



Cheshire and Merseyside



Get Cheshire and Warrington Working Plan October 2025



Cheshire+
Warrington



Bringing better jobs,
better transport,
smarter investment
- **now's**
the time.



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Foreword

Cheshire and Warrington is one of the UK's economic success stories and the most productive economy in the North of England. However, our ambition is to go much further and ensure that this prosperity benefits all of our residents.

As a result, we have developed a Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Strategy which outlines our vision to be the UK's healthiest, most sustainable, inclusive, and fastest-growing economy by 2045.

This "Get Cheshire and Warrington Working Plan" directly supports this Strategy as it aligns to our inclusive and healthy objective. It looks to:

- Connect people to opportunities
- Considers health interventions alongside those which provide employment support
- Identifies geographies and cohorts that would benefit from targeted, bespoke, and flexible programmes, in both urban and rural geographies
- Improve life chances of families and young people
- Support employers to be able to provide healthy workplaces and consider new and inclusive approaches to recruitment.

Looking at statistics alone, many would think that Cheshire and Warrington had no challenges to overcome – this is simply not true. With our strong economy and potential to grow further, Cheshire and Warrington is in a prime position to make a significant contribution to achieving the government's ambition to reduce economic inactivity, but this will need targeted interventions both for local residents and employers who are experiencing difficulties filling vacancies.

There is a wide range of reasons for economic inactivity, requiring different tailored interventions. As well as tackling long-term economic inactivity, we need to help those who have recently become economically inactive and stem the flow into economic inactivity. We know that the longer someone is economically inactive, the harder it becomes to return to work.

This Plan is the first step in acknowledging where we need to focus our efforts to ensure more residents can find, secure, and sustain good employment, fulfilling their own personal potential and benefiting from our strong economy. It has been developed in collaboration with partners across work, health, skills, and the voluntary and community sector – driven by a shared vision to support local people in the best way – including challenging the ways programmes have been delivered previously and identifying how they should change.

We are lucky to have strong foundations, partners who are willing to honestly reflect on the current status quo and who are keen to improve.

Done right – this plan will also offer a solution to why so many are businesses struggling to recruit and retain staff. Together we can make a real difference, and in Cheshire and Warrington we are committed to make this a reality.

We need greater flexibility, investment, and a joint purpose to drive forward this agenda, and this Plan marks the beginning of a longer shared journey.



Cllr Karen Shore,
Deputy Leader, Cheshire West and Chester Council
Lead member for Health, Inclusion, Skills and
Employment

Executive Summary

Introduction

Cheshire and Warrington has a strong economy and labour market with employment already at almost 80%. However, some communities remain excluded from growth and can face multiple barriers to finding employment and getting on in the workplace. This plan provides an opportunity for Cheshire and Warrington to continue to unlock growth by targeting key cohorts into employment who we know face more barriers.

By understanding how to best target support; working collaboratively to prevent people from being excluded from work or becoming economically inactive; and building an inclusive labour market, Cheshire and Warrington can play a key role in delivering the government's ambition to get two million more people into work. Building on provision already in place and adopting a joined-up, targeted approach, we can help provide a route back into employment for 17,000 residents who are currently economically inactive but are seeking to return to work,¹ and some of the 65,500 Universal Credit (UC) claimants who have been unemployed for over 12 months.

We can also better coordinate a preventative approach to interventions, reducing the number who may find themselves at risk of becoming disengaged from education or employment. There are significant numbers of residents who are in danger of becoming economically inactive – for example, 1,000 young people in every year group in our secondary schools have been identified as at risk of dropping out.

The subregion can generate important long-term savings by providing opportunities for those who face more barriers, including those on a costed care plan. Providing a route into sustained employment for those not in work, can help them to feel more included in the labour market, reduce economic inactivity, encourage economic growth, and help identify long-term savings through reductions in the demand for adult health and social care services.

The Get Cheshire & Warrington Working Plan (GCWWP) brings together evidence from existing subregional strategies and policies, builds on engagement with stakeholders (including a GCWWP task group), and additional socioeconomic analysis of the strengths and challenges of Cheshire and Warrington's labour market.

The Plan demonstrates how the three Local Authorities, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) are committed to work together to co-develop a locally driven co-ordinated approach to reducing economical inactivity and improving outcomes for residents across Cheshire and Warrington. It is a practical, partnership blueprint to support people across Cheshire and Warrington into sustained, meaningful work and to ensure local employers can access the skills and talent they need.

¹ We have taken a 5-year average of the proportion of the economically inactive population across Cheshire and Warrington who want a job and multiplied this by the current economically inactive population.

This work builds on the strong foundations of programmes such as DWP's Restart Scheme and NHS- Funded Employment Advisors in Talking Therapies.

Labour Market Analysis

Employment and economic inactivity

There is a high number of job opportunities per working age resident and economic inactivity levels remain low particularly compared to the wider North West region. However economic inactivity has been rising over the last five years, with early retirement and long-term sickness cited as the main reasons for inactivity.

Earnings and quality of work

Median earnings are above the North West average, with Cheshire and Warrington's varied economy evident in the mix of occupations present across the subregion. Despite a fall in the number of residents earning below the living wage, there remains a challenge for many residents in low-paid or insecure work, with 64,000 residents earning below the living wage.

Sectors

Professional, scientific, and technical services is the highest employing sector in Cheshire and Warrington; this tends to be a high value sector, covering areas such as life sciences. Overall, there are few major differences in sector employment to the overall national economy, with manufacturing, health and business administration and support, significant local employers.

Skills

A high proportion of residents are qualified to degree level, but there are known gaps, such as: insufficient progression pathways for residents from Level 2 upwards, and a high proportion of residents with no formal qualifications in Warrington.

Employment demand

Vacancies have started to pick up over the last year, but vacancies cannot simply be filled by those currently out of work as there are skills mismatches across the patch. Employers have struggled in a high-cost environment over recent years. There has been a lack of incentive to invest in the future workforce, including hiring younger apprentices over more experienced workers.

Universal Credit and unemployment

In total, there are 89,850 Universal Credit (UC) claimants across Cheshire and Warrington. Around two thirds of UC claimants are not working. There has been an increase of over 7,000 UC claimants who are long-term unemployed to 65,400 across Cheshire and Warrington over the last year.

Priorities

The Plan identifies six priority groups facing additional barriers to entering and sustaining employment which we will target for support. Below is a summary of these groups, along with a link to the [priorities section](#):

Priority 1: Most deprived neighbourhoods

On the whole deprivation is low but there are pockets of deprivation across the subregion particularly in urban centres of Crewe, Winsford, Warrington, Northwich, Macclesfield and Ellesmere Port. There are additional barriers in terms of accessibility to key services, employment sites and housing affordability in more rural areas, and a requirement to improve community infrastructure (as referenced in Pride in Place awards).

Priority 2: Young people and NEETs

There has been a rise in the number of 16- and 17-year-olds who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) over the last five years. Attainment is also far lower for those eligible for free school meals or classed as disadvantaged (e.g. SEND) which has a knock-on impact on their ability to progress onto further education provision, employment or some other forms of training.

Priority 3: Long-term sickness and disability

Long-term sickness has been rising as a reason for economic inactivity, matching regional and national trends. The largest drivers of this across Cheshire and Merseyside are mental and behavioural orders, which made up around 40% of fit note reasons, followed by musculoskeletal and respiratory diseases.

The employment rate for those residents with disabilities is 65%, compared to 84% for those without, therefore there is 19% gap. More work is required to support those residents wanting and able to work, along with employers willing to provide opportunities, to ensure this untapped talent is not lost.

Priority 4: Early retirement

Early retirement is the most likely reason for economic inactivity in Cheshire and Warrington, accounting for over a third of total economic inactivity in Cheshire West and Chester. This includes those who have been forced to retire early due to health conditions, along with those who are in a position where they can retire early.

Priority 5: Carers and parents facing challenges

Although the number of children living in poverty is comparatively low, there has been a rise in the number of children living in poverty across all three local authorities. Some barriers for parents from low-income families to return to and enter employment include childcare, transport, and housing costs. National research has emphasised a lack of support for people caring for elderly, sick or disabled people.

Priority 6: Connecting people to opportunities

Generally, there is a lack of coordinated careers information, advice and guidance for young people promoting the job opportunities available in Cheshire and Warrington. There is a need for employers to take an active role in skills development and invest in their workforce, with latest subregional data for 2022 showing Cheshire and Warrington to be in the bottom half of Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) areas by the proportion of establishments who have funded or arranged training for staff over the last year.

Actions

The GCWWP provides an opportunity to set out what we can do now to support residents facing exclusion as well as drive long-term system change to create a more targeted, joined-up support offer which prevents economic inactivity.

Over the next 12-18 months we will focus on:

- Setting-up the governance required to move towards a joined-up offer across the three authorities.
- On-going audit of provision to highlight where there is duplication and potential gaps emerging in our collective support offer.
- Establish targeted task and finish groups to focus on specific priority issues and actions including:
 - ‘Quick wins’ such as programmes which have the potential to be scaled and immediate priorities to engage with wider partners from across the subregion.
 - Longer term opportunities for system change to support prevention, and consider how the role of a Strategic Authority could lever in greater control/ flexibility
- Explore engagement with identified priority groups to hear the barriers they are facing to ensure the GCWWP is reflective of residents’ lived experience.

Making further progress on supporting people who are economically inactive will mean that we need to go beyond a one approach to employment support to ensure we meet people where they are in their communities and in the services and institutions with which they interact, to offer pathways to employment support that work for them.

Building on the effective targeted provision that exists in communities in Cheshire and Warrington, with the development of the Strategic Authority over the next year, there is an opportunity to draw together good practice in the programmes that are running in different places. This will be achieved through our ongoing provision audit and task and finish groups, and in the development of one strategic employment service. Initially, this will offer better coordination and connection with devolved powers and funding, as well as deeper collaboration with partners.

Our employers have a crucial role to play if we are to help those from our identified priority groups into sustained employment. It has been a tough few years for employers; an extended period of high inflation before recent rises in the National Minimum Wage and

National Insurance Contributions, and the introduction of global tariffs have further added to pressures. The British Chambers of Commerce has found that business confidence continues to remain subdued with over half of businesses citing taxation and inflation as their biggest external factors of concern, and a quarter of businesses saying they have had to cut back their investment plans². We need to ensure that employers have the support they need to change their recruitment processes to offer more supported employment opportunities for those from our identified cohorts.

² British Chamber of Commerce, 2025 Q2 Quarterly Economic Survey

Introduction and Context

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE) Get Britain Working White Paper sets out the requirement for places to develop local Plans to address key issues in local labour markets. These span supporting people to enter and participate in local labour markets, ensure school leavers access quality further training and employment opportunities if not progressing into higher education, raise the bar on creating good quality jobs in local economies, fill skill and labour vacancies, support women and people who have had caring responsibilities to progress in work, and address local inequalities in labour market outcomes.

The Get Cheshire & Warrington Working Plan brings together existing strategies into a practical, joined-up framework for delivery. It maps what provision exists, where the gaps are, and how different parts of the system interact - both for those delivering services and for the people navigating them. Moving beyond strategy into implementation, the Plan builds shared understanding, surfaces delivery challenges, and supports collective action.

There are near-term opportunities for the subregion which mean this Plan is timely:

- Devolution will give the subregion a devolved Adult Skills Fund, which can be targeted at areas of need – if skills and confidence is a barrier for returning to work this could be a focus.
- Ability to codesign future employment support to address economic inactivity (for example around health and work) and concentrations of unemployment in some parts of Cheshire and Warrington and the forthcoming launch of the Connect to Work programme.
- Local Jobcentre reform to develop a local jobs and careers service, learning from the Wakefield Pathfinder Project.
- Local Growth Plan development and future local growth funding succeeding UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), along with the refreshed Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) for Cheshire and Warrington will connect labour market demand and growth opportunities with strategy around skills and local employment supply.
- Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Cabinet Office are supporting place-based public service innovation efforts with test and learn approaches.
- The 10-year Health Plan sets out government reforms to neighbourhood health services and NHS management at the national and Integrated Care Board (ICB) level – moving to strategic commissioning and more alignment with Mayoral Strategic Authorities particularly in terms of prevention agendas.

Cheshire and Warrington has a strong foundation for inclusive economic growth: a growing population, a diverse economy, and established partnerships across local government, health, education, and business. The subregion is well placed to support the government's ambitions for national growth and the dual need to develop the future skills requirements of our economy to enable economically inactive people to move into good quality jobs.

However, like many places across the North West, some communities remain excluded from growth and can face multiple barriers to finding employment and getting on in the workplace. This plan provides an opportunity for Cheshire and Warrington to continue to unlock growth by targeting key cohorts into employment who we know face more barriers.

Devolution will provide the subregion with the opportunity to continue to capitalise on these strong foundations by having more direct control over investment into transport, housing, and local skills. It will also provide the platform to coordinate our approach to inward investment -collectively promoting our subregion as a great place to set up a new business - to help attract more businesses into Cheshire and Warrington to further encourage future economic growth.

Regional strategies set out a shared direction to reduce economic inactivity, improve employment and health outcomes, and better align workforce development with economic growth. These strategies present a consistent view of labour market challenges.

- Cheshire and Merseyside ICB's **Work and Health strategy** sets out the key health challenges in Cheshire and Warrington (along with those in Liverpool City Region), and how it impacts on the local labour market – this Plan draws on that data and analysis.
- The subregion's **Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Strategy** (produced by Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington) sets bold ambitions to tackle key indicators of deprivation and combat place-based inequality, aiming for no communities in Cheshire and Warrington to be in the most 20% deprived nationally by 2045.
- To support this, the **Fair Employment Charter**, endorsed by the three local authorities, encourages local employers to offer secure jobs, training pathways, and diverse hiring practices that also benefit residents in disadvantaged areas.

Economic inactivity in the subregion is rising, particularly among older people and individuals with long-term health conditions, and there is a need to reduce the 106,000 people currently economically inactive across Cheshire and Warrington and stem the flow into economic inactivity. Place-based inequalities remain, particularly pronounced in places such as Crewe, Ellesmere Port, and parts of Warrington, facing different barriers in each case.

The Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) co-ordinated by South Cheshire Chamber on behalf of the subregion, identifies skills shortages in sectors including manufacturing, health and social care, digital and low carbon, and the Cheshire and Warrington Jobs Portal has on average 15,000 vacancies at any one time. Despite growth potential, skills provision is constrained by limited progression pathways, and misalignment between training infrastructure and employer need.

Programmes such as Multiply and Skills Bootcamps are widening access to adult learning, while the Health and Care Academy is developing clearer pathways into care roles. Local authorities are using UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) allocations to commission locally tailored interventions that respond to community needs and align with LSIP priorities.

The Integrated Care Strategy and Work and Health Strategy further reflects a shift towards a more person-centred and preventative model of support, recognising the role of work in improving health outcomes and reducing inequalities.

Together, these strategies and programmes offer a strong foundation for action planning.

To shift the dial on unemployment and economic inactivity, Cheshire and Warrington needs an approach going forward that will:

- Provide more flexibility to tailor services to meet local needs and enable partners to be more responsive and accountable to their local communities.
- Understand delivery at the best level for the individual to deliver better outcomes, preventing duplication of activity and administration.
- Promote early intervention activities to prevent more residents becoming long-term unemployed/economically inactive, in turn reducing employment support/public health demands.
- Encourage more employers to invest in training and promote healthy workplaces, and to work more closely with JobcentrePlus, employment support, skills, and local government partners.

This Plan sets out an analysis of the current labour market strengths and challenges, focusing on patterns of economic inactivity and unemployment, maps current provision and gaps, and proposes actions to better integrate provision and employment support going forward under the first devolution agreement for Cheshire and Warrington.

While the programmes and actions included here do not cover powers that will be devolved, it nevertheless supports a joined up strategic platform to go further on employment support. The priorities outlined here are intended to align with devolved powers across economic growth and skills, and partners will need to work together on actions alongside devolution.

This Plan has been developed through engagement with stakeholders across Cheshire and Warrington including the three local authorities, Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington, DWP, skills providers, the voluntary and community sector, and employer representative bodies.

Labour Market Analysis

Overview of data

Using publicly available data largely from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and MHCLG Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), as well as bringing together insights from key strategies and policies, we have collated a separate detailed socioeconomic evidence base which is available to partners across the subregion. [C&W GBW Evidence base 0925](#)

We have also drawn on existing strategies and policies, DWP data on Universal Credit claimants in Cheshire and Warrington and engaged with stakeholders to help target specific groups which are currently facing more barriers to entering and sustaining employment.

