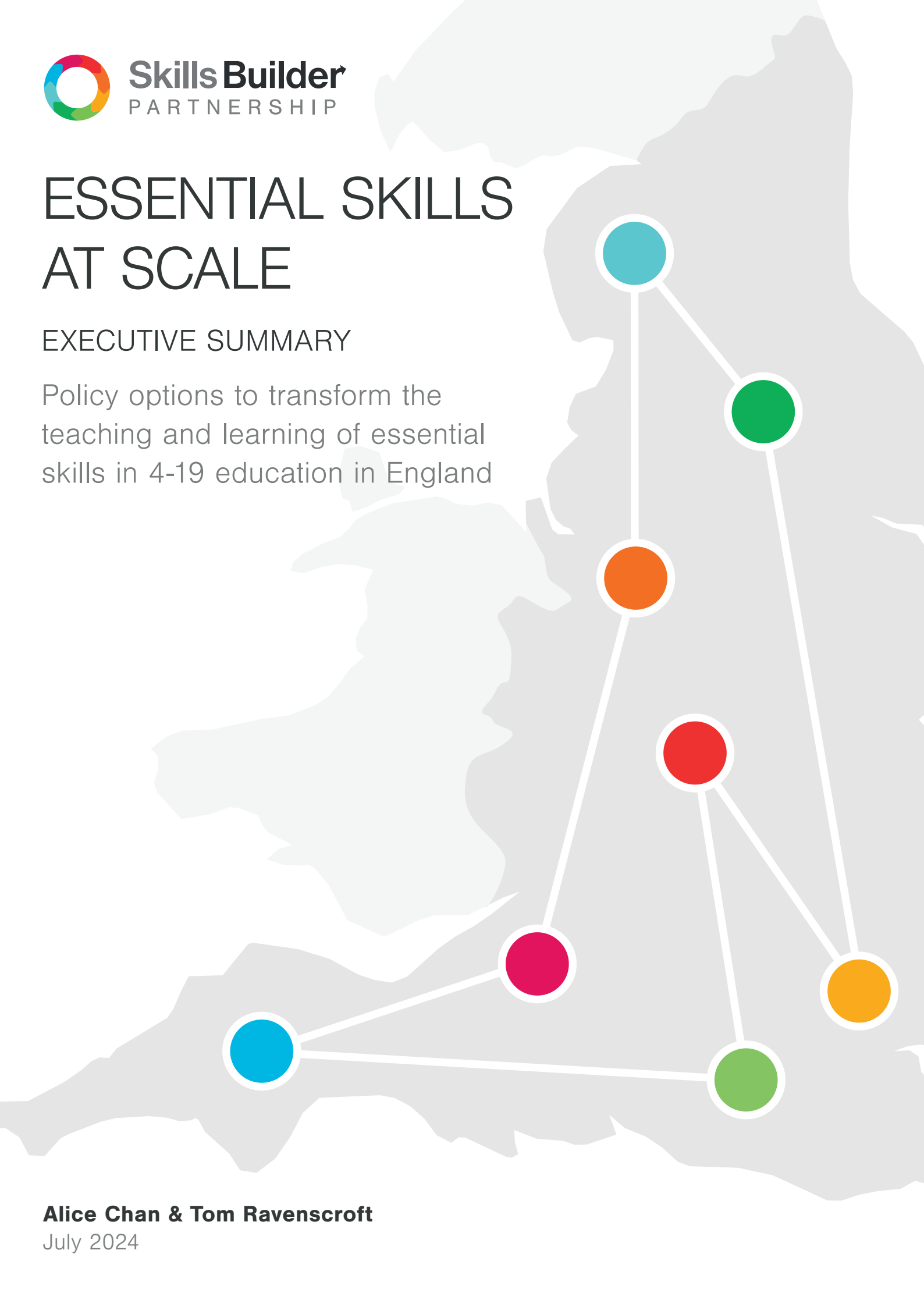


ESSENTIAL SKILLS AT SCALE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy options to transform the teaching and learning of essential skills in 4-19 education in England



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Executive summary

Skills Builder Partnership is a not-for-profit established in 2009 to ensure that one day, everyone builds the essential skills to succeed. We work with partners to develop individuals' communication, collaborative and creative problem solving skills across the whole life journey by using a consistent language and model known as the Universal Framework. With more than 900 partners spanning the full breadth of education and employment reaching more than 2.5 million individuals last year, the Partnership has 15 years of building essential skills at scale.

