

Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan

Employer Survey 2026

1. Introduction

Headline - SMEs dominate responses, reinforcing the central role of small businesses in Sussex's skills system.

As part of the development of the Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) 2026–2029, the Sussex LSIP undertook a county-wide employer survey to gather up-to-date intelligence on workforce challenges, skills needs and training priorities. The survey was open to employers across all sectors and locations in Sussex, ensuring that a broad range of business perspectives were captured. The findings provide an important evidence base to inform LSIP priorities and help ensure that future skills provision is aligned with the real needs of Sussex employers.

Respondent profile and geographic spread

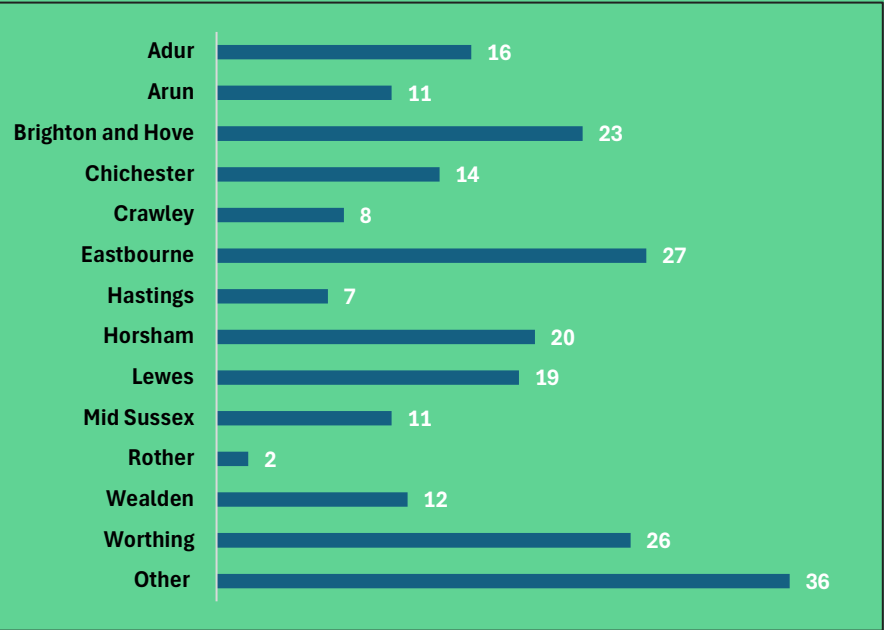
Responses were received from across all Sussex local authority areas, demonstrating strong county-wide engagement. The highest response volumes came from *Other*, Worthing, Eastbourne and Brighton & Hove, with further strong representation from Horsham, Lewes, Adur and Chichester. Overall, the data reflects a broad geographic spread, helping to ensure that the findings capture perspectives from across Sussex's diverse local economies.

Sector and business size

Most respondents are small and medium-sized enterprises, with a strong representation from businesses employing fewer than 50 staff. Engineering & Advanced Manufacturing attracted the largest number of responses, alongside strong participation from Professional & Business Services and Digital & Creative. This profile highlights the central role of SMEs in the Sussex economy, while also capturing insights from a smaller number of larger employers with more complex workforce needs.

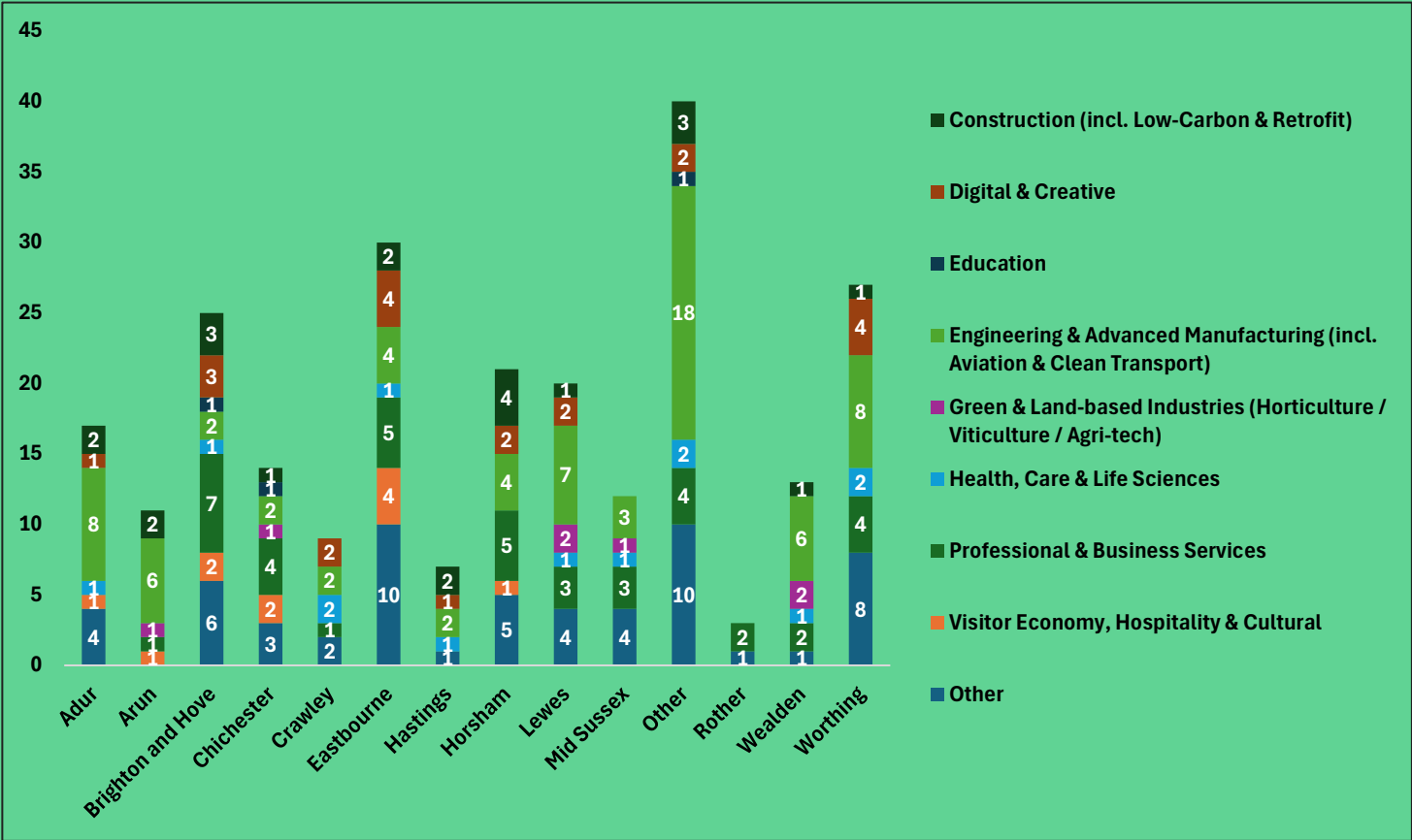
2. 2026 respondent characteristics

1. Responses by Location



225 Respondents
5 Incomplete

2. Responses by Location & Sector



Notes: Total count exceeds total number of respondents due to businesses covering multiple sectors, local authorities and where a value for "Other" was added

2026 respondent characteristics

3. Responses by Sector & Business Size



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3. Recruitment challenges - key findings and trends

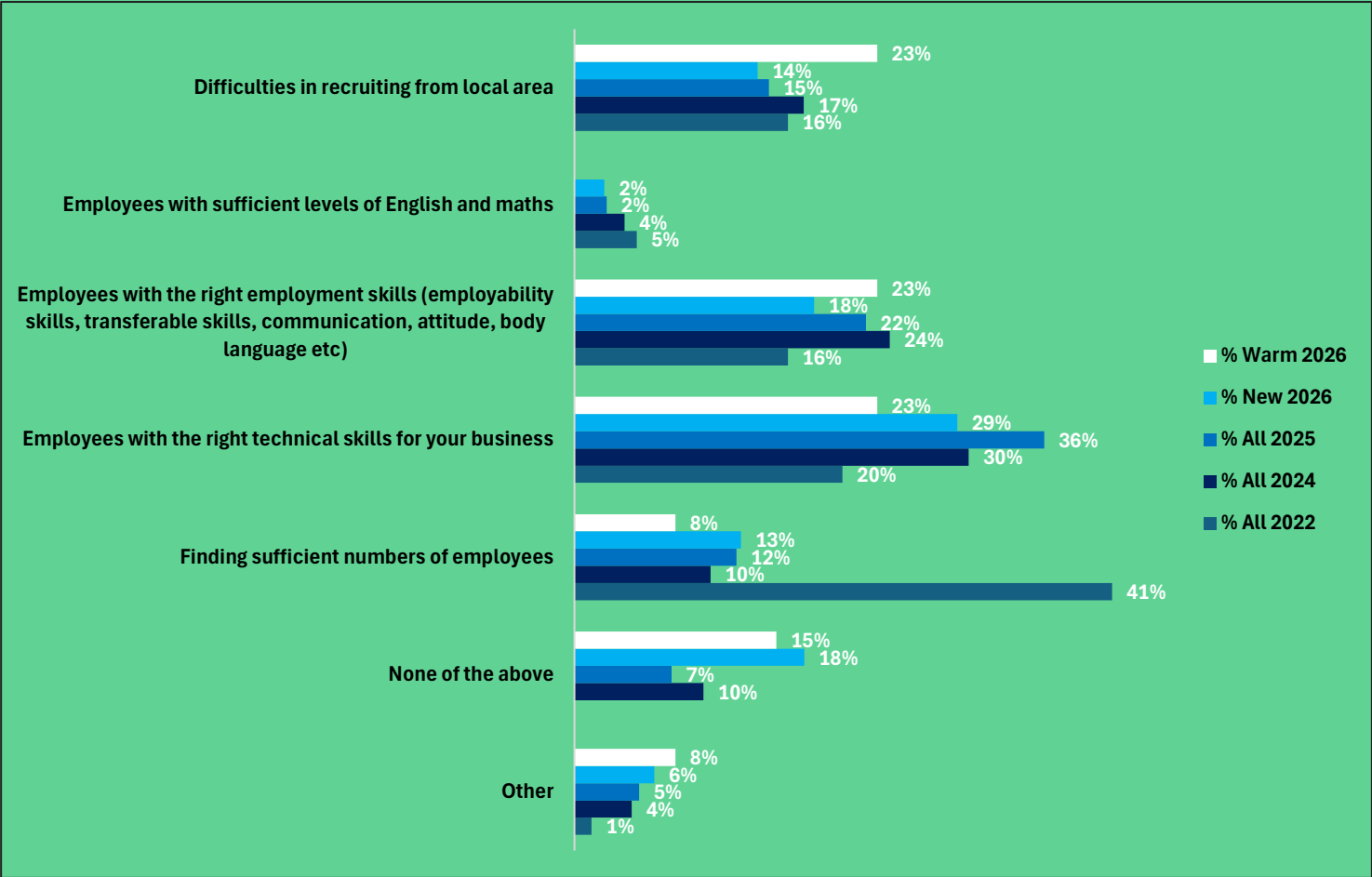
Headline - Technical skills shortages remain the most widespread and persistent recruitment challenge.