The labour market analysis in this Plan is based on the following data:

Local labour market	Current service provision
Labour market supply factors	
Levels of employment and inactivity – incl. older people, risk of NEET, NEETs, ill-health	Existing services across the NHS, local government, JCP, and VCSE (coverage, levels of demand and delivery) supporting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inactivity and ill-health, disability • Unemployment and job matching • Skill and employability development • Poverty and multiple disadvantage Targeted initiatives and projects (coverage, levels of demand and delivery) such as UKSPF-funded employability programmes; Supported Employment; health and work support for people with disabilities of substance misuse and targeted services for care leavers.
Unemployment – incl. long-term, older and young people	
Disadvantaged neighbourhoods	
Disadvantaged cohorts – multiple disadvantages incl. disability, homelessness, ex-offenders, care experienced, ethnicity	
Skill levels and educational attainment across places	
Labour market demand factors	
Earnings	Employer led / engaged activity and initiatives to support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment and apprenticeship opportunities targeted for disadvantaged cohorts and neighbourhoods. • Training and progression through high quality, skilled jobs with earnings progression • Specific in-demand skill development with colleges and skills providers
Vacancies in employment and apprenticeship/training opportunities across places and sectors	
Quality of jobs and local employer offer across places and sectors	
Skill requirements and shortage demand across sectors	

Employment and economic inactivity

The labour market in Cheshire and Warrington remains strong particularly within the wider North West region. Employment in Cheshire and Warrington is almost the 80% target as set out in the Get Britain Working White Paper. Jobs growth has been strong and there is a relatively high number of job opportunities available compared to regional and national levels. Economic inactivity, despite a steep rise following the pandemic, has since fallen, following a general downward trend over the last two decades, and at 18.5%, remains well below the 23.5% felt across the wider North West.

Figure 1. Employment rate (LHS) and economic inactivity (RHS) rate (2004-24)

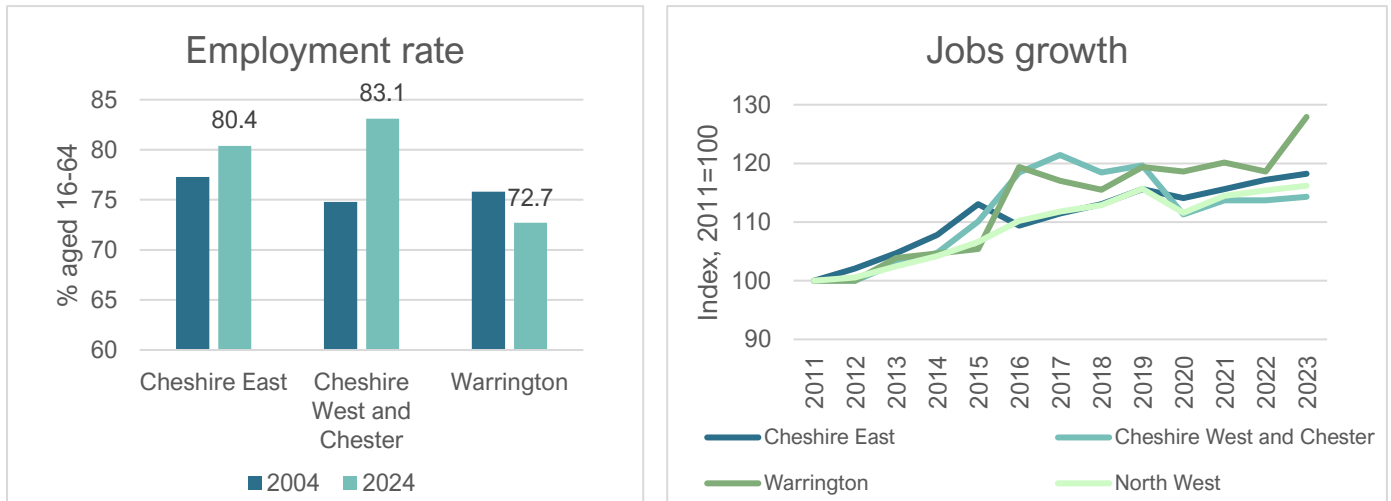


Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (2025)

However, this masks the varying experiences felt by residents. Despite strong employment levels, there are around 106,000 residents who are economically inactive, with 65,500 Universal Credit (UC) claimants who have been unemployed for over 12 months. Levels vary across the subregion, with some wards displaying lower levels of employment and higher levels of economic inactivity.

Economic inactivity is currently higher in Warrington compared to Cheshire, however, job opportunities across Warrington have been growing more quickly than elsewhere, and the number of jobs per working age resident (jobs density) is particularly strong at 1.26. All areas in Cheshire and Warrington have a high jobs density compared to 0.83 across the North West and 0.86 nationally, indicating a high number of local job opportunities.

Figure 2. Employment rate (LHS) and jobs growth (RHS)

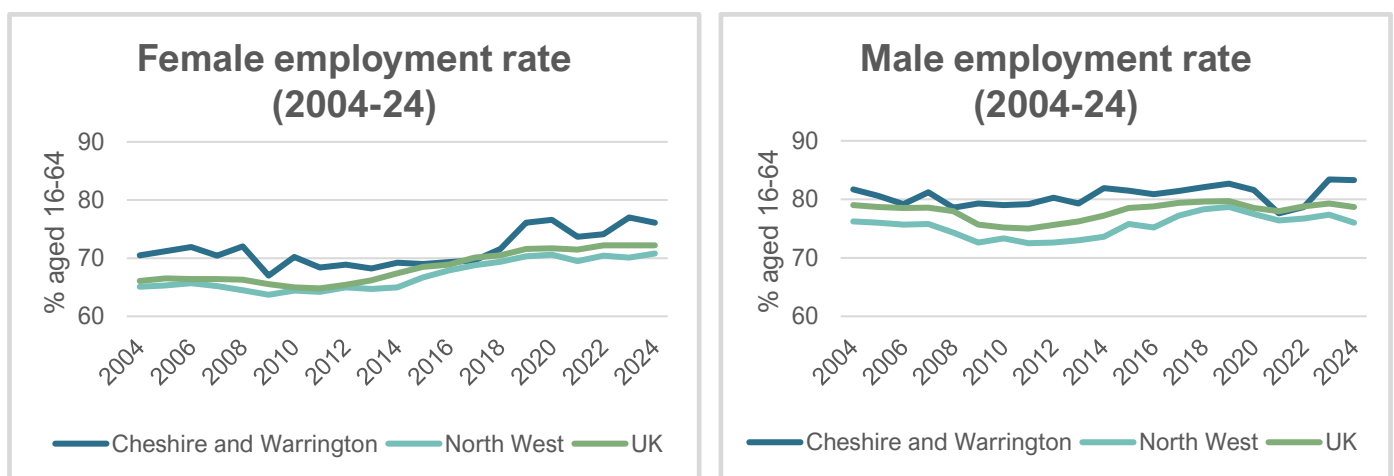


Sources: ONS Annual Population Survey (2025); ONS Jobs Density (2025)

The employment rate for both men and women are high compared to regional and national averages. Nonetheless, women in Cheshire and Warrington are more likely to be out-of-work than men. Employment rates by sex in 2024 stood at 83% for men and 76% for women. This follows through in terms of economic inactivity, although the female inactivity rate is lower compared to regional and national figures. The inactivity rate of 22.4% for women is above 15.1% for men in Cheshire and Warrington. Across the subregion, women make up 60% of those who are economically inactive, slightly above 56% regionally and 58% nationally. Women also make up a higher proportion of Universal Credit (UC) claimants at 58% across Cheshire and Warrington.

Across Cheshire and Warrington, it is estimated that around 87% of those who are economically inactive do not want a job. Of these, 60% are women, highlighting that women tend to face additional barriers entering and sustaining employment, although as seen in the chart to the left below, more women have been entering into employment over the last two decades.

Figure 3. Employment rate 2004-24, female (LHS) and male (RHS)



Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (2025)

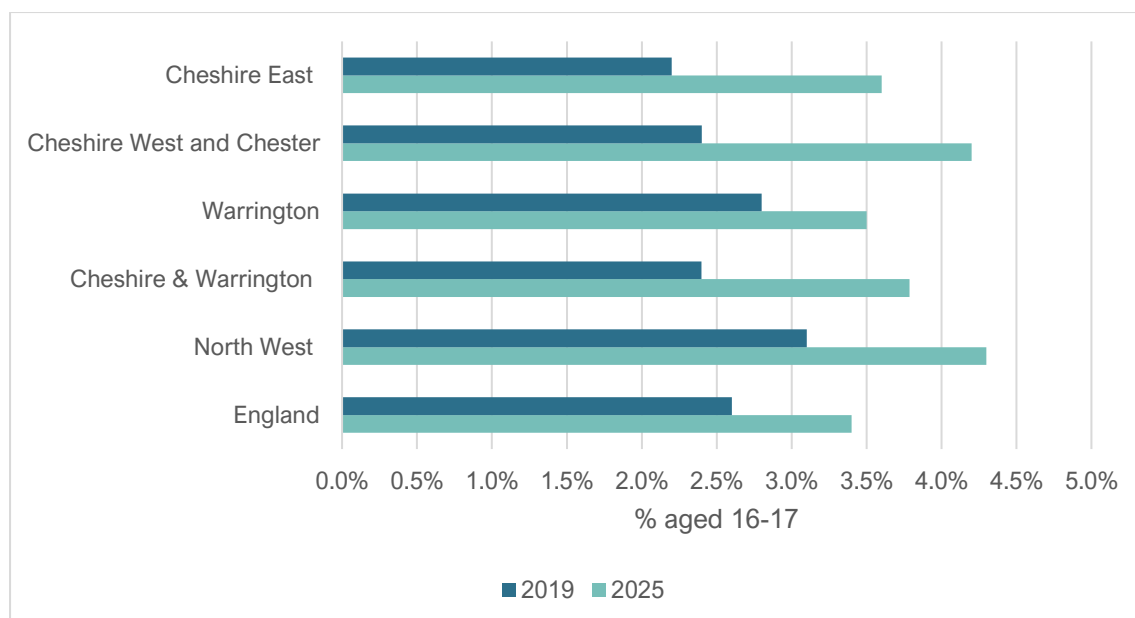
Young people and NEETs

A key transition point is those leaving school and/or college ahead of potentially entering the workforce. The risk for those leaving educational settings and not being in education, employment or training (NEET) has been steadily rising across Cheshire and Warrington over the last five years, with 821 16-17 years olds classed as NEET in 2025.

Across Cheshire and Warrington, the NEET rate has risen from 2.4% to 3.8% between 2019 and 2025, with a significant jump over the last year. All areas in Cheshire and Warrington have seen a rise in the NEET rate over this period, the most pronounced of which has been in Cheshire West and Chester. This is above the national average and in line with the North West NEET rate.

Cheshire East and Warrington have both seen rises in the number who are NEET, particularly over the last year with NEET rates in Cheshire East and Warrington around the national average.

Figure 4. Proportion of 16–17-year-olds who are NEET (2019 and 2025)



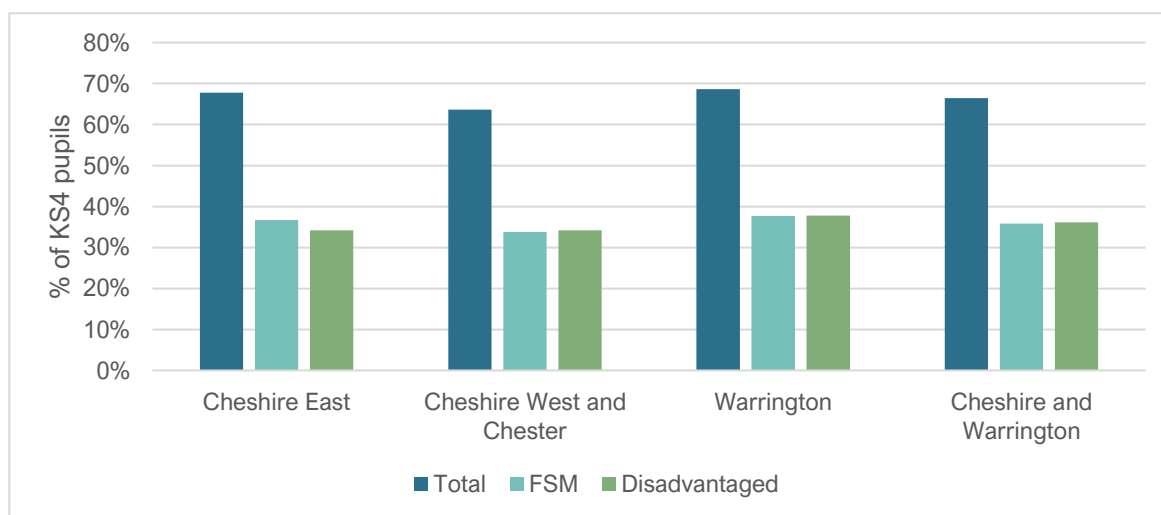
Source: DfE Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority (2024/25)

There are risk factors increasing the likelihood of young people in Cheshire and Warrington becoming NEET, including those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) or classed as disadvantaged³ which includes those who have been in care or SEND. Approximately 1,000 young people in every year group in our secondary schools are at risk of dropping out.

³ Pupils are defined as disadvantaged if they are known to have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the past six years (from year 6 to year 11), if they are recorded as having been looked after for at least one day or if they are recorded as having been adopted from care.

In the 2023/24 academic year, two thirds of pupils achieved grades 4 or above in English and Maths GCSEs across Cheshire and Warrington. However, attainment of young people eligible for free school meals or classed as disadvantaged is almost half overall GCSE attainment levels. Although attainment varies across Cheshire and Warrington, in all three local authorities, attainment is far lower for those eligible for free school meals or classed as disadvantaged compared to their peers

Figure 5. Percentage of pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs (2023/24)



Source: DfE Key stage 4 performance (2025)

This then has a knock-on impact on the ability to progress onto further education provision, employment, or other forms of training. Across Cheshire and Warrington, 94% of Key Stage 4 (KS4⁴ leavers entered some form of further education, employment, or training in 2022/23. This falls to 84% for those who are eligible for FSM or classed as disadvantaged, again a trend which is seen across the three local authorities of Cheshire and Warrington.

The attainment gap for those achieving Level 2 qualifications is around 25% for those eligible for FSM or classed as disadvantaged, increasing to 33% points for Level 3 qualifications.

⁴ KS4 refers to students at the end of Year 11. 'Key stage 4 destinations' shows data on where pupils who finished key stage 4 in 2022 to 2023 went in the next academic year.

Figure 6. Percentage of KS4 leavers in sustained education, employment & apprenticeships (2022/23)



Source: DfE Key stage 4 destination measures (2025)

Stakeholders feel there is a lack of consistent, sustainable re-engagement activity available across the subregion despite good practice taking place, including:

- Collaborative work between schools, LA staff and college pastoral staff.
- Allowing young people to be able to swap courses until November and have the opportunity to start college in January.

There is however recognition for consistency across the subregion when sharing transition plans between institutions to try and ensure more effective progression into further training

More generally there is a lack of coordinated careers information, advice and guidance for young people promoting the job opportunities available in Cheshire and Warrington.

Stakeholder engagement has found that work experience is very difficult to source and still relies on parents helping young people to find placements.

The Kick Start programme demonstrated the benefits of incentivising employers to recruit young people, but the programme was yet another short-term intervention. From an employer's perspective, there is a lack of incentives to take on younger more inexperienced employees who have just left school or early into an apprenticeship. Employers are also continuing to grapple with an increase in minimum wage and National Insurance contributions, and higher energy costs. The Careers and Enterprise Company and the Careers Hub have an increasing focus to ensure every young person has meaningful experiences of the workplace whilst at education - with targeted support for our most disadvantaged young people.

Mental health is another significant driver of rising NEET levels with a lack of access to mental health services a challenge nationally as well as in Cheshire and Warrington, with long waiting times to access services. As noted in the Cheshire and Merseyside ICB Health and Work report, the mental health of young people is impacted by longer-term cultural and environmental changes, such as social media, increased loneliness, and reduced autonomy. All of these elements need to be considered when designing appropriate wraparound employment/training support for younger people.

Early retirement

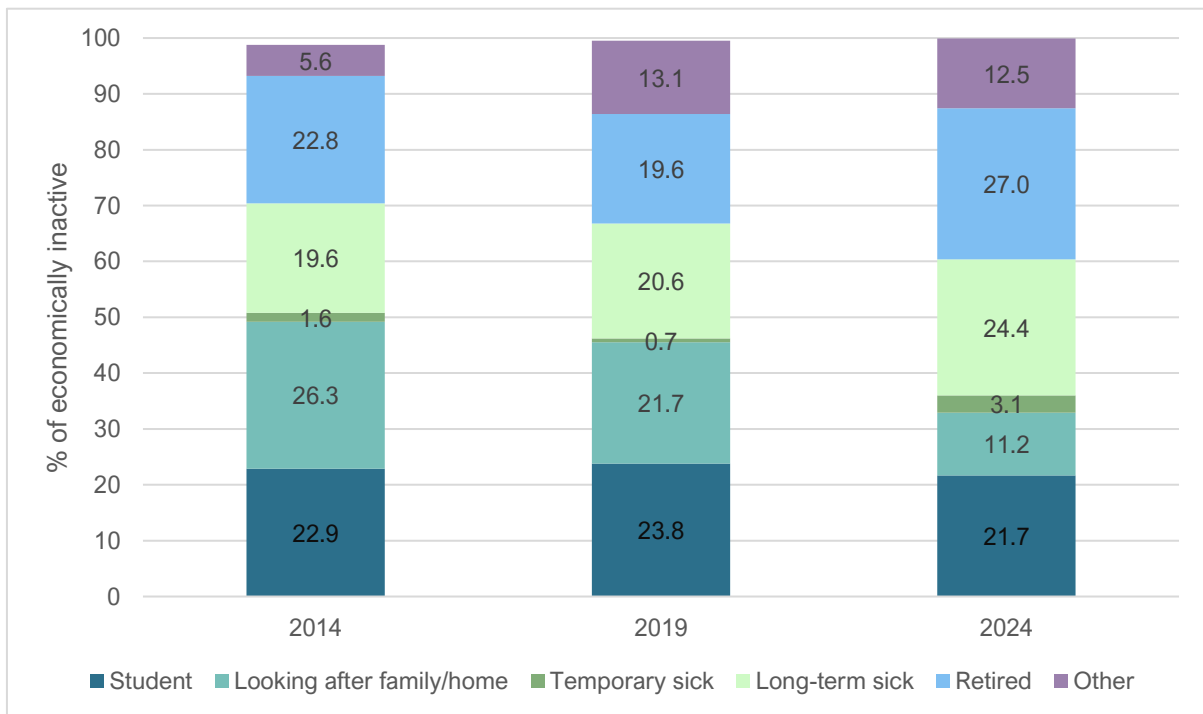
Between 2019 and 2024, there has been a slight rise in inactivity across Cheshire and Warrington, following wider national trends since the Covid Pandemic where economic inactivity has risen. Although remaining well below the regional and national averages, inactivity has increased more steeply than compared to national rates.