The government's mission for education is to ensure that every child and young person benefits from a broad, complete education that not only builds literacy, numeracy and knowledge, but also the wider experiences and essential skills to thrive.

This paper for policymakers provides a roadmap for how to scale a high-impact approach to teaching and assessing essential skills at scale in schools and colleges in England. It builds off 15 years of learning and data, and insights from more than 900 partners, whose programmes incorporating essential skills development have reached more than 2.5 million individuals in the last year alone.

These recommendations will align educators and employers behind a shared definition and methodology for building and assessing essential skills. The [Universal Framework](#) is an open source framework which structures how educators and employers can support individuals to develop the eight essential skills, breaking each skill down into 16 teachable and measurable steps.

At a low cost, the right teacher training opportunities, curriculum adaptation, assessment approaches and accountability measures can ensure every learner has rigorous opportunities to develop high levels of essential skills. This supports social mobility, productivity and eases the onward pathway for learners to education, training or employment. Skills England and the government's post-16 skills strategy can play a key role in ensuring these skills are developed by everyone.



Essential skills

Essential skills are those highly transferable skills which everyone needs to do almost any job, and which support the application of technical skills and knowledge. They incorporate communication, self-management, collaborative, and creative and critical thinking skills.

Critically, they are distinct from technical skills which are required for specific occupations; and from basic skills of literacy and numeracy.

The Universal Framework defines eight essential skills:



Evidence shows that these skills are linked to significant reductions in the likelihood of unemployment, increases in job and life satisfaction, and greater productivity as reflected in higher wages for individuals across their lives¹.

The challenge

Setting a greater ambition for essential skills must start with consistent backing for the definition and approach already used by thousands of schools and colleges across England, captured in the Universal Framework. The component parts of the education system in England (the national curriculum, assessment models, teacher training and accountability measures) do not consider how to develop

¹ Seymour, W. and Craig, R (2023). [Essential Skills Tracker 2023](#).

learners' essential skills effectively with the same rigour with which we approach numeracy or literacy.

As a result, opportunities to build these essential skills are not distributed evenly - individuals with advantages from higher levels of parental education or engagement or higher income levels tend to build essential skills to a higher level². The experience of the Skills Builder Partnership, including 900 partners across education, charities and business, makes clear that this is not inevitable.

There is clear demand for essential skills in different places:

- Universities take essential skills seriously through the application process and as a core developmental focus of learning. This is captured in the graduate attributes statement that many of them publish³. Beyond that, when it comes to grading, the Office for Students has set expectations around essential skill levels for graduates too through the Sector-recognised standards (2022)⁴.
- Business representative organisations including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Institute of Directors (IoD) consistently highlight national gaps in essential skills⁵, while many of the DfE approved Local Skills Improvement Plans (2023) observed regional gaps in these essential skills⁶.
- The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) requires apprentices to demonstrate knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) which are set out in the Apprenticeship standards. These KSBs include essential skills, which are assessed as part of the end point assessment, and IfATE recommends that trailblazer groups use the Universal Framework when developing apprenticeship standards⁷.

² Seymour, W. and Craig, R. (2022). [Essential Skills Tracker 2022](#)

³ Wong, B., Chiu, Y.-L. T., Copsey-Blake, M., & Nikolopoulou, M. (2021) A mapping of graduate attributes: what can we expect from UK university students?, Higher Education Research & Development, 41, pp. 1-16. DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2021.1882405.

⁴ Office for Students. (2022). [Sector-recognised standards: regulatory framework for access and participation.](#)

⁵ CBI, *Educating for the Modern World* (2018) and Institute of Directors, *ESC Post-16 Inquiry* (2022).

⁶ Examples include: BusinessLDN, *The London Local Skills Improvement Plan* (2023). and Federation of Small Businesses, *Greater Lincolnshire Rutland LSIP* (2023)

⁷ IfATE (no date) [Skills Builder Universal Framework](#)

The opportunity

We need a consistent and joined up approach to building essential skills throughout education, training and employment. This requires a common framework to teach and measure essential skills, and setting age-related expectations in education.