- Finding employees with the right technical skills is the most widespread recruitment challenge across Sussex, affecting employers in almost all local authority areas.
- Difficulties in recruiting locally and finding employees with the right employment (employability) skills are also significant, highlighting pressures on both skills availability and job-readiness.
- Compared with previous years, technical skills shortages remain a persistent issue, with higher levels reported by new respondents in 2026.
- Challenges in finding sufficient numbers of employees appear to be increasing, suggesting a tightening labour market in some sectors and locations.
- Issues relating to English and Maths remain relatively low and stable, indicating that recruitment pressures are primarily focused on occupational and employability skills.

Recruitment challenges

4. What challenges do you experience when recruiting?

“Knowledge of our sector is suited to more in the north of Sussex, but do not have the technology available in our local area so technical skills can be an issue”



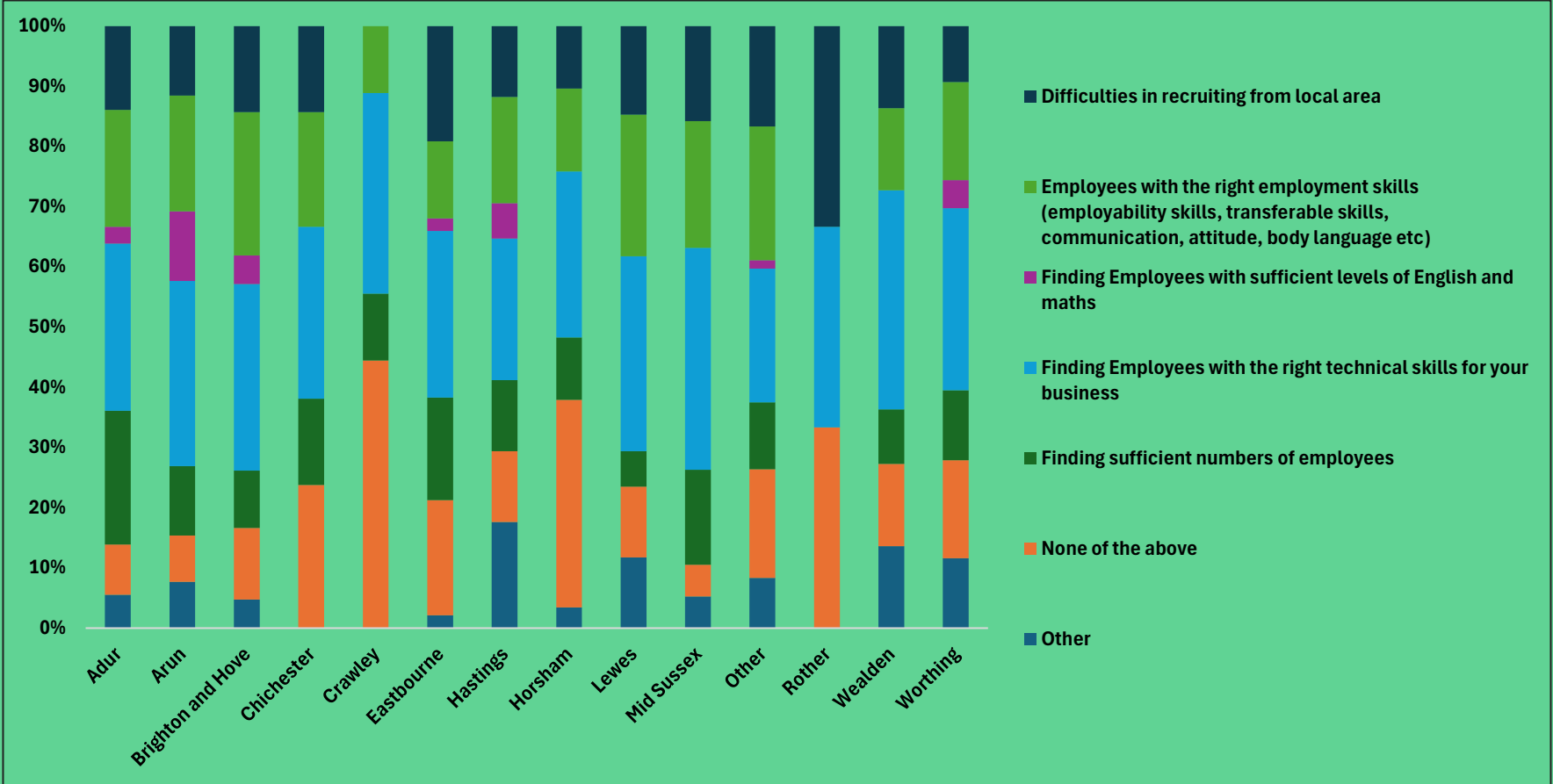
“Finding younger people for moulding technician and tool making roles”

“Most employees are commuting from Brighton and Lewes. The job roles are niche to the business so having the right technical skills in both art and manufacturing can be difficult”

Notes: ‘Warm’ 2026 respondents are employers who also took the survey in 2025. ‘New’ 2026 respondents are employers who did not take the survey in 2025. Some local authority data is based on a small number of responses and cannot support firm conclusions about variation between local authorities.

Recruitment challenges

5. Problems experienced when recruiting 2025 – by Local Authority area



“The location of the business is impacting number of people applying and at our end we struggle to recruit because of this”

“Challenges in recruiting employees with the right technical skills and difficulties in finding local candidates”

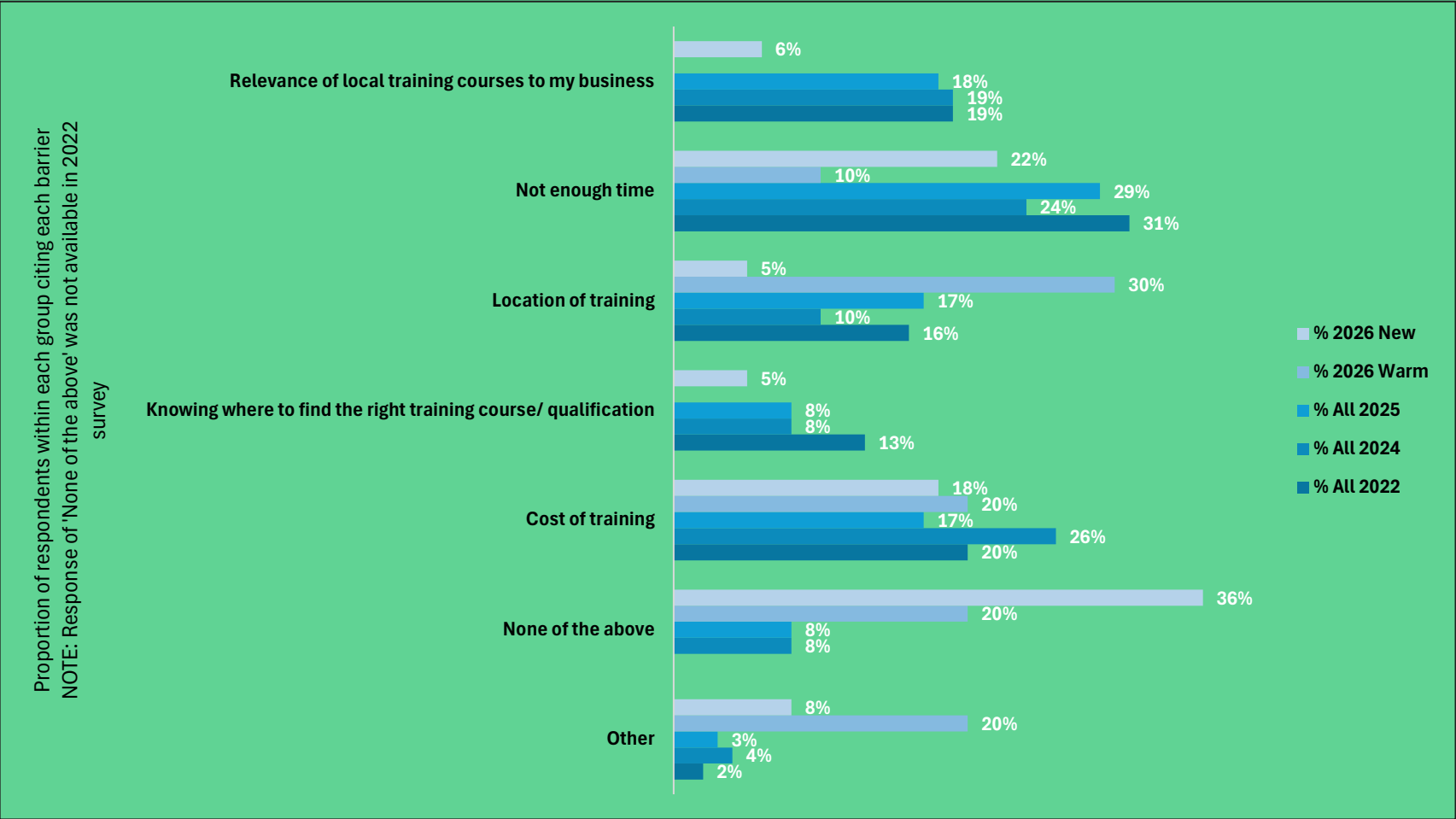
4. Engaging with training - key barriers

Headline - Time, cost and access continue to be the main barriers to employer engagement with training.