Within Cheshire and Warrington there has been differing experiences:

- Economic inactivity is lowest in Cheshire West and Chester, where inactivity has continued to decline over the last decade, including over the last 5 years to 15%.
- Cheshire East has seen a slight increase in inactivity to 16.6%, well below regional and national averages.
- Warrington has seen a significant rise in inactivity from 17% to 27% between 2019 and 2024 and has by far the highest rate of inactivity in Cheshire and Warrington. Employment has also fallen in Warrington to 73%, whereas employment is at least 80% in Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester.

The two main reasons accounting for more of the economically inactive population across Cheshire and Warrington is long-term sickness and early retirement. Increasing long-term sickness is reflective of wider trends seen regionally and nationally. An increasing proportion who are retiring early in Cheshire and Warrington differs from the regional and national picture.

Figure 7. Economic inactivity by reason in Cheshire and Warrington



Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (2025)

Early retirement is the most likely reason for economic inactivity in Cheshire and Warrington, accounting for over a third of total economic inactivity in Cheshire West and Chester. Research conducted by University College London Centre for Longitudinal Studies⁵ using life course evidence from the 1958 National Child Development Study found that a third fewer people born in 1958 were in the labour market at age 62 than at age 55.

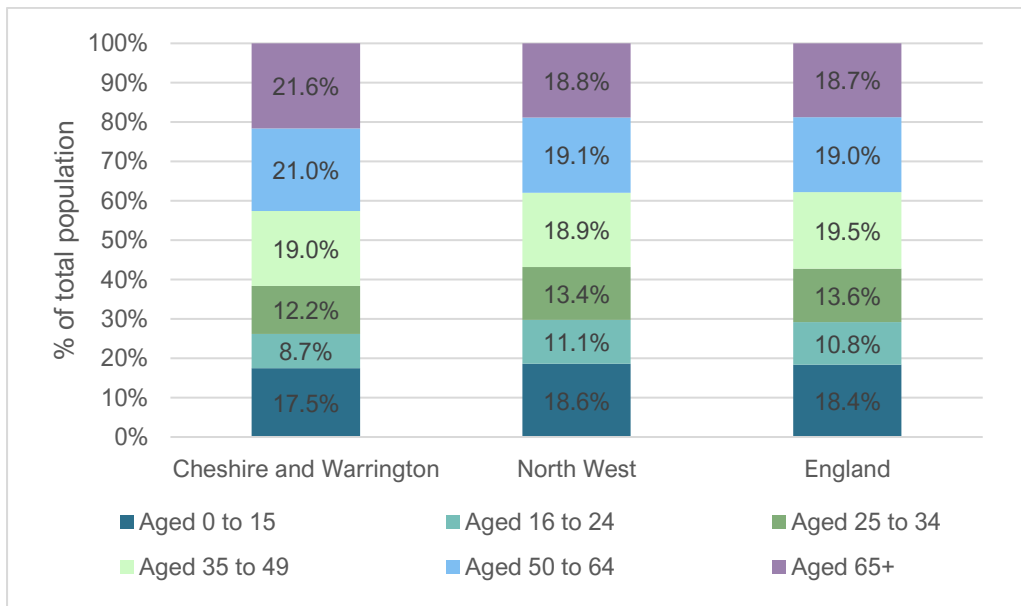
Given the median age of the population across Cheshire and Warrington is four years older than regional and national figures⁶, with more people approaching the latter stages of their working lives, this cohort will be an important one to target to ensure there is support for those who need it to stay in the workforce.

There needs to be support for those whose health is leading to early retirement - 45% of those aged 50-64 nationally gave long-term sickness as the reason for inactivity, as well as providing opportunities for those who are in a position where they can retire early, which will likely be a significant cohort in Cheshire and Warrington.

⁵ UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies: Economic inactivity before reaching State Pension Age (2024)

⁶ ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates, England and Wales, June 2024

Figure 8. Population composition (2024)



Source: ONS Population Estimates (2025)

Long-term sickness and disability

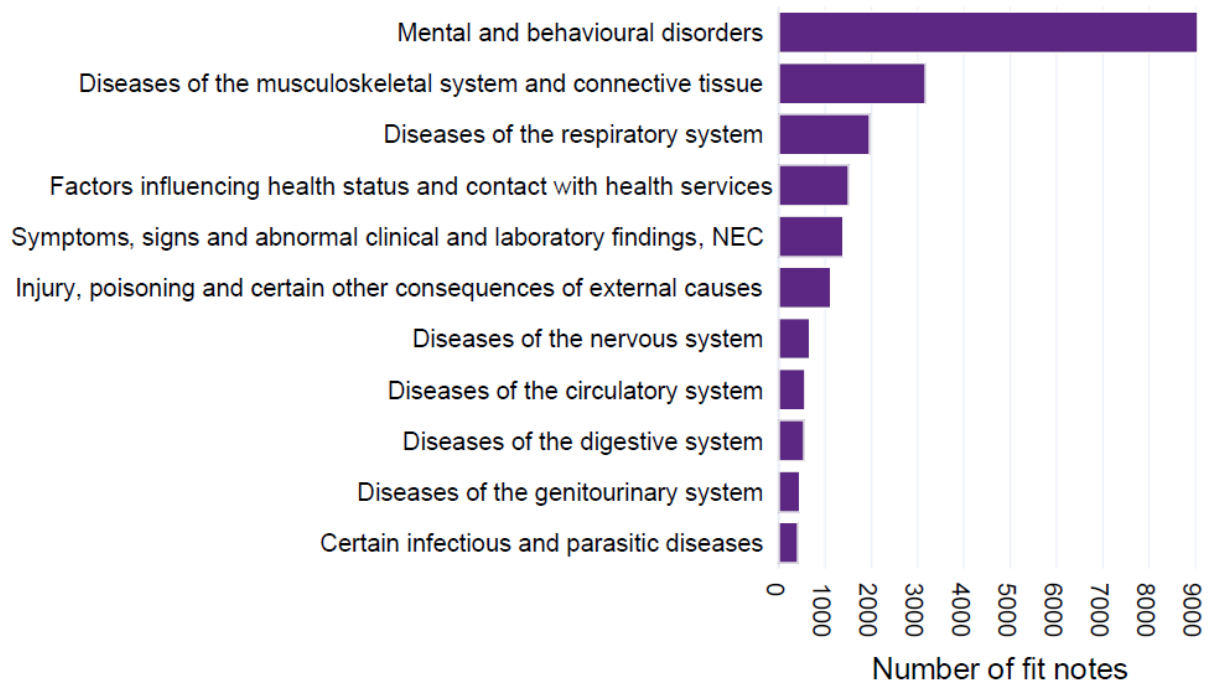
The next highest reason for economic inactivity behind early retirement is long-term sickness. All three local authorities have seen long-term sickness increase as a reason for economic inactivity particularly so over the last 5 years in Cheshire West and Chester. There has also been a continued rise over the last decade in Warrington. Long-term sickness accounts for a lower proportion of economic inactivity in Cheshire East.

In Cheshire and Merseyside in December 2024, 11,500 people were absent from work due to temporary sickness, compared to 6,800 in December 2004. This is a key group where early intervention should focus on preventing progression to involuntary worklessness related to long-term sickness.

Fit note data shows that a combined 7% of people are off work with long-term and temporary sickness across Cheshire and Merseyside, compared with 5.1% nationally⁷. The largest drivers of worklessness are mental and behavioural orders, which made up around 40% of fit note reasons, followed by musculoskeletal and respiratory diseases.

⁷ Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership: All Together in Health and Work (2025)

Figure 9. Top 10 fit note reasons (Dec 2024) in Cheshire and Merseyside



Source: Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership All Together in Health and Work (2025)

Fit notes owing to mental health and behavioural disorders have risen from around 6,000 per month in 2015 to 11,500 in 2024. Financial pressures, job strain, and insecurity tend to be more prevalent for people with fewer qualifications or living in more deprived areas which is reflected in Cheshire and Merseyside, with areas with greater deprivation exhibiting higher incidence of mental health fit notes.

Around a fifth - 21% - of the population in Cheshire and Merseyside report a long-term Musculoskeletal (MSK) condition, compared to the England 17.6% average⁸. MSK conditions affect people of all ages but are more common with advancing age and are more prevalent in areas with greater deprivation. Fit notes for musculoskeletal issues have risen from around 3,000 per month in 2015 to 4,300 in 2024 across Cheshire and Merseyside. Cheshire and Merseyside counters trends seen more widely where work-related musculoskeletal disorders have decreased over time⁹, highlighting a potential gap for employment support services specifically aimed at those with musculoskeletal conditions.

Residents with disabilities are more likely to be economically inactive than their non-disabled peers. The employment rate for residents with disabilities in Cheshire and Warrington is 65% (although this varies from 70.1% in Cheshire East and 54.4% in Warrington). Although this compares well against the UK and North West employment rate, Warrington is lower than the UK rate and level with the North West rate. This represents a loss in potential talent,

⁸ Cheshire and Merseyside ICB

⁹ The Health Foundation Commission for Healthier Working Lives

who with tailored support for the individual and employer could become economically active, which in turn could improve their health, resilience, financial independence and reduce demand on public services.

Figure 10: Employment rate for those residents with disabilities and those without (ONS Annual Population Survey, Nov 2025)

	Cheshire East	Cheshire West and Chester	Warrington	Cheshire and Warrington	UK	North West
Employment rate aged 16-64 - EA core or work-limiting disabled	70.1	65.8	54.4	65	56.7	54.4
Employment rate aged 16-64 - not EA core or work-limiting disabled	83.1	88.2	81	84	82.3	82

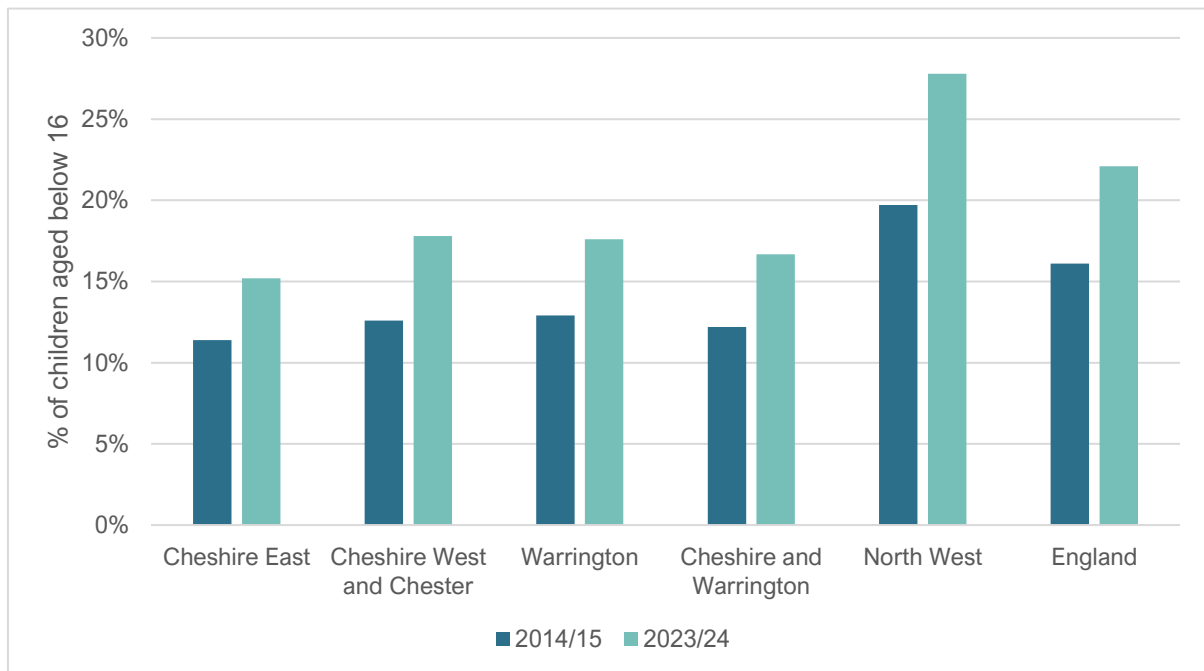
Carers and parents facing challenges

Although the number of children living in poverty¹⁰ is comparatively low, especially within the North West region, with the three local authorities amongst the six districts with the lowest levels of relative child poverty across the North West, there has been a rise in the number of children living in poverty across all three local authorities. Latest estimates across Cheshire and Warrington estimate that just over 29,000 children aged below 16 are living in relative poverty, a rise of 9,000 children since 2014/15, up from 12% of children to 17% in 2023/24. Around 70% of children in low-income households were in working households across Cheshire and Warrington in 2023/24¹¹.

¹⁰ Relative poverty refers to people living in households with income below 60% of the median in that year.

¹¹ Cheshire and Merseyside Child and Family Poverty Updated Metrics July 2025

Figure 11: Percentage of children aged below 16 living in relative poverty (2023/24)



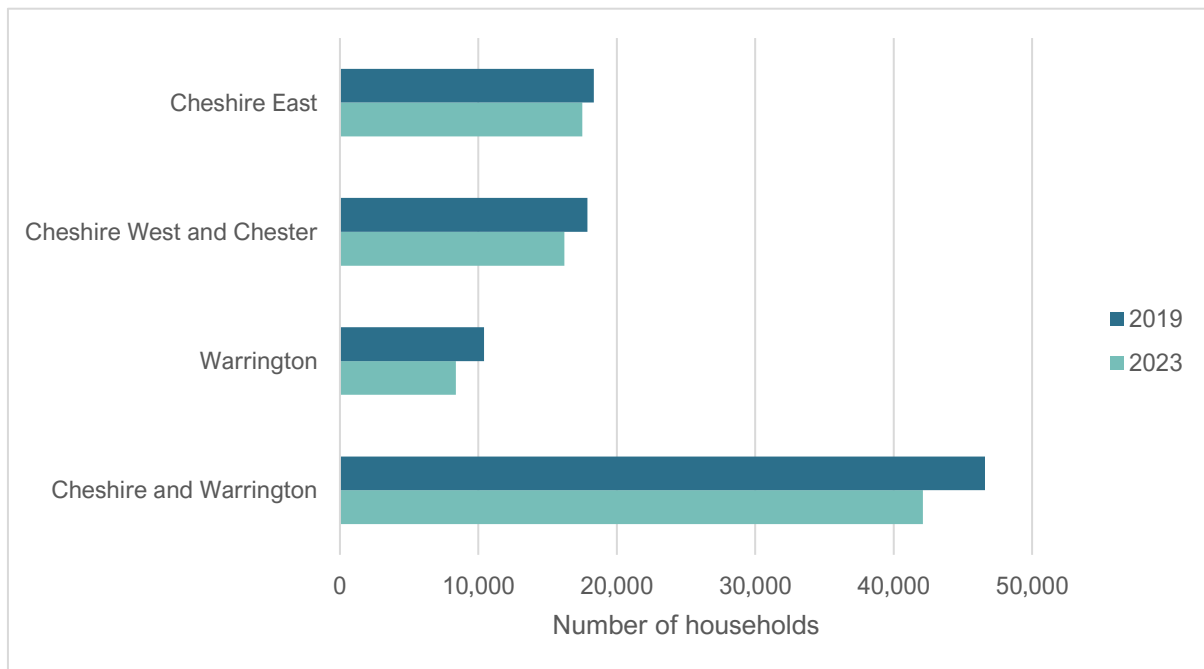
Source: Children in low-income families: local area statistics, financial year ending 2024

This reiterates that there is an increasing number of families who are living on low incomes and therefore may face more barriers to accessing and sustaining employment. Some barriers for parents from low-income families to return/enter into employment include childcare, transport, and housing costs (including the cost of heating and general maintenance).

Although the percentage of households who are in fuel poverty¹² has fallen over recent years, there remains 42,000 households (10%) across Cheshire and Warrington who are experiencing fuel poverty. This can make it more expensive to heat homes and increases the risk of developing health related issues by living in cold environments. This could be another barrier to employment, especially those who are also living on low incomes.

¹² A household is considered to be fuel poor if they are living in a property with a fuel poverty energy efficiency rating of band D or below

Figure 12: Number of households in fuel poverty (2023)



Source: Department for Energy Security and Net Zero Fuel Poverty Subregional fuel poverty data (2025)

Unpaid carers and single parents are falling through gaps in current employment and skills provision and are therefore facing significant barriers to workforce participation. Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹³ projects that by 2035 there will be an extra 400,000 people in the UK caring for the elderly, sick and disabled for ten or more hours per week. Although the government has recently put in place additional childcare support measures of up to 30 hours of free childcare for working parents.

