol for the future – including using external support to develop a clearer framework of accountability based upon well-judged KPIs and strategic partnerships where BCC/Building Bristol are not simply an operational high quality partner but also exert greater influence especially in demanding system change.

As a result, we will (not necessarily in this order)

1. Review data collection, other sources of data such as ONS, MCA and LA to identify new KPIs and/or expand or change existing with 1. Outcomes focus and 2. Consideration as to how they could impact on future
2. Consider how these KPIs and/or the data we hold could help form a strategic plan
3. Explore possibility of joint working either within existing structures e.g. One City Partnership, Economy & Skills Board or others in order to be better placed to influence future skills, employment and training activities
4. Share our existing documentation with Critical Friends for further feedback and discussion (may necessitate a trip or 2!)

Study Visit D: Supporting migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, so they can progress to employment and thrive in their community

Study Visit Location: Future Inn Bristol, Bond Street, BS1 3EN

Briefing Document: [Support for migrants so they can progress to employment and thrive CFR Briefing.pdf](#)

Supporting Materials:

[ACH Presentation Eurocities.pptx](#)

[SPoC - EuroCities presentation.pptx](#)

Staff:

- Angela Marshall – Adult & Community Learning Manager
- Charly Ramuz – Team Leader, ESOL
- Richard Davies – Development Worker for Central/East and Move In Move On Move Up
- Mark Newman – Post 16 Career Coach
- Edwina Provansal – Development Worker – Community Refugee ESOL Programme
- Adeela Cheema – ESOL tutor
- Taghreed Al Sharifi – ESOL LSA

Partners:

- Ann James – Sanctuary Service manager Bristol City Council
- Dr. Jill Court – Senior Research and Policy Lead at ACH (Bristol - ACH)
- Julia Dixon-Barrow – Entrepreneurship and employer Engagement Manager ACH

Service Users:

- 15 learners attending the Thursday morning Pre-entry ESOL class at Quakers Friars Meeting House

Study Visit Agenda:

[Link to agenda.](#)

Critical Friend Review Feedback:

Strengths

1. **ESOL Network** – The ESOL Network is made up of a range of stakeholders from across the region (Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire and Bath and North East Somerset) interested in ensuring immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have the opportunity to learn English. It is attended by representatives from local colleges, Adult Skills Funded organisations such as Adult and Community Learning and ACH and voluntary sector organisations who such as BRASC also offer legal support and organise wellbeing, orientation and community building activities. The Network meets 3 or 4 times a year and aims to

ensure courses do not overlap or duplicate and ensure a wide range of different opportunities to meet the differing needs of those with English as an additional language. Other stakeholders including the West of England Combined Authority, employers, employment support teams and the Department for Work and Pension have attended to look at employment and funding. This keeps all stakeholders talking to each other across the region and although the funding streams and legislation result in a fragmented system the Network allows stakeholders to recognise this and work better together to mitigate issues where possible. One of its solutions to understanding what courses are available for learners is the Learn in [English in the West of England](#) website. Which Stakeholders, including learners can use to identify possible courses to attend.

2. **Inclusivity/Access to Service and Creative Use of Funding:** The ESOL network as described helps to ensure the courses available offer a wide enough range of opportunities to meet the needs of those wanting to learn English. The group also talked about funding and legislation for other areas of people's lives, including housing and health. Again it was recognised that the systems are fragmented, inconsistent and complex. For example, the resettlement schemes for Syrians, Afghans, Ukrainians and those from Hong Kong are all different, offering different levels of support to different nationalities. However, it was noted that the Sanctuary Team in Bristol value inclusivity and accessibility for everyone and as such use funding as creatively as they can to ensure everyone has access to and can included in the services available in a fair and consistent way.
3. **Welcoming and supportive environment:** The group visited a community class for refugees and asylum seekers who have been housed in the city and no longer live in hotels. The learners all reported that they had been made to feel welcome in the city, even when living in hotels and that their English classes were supportive, going beyond the learning of English but signposting them to support for their families, helping with travel, liaising with their children's schools, and employment support when needed. As such, it was recognised that the Adult and Community Learning team were well connected with stakeholders across the city and those stakeholders were responsive, including the Sanctuary Services team within the council.
4. **Good links with employers.** ACH and Sanctuary Services discussed their very different approaches to supporting employment. ACH presented their pilot approach with 12 specifically chosen employers such as Ikea, which was successfully ensuring employers were clear about what skills they needed and ACH responding to that by closing the skills gaps with their courses. The employers also offering guaranteed interviews and work placements to support entry to and sustained employment. Sanctuary Services described their close links with the Department for Works and Pensions to secure pathways to employment for refugees and asylum seekers.