- Lack of time remains the most significant barrier to engaging with training and continues to be a consistent issue compared with previous years.
- Cost of training is also a major barrier, particularly for SMEs, reinforcing financial pressures on employers when investing in skills.
- Location of training remains a notable issue for some employers, although this appears more variable over time and by respondent group.
- Awareness and navigation challenges persist, with some employers reporting difficulties in knowing where to find the right training or qualification.
- While a proportion of employers report no barriers, the overall picture shows that practical constraints - time, cost and access continue to be the primary factors limiting engagement with training.

Engaging with training

6. What are the barriers to your business engaging with full-time and part-time training for your staff?



"In house training is provided for staff as there are no courses for our niche sector"

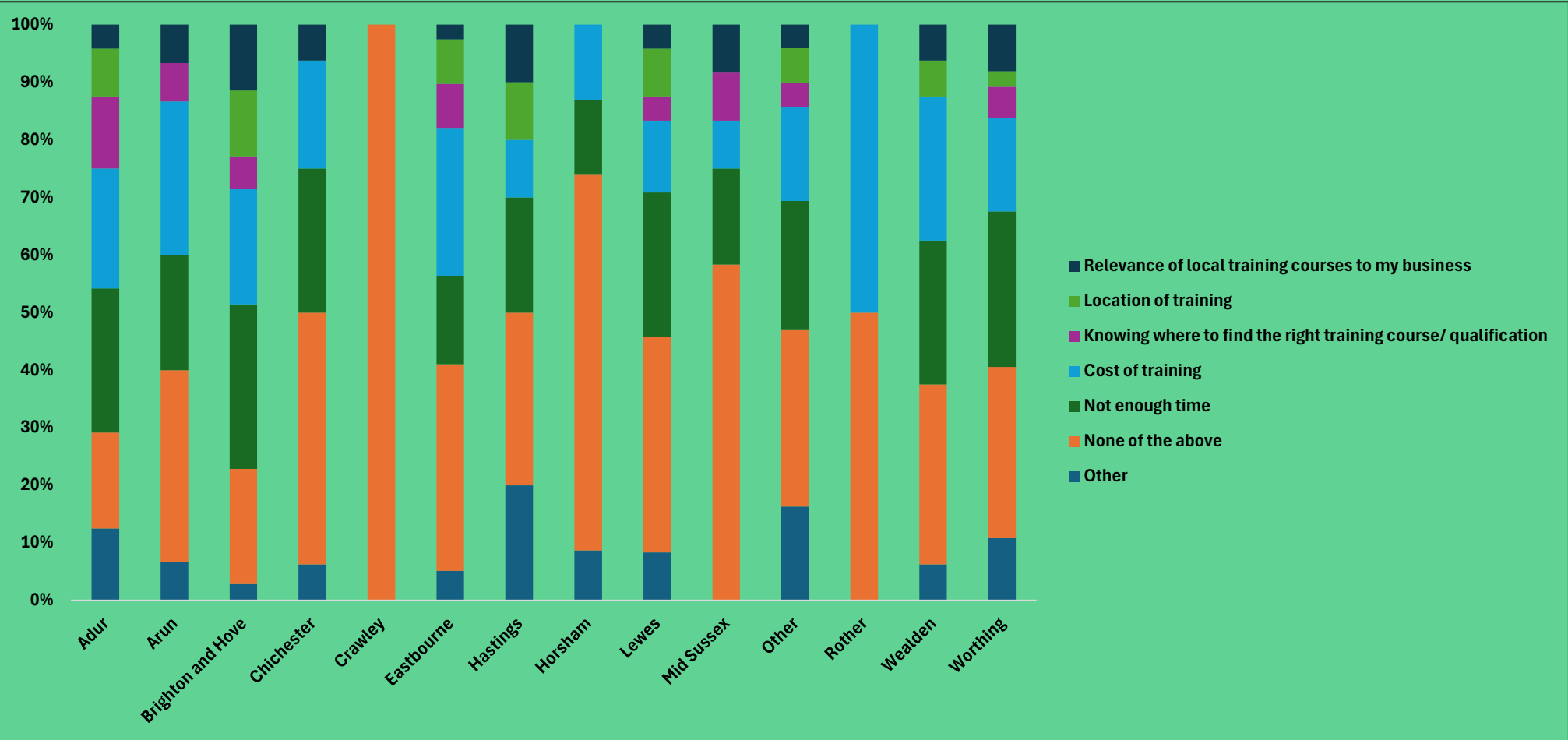
"Business struggles with the costs and time associated with training new staff, as they often need to be trained to meet specific job requirements"

"External trainer for commercial and operational energy training is provided for staff"

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Engaging with training

7. Barriers to Engaging with Training by Local Authority area



“Due to being a small company, we are not able to do this”

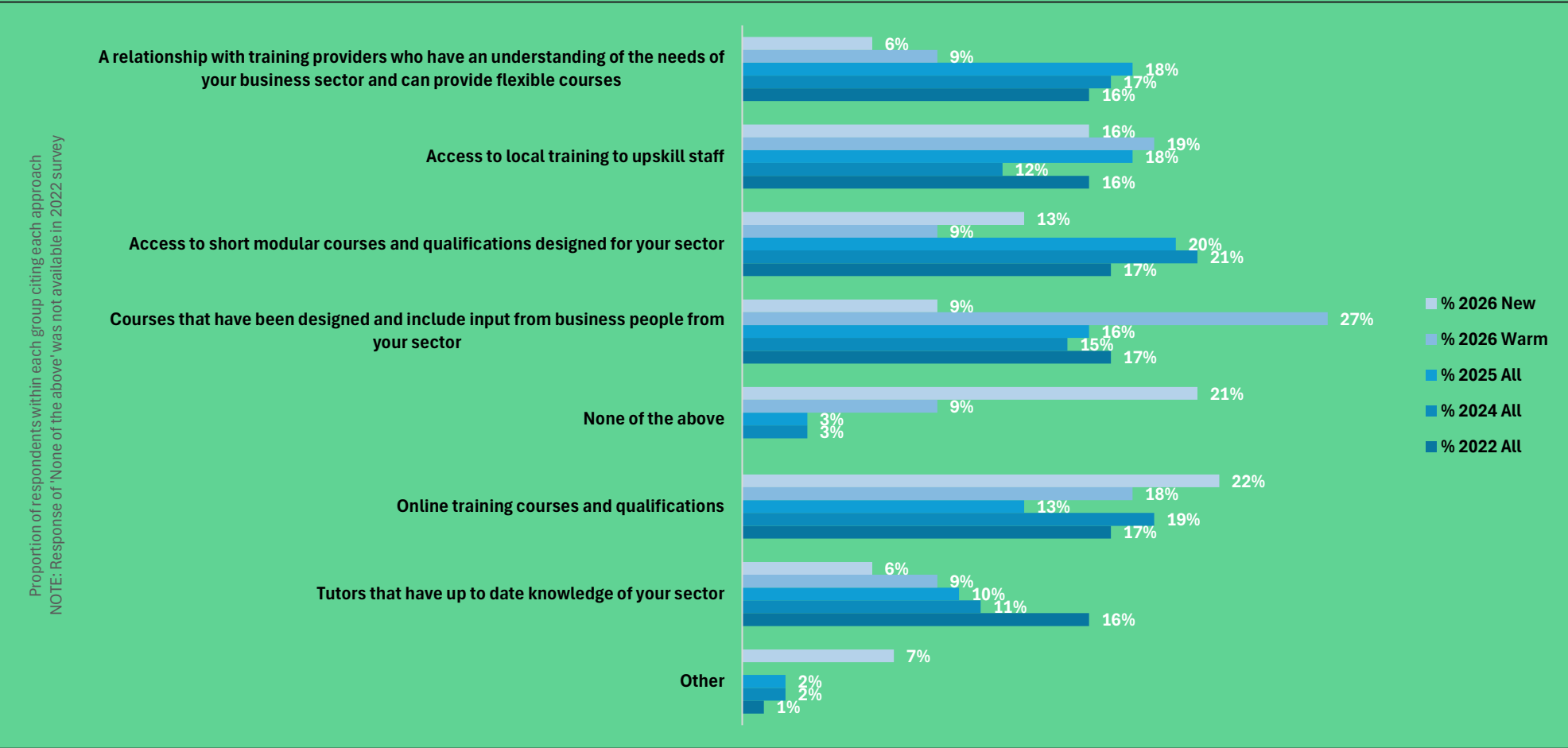
5. Improving skills supply - employer priorities

Headline - Employers want flexible, local and employer-led training aligned to real business needs.

- Employers place strong value on access to local training to upskill staff, alongside greater availability of short, modular courses designed for their sector.
- Online training courses and qualifications continue to be important, reflecting demand for flexible and accessible learning options.
- There is clear support for training designed with direct input from businesses, highlighting the importance of employer-led course design to ensure relevance.
- Access to tutors with up-to-date sector knowledge remains a consistent priority, underlining the need for provision that reflects current industry practice.
- Compared with previous years, demand for flexible, employer-informed and modular training pathways remains strong, reinforcing the need for responsive, employer-led skills provision across Sussex.