That's why the *Skills Builder Universal Framework* was launched in 2020 after four years of development by a broad coalition of education and employer bodies, including The Careers & Enterprise Company, Gatsby Foundation, CBI and CIPD. It was created to answer three questions:

- How to define and break down what essential transferable skills are?
- How to assess individuals' strengths and development areas for these skills?
- How to sequence learning to build these skills most effectively?

The Universal Framework defines eight essential skills, and then breaks them down into 16 steps which span the journey from absolute beginner through to mastery:



It can be used in mainstream settings to support learning from Foundation to Year 13 and beyond, with clear tried-and-tested age-related expectations. It is also flexible enough to be used in inclusion settings where it has been widely used with learners at all levels.

Since its launch, the Universal Framework has been used directly with more than 1,200 primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and inclusion settings across the country.

Doing so has informed the development of six principles which outline *how* the Universal Framework can be successfully applied to support essential skills development in learners of all ages and stages. They are:

- **Keep it simple**, by focusing on a consistent clear set of essential skills.
- **Start early and keep going**, by having clear steps for progression and age-related expectations.
- **Measure it**, to understand learners' strengths and development areas and to track progress.
- **Focus tightly**, by explicitly teaching essential skills and building the knowledge base behind them.
- **Keep practising**, by applying essential skills deliberately and reflecting and learning.
- **Bring it to life**, through real learning both inside and beyond the classroom.

These insights from the practical application of the Universal Framework have informed the recommendations that follow.

Policy recommendations

This paper builds off 15 years of learning, data, and insights from more than 900 partners. It sets out a blueprint to transform how essential skills are built, providing a more complete education for every child and young person.

A national model for essential skills

Formal recognition and endorsement of the Universal Framework would build off its existing widespread use in more than 1,200 schools and colleges across England, and backing from The Careers & Enterprise Company⁸, IfATE⁹ and in T Level guidance¹⁰. This would provide the consistent definitions, structures and models around essential skills that 87% of teachers are calling for¹¹.

⁸ The Careers & Enterprise Company. (2023). [Employer Standards: Insight Briefing](#).

⁹ IfATE (no date) [Skills Builder Universal Framework](#)

¹⁰ Department for Education (2023) [T Level industry placements: delivery guidance](#).

¹¹ Craig, R. and Stewart, G. (2024). [Essential Skills Tracker 2024](#).

Short term:

1. DfE should formally promote the development of essential skills as a critical part of a good 4-19 education, endorsing the Universal Framework as the model of how to do this.
2. DfE should provide guidance to schools and colleges on effective essential skills teaching, using the Universal Framework to develop and measure essential skills, against age-related expectations.
3. DfE should provide modelled teaching materials and tools to support teachers to teach and measure essential skills to support that adoption. Older learners should have access to tools to benchmark their essential skills and track their progress.

Teacher training

DfE must ensure teachers are confident in how to teach and measure learners' essential skills. The current teacher training system means that teachers are trained in how to teach knowledge but not essential skills.

Teachers are united in their view on the importance of essential skills and view essential skills as important for learners' employment opportunities and education outcomes (98% and 92% respectively)¹². However teachers think there is a mismatch between what the education system prioritises and what leads to success in employment. For 67% of teachers, being able to prepare young people for successful lives - including through teaching essential skills - is important to them remaining in the profession¹³. However over three-quarters think a lack of CPD is a barrier doing so¹⁴.

Short term:

1. DfE should encourage schools and colleges to provide training for teaching staff in continuing professional development on how to effectively teach and assess essential skills.

Medium term:

2. DfE should reform the Early Career Framework to incorporate teaching and assessing essential skills.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

3. DfE should encourage the appointment of specialist skills leaders in schools and colleges to implement essential skills strategies through either NPQ training or including it in Careers Leaders training.

Curriculum (4-16)

The education system is not currently providing children and young people with a ‘balanced and broadly based’ education which ‘prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life’ as intended by DfE¹⁵. Essential skills should be included in the curriculum at all ages and stages. Introducing an expectation in the national curriculum that schools use the Universal Framework to teach and measure essential skills would enable more consistency and robustness in how essential skills are developed.

Short term:

4. DfE should explicitly include the development of essential skills in the existing national curriculum (2014) and statutory careers guidance for secondary schools and colleges.