5. **ACH – supported housing for migrants, even in work:** The group heard about the supportive housing offered for refugees and how they aim to offer accommodation whether they are in work or not. Offering supported accommodation for those in work was a different approach to that offered in some of the other European countries represented in the group.
6. **Hotels – secure places to stay:** Despite some of the negative assumptions around living in a hotel as a family (lack of space and places to play) or as an individual (isolation), the group heard from the learners that they had always felt safe in the hotels and that the support offered through the voluntary sector organisations, funded by Sanctuary Services and the hotel staff made them feel secure, which was regarded as paramount when living with the trauma of fleeing from their home countries and getting to the UK in the first place. We also discussed how Council representatives and school and nursery school staff went out of their way during difficult times such as the anti-immigration protests held outside hotels, to make them feel secure and safe.

Weaknesses

1. **The lack of national strategy and co-ordination and the resultant complexity and number of “actors in the system”:** the UK lacks a coherent, inclusive immigration strategy and funding policy that covers all aspects of migrating to the UK including learning English, access to health services, housing and employment. Instead, different schemes have been developed to address different issues and emergencies. This was made even more evident when we discussed the fact that even within single schemes such as the Ukrainian resettlement scheme, there were 2 possible approaches with very different offers. With the those on the Homes for Ukraine having more government funding and opportunities around benefits and employment than those on the Ukraine Family scheme where Ukrainians went to live with relatives, and relied on what their families could offer. As such the support available has developed from a range of funding streams with different eligibility criteria, offered by government, Trusts and charities such as Comic relief and AB Charitable Trust. This assortment of offers is difficult to navigate for everyone involved leading to inefficiencies and profiteering (see below Hotel issue below) and the failure to ensure equity.
2. **Lack of funding – transport costs:** Bristol’s public transport infrastructure is underdeveloped and has suffered from a lack of drivers leading to reduced timetables. It is expensive and is not always affordable for those on a low income. As the buses are run by the free market it means that smaller communities are not always served well and some parts of the city are not joined up well. When also considering the city’s constant congestion, people find that they cannot get to the most appropriate classes for them for even to a place of employment, especially if shifts start early in the morning or late at night. [“Wheels to Work”](#) is one option that can be used to reduce costs in the short term.

3. Housing crisis and the use of Hotels – cost to the country and a small number of players making significant profits:

Affordability is a problem in Bristol, with house prices rising faster than nationally and much faster than average incomes. The cost of the median home in Bristol is now nearly nine times higher than the annual earnings of lower income households.

The private rented sector has reduced to 27.4% of housing stock in 2023 compared to 30.3% in 2020 according to the Building Research Establishment (BRE). This reduced stock has led to an increase in a huge demand for housing in the private rented sector, leading to increased rents.

Therefore, there is a serious shortage of affordable housing in the city. This means that for refugees and asylum seekers moving to Bristol, hotels are the only option and this puts money into the hands of a small number of organisations.

Since 2019 the Home Office has outsourced asylum accommodation through the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts (AASC) to three private giants: Clearsprings Ready Homes, Mears Group, and Serco.

When the formal estate runs out of space, these providers place people in contingency hotels at block-booked rates. The National Audit Office reports these three companies made a total profit of £383m on the contracts between September 2019 and August 2024.

Specifically, Clearsprings Ready Homes, whose sole business is asylum accommodation, has reported a rapid, sustained surge in profits, for example around £90m in the year to January 2024.

Opportunities

1. **Leaders are motivated to progress further:** The development of a new sanctuary Services Strategy and policy; work undertaken and planned for the Single Assessment ESOL Hub, the existence of the ESOL Network and the work with DWP and employers demonstrated to the group that the local authority and other ESOL providers are motivated to remove fragmentation and make the provision of ESOL classes and employment support more effective and efficient regionally despite the lack of national strategy.
2. **One integrated ESOL Hub and potential to track individuals:** In order to reduce the fragmented ESOL offer across the city, the Adult and Community Learning team has been investigating the best way to provide an integrated ESOL hub for the City and the wider region. The hub would be the first place an ESOL learner goes to arrange an assessment of their English skills and wider learning needs (ability to travel, caring responsibilities, work patterns or shifts) and gather information on previous work experience, education and aspirations for the future. Based on this information the learner would be signposted to the most appropriate course for their needs, with assessment updates coming back through the

hub so that the learner can be signposted to the next appropriate opportunity at the end of the course. The benefits of the Hub would be threefold. The learners would know where to go for English courses and assessment. Because the assessment would be agreed and used across the city all providers would be satisfied with the results and this would reduce the need for the further initial assessments that learners currently face when moving from one provider to another. Providers will benefit from classes that are well attended by students at the correct level who are less likely to withdraw due to accessibility problems. The hub will provide a rich pool of data that can be used by providers to plan an ESOL offer that does not overlap or leave some learners without an appropriate class. In addition the data can be used for funding bids and to lobby funders to prioritise ESOL.