Improving skills supply

8. What approaches would improve the skills supply for your business?



"Basic courses for power tools and safety in handling. Technical skills (masters degrees/ doctorates) very difficult to find. Skills in health and safety executor roles"

"Courses need to be improved with up-to date knowledge of what we need and timescales for training course availability needs improvement"

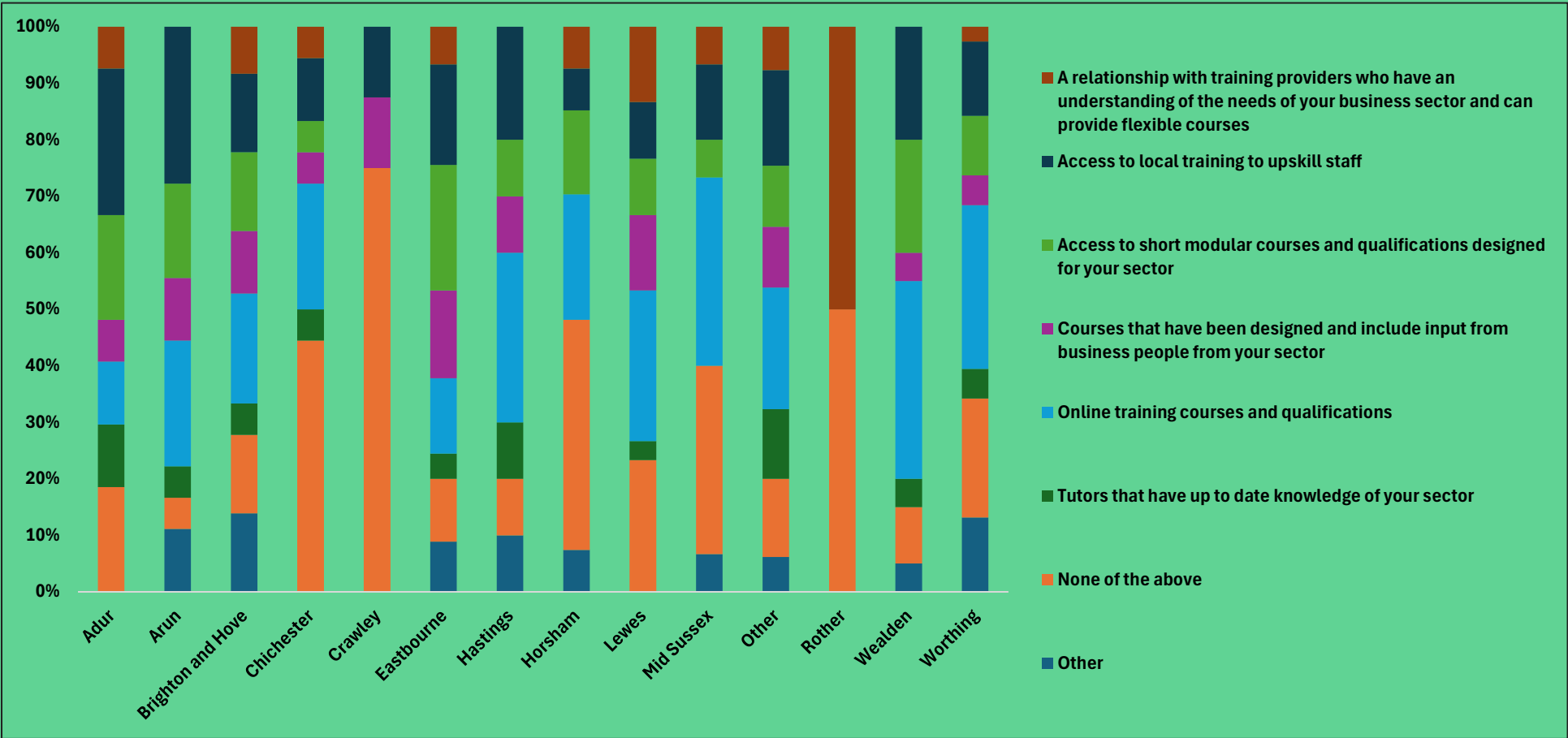


Chamber of Commerce

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Improving skills supply

9. Preferred Approaches to Improving Skills Supply 2025 – by Local Authority area



"Availability of specific training locally"

"Investment in charities to get upskilled is missing in Sussex"

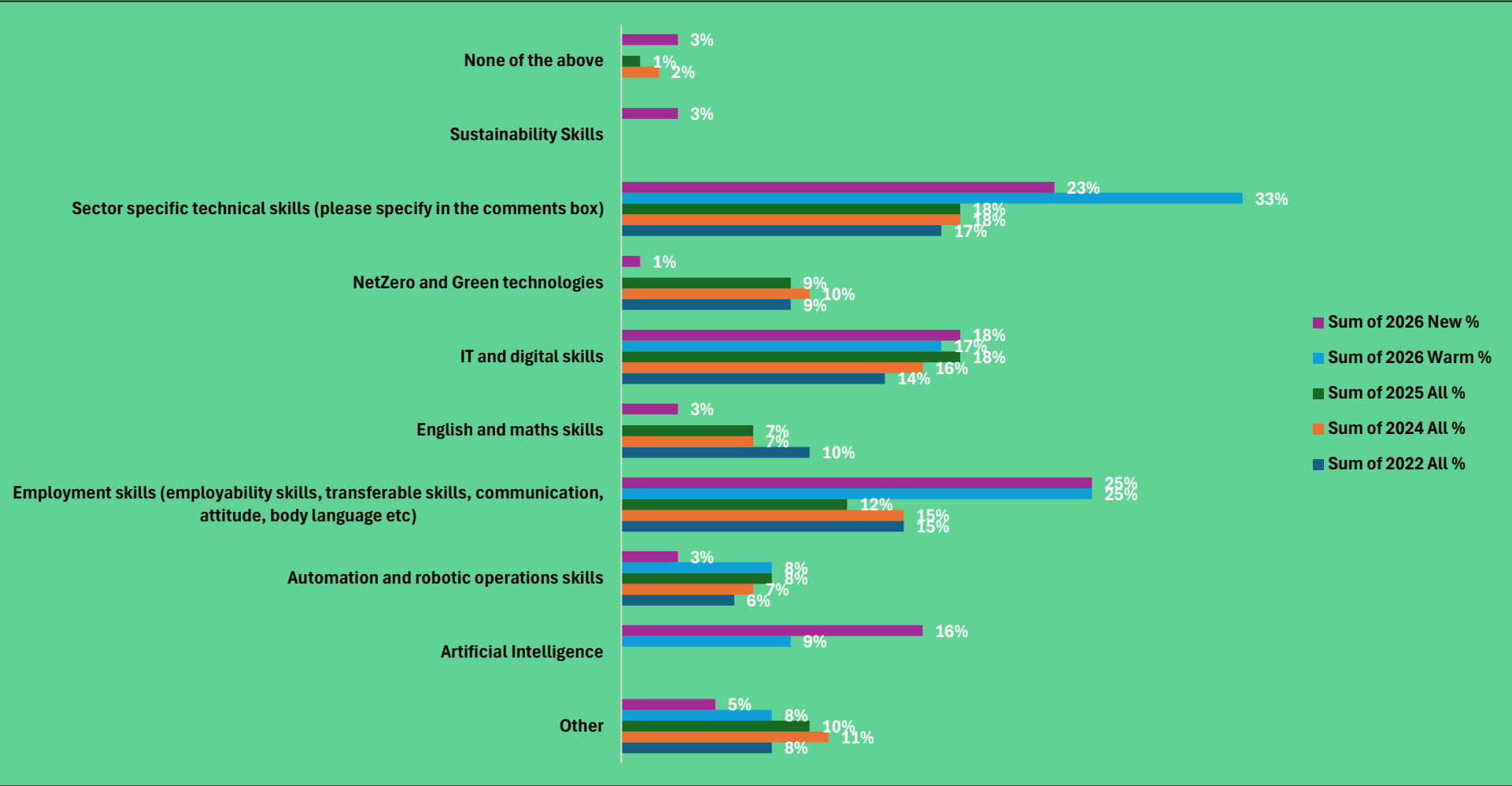
6. Future skills – employer priorities

Headline - Employers are prioritising technical, digital and employability skills, with growing demand for AI and green technologies.

- Sector-specific technical skills remain the top future priority for Sussex employers, reinforcing ongoing demand for occupation-specific training pathways.
- Employability skills (including communication, adaptability and problem-solving) continue to feature strongly, highlighting the importance of work-readiness alongside technical capability.
- IT and digital skills are a consistent priority across years, reflecting ongoing digital transformation across sectors.
- Interest in Artificial Intelligence and automation/robotics skills is emerging and growing, particularly among new 2026 respondents, signalling increasing awareness of technology-driven change.
- Net Zero, green technologies and sustainability skills also feature, underlining the importance of the transition to a low-carbon economy for future workforce planning.