Earnings and quality of work

Median pay in Cheshire and Warrington closely matches UK levels, with modest variation across local areas in May 2025. Median pay for employees living in Cheshire & Warrington is highest in Cheshire East, and lowest in Cheshire West & Chester, although median monthly pay of £2,525 across Cheshire and Warrington is £100 above the regional average¹⁴.

The varied nature of the economy in Cheshire and Warrington is evident in the occupations residents are employed in with both higher and lower skilled occupations present in the employment mix. Although not massively different to the make-up of regional and national employment, there is a slightly higher base of employment in high skilled occupations with a

¹³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation: The future of care needs: a whole systems approach

¹⁴ ONS PAYE Real Time Information (2025)

relatively high share of workers in managerial roles, well above regional and national averages.

But there is variation across Cheshire and Warrington with higher shares of those employed as managers and in professional occupations in Cheshire West & Chester than Warrington who has a higher share of residents employed in lower skilled occupations such as process, plant, and machine operatives, and in elementary occupations.

In Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester, residents' earnings are higher than workplace earnings suggesting many people commute to higher-paid, high skill jobs likely as managers or in professional occupations outside the area. In contrast, workplace earnings in Warrington are higher than resident earnings, indicating an inflow of higher-paid workers and potential skills mismatches among the local population, where residents are more likely to work in lower skilled occupations.

Figure 13: Employment by occupation (2024)



Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (2025)

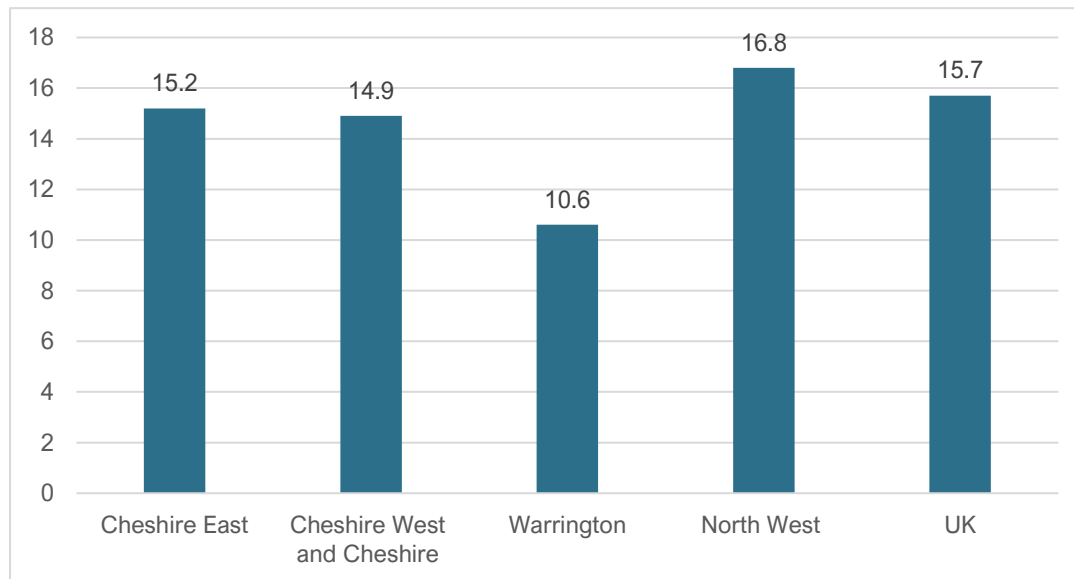
All areas have seen a decline in the number of employees earning below the living wage, and all have a lower proportion compared to the 17% of employees regionally, especially in Warrington. Coupled with a strong employment rate, high earnings in relation to the regional average, a high number of jobs per working age resident, and a high proportion employed in high skilled occupations, all point to a strong labour market featuring high quality job opportunities.

However, this is not felt by all in Cheshire and Warrington. It is estimated that 64,000 people earn below the living wage, around 14% of the working age population in Cheshire and Warrington, so there remain challenges for many residents in low-paid or insecure work with limited progression routes.

Despite the low proportion of employees earning below the living wage in Warrington, we have seen that qualifications attainment across the authority area tends to be lower than elsewhere in the subregion, creating a potential barrier to accessing good quality work. This may mean that residents may be stuck in lower skilled occupations rather than some of the

higher paid roles in sectors such as professional, scientific and technical services where Warrington is particularly strong.

Figure 14: Percentage of employees earning below the Living Wage (2024)



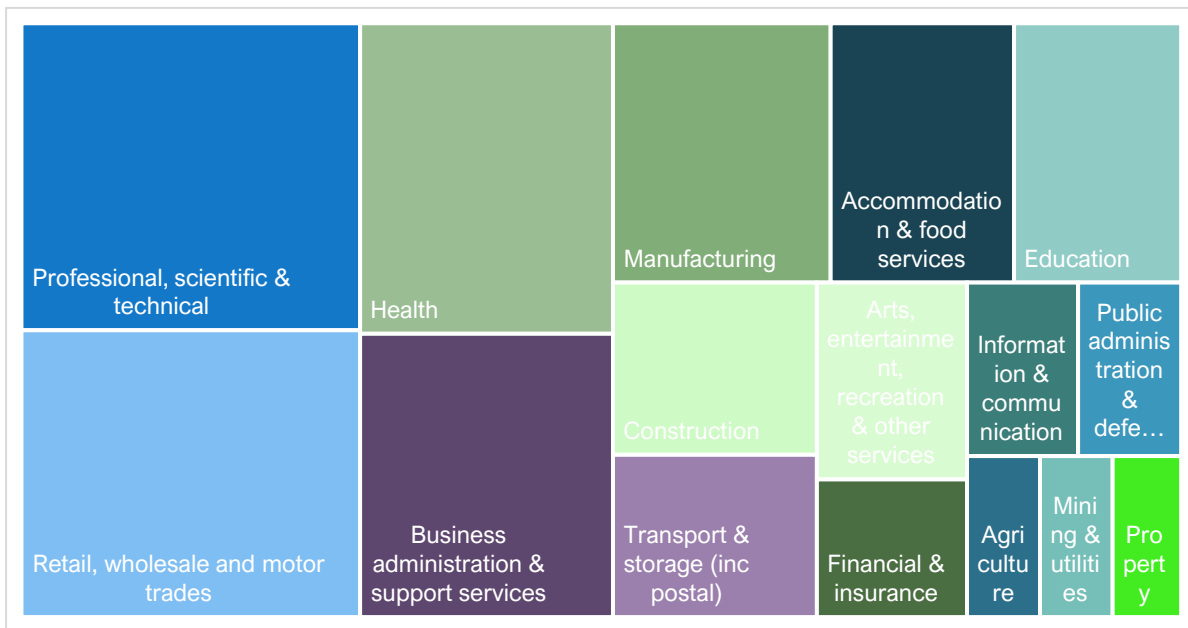
Source: ONS Number and proportion of employee jobs with hourly pay below the living wage (2024)

Sectors and occupations

Professional, scientific, and technical services is the highest employing sector in Cheshire and Warrington, with employment growing strongly in the sector particularly between 2022 and 2023. The sector makes up 15% of total employment, well above 9.5%-10% regional and national averages. This tends to be a high value sector, covering areas such as life sciences (one of five priority sectors identified in their LSIP) and are core components of the growth sectors identified by the government as part of the national Industrial Strategy.

Manufacturing remains an important sector (another priority sector) at over 8% of total employment, with employment growing by 1% a year on average since 2015, whereas nationally employment has declined. Business admin and support is also a relatively big employer in Cheshire and Warrington at over 10% of total employment. But overall, there are few major differences in sector employment to the overall national economy. IT is relatively small compared to nationally, along with health although this is still a significant employer regionally at 11% and another of Cheshire and Warrington's sector priorities. Public admin and defence has a low proportion of employment compared to nationally, as does education which may point towards having to travel outside the subregion for certain courses/training options.

Figure 15: Breakdown of employment by sector in Cheshire and Warrington¹⁵ (2023)



Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey (2025)

All areas have a strong base of employment in professional, scientific, and technical services. Warrington is the centre of employment in the subregion, with the sector making up a fifth of employment across the district. Warrington is also the hub for business administration, wider logistics, construction, and utilities jobs in the subregion.

Cheshire East is the centre for manufacturing employment and although a relatively small employer, the base for agricultural employment in the subregion.

Cheshire West and Chester is the base for employment in the financial and insurance sectors, along with education, creative and hospitality sectors.

Skills

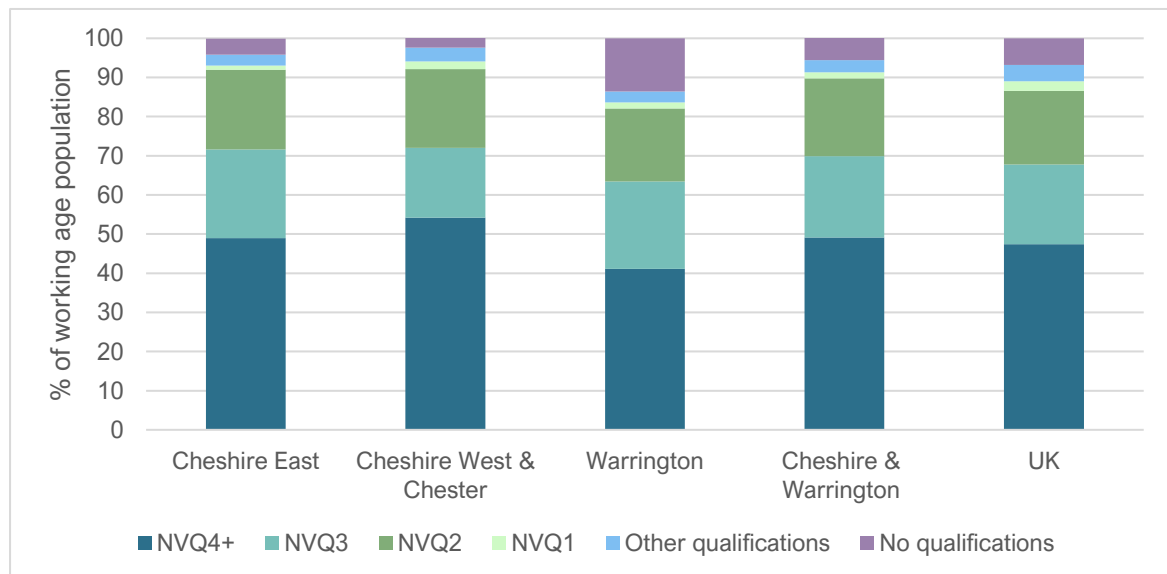
While there are strong top-end skills across the subregion, gaps remain in foundational attainment, particularly in Warrington. Overall, qualification levels in Cheshire and Warrington are slightly above the UK average: 49.1% of working-age adults (16–64) hold Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF) 4+ qualifications, compared to 47.4% nationally. Cheshire East and Cheshire West & Chester have relatively high proportions of residents qualified to RQF3 and RQF4+. In contrast, Warrington has a significantly higher share of adults with no formal qualifications at 13.6% - more than double the UK average of 6.8%, and well above neighbouring areas.

¹⁵ Figure 14 presents the proportion of total employment made up by sector

This suggests challenges in progression for some groups and points to uneven education outcomes across the subregion that may limit access to higher-skilled employment.

Although higher level apprenticeship achievements have been rising over the last 5 years, there has been a fall in intermediate level apprenticeships across the subregion, where the achievement rate is low compared to regional figures. There has also been a rise in the number of 16-17 years olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET) to over 800 across Cheshire and Warrington. Previous reports and engagement have raised concerns over insufficient progression pathways for residents from Level 2 upwards.

Figure 16: Highest qualification attainment aged 16-64 (2024)

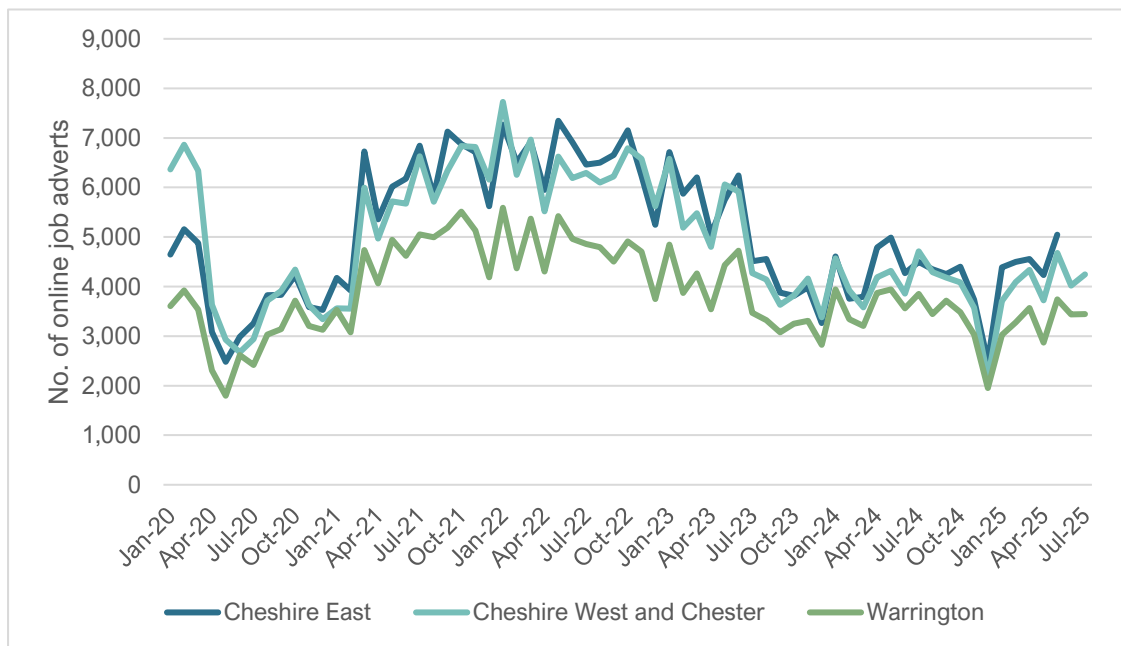


Source: Annual Population Survey (2025)

Employment demand

Vacancies fell significantly at the start of the Pandemic, before slowly picking up until early 2023. These fell again in late 2024. Over the last year or so vacancies have started to pick up across all three local authorities. Job vacancies are focused in health and social care, construction, advanced manufacturing (including opportunities associated with low carbon) and the visitor economy sectors, with some of the occupations most in demand being engineers, nurses and social care workers, and managers.


Figure 17: Online job adverts (2020-25)





Source: ONS Labour demand volumes by Standard Occupation Classification (SOC 2020), UK


Evidence from the LSIP and health and wellbeing strategies, alongside national trends, highlight health and social care, retail and hospitality, logistics, construction and manufacturing as industries where work related problems are the most acute. These challenges typically stem from a combination of skills shortages, recruitment and retention issues, workplace health concerns, and structural pressures in the business environment.


Figure 10. Sectors facing a high level of work-related problems

- 

Health and social care is one of the most pressured industries, with staff shortages, high turnover, and rising demand from an ageing population. Employers report challenges in recruitment and retention, reliance on agency workers, and above average sickness absence linked to physical strain and stress. The sector has difficulty retaining younger staff, with a 44.6% turnover rate of care workers aged under 25.
- 

Retail, hospitality, and other parts of the visitor economy see high workforce churn. Many roles are low paid, involve unsocial hours, or are seasonal, with peak periods in customer-facing jobs creating additional pressure. The sector also lost many workers during the pandemic, with a need to attract people back to sustain this part of the foundational economy.
- 

Logistics, warehousing, and transport experience skills gaps in higher-skilled roles, alongside high turnover in lower-skilled positions. Shift work, long hours, and physically demanding tasks contribute to musculoskeletal problems and absence rates.
- 

Construction and skilled trades face shortages of qualified workers, an ageing workforce, and the physical risks of the job. Seasonal weather disruption, demanding work, and a lack of new entrants in trades such as bricklaying, electrical installation, and retrofitting create capacity pressures nationally.
- 

Manufacturing and process industries are a major economic contributor, with strengths in advanced engineering, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. The sector faces an ageing workforce in specialist roles, skills gaps, and the need to adapt to automation and digital manufacturing. Some jobs remain repetitive or physically demanding, adding to recruitment and retention pressures.

But it is not a case that vacancies can simply be filled by those currently out of work as there are skills mismatches across the patch. Previous reports and engagement have also raised concerns over insufficient progression pathways for residents from qualification Level 2 upwards, an obvious barrier to enter into many of the sectors highlighted, including

professional, scientific and technical services, the largest employing sector across Cheshire and Warrington. Areas such as life sciences where Cheshire and Warrington displays a strong specialism, are difficult for some residents to enter, particularly in Warrington where the share of adults with no formal qualifications is more than double the national average. And despite the need for more workers to enter into skilled trades, we have heard that apprentices have struggled to secure placements, with employers more focused on current delivery while operating in a high-cost environment, opting to try and hire more experienced workers rather than helping to train and recruit the next generation.