3. **Create a counter-narrative to negative sentiment:** The group felt that providers could produce and promote positive messaging around immigration, refugees and asylum seekers to use across communities and public forums to counter negative sentiment. Being proactive and not just reactive.
4. **Joint lobbying of national government between regions + employers (e.g. Netherlands strategic litigation)** – The non UK members of the group were surprised that the energy for supporting refugees and migrants was coming from Local Authorities, ESOL providers and the voluntary and charitable sector; that regions were not coming together to discuss the issues and that employers were playing no real part in lobbying for employment law to be changed in the face of employment shortages and the need for immigrants to enter the employment market to make them economically active and contributors to the economy. They felt that this was a lost opportunity and was different to the [litigation](#) approaches more common in other parts of Europe.
5. **Activity from Day 1 in hotels e.g. Employment Support:** Although the group recognised that many refugees and asylum seekers will be traumatised by their experiences when arriving in hotels this should not be a reason to delay the offer of employment support and ESOL classes from day 1. When delivered in a trauma informed way this was seen as a missed opportunity.

Threats

1. **Complexity of system/funding streams:** this has been explained as a “Weakness” above under “The lack of national strategy and co-ordination and the resultant complexity and number of “actors in the system” It is a weakness locally as we have to work within the systems developed nationally and is a threat because we have little control over the schemes and policies developed by government.
2. **Women sacrifice their own dreams for their children:** It was apparent as the conversation at the ESOL class went on that although the women in the class were eager to learn English they were putting their children’s education and future careers in front of their own. As such they appeared to have no aspirations for their own progression. This is a threat as it

means they may stay economically inactive, feel unachieved in the future and suffer from the lack of wellbeing and isolation that can occur when bringing up children and later in life when the children have left home.

3. **Sentiment around migration:** Although public anti-immigration protests make the news they are often countered by Pro-immigration protests occurring at the same. The threat here is visible and obvious to see. However, it was also felt that private sentiments are also big threat in that mis information and views spread through communities leading to everything from low level racism to becoming breeding grounds for right wing radicalisation.
4. **Losing motivation/mental health, staying in hotels:** Although the hotels offer accommodation where there is none, the group felt that living in a hotel on pocket money leads to mental health issues and a loss of self-worth and motivation. This is a threat as those experiencing this find it hard to attend classes or move into employment and will therefore stay economically inactive for longer and possible need further support from already over stretched mental health services.

PLUS

1. ESOL Network – See point 1 under Strengths above
2. Welcoming – See point 3 under Strengths above
3. Inclusivity – See point 2 under Strengths above
4. Employer links – See point 4 under Strengths above
5. Creative funding use - See point 2 under Strengths above

DELTA

1. Allow council more responsibility of housing asylum seekers: it was felt that the money currently being paid to a small number of hotel chains could be better used by local authorities who now their areas better and could use it for economies of scale with local landlords. This would be more efficient and in addition support the local economy.
2. Build on and strengthen work with employers - stronger storytelling: The group felt that employers do not know what language skills their employees need and therefore assume they need to be able to speak English to work. This obviously excludes many refugees and asylum seekers from moving into employment. Nor do employers embrace their responsibility to offer English as a training offer as part of Career Planning and Development. It was felt that ESOL providers have a role to play in discussing this with employers and creating a strong narrative around the possibilities and benefits of taking on refugees and immigrants.

3. **Integration of services e.g. expand ESOL approach:** The integration of services for refugees and Asylum Seekers is paramount to reducing complexity and fragmentation and bringing about efficiencies in what is offered and how money is spent across the region. The ESOL Hub being a good first step for ESOL courses.

Areas for Development

Reduction of the fragmentation of the ESOL provision in the area. As explained above, the group discussed the fragmentation of the sector and the fact that the demand outstrips the provision in Bristol, both of which points towards the need to have a centralised data collection system which can be used by providers to plan their provision (both extent and type) in a joined up systematic manner. This would also help with the curriculum planning for ESOL funded through the West of England Combined Authority and provide evidence when lobbying them to support a joined-up system for ESOL provision across the region.

Increase ESOL offer, employment support, mental health and housing options for refugees and asylum seekers: The Sanctuary Services Strategy has now been published and this is aimed at providing an improved offer for refugees and asylum seekers of all ages across the city.

Strategy on a page

Vision: Bristol is a city of safety, a welcoming place where people seeking sanctuary are provided with the support, services and opportunity to rebuild lives and thrive in our communities from the day they arrive.