Future skills

10. Which skills will be particularly important your business over the next 5-10 years?



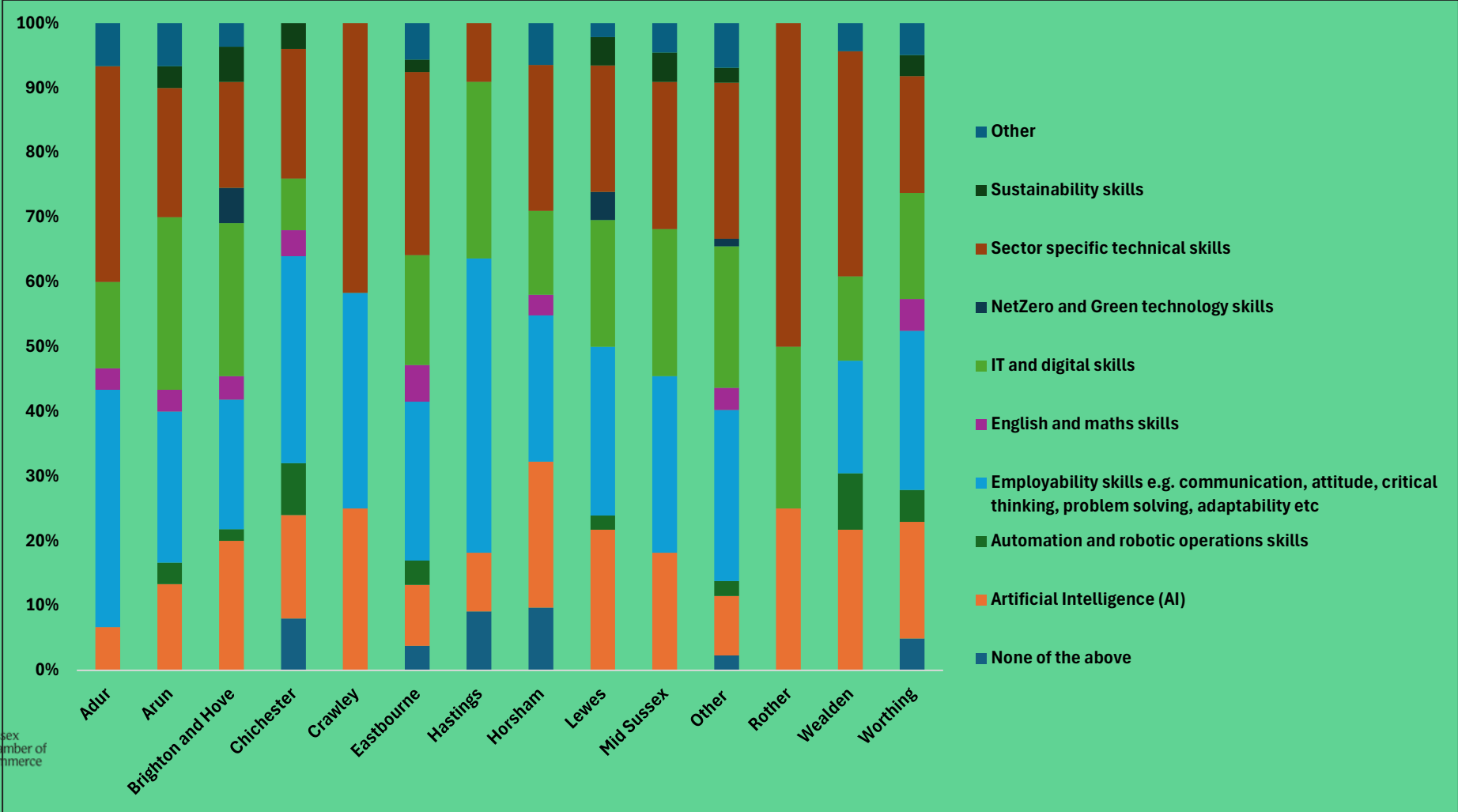
"Digital literacy among new employees, indicating a lack of basic computer skills and understanding of software systems"

"Working with Brighton University to develop more knowledge around AI"

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Future skills

11. Perceived Future Skills need 2026 – by Local Authority area



"Management and supervisory skills"

"Technical skills will be crucial for business, particularly in manual machining and welding."

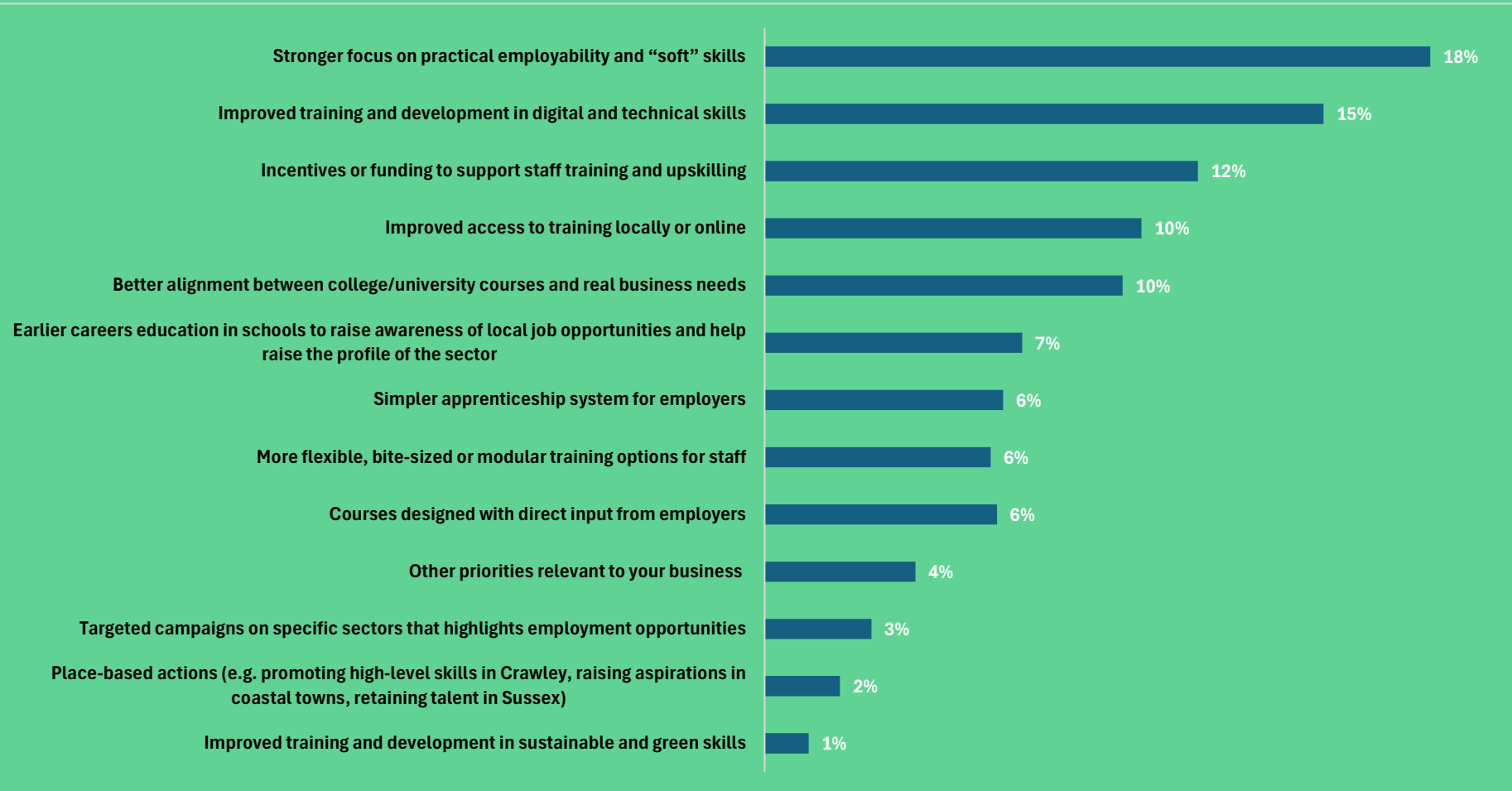
7. Skills priorities – employer focus

Headline - Employers prioritise employability and technical skills, with growing focus on digital and AI capabilities.

- Employability skills are the top priority for employers, highlighting the continued importance of communication, attitude, adaptability and problem-solving in the workplace.
- Sector-specific technical skills are a close second, reinforcing the need for occupation-specific training aligned to business needs.
- IT and digital skills remain a strong priority, reflecting ongoing digitalisation across sectors.
- Artificial Intelligence is emerging as a notable priority, indicating growing employer interest in preparing for AI-enabled ways of working.
- Lower priority areas include English and Maths, sustainability, automation/robotics and Net Zero skills, suggesting that employers are currently more focused on immediate workforce and productivity needs.