Employers need to take an active role in the skills and training landscape to help train staff to fill vacancies in the local economy and allow them to progress throughout their career. This will also improve their own business resilience. However, from the latest Employer Skills Survey where data is available from 2022 at a LEP level, Cheshire and Warrington ranks in the bottom half of LEP areas by the proportion of establishments who have funded or arranged training for staff over the last year (59%). Less than half of establishments funded or arranged on-the-job training (46%) for their staff, the fourth lowest proportion across LEP areas.

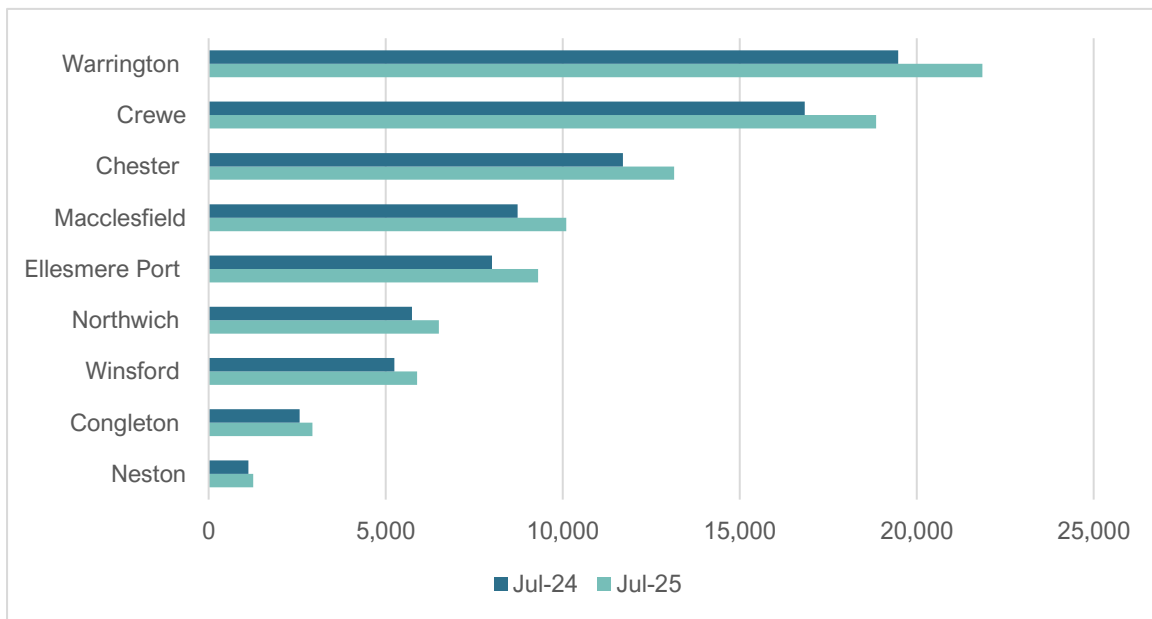
The proportion of employers investing in skills and training varies across the subregion, where over 60% of establishments invested in training in Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington, falling to 55% in Cheshire East. This highlights the need for employers to invest in their workforce and potential employees if we are to help provide residents with the skills they need to fill vacancies and help to grow the local economy.

Universal Credit and unemployment

Between July 2024 and July 2025 total Universal Credit (UC) claimants rose by over 10,000 from 79,400 to 89,850 across Cheshire and Warrington. The rise in UC claimants is partly explained by UC replacing six legacy benefits that cover people in work and out of work (income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, and Child Tax Credit), and to put into context, the 13% rise in UC claimants across Cheshire and Warrington is slightly below the 16% seen regionally and nationally.

Warrington continues to make up around a quarter of total claimants followed by just over one in five from Crewe – combined Warrington and Crewe make up nearly half of total claimants. All areas (as shown in the chart below using Jobcentre Plus areas) within Cheshire and Warrington have seen a rise of at least 12% in total claimants over the last year, the highest rises being in Ellesmere Port and Macclesfield of 16%. Ellesmere Port and Macclesfield combined made up a quarter of the total rise in claimants across the subregion over the last year.

Figure 18: Total UC claimants (Jul 2024 and Jul 2025) by Jobcentre plus area



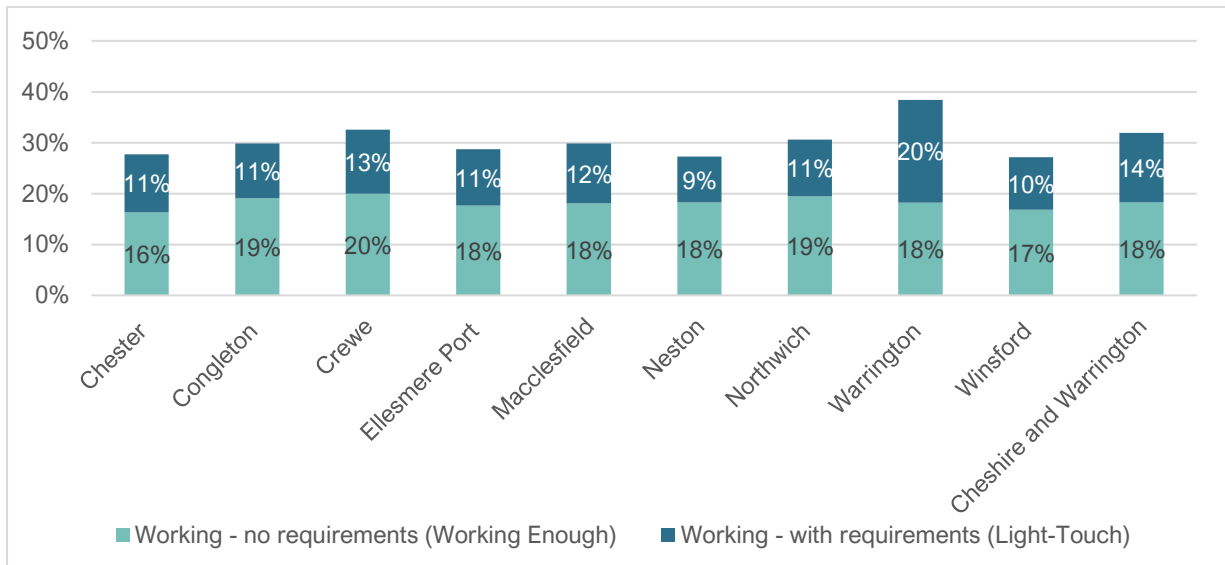
Source: Department for Work and Pensions (2025)

There has been a rise in the number of UC claimants with no work requirements to 45,600 across Cheshire and Warrington, making up over half of total UC claimants. Warrington and Crewe make up nearly half of the total UC claimants with no work requirements - Warrington around quarter of UC claimants with no work requirements and Crewe a fifth of claimants.

Across Cheshire and Warrington, 32% of UC claimants are working with or without requirements¹⁶. This varies with Warrington the highest at 38% of claimants with a high number of UC claimants working with requirements, to 30% or below in Winsford, Neston, Chester, Congelton and Ellesmere Port. Therefore, most of UC claimants are not working – 58,700 UC claimants across Cheshire and Warrington are not working with over two thirds of these with no work requirements.

¹⁶ Working no requirements: individual or household earnings over the level at which conditionality applies. Required to inform DWP of changes of circumstances, particularly if at risk of decreasing earnings or losing job. Working with requirements (light-touch): in work but could earn more or not working but has a partner with low earnings.

Figure 19: Percentage of total UC claimants working [either working with or without requirements] (Mar 2025)

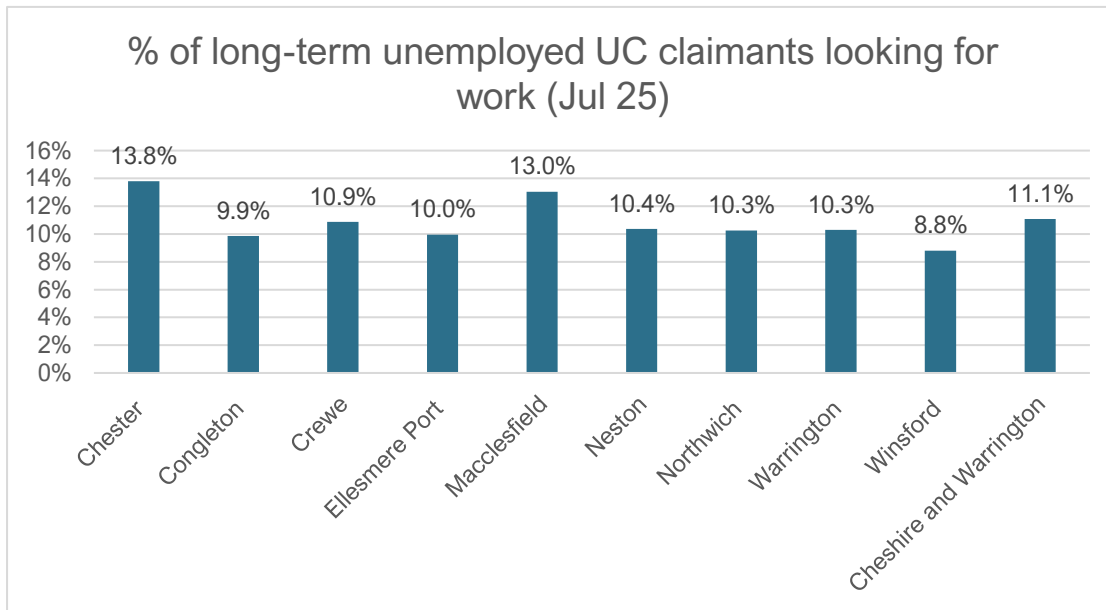


Source: Department for Work and Pensions (2025)

There has been an increase of over 7,000 UC claimants who are long-term unemployed to 65,400 across Cheshire and Warrington over the last year. This refers to people claiming UC who have been unemployed for more than 12 months across all DWP regimes. Warrington makes up around a quarter of long-term unemployed UC claimants, a fifth from Crewe, and Chester and Macclesfield combined another quarter of claimants.

Women make up 62% of long-term unemployed claimants across Cheshire and Warrington and this is fairly consistent across Jobcentre plus areas, although it is slightly higher in Winsford and Crewe. Across all areas most of those who are long-term unemployed are not looking for work. Only 11% of UC claimants who are long-term unemployed are looking for work, the highest is in Chester and Macclesfield with 13-14% of UC claimants who are long-term unemployed looking for work, but this figure is 10% or lower in Winsford, Congelton, Ellesmere Port, Warrington, Northwich and Neston.

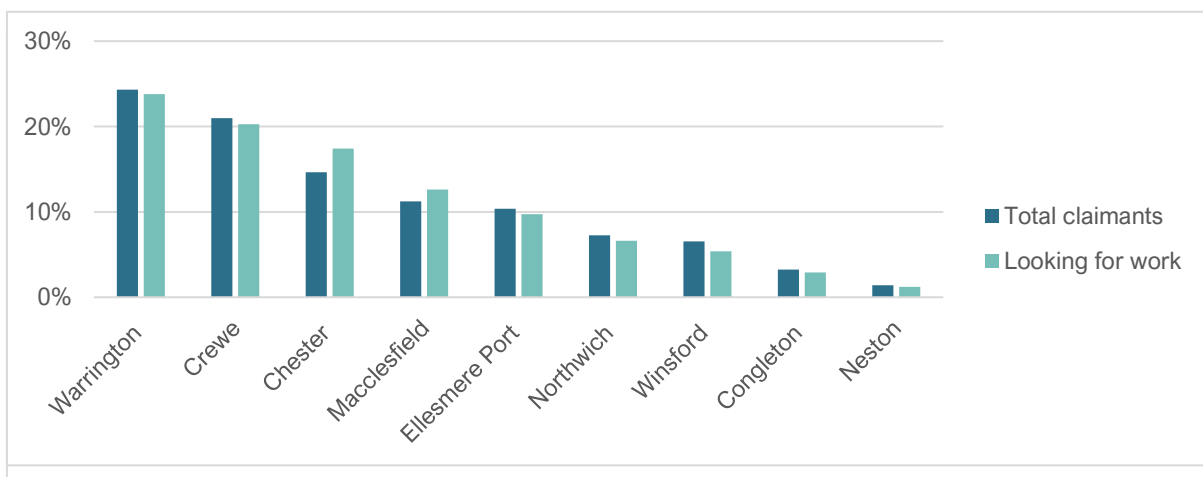
Figure 20: Percentage of long-term unemployed UC claimants looking for work (Jul 2025)



Source: Department for Work and Pensions (2025)

Between July 2024 and July 2025, the number of claimants looking for work has fallen by 6% from 14,450 to 13,635, with all areas within Cheshire and Warrington seeing a fall, although this has been more subdued in Winsford, Chester, and Warrington. Those claiming UC and looking for work only make up 15% of total UC claimants. Although the overall split of UC claimants looking for work by Jobcentre Plus area is not dissimilar to total UC claimants share, Macclesfield and Chester make up a higher proportion of claimants looking for work than total UC claimants.

Figure 21: Share of total UC claimants and looking for work by Jobcentre plus area



Source: Department for Work and Pensions (2025)

Women make up 58% of total claimants with this being fairly consistent across Jobcentre plus area, while men make up 58% of UC claimants who are looking for work. Overall, the fall in UC claimants looking for work appears to be from a fall in the number of female UC

claimants looking for work, falling by 12% over the last year whereas there has been little overall change in male UC claimants looking for work across Cheshire and Warrington.

Key transition points

Key transition points increase the risk of inactivity. They require sufficient, joined-up whole system support to prevent disengagement and support groups most at risk. Below we have summarised three key transition points of leaving education and becoming NEET; falling out of work due to health; and leavers from institutional system in the Cheshire and Warrington context, along with a high-level summary of existing support in place.

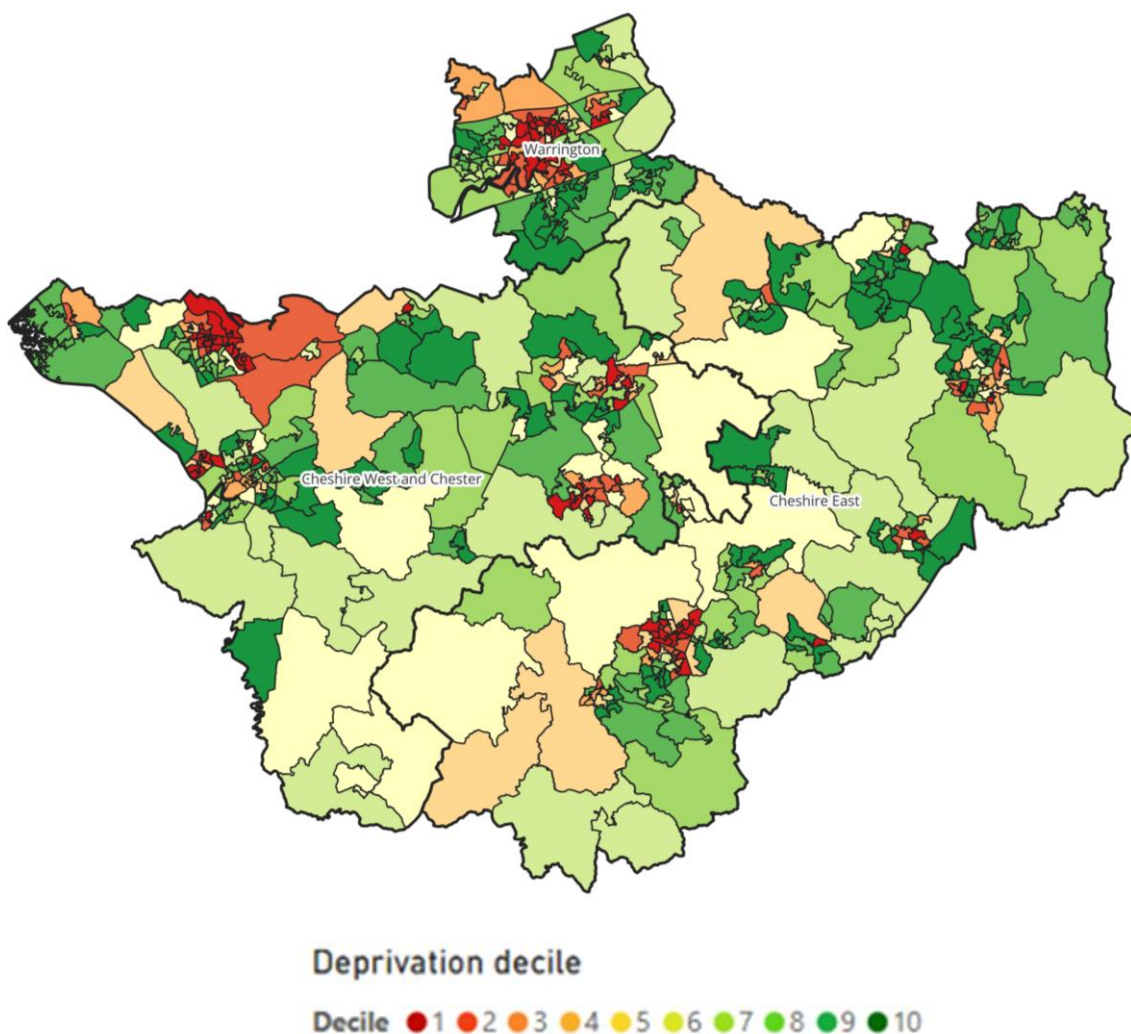
Figure 22: Key transition points – Cheshire and Warrington

Transition point	The need for intervention	Existing support
Leaving education becoming NEET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 800 16–17-year-olds in Cheshire & Warrington are NEET, equal to 3.8% of this age group, above the national average • Risk of dropping out during transition from school to college • Risk factors include poverty, SEND, care leavers and rural isolation • There is a lack of reengagement routes or sustained outreach in some areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pledge Partnership Careers Hub • Fresh Start • Total people
Falling out of work due to health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising long-term sickness is a key driver of inactivity • Includes mental health, Musculoskeletal (MSK) and other chronic illness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-Life MOT • Restart • IPS Severe Mental Health
Leavers from institutional systems (e.g. prison, military)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High risk of disengagement after structured institutional life • Complex needs, including housing, mental health, addiction and stigma • Limited integration with integration services and low levels of employer engagement in targeted hiring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breaking the Cycle: Tempus Novo support for ex-offenders • The Armed Forces community support hub

Deprived neighbourhoods

On the whole deprivation is low at the Cheshire and Warrington level, with almost two thirds of neighbourhoods living in the 50% least deprived neighbourhoods nationally, and over a third of neighbourhoods in the least 20% deprived nationally. However, there are pockets of deprivation across the subregion particularly in urban centres of Crewe, Winsford, Warrington, Northwich, Macclesfield and Ellesmere Port. This includes some neighbourhoods towards the most deprived in the country including Crewe North East, Lache, Hebden Green, Poplars and Hulme, Central Warrington and Wharton.