Priorities	Meeting Basic Needs	Promoting Opportunity	Compassionate and Resilient Communities
This means that Bristol is a place where all sanctuary seekers...	Have access to essential services to foster stability and security from the day they arrive.	Can build independent lives through suitable homes, have support to navigate health services and access to education, training and skills.	Feel accepted, thrive and participate fully in life in the city as part of friendly and welcoming communities.
To meet this priority, we will focus on...	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Urgent health needs 2. Preventing homelessness 3. Mitigating safeguarding concerns 4. Legal support 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employment skills, training and volunteering support 2. Education and English language (ESOL) classes 3. Longer-term health issues 4. Access to accommodation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural awareness 2. Building connections and tackling misinformation and disinformation 3. Removing barriers to accessing wider services 4. Training for council staff on sanctuary seekers' needs
Examples of how we will make a difference include...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of essential needs • Increase capacity for legal immigration advice • Information and advice for sanctuary seekers on how to access health services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-to-one employment support for all sanctuary seekers • 6 hours ESOL per week for 16-19 year olds • Move-on funding to provide for living essentials (eg kitchen equipment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bespoke sanctuary training for all council staff • Cultural 'Welcome to the UK' classes including UK law • Expand befriending and community programmes

Implementation: Our vision and priorities are underpinned by our commitment to Bristol as a City of Sanctuary. The Strategy and Action Plan will be delivered through the Sanctuary Corporate Strategic Steering Group, working with partners on actions for which the council are not wholly responsible. The Steering Group will take stock of the actions set out in the Action Plan on an annual basis and conduct a formal mid-point review of the strategy and action plan in early 2028.

The full strategy and plans can be found here: [Bristol City of Sanctuary Strategy and Sanctuary Action Plan](#)

The non-UK delegates saw this network of services and creative use of funds as a strength but were surprised that employers with employment shortages are not more proactive in lobbying government to change employment rules. We were signposted to the Netherlands Strategic Litigation approach as an example of how policy and strategy is influenced by employers and advocates to challenge government policies. Links to papers and information can be found [here](#).

Netherlands Strategic Litigation

Next Steps:

1. Development of the local ESOL Offer

The Sanctuary Services Strategy and Action Plan provide a significant opportunity to support refugees and migrants to learn English and approach the employment market. As such Adult and Community Learning will be developing or maintaining the following offers:

- English classes in the 3 asylum hotels. Three tutors and 3 learning support assistants have already been employed, and initial assessments start in December 2025.
- Community English classes for refugees and asylum seekers who have already been housed, these courses will be easily accessible, and some will offer a creche. This is a continuation of work that has been ongoing since the first resettlement scheme came into play for Syrian refugees in 2017.
- English classes for 16–18-year-olds who have yet to be offered a place at college or in schools.
- Provision of laptops and or chromebooks for refugees and asylum seekers at secondary school and college.

In addition, an ESOL Hub pilot is being developed by the Adult and Community Learning Team Leader ESOL. This is being funded as part of the Sanctuary Services Strategy commissioning process and Adult and Community Learning projects. This will be developed in liaison with City of Bristol college who it hoped will support the resourcing of the pilot by offering their ESOL tutor as part of the assessment team.

A software company has been approached to develop the CRM and the Team Leader ESOL and Team Leader Digital Inclusion are working on the specification. One of main criteria being that it will interface with City of Bristol College systems as they are the biggest ESOL provider.

In the meantime, Adult and Community Learning will continue to put pressure on the West of England Combined authority as the main funder of ESOL courses for adults to extend the pilot across the region.

Data from the initial pilot will be collected and used to lobby the combined authority to do this.

Employment Support are also being commissioned to provide a job coach for hotels and therefore ensure refugees and asylum seekers are offered employment support from day one.

2. Improving Employer Links and Engagement

Apart from the On Site Apprenticeship Team (who have excellent employer links within the construction industry) all Employment, Skills and Learning (ESL) teams recognise the need to improve employer links for various cohorts of learners and clients. Initial discussions have been had about the development of a team employer database with each employer having a key ESL contact through which requests will be made. The Team Leader Digital Inclusion has been tasked to review appropriate CRM systems and will then work on its development based on specifications agreed within ESL. Ownership of the CRM and the policies will need to be agreed before the system is rolled out.

ESL managers to organise an employer event whereby employers can hear firsthand from employers who have successfully worked with refugees and migrants who have successfully been employed, as a first step towards supporting employers to employ migrants.

Investigate European Strategic Litigation on behalf of employers and organisations working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to understand why it is used in Europe and not significantly within the UK.