Skills priorities

12. Top Skills Priorities (%) for Sussex Businesses

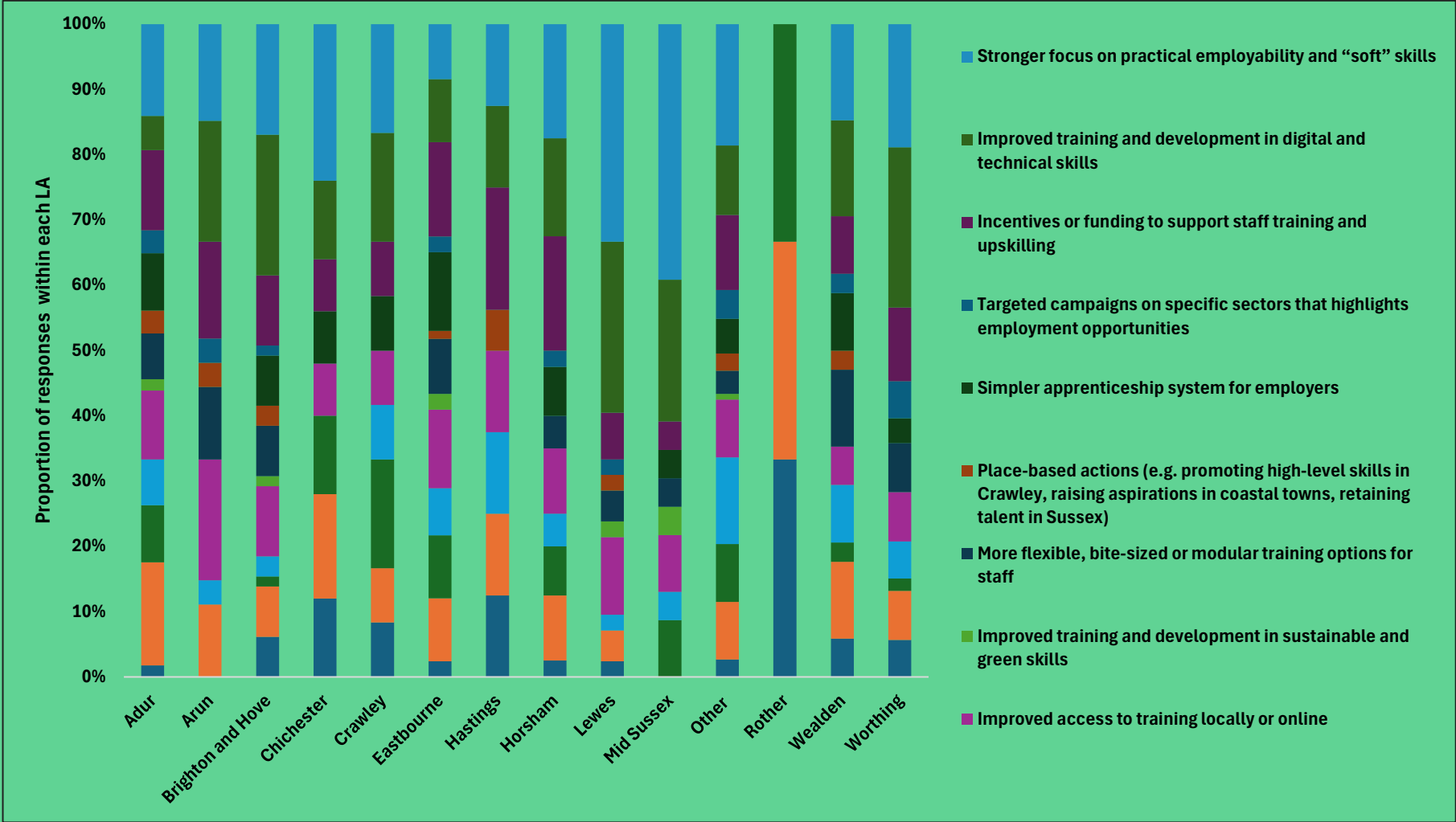


"Improved training and development in accounting skills"

"Staff have a basic understanding of film but learning skills for animation would be an advantage."

Skills priorities

13. Top 3 Skills Priorities 2025 – by LA



"Local training courses"

"Promoting employees with certification as it is not widely accredited and would help the business"

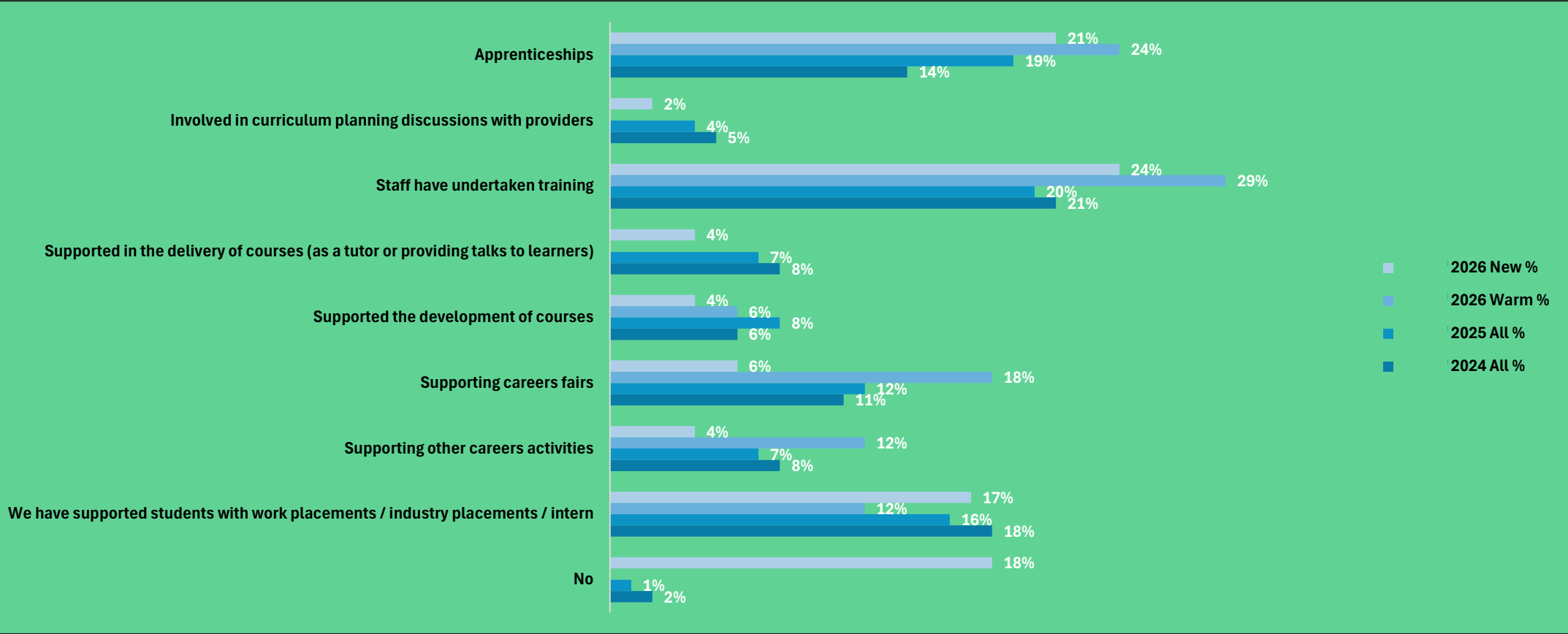
8. Engaging with education providers – employer activity

Headline - Employers engage most through training, apprenticeships and placements, with scope to deepen curriculum collaboration.

- A significant proportion of employers report that staff have undertaken training, making this the most common form of engagement with providers.
- Apprenticeships continue to be a key route for employer engagement, with consistent participation across years.
- Work placements, industry placements and internships also feature strongly, highlighting the importance of work-based learning opportunities.
- Employer involvement in careers fairs and wider careers activities remains an important channel for engagement with learners and providers.
- More in-depth engagement, such as supporting course development, delivery or curriculum planning, is less common, indicating an opportunity to strengthen employer-provider collaboration.

Engagement with education providers

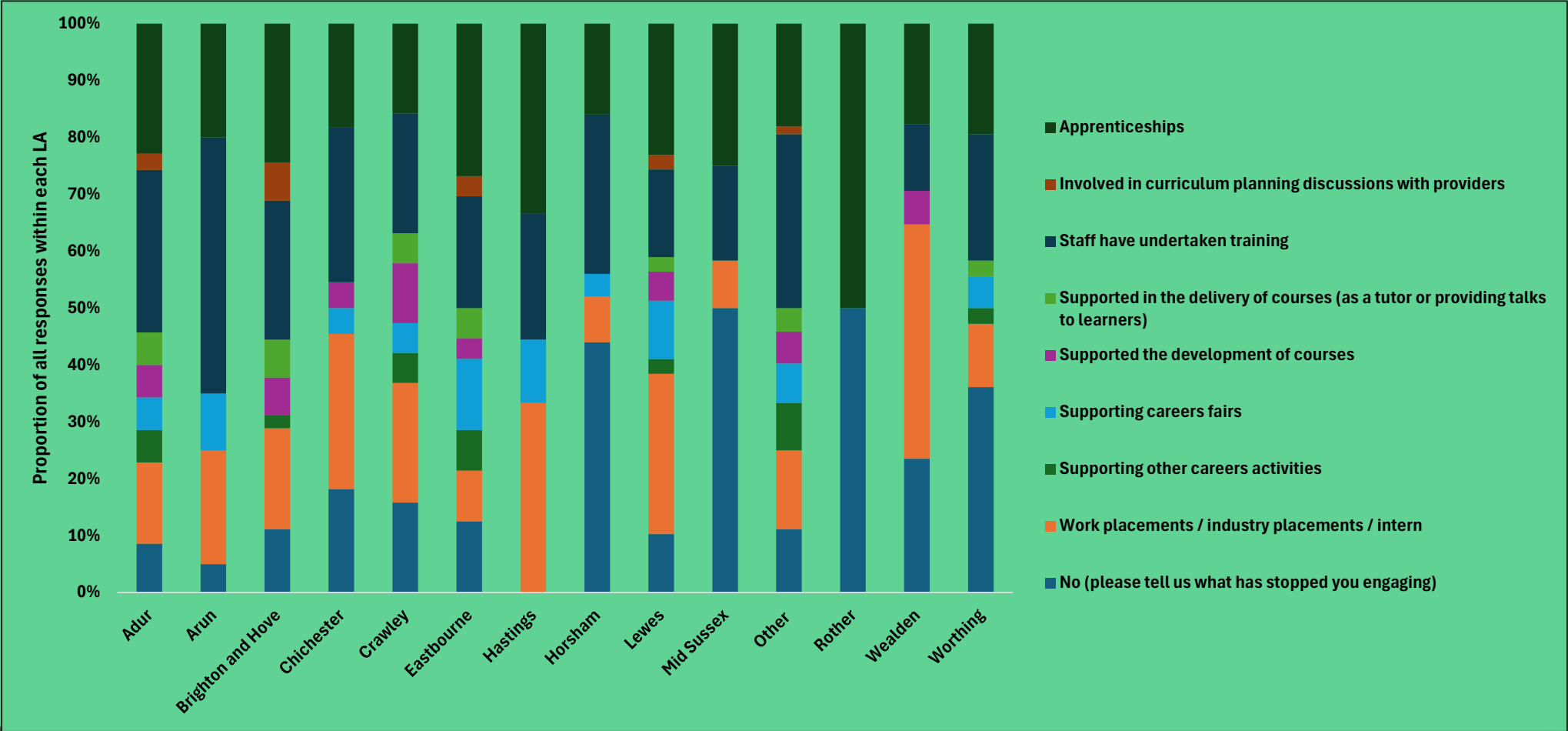
14. Over the last year has your business engaged with education providers for any of the following?