Figure 23: Index of Multiple Deprivation

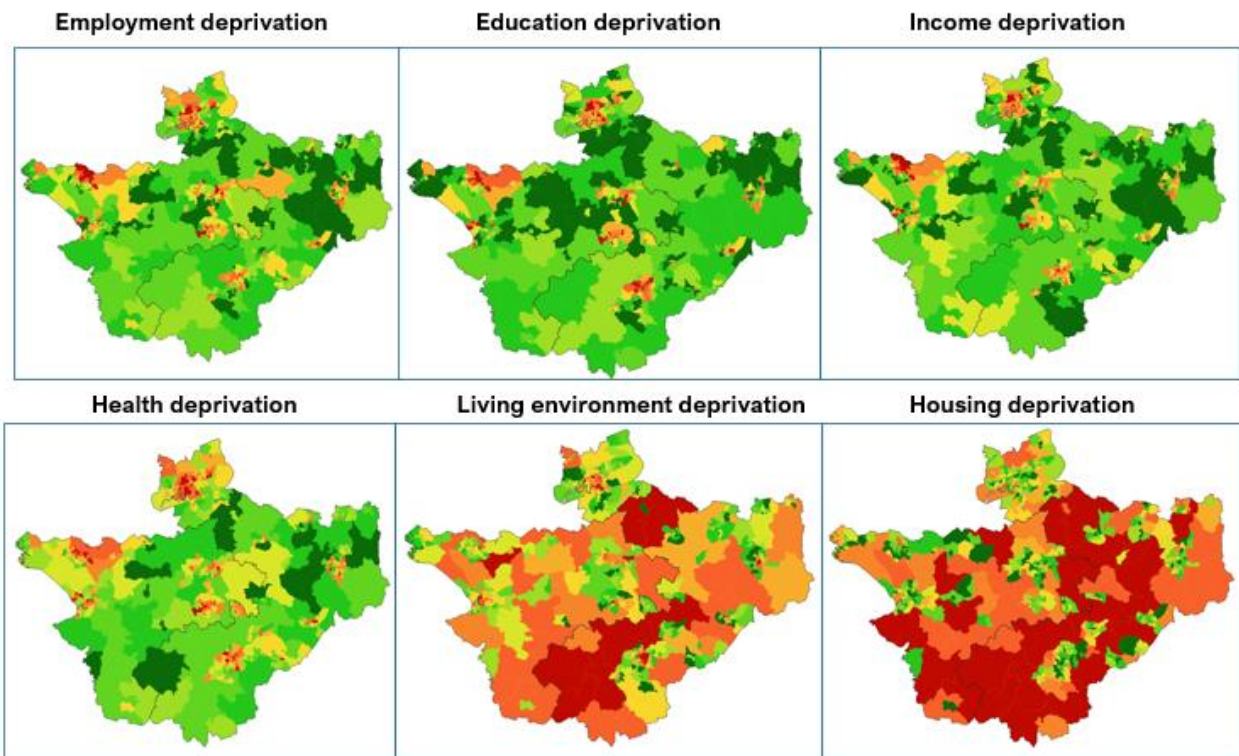


Source: MHCLG English indices of deprivation (2019)

Focusing on different domains which make up the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation again points to relatively low levels of deprivation across Cheshire and Warrington, particularly the domains of employment; health; education, skills and training; and income, whilst highlighting pockets of deprivation concentrated in Crewe North East, Hebden Green, Northwich, Dallam, Ellesmere Port, Central Warrington and Blacon.

However, the Index of Multiple Deprivation may mask some of the inequality felt in more rural areas, where transport accessibility and housing affordability are potentially significant barriers to entering and sustaining employment. This can be seen in the living environment and access to housing and services domains, where many of Cheshire and Warrington’s rural communities rank more towards the most deprived nationally.

Figure 24: Domains of the Index of Multiple Deprivation¹⁷

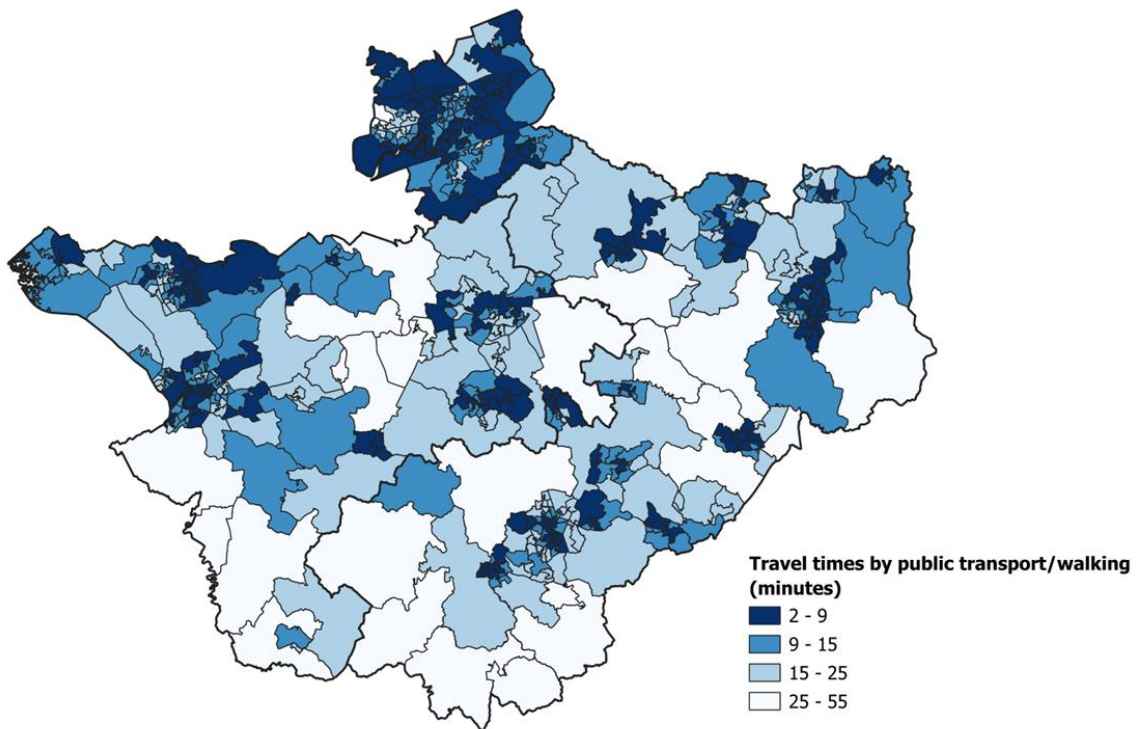


Source: MHCLG English indices of deprivation (2019)

Journey times to key services are generally longer in Cheshire than they are in Warrington, including average journey times to employment centres. The map below shows average minimum journey times to medium sized employment centres (500-4,999 jobs) by public transport/walking. This highlights that journey times are typically shorter in urban centres of Crewe, Winsford, Chester, Northwich, Ellesmere Port and Neston, Knutsford, Congleton, Macclesfield and generally across areas in Warrington, but are longer across large areas of Cheshire in what are more typically rural areas.

¹⁷ There are seven domains which make up the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation. The only domain not included in this figure is crime.

Figure 25: Average minimum journey times to medium sized employment centres (2019)



Source: *DfT Journey Time Statistics (2022)*

Social mobility is likely to be impacted for those living in more deprived neighbourhoods in Crewe, Winsford, Warrington, Northwich, Macclesfield and Ellesmere Port, and potentially reinforcing barriers people face to enter into employment after leaving school. But what may be considered less deprived areas, generally in more rural communities, there remains significant barriers to employment in the form of reliable and accessible transport, and in being able to afford housing given higher costs especially when compared to other areas in the North West.

Current System and Offer

This section maps the current service provision across Cheshire and Warrington, spanning local government, DWP, NHS, the education sector, and the voluntary sector. It provides an overview of local services and programmes, highlighting what support is available, who delivers it, and how far it reaches. It also summarises provision for each priority group and identifies key gaps in provision.

Cheshire and Warrington hosts a diverse network of employment and skills support. This includes:

- National DWP funded provision – delivered through a range of providers.
- Local Authority (LA) activity, funded through UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Department for Education (DfE)
- Work and health related initiatives are supported through the NHS/Integrated Care Board (ICB)
- Further education provision including apprenticeships and T Levels delivered by colleges and private training providers.
- Careers Provision delivered by SEETEC
- Numerous voluntary sector projects.
- Probation and Youth Justice Services

This array of skills provision and employment support assists inactive cohorts and those most at risk of disengaging from the labour market across the geography of the subregion. We have drawn on insights from engagement with councils, employers, and service providers, as well as the evidence used to inform the Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Work Strategy, to inform a comprehensive understanding of the support landscape.

The below table summarises an overview of what support and provision is currently delivered across Cheshire and Warrington by partners.

Services are delivered at a range of locations, including JCP locations, Skills and Employment Hubs in Cheshire West and Chester, Springboard Work Hubs and Youth Hubs in Cheshire East, Warrington Youth Zone, various community settings, at local schools and colleges, and via online support. Programme information has been collated through desk-based research and stakeholder consultation. This is not a comprehensive list of all support offered across the subregion, but rather a brief overview of work and health support commissioned programmes. (Stakeholders are recommended to continue to develop and update this catalogue of support available to residents of Cheshire and Warrington).

Key:

	Sub-region wide
	Cheshire West and Chester
	Cheshire East
	Warrington

Figure 26: Matrix of support

Type of Support	Commissioned				VSCE delivery partners
	DWP	DfE	ICB	LA	
Job Matching	JobcentrePlus National Career Service Restart			RAST redundancy support	Springboard Youth Fed
Skills Progression	Sector-based Work Academy Programmes Seetec Work and Health	Skills Bootcamps			Springboard Youth Fed YMCA Cheshire
SEND	Employment Directions Supported Internships schemes		Mersey Care	Site Smart New Ground, Fresh Start Defining Futures Inspiring Futures Supported Employment	Fedcap Petty Pool Warrington Mencap Walton Lea Partnership Creating Adventures
Young people and NEET	Access to Work Youth Hub	The Careers Hub Supported internships	CAMHs	The Pledge Partnership Venture with Confidence Youth Support Service Fresh Start	The King's Trust Youth Fed
Mental Health	Employment Advisors (EA) in Talking Therapies (Cheshire)		EA in talking therapies. Individual Placement Support (IPS) (Drugs and Alcohol) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs) Veterans in Mind		
CIAG		The Careers Hub		Warrington LiFE Skills Employment hubs Work Hubs	

Adult and mid life	Mid Life MOTs Flexible Support Fund	Adult Learning		Defining Futures	YMCA
Digital skills	Essential Digital Skills			Digital drop-in Microsoft Suite training	Springboard Learn My Way

Local government

Local authorities provide a mix of employment and skills support for residents of all ages, within Cheshire and Warrington. Councils work closely with voluntary sector providers, colleges, and businesses to deliver targeted support for young people, NEETs, employers, and adults seeking to retrain or upskill.

Across Cheshire and Warrington, there is a core offer of subregional support through national DWP programmes, complemented by Adult Skills Fund provision delivered by colleges, independent training providers, LAs, DfE funded Supported Internships to facilitate work placements and provide employability training to young people 16-25 with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), Skills Bootcamps and various support provided by the voluntary and community sector. However, variation in the scope and scale of services contribute to differing levels of support, resulting in a postcode lottery. Cheshire West and Chester Council delivers the most extensive locally commissioned offer through its Skills and Employment hubs funded by DWP, NHS and multiple UKSPF projects; Cheshire East relies more on commissioned providers and has varying coverage in communities; while Warrington commissions through its Chamber and voluntary sector partners, resulting in a stronger emphasis on community-based and specialist provision.

Each council maintains a specialist local offer for care-experienced young people setting out entitlements and available support. This is due to the fact that LAs are corporate parents for care leavers until they are 25. Further detail on council led services are summarised below:

Cheshire East

- Cheshire East Council hosts the welfare-to-work partnership, maintaining a directory of provision and referral routes, with outcomes delivered through commissioned programmes through various providers across the local authority.
- The Venture with Confidence programme provides tailored support for young people who are NEET, helping them to re-engage with training and employment. This is being funded by Cheshire East Council through the Virtual School and Care Leaver Team.
- The council works with YMCA and local housing associations to provide outreach and mentoring support for residents experiencing homelessness or multiple barriers to work.
- The Youth Support Service provides statutory open access support for 13–19-year-olds (up to 25 with SEND), outdoor education focused support for NEET, support to young people who have an Education Healthcare Plan (EHCP), and transitional planning for targeted young people preparing for adulthood.
- Inspiring Futures, delivered by Fedcap on behalf of Cheshire East Council (funded by UKSPF), offers personalised support for people with disabilities and health conditions into employment.
- Supported Employment team support residents with disabilities or complex needs into the work environment.

Cheshire West and Chester

- Cheshire West and Chester delivers the largest programme of employment support in the subregion and manages the biggest share of adult education provision.
- The council operates four Skills and Employment Hubs in Chester, Ellesmere Port, Winsford and Northwich, providing free one-to-one advice, guidance, qualifications, and confidence-building support for residents aged 19+. This is funded through the council's core budget and DfE Adult Skills Funding. It is where the majority of the employment support programmes are delivered.
- Site Smart, delivered by Procure Plus aims to break down barriers for care-experienced and NEET young people who are interested in entering the construction industry, offering local on-site experience at Ellesmere Port. This is currently funded by UKSPF.
- Team Around the Family, is a council led early intervention service to help families identify strengths and needs, offering support and advice, and bringing together involved agencies.
- Fresh Start is designed to support those with poor grades or unwilling to remain in school or college, offering an alternative to repeated GCSE exams through practical, community-based learning, providing functional skills training through this employment support approach. Currently there is no other employment support programme aimed at this age group.

Defining Futures, provides employment support to adults with disabilities, those at risk of homelessness, over-50s, and residents in rural communities.

Both have helped participants gain skills and qualifications, and progress into work, through UKSPF funding, although this is due to end in March 2026.

- Local Supported Employment is DWP and Council funded and supports adults with learning disabilities and autism into paid employment.
- Better Start, delivered by Youth Fed and funded through UKSPF and the Westminster Foundation, supports young people aged 16-24 living in Winsford, Northwich, Ellesmere Port, Lache and Chester. It offers practical and emotional support via a 12-week program to develop skills and supports transition into adulthood.
- Independent travel training is a Council funded support programme to help people build the skills and confidence needed to use public transport. Although the lack of sufficient public transport across the area, remains a concern.

Warrington

- Warrington's Employment Development Team offers a wide range of support, including tailored employment coaching, CV and interview preparation, Digital Drop-Ins, and redundancy support, alongside ESOL and digital skills programmes. The

team works closely with both residents and local businesses to support progression into work.

- Warrington LiFE is the careers, education, information, advice and guidance service provided by Warrington Borough Council. It works with schools, colleges and academies to deliver tailored support for young people, providing careers information, advice and guidance services.
- Community-based support like Youth in Mind at Warrington Youth Zone.
- The council commissions a range of voluntary sector organisations to deliver specialist provision. This includes Warrington Mencap, Walton Lea Partnership, and Creating Adventures, which provide supported work experience, job coaching, and life skills development for adults and young people with learning disabilities. Support for veterans is also delivered through voluntary and community-led services such as the Armed Forces Community Support Hub and Veterans in Mind.
- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) FY25/26 is delivering a range of impactful support programmes, including The Pledge, New Enterprise Accelerator, and Employment Training and Support. These initiatives provide tailored, person-centred support to individuals, helping them progress in their career development, improve employment readiness, and explore entrepreneurship. Through targeted interventions, participants gain the skills, confidence, and explore opportunities.

Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington (ECW) a Council owned partnership vehicle and the successor to the LEP

- Opportunities Portal, a digital platform promoting apprenticeships, training, and job vacancies across the subregion.
- Hosting the DfE Cheshire and Warrington Careers Hub, working with the Careers Enterprise Company. Supporting strategic careers, education and guidance in schools and colleges and providing links to local employers.
- Oversees the Cheshire and Warrington Skills Bootcamps programme supporting employer-led training and responding to local skills needs. Provides funding to support in-work upskilling and links to DWP to provide adults a route to employment.

DWP and JobcentrePlus

DWP provides personalised employment support through its JobcentrePlus network and work coaches, consisting of 9 JCPs and 200 staff working across the subregion, supporting Universal Credit claimants.

Several nationally commissioned schemes operate across Cheshire and Warrington:

- **Work and Health Programme:** supports people of all ages with health conditions or disabilities, to see themselves ready for work within a 12-month period.

- **Restart:** Aimed at Universal Credit claimants who have been out of work for more than 9 months, providing up to a year of intensive help. Delivered locally across all boroughs, by FedCap in Cheshire East and Seetec Pluss in Cheshire West and Warrington.
- **Individual Placement and Support in Primary Care:** Cheshire West and Chester Council places employment specialists in GP practices to help patients who are accessing primary health services to return to or remain in work. Since 2023 this program has engaged over 1,000 people in Cheshire West and Chester, with 33% of participants experiencing positive outcomes.
- **Local Supported Employment:** Cheshire West and Chester Council supports adults with learning disabilities and autism into paid employment. Supported Employment staff work long-term with clients and employers to find suitable roles and assist with in work adaptation.
- **2nd Chance Employment Initiative:** DWP is currently working closely with the Probation Services and the Office of Police and Crime Commission, to develop a programme which would aim to provide wraparound support to Cheshire customers with offending issues currently supervised by Probation Services to provide employment opportunities.

In Autumn 2025, the Connect to Work programme is due to launch across Cheshire and Warrington. This will integrate IPS and Supported Employment, into a single, voluntary work and health support offer. This five-year scheme will provide holistic, person-centred support for economically inactive individuals facing barriers to employment. This will be managed initially by Cheshire West and Chester Council but will operate across the whole of the subregion.

NHS Integrated Care System and Board

The ICS operates across the footprint of Cheshire and Merseyside, working closely with local stakeholders to integrate health and employment support and encourage stable, and sustainable outcomes.

As a designated Marmot region, Cheshire and Warrington are committed to tackling the wider social determinants of health, including education and employment. Programmes include:

- **Employment Advisors in talking therapies:** Funded by DWP and NHS England and delivered across Cheshire, Employment Advisors in Talking Therapies work alongside therapists to address the emotional challenges related to work through integrated psychological treatment and employment support.
- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health provision,** delivered through the NHS across Cheshire.
- **IPS in drugs and alcohol:** Jointly funded with Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and currently delivered only in Cheshire West by the LA, supports people

accessing substance misuse services (VIA provision) who want to move into paid employment. The program provides advice about health and wellbeing, regular sessions with personal keyworker, support groups, and guidance on next steps, including education, training and employment support.

- The **Work and Health Plan Pilot** is delivered in Crewe to support 16-18 young people at risk of dropping out during transition from schools to college. If successful, this pilot may be rolled out to the wider Cheshire and Warrington area.

The ICB Works with Councils on the Work and Health Strategy, aligning primary care, housing, and employment support to address long-term sickness and the main drivers of inactivity including MSK and mental health conditions.

Further education

In Cheshire and Warrington, further education colleges and independent training providers are central to delivering skills and training opportunities for both young people and adults. Higher education providers complement this delivery, and provide support linked directly to local economic and sectoral priorities outlined in the Local Skills Improvement Plan. Key areas of provision include:

- Sector-specific pre-employment programmes in areas such as health and social care, logistics, digital, and construction, alongside core English, Maths and IT skills.
- Supported Internships, available to SEND young people, aged 16 to 24, with an education and health care plan.
- Programmes to tackle wider barriers to work, including ESOL provision, digital skills support, and volunteering opportunities that act as a stepping stone into sustained employment.
- College pastoral staff and local authorities are working together to support vulnerable school leavers and those at greater risk of becoming NEET. Cheshire College South and West has worked closely with local authorities to smooth transitions and reduce disengagement across the academic year. Young people are able to start college in January, and opportunities are available to swap courses until November.

Universities and colleges collaborate through the Cheshire and Warrington Careers hubs, helping to align careers advice, apprenticeships and employer engagement with local labour market opportunities. Specialist training centres such as the Health and Social Care Academy and the Advanced Construction and Civil Engineering Centre, launched at Warrington and Vale Royal College, provide facilities to train students and upskill adults in high-demand fields. The Institute of Technology, a partnership of leading educational providers and local employers deliver high-quality, sector specific technical training at locations across the subregion.

Voluntary and community sector

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VSCE) sector provides a range of commissioned and delivered services that support residents across Cheshire and Warrington to access work, build skills and manage complex barriers to work. The sector works closely with local authorities and the ICB to reach residents who may be less likely to engage with statutory provision.

Some examples of VSCE providers and services include:

- **Petty Pool:** offers supported internships for young people with special educational needs, helping them transition into employment or further learning.
- **Youth Fed:** supports a network of around 150 youth groups, providing mentoring, skills development and progression support for young people.
- **Springboard:** provides employability and confidence-building support for adults aged 18+. Springboard run Work Hubs in Cheshire East in Alsager, Congleton, Crewe and Macclesfield, as well as training for SEND student.
- **Via (drug and alcohol service):** delivers an Individual Placement and Support service within treatment pathways, supporting participants in recovery into employment.
- **Targeted training provision exists to support residents into entry-level work** – for example, the Greenhouse Training Centre, which delivers hospitality training, including a six-week barista course which has proven popular amongst residents. The centre offers a range of hospitality courses designed for both newcomers and experienced professionals, providing practical, hands-on training for individuals seeking to develop basic skills without undertaking formal qualifications.
- **The King's Trust Team Personal Development Programmes** offer 12-week programmes, delivered by Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) staff across several Cheshire locations in Chester, Crewe, Macclesfield, Halton and Winsford. This programme supports NEET young people aged 16-25 years to develop confidence, self-esteem, teamwork and employability skills.

Chambers of Commerce

The South Cheshire Chamber of Commerce delivers the Cheshire and Warrington Local Skills Improvement Plan, on behalf of the subregion, and working to tailor support to meet local sectoral needs. There is a rich network of Chambers of Commerce across the subregion representing different communities and economic centres. Their engagement feeds local intelligence around the local labour market, opportunities for growth and investment, and challenges that businesses are facing, whether in labour and skills or more broadly in local infrastructure, land, and connectivity.

Priorities

Priority 1: Most deprived neighbourhoods

Cheshire and Warrington generally experiences low levels of deprivation, but deprivation is high in some of our urban centres and rural communities including Crewe, Winsford, Warrington, Northwich, Macclesfield and Ellesmere Port. Deprivation has been concentrated in these areas for a number of years, impacting the social mobility for these communities, which for example can be seen in lower education attainment in Warrington. This may create a cycle whereby residents feel they have to move from these communities in order to access more training/employment opportunities.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation also masks some of the challenges felt by those in some of our more rural communities which may on the surface appear to be more affluent, but where significant barriers remain to accessing training or employment in the form of reliable and accessible transport, and higher than average housing costs.

Despite coverage across major towns in the subregion, stakeholders noted ongoing challenges in reaching all who need support, with engagement, not capacity being the biggest constraint. Deprived neighbourhoods lack consistent outreach and recognisable access points, underlining the need for a stronger visible presence within communities.

Partners expressed during engagement on this Plan a need for more local access points, particularly in areas in Cheshire East and Warrington, outside of employment hubs. These are needed in people's communities to be able to better support people in deprived neighbourhoods who may be further from the labour market. There are also issues with some pockets of rural deprivation and the reach of services.

Priority 2: Young people and NEETs

On the whole, Cheshire and Warrington has a skilled labour market with almost half of residents qualified to degree level or above. However, there are uneven education outcomes across the subregion that may limit access to higher-skilled employment.

NEET levels have slowly been rising across Cheshire and Warrington over the last 5 years – a trend reflected regionally and nationally. In 2025, the NEET rate had risen to 3.8% across Cheshire and Warrington, and as high as 4.2% in Cheshire West and Chester. There are further barriers to enter into employment for young people who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) or classed as disadvantaged, where the proportion attaining grades 4 or above in English and Maths GCSEs is almost half of the total Key Stage 4 cohort. This has a knock-on impact on ability to access future opportunities or access some form of further education, employment or training, and thus increasing the chance of becoming economically inactive, reinforced by insights from stakeholders of a lack of consistent, sustainable re-engagement activity.

Support for young people, including those not in education, employment or training is provided through a layered system of careers guidance, youth services, and targeted

programmes. Raising young people's aspirations and developing employability skills help to support young people through key transition points and into employment and training.

Transitions out of education can be a critical point for disengagement. Stakeholders recognised impactful support for young people in the area moving from education to employment, offering apprenticeship opportunities and specialised training to support sustainable career pathways. Despite this, apprenticeship opportunities for younger entrants have declined, with opportunities more likely to go to older and more experienced workers. For young people already disengaged from education, specialised re-engagement programmes provide alternative, employment-focused provision outside of traditional progression routes.

Mental health is a significant driver of rising NEET levels. Locally available services are not at levels to fully meet demand. Long waiting times exist (which are replicated nationally) and this limits the impact of support.

Provision is not consistent across the subregion, meaning that the level of support a young person receives depends heavily on where they live. In Macclesfield, for example, the removal of King's Trust provision has left a gap, with little alternative provision available locally. Cheshire West also lacks the presence of a dedicated local youth hub.

The DWP task group only supports those 19+, failing to address earlier issues or provide sufficient preventative support.

Support for young care leavers is fragmented. Specialised approaches that are trauma informed are not embedded across all programmes, and stakeholders recognised the need for more structured stepping-stone opportunities to help those most disadvantaged to move gradually into education, training or employment. Despite efforts with colleges to support more vulnerable school leavers, there is recognition that transition plans need to be consistent across the subregion and shared from education to receiving institutions to best prepare staff and maintain support.

Engagement revealed that apprenticeship opportunities for young people are being limited by a reduction in employer willingness to offer places. Engagement shows that in sectors such as construction; employers are increasingly reluctant to commit to long-term training. Rising costs including increases to the minimum wage, National Insurance contributions and energy bills compound pressures, reducing incentives to take on younger and less experienced entrants. Similarly, engagement has found that work experience is difficult to source and still relies on parents helping young people to secure placements.

Priority 3: Long-term sickness and disability

Over recent years health related issues have risen across Cheshire and Warrington. We have seen this in the form of an increasing proportion of economic inactivity made up by long-term sickness, as well as a rise in people off work due to temporary sickness. Fit note data shows that a combined 7% of people are off work with long-term and temporary sickness across Cheshire and Merseyside, compared with 5.1% nationally.

The largest drivers of health related worklessness are mental and behavioural disorders which make up around 40% of reasons for fit notes across Cheshire and Merseyside, exacerbated by financial pressures, job strain and insecurity, and therefore more acutely felt in some of our more deprived communities. Musculoskeletal and respiratory diseases are the next most likely reason given in fit notes, where 21% of the population in Cheshire and Merseyside report a long-term musculoskeletal condition, compared to the England 17.6% average.

As a priority, this includes supporting people temporarily out of the labour market – observed as a rise between 2019 and 2024 in the economic inactivity data – and preventing them from becoming long-term sick, as well as employers supporting employees who are temporarily sick from leaving employment due to ongoing health issues.

Residents with disabilities are more likely to be economically inactive than their non-disabled peers. The employment rate for residents with disabilities in Cheshire and Warrington is 65% (although this varies from 70.1% in Cheshire East and 54.4% in Warrington). Although this compares well against the UK and North West employment rate, Warrington is lower than the UK rate and level with the North West rate.

As a priority we would look to develop tailored support that would ensure an individual with a disability looking for work is supported to access and sustain employment, working closely with employers. This will be a priority group for the new Connect to Work programme.

Priority 4: Early retirement

Early retirement is the most common reason for economic inactivity in Cheshire and Warrington, accounting for over a third of total inactivity in Cheshire West and Chester. With an increasingly ageing population, this is a key group to target to ensure there is support for those who may be considering retiring early due to health reasons, whilst ensuring there are suitable job opportunities for those who may be in a position financially to retire early. This could help fill the growing number of vacancies in the subregion and continue to contribute to the local economy whilst helping to develop the future skills pipeline by passing on the skills and knowledge they have developed through their careers.

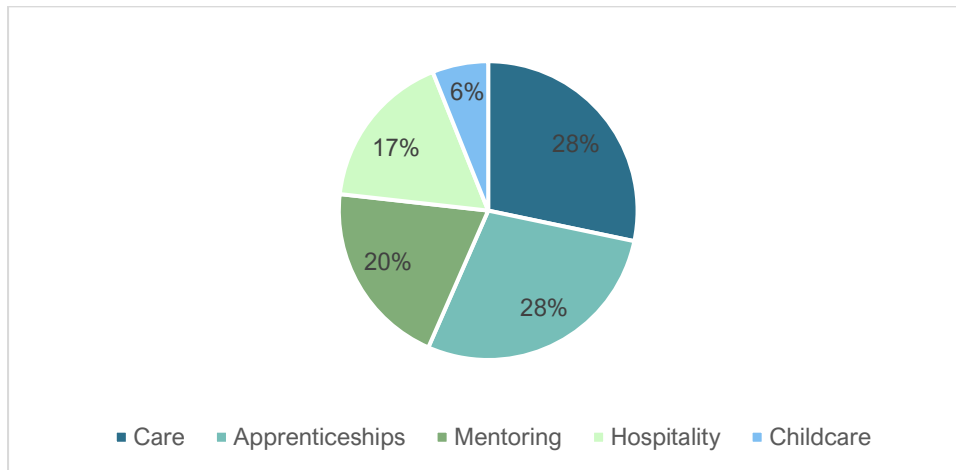
While JobcentrePlus can provide support for those who are out of work and seeking employment, and the Opportunities Portal provides signposting to job opportunities for people over 50, there is a lack of tailored programmes designed to prevent early retirement or actively seek to re-engage those who have already left the workforce.

Over recent years, employment services have shifted to digital platforms, with job opportunities posted online, and support often offered through portals and website signposting. With technology moving at a pace that can be overwhelming for adults returning to work, digital exclusion acts as a barrier to job searching and training for older residents. For older residents with limited experience with modern, digitised recruitment practices, these systems can be challenging to use, further limiting access to job opportunities.

Engagement has informed the work opportunities those claiming UC aged 50 and over would value in Cheshire and Warrington includes care (cook, administration, reception),

apprenticeships while training, mentoring at schools/colleges, hospitality (waiting, bar or kitchen staff) and childcare.

Figure 27: Cheshire 50 Plus: What work opportunities would you consider?



Source: DWP Cheshire 50 Plus Insight summary

Priority 5: Carers and parents facing challenges

Despite the three authorities ranking amongst the six districts with the lowest levels of child poverty across the North West, there has been a rise of 9,000 children aged below 16 living in relative poverty since 2014/15, from 12% of children in 2014/15 to 17% in 2023/24.

Support for those balancing work with caring or parenting responsibilities, particularly lone parents and low-income families, is primarily embedded within broader programmes rather than offered through tailored provision. Access to support is typically through channels such as Jobcentre Plus work coaches or general skills and employment services, but these offers are usually generalised, and not specific to the circumstances of carers or single parents.

Unpaid carers and single parents are falling through gaps in current employment and skills provision and therefore facing significant barriers to workforce participation.

These services can direct carers to training or employment support when appropriate, but dedicated employment support is limited, with wellbeing remaining the central emphasis.

Childcare affordability and inflexible employment practices can be core barriers to entering employment, and employers are not consistently supported to offer adjusted hours or specialised support to fit commitments.

Cheshire and Warrington's carer support service offers education, training, and employment advice to carers across the subregion. Council commissioned services such as the Carers Trust Cheshire and Warrington, Better Together in Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East Carers Hub and Warrington Carers Hub offer support to carers. However, the majority of this is general support and advice, covering financial support, social engagement and signposting.

But partners have identified specialist services for carers as a significant service gap. Many in this cohort may not actively come forward for employment support because their immediate circumstances make working difficult. There is a lack of focused outreach to identify and engage carers or struggling parents specifically.

Priority 6: Connecting people to opportunities

There are stark contrasts across the subregion in adult skill levels - Cheshire East and Cheshire West & Chester have relatively high proportions of residents qualified to RQF3 and RQF4+. In contrast, 14% of residents in Warrington hold no formal qualifications, a clear barrier to entering into certain sectors/roles. This suggests challenges in progression for some groups.

Across Cheshire and Warrington 106,000 residents are economically inactive, whilst the number of UC claimants has risen to 90,000, with over two thirds of UC claimants being unemployed for over 12 months. Tailored support will be needed to help encourage some of those people back to work, along with working with employers to see what adjustments can be made to ensure a phased return for those who may never have had a job or those returning to the workplace.

A lack of sufficient entry level jobs in the business base act as a barrier to lower-qualified residents without accessible routes into good employment. This can exclude people from the labour market despite a desire to work. The number of vacancies has started to pick up again following a decline post-pandemic. There is a number of issues which may be preventing residents who are currently out of work from filling these roles.