Medium to long term:

5. Through the planned curriculum and assessment review, DfE should set an expectation that schools use the Universal Framework to teach essential skills through subjects, teach essential skills explicitly and to measure progression.

Assessing essential skills

To ensure essential skills are developed, we need an effective measurement system. The Universal Framework enables teachers and learners to measure and reflect on progress against a consistent, objective framework. Essential skills can be assessed in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of that assessment. It is important to get the balance of formative and summative assessment right.

¹⁵ Fair Education Alliance (2023) [Fair Education Manifesto 2023](#); Times Education Commission (2022). [Bringing out the best: How to transform education and unleash the potential of every child.](#)

Short to medium term:

6. DfE should adopt and promote the Universal Framework to ensure effective measurement of essential skills throughout strategy and guidance (like the reading framework). Where qualifications already include essential skills, they should be defined in line with the Universal Framework.
7. The planned assessment review should build on and promote existing, tried and tested approaches to assessing learners' essential skills. This includes portfolio-building, assessed scenarios, observation, and testing depending on the goal of formative assessment or certification.

Extra-curricular and co-curricular learning

Extracurricular and co-curricular activities have a critical role to play in ensuring that learners at all ages can practise and apply their essential skills. The Universal Framework is already used by more than 200 providers including NCS Trust, UK Youth, Young Enterprise and many more.

This ensures that not only do learners have the opportunity to apply and practise their essential skills, but they can track their experiences, reflect more deliberately, and connect their classroom learning with the application of these skills in the wider world.

Short term:

8. DfE and DCMS should require funded extra-curricular programmes to track impact on essential skills using the Universal Framework.
9. DfE should require schools and colleges to use the Universal Framework to develop learners' essential skills in any new baccalaureate qualification or enrichment premium

Post-16 education and training

Education and training beyond age 16 should equip learners with the knowledge and skills needed to progress and succeed in their chosen pathway. To do this, education and training providers should use the Universal Framework to develop and measure learners' essential skills. To maximise the opportunities, essential skills should be integrated into all qualifications, into a quality careers education and in the broader enrichment offer.

Short term:

10. Skills England and the post-16 skills strategy should adopt the Universal Framework as a common language for all stakeholders to use. This would encourage educators, training providers and employers to develop essential skills using a framework.
11. Qualifications should use the Universal Framework to define expectations as far as possible. IfATE should use the Universal Framework when revising occupational standards for apprenticeships to ensure greater consistency.
12. DfE should require the use of the Universal Framework in planned employability, enrichment and pastoral (EEP) hours.
13. DfE should amend statutory careers guidance to set an expectation that all schools and colleges should maximise the impact of employer encounters and workplace experience through use of the Universal Framework.
14. The new national jobs and careers service should adopt the Universal Framework to provide a consistent language and allow comparability of roles and recognition of existing skills.

System change and accountability

System change requires schools and colleges to have a clear understanding of how to build essential skills effectively, and to be supported and accountable for providing high quality opportunities to build essential skills. The Gatsby Benchmarks have shown that recognition by government of best practice influences schools' and colleges' behaviour.

Short term:

15. DfE should review performance measures and criteria for qualifications in the performance table to move away from a narrow curriculum.
16. DfE should set a clear expectation in statutory careers guidance that:
 - Schools and colleges benchmark themselves against and work towards national standards in essential skills.
 - Careers and skills leaders are given adequate time and training to carry out the role and embed an essential skills strategy effectively in statutory careers guidance.
17. The Ofsted inspection framework, handbooks and report cards should explicitly include essential skills to provide clarity to all stakeholders and Ofsted inspectors should receive training in essential skills pedagogy.
18. Skills England and the post-16 skills strategy should explicitly prioritise essential skills and measure essential skills using the Universal Framework.

Medium term:

19. Regional improvement teams should support schools and colleges to embed successful essential skills teaching and assessment strategies.

Conclusion

A complete education which ensures that all children and young people build the essential skills to be successful has never been more important. Higher levels of essential skills deliver social mobility - those with less social advantage are more likely to benefit from developing essential skills¹⁶.