Notes: ‘Warm’ 2026 respondents are employers who also took the survey in 2025. ‘New’ 2026 respondents are employers who did not take the survey in 2025. The question posed differed to the 2022 survey, hence no 2022 comparison. Some local authority data is based on a small number of responses and cannot support firm conclusions about variation between local authorities.

Engagement with education providers

15. Engagement with Education Providers 2025 – by LA



"Not been in the position to engage"

"Have looked into it, but it's to time consuming"

"Due to being a small company, we are not able to do this"

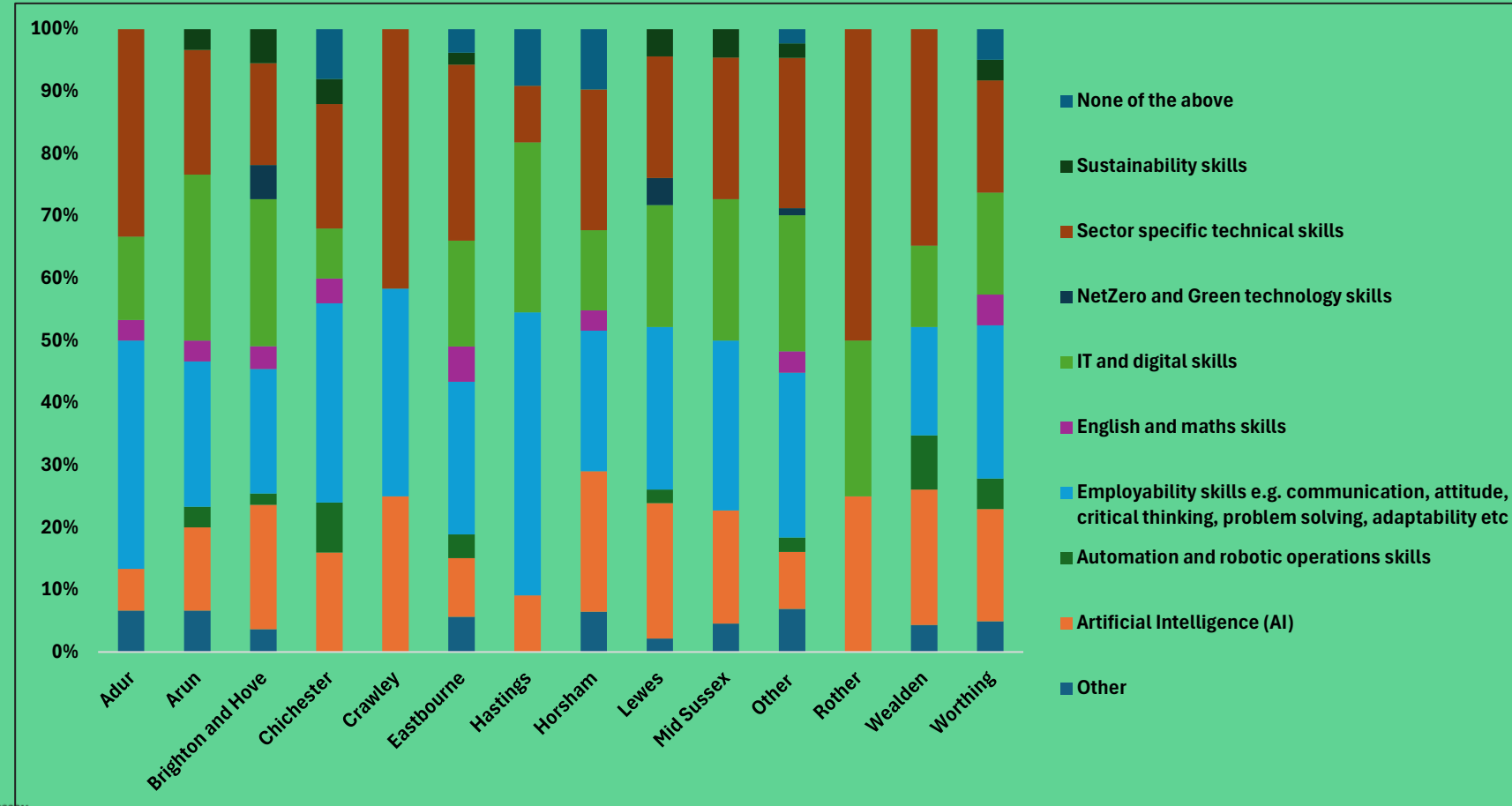
9. Net Zero skills needs – employer priorities

Headline - Net Zero delivery is driven by technical, digital and workforce skills, with green skills still emerging as a distinct priority.

- Employability skills and sector-specific technical skills remain the most commonly identified needs, even in the context of Net Zero, highlighting that core workforce capabilities are essential to delivering the transition.
- IT and digital skills and Artificial Intelligence also feature strongly, reflecting the role of digital technologies in enabling energy efficiency, monitoring and optimisation.
- Demand for automation and robotic operations skills is present but lower, suggesting early-stage adoption in many sectors.
- Sustainability, Net Zero and green technology skills are identified by a smaller proportion of employers, indicating that while the transition is recognised, many businesses are still at an early stage of translating Net Zero ambitions into specific training requirements.
- Overall, the findings suggest that employers view Net Zero delivery as closely linked to broader technical, digital and workforce capability, rather than as a standalone skills category.

Net Zero skills needs

16. What training or skills does your business need to help you operate more sustainably or move towards Net Zero?

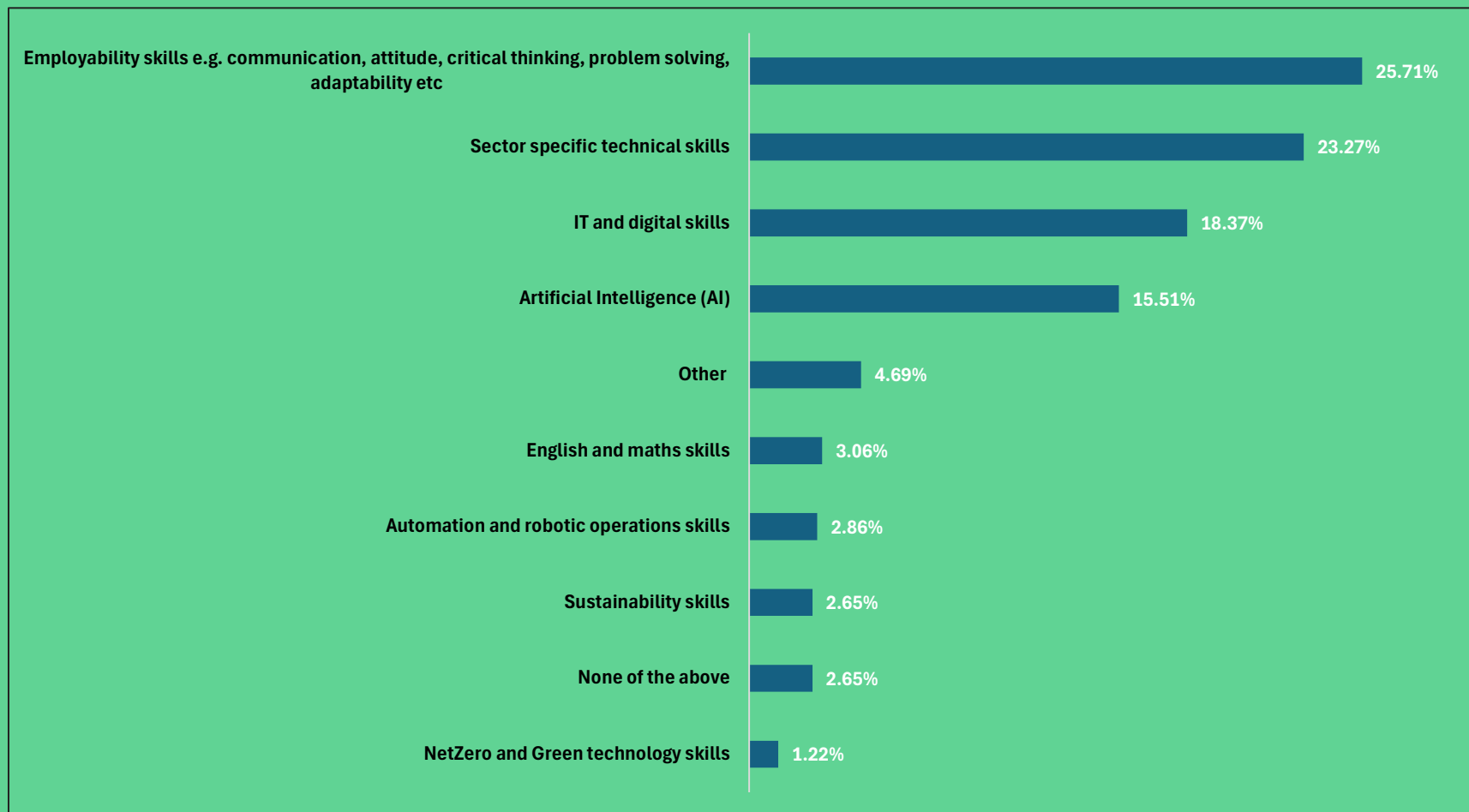


"Staff are aware of sustainability and recycling within the workplace"

"In house training for sustainability is already available"

Top net zero training & skills priorities

17. Top Net Zero Training & Skills Priorities for Sussex Businesses



"Cheaper to get a third party to help train the staff and make the company more compliant towards Net Zero"