Local Supported Employment services provide job matching services to connect residents with vacancies, helping to match existing skills with employer demand. Careers Hubs and the Pledge Partnership engage with the local employer base to raise awareness of local opportunities and provide brokerage between residents and businesses to help fill local vacancies. But engagement has found that a loss of local training providers has reduced options for entry-level and vocational training, leaving fewer accessible pathways into work. Employers are not consistently providing intermediate labour market opportunities or tailored entry-level roles for people with barriers to work, such as those with low skills or limited work history.

The last few years have been tricky for employers, and it continues to be so, with continued cost pressures, National Insurance rises, and global trade uncertainty to contend with. If we are to break down the barriers our identified cohorts face, we will need local employers to take a prominent role in ensuring roles are better tailored to meet their needs and/or there is training in place to help upskill and get them work ready. We need to ensure that employers have the support they need to accommodate providing more supported employment roles which are tailored towards our cohort groups who for example may not have held down a permanent role previously.

Actions

In order to shift the dial on unemployment and economic inactivity across the six priorities identified through the data, current provision mapping, and partner engagement, Cheshire and Warrington need an approach going forward to:

- Provide more flexibility to tailor services to meet local needs and enable partners to be more responsive and accountable to local communities, including going directly to neighbourhoods to make services more visible.
- Understand delivery at the best level for the individual to deliver better outcomes, preventing duplication of activity and administration.
- Promote early intervention to build the social and institutional capacity, enabling long term cost reduction.

The below actions are developed and proposed based on the analysis in this Plan and the current and evolving operating environment in Cheshire and Warrington. They are to be further developed and detailed with partners, aimed at removing the additional barriers the six priority groups face to entering and sustaining employment into the medium/longer term.

To start moving towards this point, we will focus on getting the foundations in place over the next 12-18 months, where we will aim to establish a joined-up support offer across the subregion, with the potential to scale smaller scale programmes which have been successful across Cheshire and Warrington. Specifically, our actions in the shorter term are focused around:

- Setting-up the governance required to move towards a joined-up offer across the three authorities.
- On-going audit of provision to highlight where there is duplication and potential gaps emerging in our collective support offer.
- Establish Task and Finish groups to identify which programmes have potential to be scaled and immediate priorities to engage with wider partners from across the subregion.
- Explore engagement with identified priority groups to hear the barriers they are facing to ensure the implementation of the Plan is reflective of residents' lived experience.
 - We will do this through survey work, working through community partners (e.g. VCSE organisations, housing associations, JCP, Health Settings, unions and the Probation and Prison Service), and direct engagement with communities through targeted events in local areas, drop-in sessions at common meeting places, and listening groups.

Evolving a strategic employment support service for Cheshire and Warrington

Over time, as devolution evolves in Cheshire and Warrington, this strategic capacity will be used to develop more integrated future service design. Government has indicated a direction towards devolving employment support, and the English Devolution Bill sets out the process through which Strategic Authorities can become Established SAs with Integrated Settlement funding across seven competences including skills and employment support, and health, wellbeing and public service reform. The Bill also allows for an annual right to request further powers and funding by Mayors to Ministers.

This will therefore be a strategic function for Cheshire and Warrington that develops over time, starting with coordinating and aligning existing delivery service insights, develop new approaches based on best practice and fill provision gaps over the medium term, and developing longer term into designing integrated services across Cheshire and Warrington with future funding and devolved powers.

The focus of the strategic service should be to design a system that addresses people at risk and preventing people from falling out of the labour market – that is strategic, consistent, and long term to help the cohorts of people who will become inactive through a similar range of barriers – health, skills, transport, culture, caring, and quality of jobs. This should provide a standing portfolio of responsive interventions that is always there for people and also sets up a delivery model for prevention.

Over 2026/27, local authorities, the ICB and DWP will work with providers and VCSE partners to develop a strategic employment support service for Cheshire and Warrington that provides a cohesive approach and set of functions that takes forward the priorities in this Plan and prepares the approach for future funding and commissioning of employment support. This will work in partnership and draw on the subregional capacity of the Strategic Authority as it is established.

We will develop core functions:

Building on provision that is working well

- While a range of local support is available, residents in deprived areas who face multiple barriers to employment, such as homelessness or substance misuse are often supported through community organisations. We will work with partners to connect services more closely to mainstream employment support, helping to remove gaps in pathways into work, building on current local good practice, for example:

- IPS approaches that are developing into the new Connect to Work programme, being designed for implementation in Cheshire and Warrington, building on understanding of what has worked locally.
- Using functional skills and practical learning design in adult training programmes for people to gain the certifications they need to progress into apprenticeships and employment, moving away from mandated approaches to GCSEs and classroom learning that doesn't work for everyone. This will be used to inform the developing devolved Skills Priorities Plan.
 - Testing pilot WorkWell services and embedding employment advisers in musculoskeletal pathways, which would strengthen preventative support for those whose health issues may lead to long-term sickness.
- We will develop ongoing new approaches that build on good practice tested in Cheshire and Warrington (and wider afield), using an overarching strategic service to retain knowledge and intelligence from programmes, and use engagement with service users to understand lived experience and how programmes work and could be improved in the future.

Data and evidence development

- We will continue to build and retain a local evidence base informed by programme intelligence and analysis of what is happening in the labour market, combining publicly available data and local service data to understand population level changes in employment and health over time.
- We will also build an understanding of beneficiaries' journeys in different circumstances and places in Cheshire and Warrington to inform future programme design and retain an up-to-date understanding of barriers people face.
- Investigation of enhanced data sharing and transferability between services – bringing together evidence from across local authority services, DWP and JobcentrePlus, NHS trusts and providers, and the VCSE sector.
- Setting up shared data analysis and digital tools will enable a more joined up view of where provision is delivered, scale up approaches that work well, streamline areas of duplication, and monitor programme outcomes to iterate as they are delivered.

Partnership collaboration

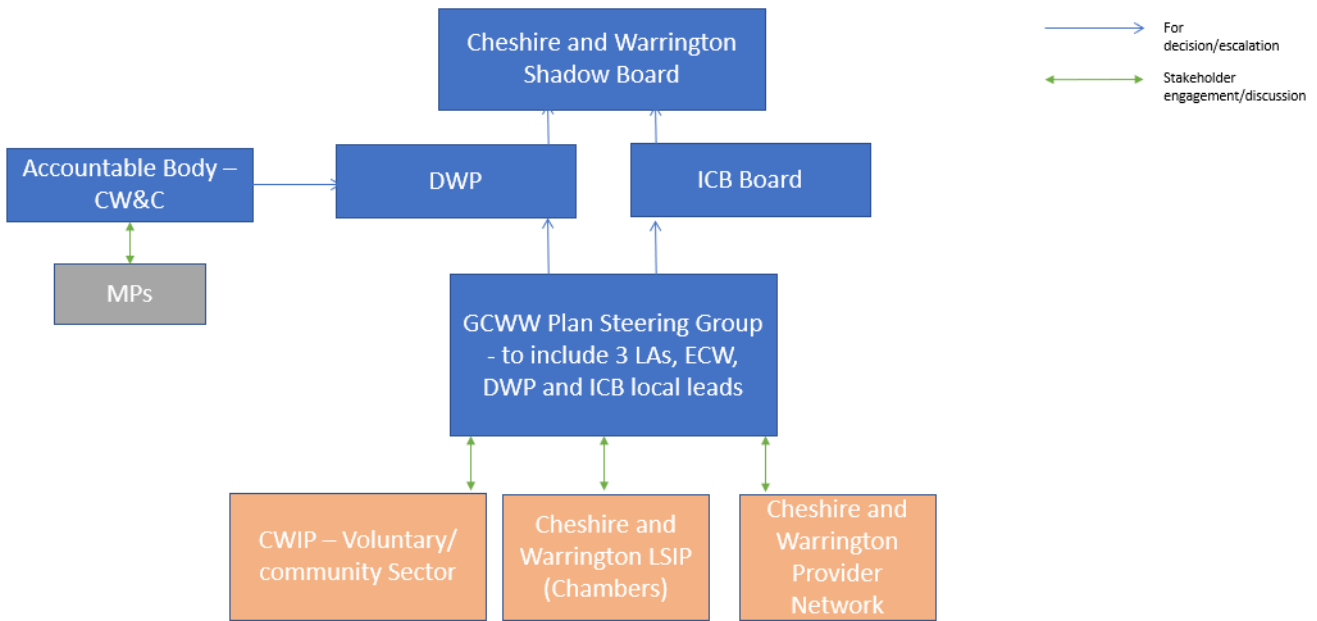
- Partnerships have been established in Cheshire and Warrington, with several active programmes including IPS, devolution, Pledge Partnership, the Population Health Programme, and Poverty Commission.
- We will build on these to develop lasting collaboration mechanisms and provide more tailored support to those with health issues, to help bring down barriers preventing people from entering and sustaining employment.

- We will develop opportunities to share capacity and capabilities among public service and VCSE organisations across frontline service delivery, data analysis, and programme design and management.

Governance – Get Cheshire and Warrington Working Plan

- As Cheshire and Warrington are currently preparing for devolution, many of the systems and processes required are not fully developed. This includes the governance structures for each of the devolved workstreams, including Skills and Employment, and delivery against the Cheshire and Merseyside Work and Health Strategy. The intention is that the governance of the Cheshire and Merseyside Work and Health Strategy is fully aligned with the GCWWP governance mechanisms to best utilise the available capacity and avoid duplication.
- We envisage that each workstream will have its own governance board which will include representation from each of the three LAs, Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington, DWP, Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, FE and HE training providers, a business representative body and the voluntary and community sector. This Board will provide strategic oversight and ensure appropriate links are made across other devolved functions such as transport and inward investment.
- This would then be supported by an operational group who would be responsible for the delivery against the actions identified in the Plan – including the further development of the actions themselves (including timeline, possible funding routes, lead actor) and approach to measuring progress. This group would also feed into the main Board to ensure they are kept abreast of developments and any emerging issues arising.
- This operational group would regularly engage with the voluntary sector, employers and providers to ensure the interventions are fit for purpose and responding to the needs of Cheshire and Warrington.
- Unless a decision is made to move this programme into the Combined Authority the accountable body will remain with Cheshire West and Chester.

Get Cheshire and Warrington Working (GCWW) Plan Governance Chart



We will develop a cohesive approach that targets:

Priority 1: Most deprived neighbourhoods

- There is a need to be more proactive in creating inclusive environments and providing opportunities and sufficient support for disadvantaged cohorts, to both enter and remain in employment, including a focus on wellbeing and preventative health support.
- We will support expanding community led approaches that are in development in some areas to enable local solutions to employment barriers in development but not yet embedded, so that we have fuller coverage of support across Cheshire and Warrington.
- We will develop and coordinate access points in deprived neighbourhoods to support people in their communities who are further from the labour market, face complex barriers, and live in areas with barriers to services and employment centres. These will provide wraparound support in existing community spaces, for example, at foodbanks or housing association premises, to target those most in need.
- Access points will provide a gateway into formal support – working with VCSE organisations to deliver a neighbourhood service setup for support triage, preparation for individuals to access further services, and provide a journey to JobcentrePlus, college or other learning environment, volunteering, or with an employer.

Outcome: a reduction in economic inactivity and health conditions acting as a barrier to the labour market, in our more deprived communities, encouraging those who are economically inactive to want to work, with more people going on to access employment related support.

Priority 2: Young people and NEETs

- We will develop a subregional approach to skills, careers, and employment support that delivers early intervention and prevention of young people falling out of education, training, or employment at key transition points. This should include helping to develop key soft skills/workplace behaviours expected by employers,
- This will build on our existing partnership working and collaboration between local authorities, schools, colleges, skills providers, local support services (including health and DWP) and employers to better match skills supply and demand tailored to younger people entering the workforce, gaining work experience, and understanding their own potential and training routes.
- We will collaborate on designing local apprenticeship schemes that can be more flexibly delivered to meet the needs of employers, and to engage with young people closer to where they live, and in community environments that work for them – not requiring everyone to come to a formal learning environment to understand careers options and guidance. We will work with schools to implement early intervention more comprehensively for young people who have been in care to prevent NEET status and offer alternative progression routes from formal education.
- We will support our young people with the mental health challenges they may be facing, which can present a prominent barrier to entering into employment, training or further education.
- Careers support and guidance from an earlier age whilst encouraging parents to play a more active role in careers development.

Outcome: a reduction in the number of young people who are NEET across Cheshire and Warrington by working to develop consistent and sustained engagement activity

Priority 3: Long-term sickness and disability

- While varied health related employment support exists, the system lacks consistency in linking health and employment services at scale across Cheshire and Warrington.
- We will join up innovative services that are currently operating in specific areas to shift more comprehensively to support for people who are inactive and long-term sick and to prevent people at risk of dropping out of the labour market.

- We will work with partners to develop more consistent front door support across the area to provide in every part of Cheshire and Warrington access to employment support, primary or secondary healthcare, housing and homelessness support or temporary accommodation, JobcentrePlus and welfare, financial or debt advice, and other voluntary organisation services.
- We will work with employers and employer representative organisations to better connect support for people who are off sick temporarily to prevent absences becoming long-term and people leaving the workforce.
- We will work with voluntary, community organisations to fully understand the barriers faced by residents with disabilities to access and sustain employment.
- We will support employers to better understand how they could become more inclusive of those with disabilities and the benefits these individuals could bring to their business.

Outcome: a reduction in the number of people who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability, and a reduction in the 7% of people who are off work with long-term and temporary sickness across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Priority 4: Early retirement

- Support will include retraining and employability interventions, building on the current JCP offer to targeting older workers including working with employers, health and anchor networks to support return to work, age-inclusive employment support, and more flexible employment options.
- We will develop and coordinate physical access points for those who may struggle to access online employment support services and support/training to be able to use online recruitment/hybrid working practices.
- Design suitable volunteering/mentoring opportunities for those who may have retired from the workforce or are thinking about doing so.

Outcome: an increase in the number of UC claimants aged over 50 who are looking for work and an increase in the number of people aged 50 and over accessing volunteering/mentoring opportunities

Priority 5: Carers and parents facing challenges

- The rising numbers of children living in low-income households and inactivity linked to caring requires a more joined up approach for parents and those with caring responsibilities.

- We will focus on early years and family support across communities to provide more consistent family hub style support for early years education, healthcare and childcare, combined with access and guidance for parents on services they require e.g. financial, welfare or housing support, and employment support and learning opportunities, to support parents with multiple barriers to participate in the labour market and support early intervention for improved childhood health and development outcomes.

Outcome: more people engaging in early years and childcare support. An increase in the number of young people who are disadvantaged engaging in further education, employment or training opportunities.

Priority 6: Connecting people to opportunities

- Training and employment support services alone are insufficient to connect disadvantaged residents to sustained employment. Provision to engage this group therefore needs to be matched by demand-side measures that encourage the creation of accessible, good-quality jobs at the lower end of the labour market.
- Support is needed to ensure residents are not prevented from accessing local job opportunities by providing tailored support and training which can help to fill local vacancies, including those from more disadvantaged backgrounds who may have been prevented from achieving their potential in an educational setting.
- We will work with employers and trade bodies on understanding skills and labour needs, link up hiring pathways with individual support service pathways, and codesign participation in employment support and skills programmes. For example, T Level and apprenticeship placements, supported internships and employment, and targeted programmes for specific cohorts. This will help ensure that employers are better prepared to support individuals and develop quality job and progression opportunities.
- Supported employment provision which is provided must stick with the established Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) and Individual Placement and Support (IPS) system as these are centred on evidence-based best practice and value for money.

Outcome: an increase in the number of employers who are investing in skills and training, and an increase in the number of supported internships and employment. More young people and adults accessing local training opportunities.

Maximising the impact of a new Strategic Authority

As the Cheshire and Warrington Strategic Authority is established and developed, we will ensure that the powers and funding that are immediately devolved align with the priorities in this Plan, and can help to deliver the operating environment that will improve employment outcomes, through:

- Devolved Adult Skills Fund via the Skills Priorities Plan (to be agreed with DfE): prioritising allocations and working with providers to ensure funding is targeted at our skills, labour market and employment priorities, building on the work of the Local Skills Improvement Plan, our local colleges employer advisory boards, the Integrated Care Board's Work and Health Plan pilots, the DESNZ pilots to support employers to transition to lower carbon usage, etc.
- Local Growth Plan: identifying employment and business growth opportunities through engagement with employers, and connecting specific sector, occupation, major project and skills needs with employment support and skills provision to inform individuals about the training and employment that supports local growth.
- Future local growth funding: using employment and skills priorities to inform future local growth funding (including the successor to UKSPF) and designing local interventions to support the Local Growth Plan and employment support priorities.
- Tools to alleviate barriers to participating in the labour market: employment priorities informing strategic roles of the SA in strategy, funding and delivery of transport, infrastructure, housing, employment land and spatial planning, to connect people to opportunities.
- Developing institutional roles: working to integrate employment support (JCP) and health at the strategic commissioning level between the Mayor and ICB, aligned with the ambitions of the 10-year Health Plan.

Over 2026/27, as the Cheshire and Warrington Strategic Authority is established, local authorities, the ICB, DWP, and partners will bring insights and priorities for employment and health support into the development of SA strategies including the Local Growth Plan, Adult Skills Fund commissioning, Transport Strategy, and local growth funding projects, to ensure that devolved levers deliver for the needs of communities and cohorts to participate and progress in the labour market.