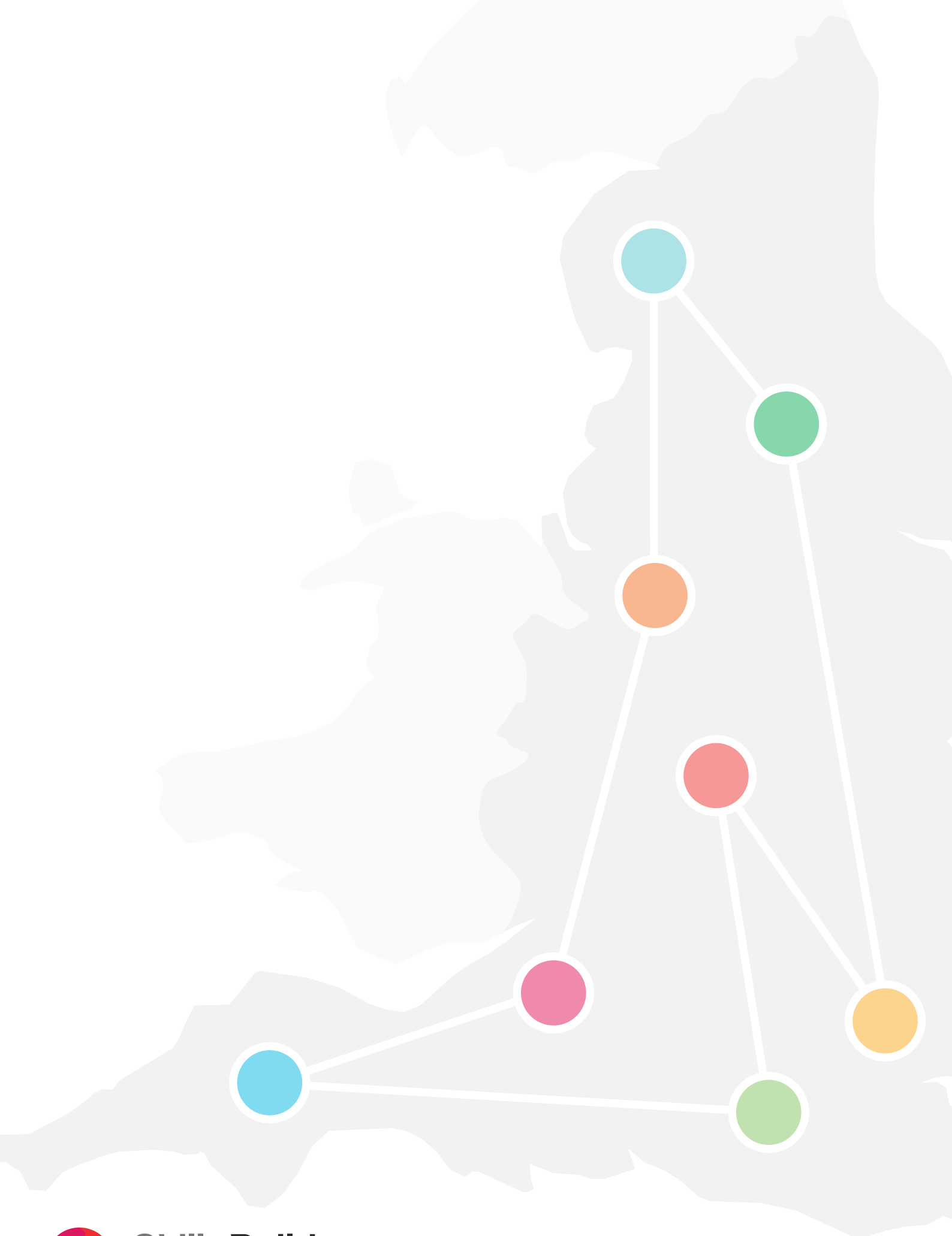
At a national level, policy makers grappling for ways to increase national productivity should consider that higher levels of essential skills have the potential to deliver national productivity gains of £22.2bn¹⁷.

Improving our education system to benefit all learners is more in reach than ever before. The experience and insights of thousands of schools, colleges, providers and employers using the Universal Framework and Skills Builder Principles demonstrate that it is possible for everyone to build their essential skills.

¹⁶ Seymour and Craig, 2023

¹⁷ *ibid.*

There are practical and cost-effective ways to scale this impact through backing the Universal Framework consistently, providing teachers with the modelled resources and training to put the approach into practice, then providing the assessment tools, curriculum opportunities and supportive accountability structures to support that drive. If we can do this, then one day, every child and young person can build the essential skills to succeed.



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