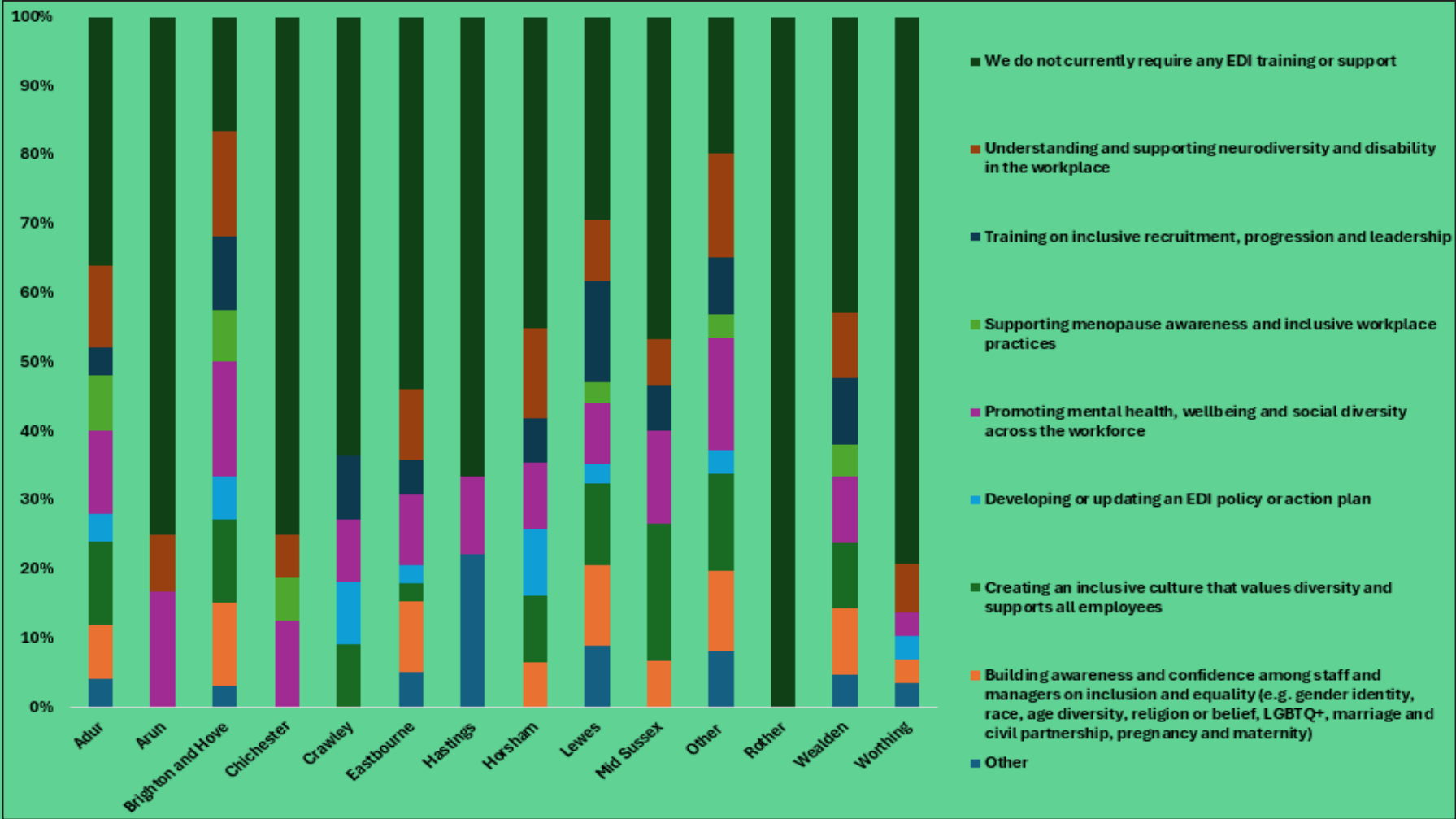
10. Strengthening Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) – employer needs

Headline - While many employers report no immediate EDI needs, those seeking support prioritise inclusive culture, awareness and wellbeing.

- A significant proportion of employers report that they do not currently require EDI training or support, suggesting varying levels of maturity and perceived need across the business base.
- Among those seeking support, the strongest areas of interest are creating inclusive workplace cultures and building awareness and confidence among staff and managers on equality and inclusion.
- Promoting mental health, wellbeing and social diversity also features as a key priority, reflecting the growing importance of employee wellbeing within workforce strategies.
- There is more limited demand for formal EDI policy development, menopause awareness, and inclusive recruitment and leadership training, indicating that many employers may still be at an early or informal stage of EDI activity.
- Overall, the findings suggest an opportunity to increase awareness of the business value of EDI and to support employers to move from awareness-raising towards more structured, strategic approaches

Strengthening Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the workplace

18. What support or training would help your business strengthen Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the workplace?

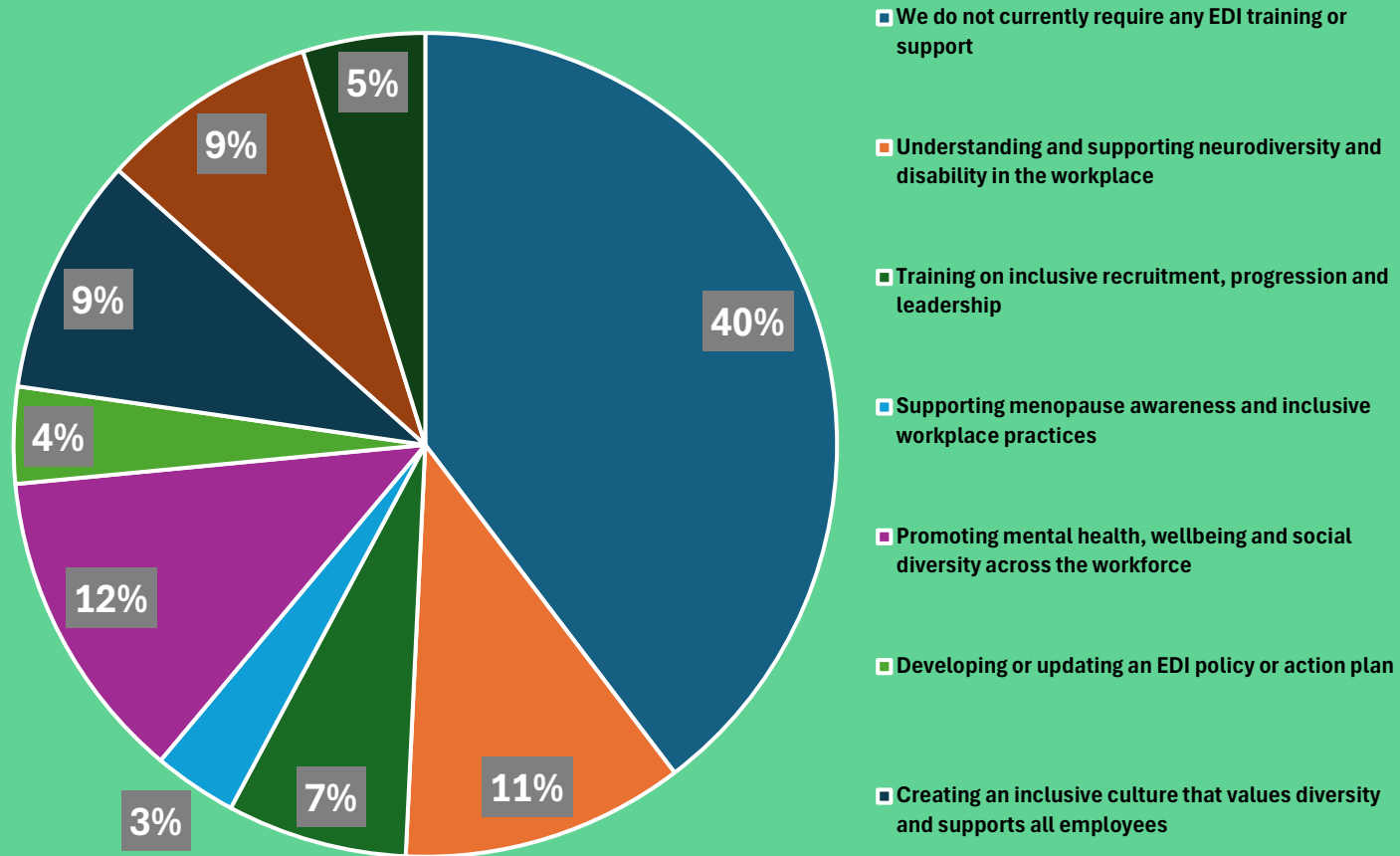


“Very inclusive as they take on children from specialist schools for placements. The staff have a good awareness of disability and autism”

“Business is already utilising NHS resources for promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion, and feels confident in their current practices regarding workplace inclusivity”

Strengthening Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the workplace

19. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion - Support & training by response and percentage



“60% female staff, multinational, embracing psycho-diversity in staff”

11. Closing Summary

Headline - LSIP 2.0 must focus on flexible, employer-led skills provision that addresses today's technical and employability gaps while preparing Sussex's workforce for digital, green and future technologies.

This survey provides a robust, county-wide evidence base for the development of LSIP 2.0, with strong engagement across locations, sectors and business sizes. The findings clearly demonstrate that Sussex employers continue to face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining staff with the right technical and employability skills. Alongside these structural skills gaps, employers are also experiencing increasing pressures around workforce availability, reinforcing the need for targeted action to strengthen local talent pipelines and improve job-readiness. Barriers to engaging with training remain largely practical in nature, with time, cost and access continuing to constrain employer participation. Employers are calling for more flexible, modular and locally accessible training, designed with direct input from business and delivered by tutors with up-to-date industry knowledge.

Looking ahead, future skills priorities highlight sustained demand for technical, digital and employability skills, with growing interest in areas such as artificial intelligence, automation and green technologies. Net Zero ambitions are closely linked to broader technical and digital capability, suggesting that green skills should be embedded within mainstream workforce development rather than treated in isolation. While EDI is not currently a priority for all employers, there is clear demand for support around inclusive cultures, awareness and wellbeing, indicating an opportunity to build employer capability and maturity over time. Together, these findings underline the importance of an employer-led, flexible and forward-looking LSIP that responds to both immediate workforce needs and longer-term economic transition.